





GRADE-SPAN CONFIGURATION AND SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Educational Leadership Program of the College  
of Saint Elizabeth in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of Pauline F. Anderson for the degree of Doctor of Education in the Educational Leadership Program presented May 2012

Title: GRADE-SPAN CONFIGURATION AND SCHOOL-TO-SCHOOL TRANSITIONS

The grade-span configuration of a school district determines the number of school-to-school transitions students experience; a review of the literature concludes that these factors may have an impact on students' sense of belonging, the continuity of curriculum and instruction, and student academic achievement. This study derived input from the stakeholders of the school district: students, parents/guardians, faculty members, guidance counselors, principals, and curriculum directors and supervisors. In addition, a review of student assessment scores determined the impact on student academic achievement.

A focus on students' sense of belonging determined that, although the adults believe that students are safe, happy and comfortable attending their schools, students themselves stated that they are more likely to be proud to belong to their schools if they are active in sports or other extracurricular activities. Students believe that their teachers are friendly and respectful, but students do not feel especially close to the educators in their schools. Students are provided assistance before, during and following each school-to-school transition, but still experience an adjustment period following a transition into a new school. In addition, students report feeling a sense of belonging to the entire district rather than to any school in particular.

A focus on the continuity of curriculum and instruction determined that faculty members are not fully aware of the curriculum of the grade before and/or after the one which they teach, and that articulation time between grade levels and schools is minimal. The lack of communication between schools and restricted opportunities for vertical articulation are creating excessive reteaching of material and a lack of continuity in students' instructional programs. The faculty members also report that the students are not always ready for their new grade levels and that they must reteach material and spend time helping students become more comfortable in their new school settings.

A focus on students' academic achievement determined that faculty members believe that although their students leave their classrooms ready for the next grade level, students are not arriving to their classrooms ready. An analysis of the standardized test scores demonstrated a drop in academic achievement following each school-to-school transition.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to all of life's educators...

...to parents and guardians, who are their children's first and most important educators

*"The role of parents in the education of their children cannot be overestimated."*-Mexican  
American Legal Defense Fund

...to pre-primary, primary and elementary school teachers, who first light the fire of  
learning in the hearts and minds of their students

*"Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire."* -William Butler Yeats

...to middle and high school teachers, who teach their students during some of the most  
challenging years

*"The job of an educator is to teach students to see vitality in themselves."* -Joseph Campbell

...to college professors, who teach so that others may teach

*"It must be remembered that the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with  
facts...it is to teach them to think, if that is possible, and always to think for themselves."*

-Robert Hutchins

...to each and every person who touches the lives of the young people in society so that  
they may make the decisions when we are no longer able to do so

*"A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops"* -Henry B. Adams

...and to each and every administrator, who works behind the scenes so that teachers may  
teach, I express my most sincere thanks.

*“It is the responsibility of every adult...to make sure that children hear what we have learned from the lessons of life and to hear over and over that we love them and that they are not alone.”-Marian Wright Edelman*

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*“Some people come into our lives, leave footprints on our hearts, and we are never the same.”*

-Franz Peter Schubert

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

The division of elementary schools into grade-span configurations that include fewer grades requires students to make several transitions from one school to another after completing the grade levels housed within the school; this transition is referred to as student turnover. Schools with fewer grades in their configuration experience frequent student turnover, as many of the students are transitioning into or from the school building. Frequent student turnover can negatively influence the school's identity and sense of community, and imposes the stress of frequent school transitions on students (Renchler, 2002). The trend towards creating narrow grade-span configurations actually creates larger schools due to the increased number of students in each grade level (Howley, 2002b). The creation of larger schools damages educational equity for educators, students and their families; every transition from one narrowly-configured school to another can disrupt the social structure in which learning takes place, lowering achievement and participation for many students (Howley, 2002b; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Paglin & Fager, 1997). This study will focus on the grade-span configuration of the schools in Bearwood Township School District, the impact of the configuration and school-to-school transitions on the students' sense of belong in the schools, the continuity of the curriculum among the schools, and student academic achievement.

### **Background**

There are currently more than 30 documented grade-span configurations in K-12

schools, and the grade-span configurations adopted by districts are frequently motivated by matters unrelated to student achievement (Howley, 2002b; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Seller, 2004). The wide variety of school configurations in the United States usually includes an elementary, middle, and high school for each district; however, the lack of research on the issue of grade-span configuration and school transition may contribute to the wide variety of grade-span configurations (Cullen & Robles-Pina, 2009). Table 1 is based on figures available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010) which shows the number of grade-span configurations for preschool through grade 8 in the United States for the 2007-2008 school year. The data presented in Table 1 indicates that the most common grade configuration is pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or grade 1 to grade 5, with nearly 37% of the school districts adopting that configuration (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). The grade configuration with the least amount of schools is pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or grade 1 through grades 3 or 4 (NCES, 2010).

Table 1

*U.S. Public Elementary School Grade Configurations 2007-2008*

Grade Configurations	Number of Schools	Percentage of Total Schools
Pre-k, k, or grade 1 to grades 3 or 4	4,958	7.4%
Pre-k, k, or grade 1 to grade 5	24,754	36.9%
Pre-k, k, or grade 1 to grade 6	12,020	17.9%
Pre-k, k, or grade 1 to grade 8	6,049	9.0%
Grades 4, 5, or 6 to grades 6, 7, or 8	12,940	19.3%
Other grade spans	6,312	9.4%
Total	67,032	100.0%

*Note.* Adapted from “Digest of Educational Statistics: 2009” (NCES, 2010).

The grade-span configuration of schools within a district determines the number of school-to-school transitions students in that district will experience. The smaller the number of grades in each school within a K-12 system, the more transitions students will make during their schooling. A study by Alsbaugh (1998a) indicates that the more transitions a student makes, the worse the student performs, according to an analysis of the scores from the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests (MMAT). Students who attend the same school for longer periods of time tend to experience less loss of achievement upon transitioning into

a new school; thus, it is more beneficial for students to stay in each school for a longer period of time, as this may have a positive impact on student achievement (Alspaugh, 1998a).

According to Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman (2008), students who were subject to more than one school-to-school transition displayed poorer performance with respect to grades. A study by Alspaugh (1998a) found that students making a double transition experienced a greater loss of achievement in high school than those who transitioned into high school from a K-8 elementary school. Alspaugh (1998a) also found that as the number of students per grade increased, the students' achievement loss associated with the transition to high school also increased.

When a school is configured with a narrow grade-span, student turnover can present a problem since a large percentage of the student population is new to the school each year. It is difficult to develop school spirit or a sense of community when the students do not remain in one setting long enough to feel a level of comfort with the building, staff, and climate (Paglin & Fager, 1997). According to Renchler (2002), frequent student turnover adversely affects a school's identity and sense of community. Paglin and Fager (1997) and Cullen and Robes-Pina (2009) ascertain that schools with one or two grades present the biggest challenge of how to preserve a sense of continuity and stability when all or half of the student population turns over every year. Although most literature regarding grade-span configuration and its influence on student achievement, socialization, and school culture focuses on students in middle school, the significance of grade-span configuration can be noted across all grade levels.

Wren (2003) found that as the grade span configuration of a school increases, so does student achievement; the more grade levels a school services, the better the students perform.

According to Howley (2001), the total enrollment of a school does not determine “school size;” his definition of school size is determined by the number of students per grade. The trend towards narrower grade-span configurations generates situations in which the number of students per grade greatly increases, creating the tendency to construct larger schools which “damage educational equity for everyone” (Howley, 2002b, para. 35). “Every transition from one narrowly configured school to another seems to disrupt the social structure in which learning takes place, lowering achievement and participation for many students” (Howley, 2002b, para. 36).

When students remain in one school setting for a number of years, the educators with whom they learn take responsibility for their learning. Educators can discuss students with the teachers who taught them in the previous grade(s), and are available for questions from the students’ future educators. By analyzing the test results for sixth graders on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), Tucker and Andrada (1997) found that students’ test scores were higher when students remained in the same school the year prior to and the actual year of the administration of the assessment. These researchers compared the test results to those of students who attended a K-5 school, as opposed to a K-6 school. Students who entered a new school for sixth grade were not given the attention needed to prepare for the test by their fifth grade teachers; this resulted in poorer test results for the students who transitioned into a new school than the students who remained in the K-6 school for CMT testing (Tucker & Andrada, 1997).

In order to develop educational settings in which students are comfortable and educators really get to know their students well, a number of districts—especially in large urban cities—are reconfiguring their schools to house students from kindergarten through

grade 8 in one building (DeJong & Craig, 2002). This also provides an opportunity to create small school settings, which are defined by the number of students per grade level, not the total number of students housed in each school building. DeJong & Craig (2002) believe that the primary reasons for embracing a K-8 grade-span configuration is to foster greater articulation of curriculum from grades pre-K through grade 8 by causing fewer transitions for students throughout their education.

It is imperative that each district is cognizant of the impact of its grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions experienced by its students: on the students' sense of belonging in each school setting, on the continuity of, and articulation about, the curriculum across the district, and on student achievement.

### **Local Context**

Located in northern New Jersey, the Bearwood Township encompasses a total area of 70.5 square miles; 68.4 square miles of the township is land and 2.1 square miles is water (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Until a few decades ago, the Bearwood Township served as a summer lake community, and few of the residents lived in the township on a year-round basis. It is now considered primarily a “bedroom community,” because the majority of residents commute approximately 30 minutes via private vehicle to work on a daily basis (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Using data from the United States Census Bureau's 2007-2009 American Community Survey (ACS), the median age of its residents is 39.4 years, the population is nearly equally male and female, and approximately 25.5% of the residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor's or advanced college degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The ethnic makeup of the population is approximately 95.3% white, and 2.1% black or African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The median household income in 2009 was \$84,613, and the median single-family home was valued was \$293,300 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The residents are employed in a wide number of industries, although none of the professions employ a large percentage of the population: the largest percent of males (17%) are employed in construction and the largest percent of females (15%) are employed in educational services (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to the same ACS survey, at the present time, the Bearwood Township School District is the sixth largest employer in the county.

As shown in Table 2, data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that the population of Bearwood Township increased from 1,407 persons to 2,155 persons from 1940 to 1960; that was an increase of only 748 persons—an average of a mere 374 per decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, the township population increased over two and one-half times from 1960 to 1970, rising at an average annual rate of 10.89%; the population increased again by over two and one-half times during the 1970-1980 period, an increase of over 10,000 persons at the annual rate of 10.4%; and growth slowed from 1980 to 1990 to an average annual rate of 2.67 %. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) This slowed rate, however, still produced a growth of 4,909 persons over the decade and increased the size of the under-20 population substantially. The township grew again between 1990 and 2000, increasing the population by 3,475 people over the decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Coupled with the population growth was an increase in the number of children residing in the township, which had an enormous impact on the Bearwood School District. The population growth in the township slowed and is now declining; there are presently 23,943 persons residing in Bearwood (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Table 2

*Change in Population of Bearwood Township*

Year	Population	Change	Change (in percent)
1940	1,407		
1950	1,548	141	10.0
1960	2,155	607	39.2
1970	6,059	3,904	181.2
1980	16,302	10,243	169.1
1990	21,211	4,909	30.1
2000	24,686	3,475	11.6
2009	23,943	-743	-0.21

Beginning in 1958, the Bearwood Township School District housed all of its elementary school students in the Bearwood Consolidated School; its high school students attended high school in neighboring towns. However, Bearwood Township's phenomenal growth was soon reflected in its school system, and the Bearwood Township Board of Education was forced to embark on a massive building program, which resulted in the construction of five additional schools, including a high school, between 1968 and 1988. The students attended one of the three elementary schools school for kindergarten through grade 4, after which they transitioned to one of the two middle schools for grades 5 through 8. The district built a high school for the students in grades 9 through 12. The schools were previously configured as follows:

- Primary School I housed students in kindergarten through grade 4;
- Primary School II housed students in kindergarten through grade 4;
- Primary School III housed students in kindergarten through grade 4;
- Middle School I housed students in grades 5 through 8;
- Middle School II housed students in grades 5 through 8;
- Bearwood High School housed students in grades 9 through 12.

The Bearwood School District revised its grade-span configuration in September 1994 in an effort to balance enrollment at the K-8 level and to maximize the use of the existing facilities. The schools are presently organized as follows:

- Primary School I houses students in preschool through grade 1;
- Primary School II-A houses half of the students in grades 2 through 4;
- Primary School II-B houses the other half of the students in grades 2 through 4;
- Middle School I houses students in grades 5 through 6;
- Middle School II houses students in grades 7 through 8;
- Bearwood High School houses students in grades 9 through 12.

One of the reasons provided by the district for the reconfiguration was that the new configuration would aid in the elimination of the competition between the two middle schools, which both housed grades 5 through 8 in the original configuration. According to the former superintendent, the community had compared the schools and viewed them as being in competition with one another (personal communication, October 18, 2010). In addition, there were many conflicts between the students when the populations of the two middle schools merged into Bearwood Township High School for ninth grade. Thus, with the exception of

the students in grades 2, 3, and 4, every student in the district now attends school with their grade-level peers for their entire school career.

None of the schools have been given the classification of “elementary” or “intermediate.” Four of the schools were built on the same road with the oldest school in the district (Primary School I) just around the corner and the high school three miles away. There are no “neighborhood” schools per se; the only time students attend school with their “neighborhood” friends is during grades 2 to 4 when they are bussed to two different schools at the same location, across the road from one another. The district was averaging between 400-500 students per grade level in 1994, at the time of the reconfiguration decision, and had two buildings remaining after creating a pre-kindergarten through first grade school. Students attend one of the two schools based solely upon their home residence; the student population of each school is developed by the Director of Transportation. The bus routes are developed so that the school populations are balanced in grades 2 through 4. For the other grades, all students attend school with their peers of the same grade level. As a result of the present grade-span configuration, the students in the Bearwood Township School District spend an average of two years in each school setting and make five school-to-school transitions during their educational career.

According to the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) (n.d.) website, the District Factor Group (DFG) for the Bearwood Township School District is FG. DFGs were first developed in 1975 for the purpose of comparing students’ performance on statewide assessments across demographically-similar school districts (NJDOE, n.d.). Based on data from the United States Census, the District Factor Groups describe the socioeconomic characteristics of the local school districts and are grouped from lowest to highest in categories: A, B, CD, DE, FG, GH, I and J (NJ DOE, n.d.).

As depicted in Table 3, the Bearwood Township School District educated a total of 5,366 students in the 2000-2001 school year. By 2010-2011, the number of students declined to a total of 4,013 students. Although there has been a steady increase in the number of preschool students being educated in the district since 2002-2003, the class of 2007 was the largest graduating class of the decade. The Bearwood Township School District has seen a decline of 1,353 students over a ten year period. With the decrease in enrollment, there will be some decisions to be made by the district in the near future.

Table 3

*Bearwood Township School District Enrollment for 2000-2011*

Grade	2000- 2001	2001- 2002	2002- 2003	2003- 2004	2004- 2005	2005- 2006	2006- 2007	2007- 2008	2008- 2009	2009- 2010
PS			21	32	44	36	63	54	65	59
K	330	307	298	304	303	285	315	260	262	231
1	370	371	347	332	319	314	290	268	261	259
2	409	379	383	347	324	302	314	320	307	280
3	445	420	390	398	348	331	297	283	282	267
4	472	445	433	390	405	352	330	310	311	309
5	442	487	445	443	382	400	342	329	305	277
6	484	443	496	462	459	381	400	343	325	311
7	432	490	435	494	466	441	381	387	333	296
8	460	415	476	436	493	459	437	375	387	325
Total	3844	3757	3724	3638	3543	3301	3169	2929	2838	2614

Table 3

*Bearwood Township School District Enrollment for 2000-2011*

Grade	2000- 2001	2001- 2002	2002- 2003	2003- 2004	2004- 2005	2005- 2006	2006- 2007	2007- 2008	2008- 2009	2009- 2010
PS-8										
9	417	457	403	456	421	457	435	395	353	306
10	385	423	428	405	455	412	450	430	388	347
11	367	351	379	427	391	448	400	432	428	357
12	353	354	353	368	423	387	453	389	423	389
Total	1522	1585	1563	1656	1690	1704	1738	1646	1592	1399
9-12										
Grand	5366	5342	5287	5294	5233	5005	4907	4575	4430	4013
Total										

*Note. Adapted from Superintendent's Files*

The steady decline in student enrollment may have an impact on important decisions made by the Bearwood Township School District. There might need to be a reduction in staff, and deciding which staff members will be transferred or eliminated is a weighty decision for the Board of Education. In addition, with the reduction of the number of students comes the opportunity for the district to be proactive rather than reactive—to make educationally-sound changes necessary to better prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To that end, it is important for the Bearwood Township School District to seek the input of the stakeholders and staff members before moving forward.

## **Exploratory Research**

Based on an interest in the effects of the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions in the Bearwood Township School District, this researcher conducted exploratory research within the district to determine whether further study of the issue is warranted. Four areas of focus for the exploratory research included: a telephone interview with the superintendent, an interview with one of the Student Resource Officers from the Bearwood Police Department, a focus group comprised of guidance counselors from across the district, and an on-line survey of faculty and staff members of the Bearwood Township School District using SurveyMonkey.

The researcher concluded that the present grade-span configuration is an area of concern for many of the staff members who work with the students of the district. Some of the issues identified included the impact of frequent school-to-school transitions on student achievement, the lack of communication among the teachers of the district, and the need for continuity of instruction across the curriculum.

A common concern expressed by those interviewed and surveyed was that the students throughout the district do not become sufficiently comfortable within each school environment before they transition into a new school. The staff members also expressed that it is difficult for them to get to know the students. This gives rise to a “disconnect” between schools and a loss of the sense of community within the schools. Another concern was the lack of role models for students, since every student in the school is the same age and on the same grade level. Also notable is that many of the participants referred to each school as a “building,” rather than as a “school.”

## **Statement of Problem**

The Bearwood Township School District is configured with one primary school for students in preschool through first grade, two additional primary schools for students in second through fourth grades, a middle school for students in fifth and sixth grade, another middle school for students in seventh and eighth grades, and one high school for students in ninth through twelfth grades. The district's grade-span configuration requires students to make five school-to-school transitions during their educational experience in the district. Exploratory research on the topic of grade-span configuration and the subsequent school-to-school transitions indicates a number of concerns expressed by the faculty, staff and administrators. First, frequent student turnover as students transition from school to school results in most schools losing half of their student population each year; there are indications that this may have an impact on the sense of belonging or sense of community in each school setting. Additionally, the educators in the district also express a concern that the grade-span configuration has an influence on communication, continuity and collaboration between the schools, especially as it affects the curriculum. This is perceived to have a negative impact on student achievement; there is a prevailing concern that students are not scoring as well on standardized tests as would be indicative of a district of this size and caliber.

## **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions on students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and student academic achievement in the Bearwood Township School District. Each of these topics will be explored in this study to determine the

current overall quality of the educational experience for the students of the Bearwood Township School District.

This action research study will use both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data will be obtained by conducting surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Quantitative data will be garnered from student scores on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) by Pearson, Inc. for students in kindergarten through grade 2, and the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) for students in grades 3 through 8. Scores from the end-of-the-year math assessments created by teachers will also be reviewed.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be investigated in this study:

1. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?
2. How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood Township School District?
3. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?

### **Significance of Study**

This study will assist the Bearwood Township School District administrative team to more clearly understand the impact of the present grade-span configuration on the staff and students of the district. Albeit a significant component of the district, the configuration is seldom discussed and its impact on students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and students' academic achievement has not been thoroughly investigated. While student achievement and the continuity of curriculum and instruction have been major areas of

focus in the district's efforts for the past few years, the impact of the grade-span configuration on education was rarely discussed. The results of this study will assist the administrative team in becoming more knowledgeable about an often-overlooked topic, which may result in more discussions about grade-span configuration, and improved articulation between schools, especially as it relates to curriculum and the significance of effective transition programs.

### **Summary**

The students of the Bearwood Township School District attend five schools during their educational experience in the district. As a result, students must make five school-to-school transitions, predominantly after spending only two years in one building, which creates frequent turnover of students for each school, which can be difficult for staff members, and adds additional stress for students and their families. Exploratory research into this topic has established that the present grade-span configuration is an area needing further study. It is the objective of each school district to provide an optimal learning environment for its students; this study will enable more in-depth analysis of the effects of the present grade-span configuration in the Bearwood Township School District.

### **Operational Definitions**

Academic achievement (or student achievement): How much students learn or how well a student meets the standards set by the institution or by the government. Academic achievement can be measured by teacher-made tests, test scores on standardized tests, honor roll membership, subject-area achievement, and the assessment of higher-order thinking skills (Cotton, 1996). In this study, the data selected for analysis will be derived from the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) developed by Pearson, Inc., a teacher-made end-of-the-year math assessment

for students in kindergarten through grade 2, and the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) results for students in grades 3 through 8.

**Accountability:** Being held responsible for; such as teachers being accountable for student performance.

**Cluster schools:** Schools which are broken into small arrangements such as K-2, 3-5 or other variations (K-1, 2-3, 4-5 and single grade schools such as kindergarten centers).

**Curriculum:** Content to be taught to students, and the learning expectations and objectives for each subject area.

**Curriculum alignment:** Coordination of the standards, curricula, and assessments; provides a shared vision of specific goals to be accomplished within a specific period of time

**Curriculum articulation:** Communication about the curriculum between grade levels, as well as between schools.

**Curriculum continuity:** A smooth and logical transition both within and between grade levels, which occurs when sending and receiving teachers are informed about the topics, materials, skills, understandings, and teaching styles. Curriculum continuity enables a more seamless transition and better planning.

**“Elemiddle” schools:** K-8 schools which implement the middle-level best practices within the elementary school setting (Hough, 1995).

**Extracurricular participation:** Student participation in activities that are outside the classroom and usually held after school.

**Grade level configuration:** the number and range of grade levels that a school comprises; in terms of this research, it is synonymous with “grade-span configuration.”

**Grade size:** The number of students in a specific grade level within a school.

Horizontal articulation: Continuity of the outcomes, teaching strategies, materials, and evaluation methods within a grade level.

Instruction: How the curriculum is to be taught; teaching practices used to educate students about the curriculum.

Middle-level best practices: Practices aligned with the child-centered philosophy of the elementary school within a middle school setting (Hough, 2005).

School connectedness: Sense of continuity and stability for students in a school setting.

School size: The ratio of students per grade level to the number of grades offered, as defined by Howley, Strange, & Bickel (2000).

School-to-school transition: the movement from one school to another as a result of the promotion to the next grade level which is located in another school; sometimes referred to as a *transition* in this study

Sense of belonging: Sense of continuity, acceptance, respect, and stability for students in a school setting (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2006).

Smaller schools: Schools with a larger grade-span are sometimes referred to as smaller schools because there are fewer students per grade (Howley, 2002b).

Student achievement (or academic achievement): How much students learn or how well a student meets the standards set by the institution or by the government. Academic achievement can be measured by teacher-made tests, test scores on standardized tests, honor roll membership, subject-area achievement, and the assessment of higher-order thinking skills (Cotton, 1996).

Student engagement: The extent to which students identify and interact with their schools; student engagement is often focused on student participation in academic and non-academic activities.

Student turnover: The number of students transferring from one school to another. As defined by Renchler (2002), schools with a narrow grade-span configuration may lose 50% of their students each year, as one entire grade level (which comprises one-half of the school population in a school containing only two grade levels) transitions into a new school setting.

Transition: A student's movement from one school to another as a result of promotion to the next grade level located in another educational setting; sometimes referred to as a "school-to-school transition" in this study. It can also mean the transition into a school setting for the first time from home environment.

Transition programs: Activities that bring administrators, counselors, and teachers together to learn about the programs, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools; transition programs focus on students (and their families) to ease students' transitions into their new school settings.

Vertical articulation: Continuity of the outcomes, teaching strategies, materials, and evaluation methods between grade levels and, at times, schools.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

The effects of grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions have become a focal point for districts in recent years (Craig, 2006). The configuration of a district's grade levels remains one aspect of the educational system that is still within the jurisdiction of each individual school district. Since districts are being held more accountable for student achievement since the implementation of No Child Left Behind, the relationship between the grade-span configuration and the quality of students' educational experience within districts has captured the attention of some administrators and school boards. "In an effort to address the NCLB-mandated testing process, one of the key issues to be considered is how to best configure student populations to maximize all aspects of the educational setting while simultaneously maximizing student achievement; one aspect is grade-span configuration" (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010, p. 273). In the current age of school system accountability, state mandates to improve student achievement are examining a variety of factors believed to be associated with student learning; one of these factors is grade-span configuration (Hough, 2004). "Configuring schools by grade is a practice influenced by history, psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. With all of these social sciences to draw on for knowledge and direction, configuring schools remains a process with inexact guidelines" (Seller, 2004, p. 2). According to Renchler (2002), every grade configuration has its own strengths and weaknesses.

The purpose of this mixed-methods research study is to explore the effects of grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions on the students' sense of belonging within the schools, the continuity of, and articulation about, the curriculum between the schools, and the

academic achievement of students. The chapter will provide an overview of the educational literature on grade-span configurations and the subsequent school-to-school transitions for students, and available research on the impact of grade-span configurations and school-to-school transitions on the students' sense of belonging within a school, the continuity of, and articulation about, the curriculum between schools, and students' academic achievement. Since transitions are inevitable regardless of grade-span configuration, methods of easing students' school-to-school transitions are also detailed in this chapter, as well as a description of the existing transition programs that have been used in many districts.

### **Grade-Span Configurations**

A district's decisions about the grade-span configuration of its schools are often based on geography, enrollment numbers, economics, or politics, rather than the academic needs of students (Erling, 2006). Grade-span configurations have been created primarily with a reactive rather than a proactive approach. As Renchler (2000) notes, "the dearth of empirical research stems from the fact that grade configuration is to some degree out of the hands of administrators who run the schools. The exigencies of geographic locations, student populations, limited finances and community preferences among other factors often dictate the grade spans within a school" (p.1).

**Definition.** A school's grade-span configuration relates to the range of grades it contains in the building. Grade-span configuration can be defined as "the number and range of grade levels that exist within an individual school" (Grade-Span Configurations, 2005). Specific guidelines for schools configuring grade-spans do not exist (Seller, 2004). Although there is no exact science for deciding how to configure schools within a district, the configurations of grade spans have been altered throughout the history of education in the United States.

**Historical Background.** Schools were organized as one-room school houses serving the local community until they merged into larger schools when the graded school system was introduced in the mid-1800s (Dove et al., 2010). Throughout the early 1900s, the majority of schools in the United States continued to be one-teacher schools, typically serving a small local community and enrolling about 30 children in the elementary grades (Howley, 2002a). As schools gained students, schools with grades 1 through 8 were the most common; attendance in high school was rare when the United States was primarily an agricultural society (Dove et al., 2010). After 1915, small one-teacher schoolhouses were consolidated through the efforts of Professor Ellwood Patterson Cubberley of Teachers College, who encouraged the creation of larger schools for students in grades 1 through 8 in central locations to provide better education for students through the use of additional resources (Howley, 2002a). The movement toward the consolidation of one-teacher schools was also facilitated by students being able to travel longer distances to schools due to an improved road system following World War I (Howley, 2002a).

As schools continued to grow, school districts were created to help facilitate the shift to a more centralized school system (Seller, 2004). With the passage of the child labor laws in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, more students needed to be prepared for entrance into secondary schools; and as the country changed from primarily agricultural to industrial industries, children needed increased education in order to secure employment (Seller, 2004). The reason for the establishment of the primary-secondary school structure predominant in the 20th century was primarily economic, because it helped move children into the labor force (Renchler, 2000).

In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education recommended that the six-year elementary school be followed by a six year high school configuration; subsequently, students needed to be better prepared for the demands of high school. In some

districts, the Commission's recommendation created the 6-3-3 configuration, with separate junior and senior high schools (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003). In others, a growing elementary enrollment pushed the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students into junior high school (Craig, 2006). The concept of the junior high school was credited to Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University in 1909, and was intended to serve as a transitional period between the "sheltered" elementary school and the "more demanding" high school (Wilder & Murphree, 2008). This configuration remained popular throughout the 1950s and 1960s until William M. Alexander proposed reorganizing the junior high, which resulted in the present-day middle school (McEwin, 1983). The junior high school typically contained grades seven through nine while the middle school model typically consists of grades six through eight (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Following the establishment of the National Middle School Association (NMSA), junior highs were replaced at a rapid rate by middle schools during the 1960s and 1970s, although it was not until the 1980s that true educational reform at the middle school took place (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

The more recent history of education indicates a renewed interest in grade-span configuration. Although public education in the United States is a function of the individual states, since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965, the federal government has assumed a larger and larger role in public education (Dove et al, 2010). In January 2002, with the reauthorization of ESEA, No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB) became law and has had a profound impact on the education of every student (Dove et al., 2010). NCLB contains "four principles of educational reform: (1) stronger accountability for results; (2) expanded flexibility and local control; (3) expanded options for parents; and, (4) emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work" (Dove et al., 2010). NCLB demands academic gains in return for federal funding and sanctions schools that do not meet Adequate Yearly

Progress (AYP) (Dove et al., 2010). NCLB has caused schools to investigate methods to improve academic achievement through a number of initiatives, including the examination of patterns of school organization and the exploration of grade configuration (Lashway, 2000). According to Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein, and Zabel (2009), “reorganizing the grade spans of elementary and middle schools is a particularly attractive reform mechanism because it is relatively inexpensive compared to other organizational reforms...and, undoubtedly, because it is a ‘lever of change’ within the control of the district themselves” (p. 2). Thus, as districts consider grade-span reconfiguration as a method of improving student performance, important questions must be asked, and research must be undertaken to understand the possible effects.

**Investigating configuring grade-spans.** Paglin and Fager (1997) contend that important questions should be answered before districts make any decisions about grade-span configurations. Among those questions, the following are most pertinent to this study:

1. Will the configuration likely increase or decrease parent involvement?
2. How many students will be enrolled at each grade level and what implications does this have for course offerings and instructional grouping?
3. Are any data available that suggest whether the configuration might boost achievement scores for a significant portion of the community’s students or depress the performance of others?
4. How many points of transition and articulation will occur in the K-12 system?  
How will these be addressed? What mechanisms or channels of communication will be used to ensure that students move smoothly through the system, in terms of both academics and social and emotional adjustment?

5. Does the configuration allow for interactions between a range of age levels and a variety of grouping options?
6. How will the presence or absence of older students affect younger students in a particular school?
7. Is the design of the school building(s) suited to managing students in the selected grade span?

Paglin and Fager (1997) identify three main issues related to grade span configuration: the appropriateness of grouping certain grades together, the number of grades included in the school and the number of classrooms within each grade, and the number of transitions students would be required to make during their K-12 education. However, Paglin and Fager (2007) caution, “No particular sequence of grade spans is perfect or in itself guarantees student achievement or social adjustment” (p. 12). It is imperative that districts decide on the best grade configuration for their individual district; there are currently thirty different grade-span configurations being currently utilized in the United States (Paglin & Fager, 2007).

**Current configurations.** Prior to 1970, the dominant grade configuration in the United States incorporated grades K-6 (or 1-6), 7-9, and 10-12; this configuration is known as a 7 (or 6)-3-3 structural pattern. In the 1970s and 1980s, the grade span shifted to K-5, 6-8, and 9-12; this is referred to as a “three-tier” or 6-3-4 organizational plan that is currently the configuration most utilized by school districts across the United States. Many smaller school districts choose K-7 or K-8 followed by grades 8-12 or 9-12, referred to as “two tier” organizational plans since the students attend one elementary school followed by one high school. K-12 schools were once utilized in districts, but most of them have now adopted two

tier organizational plans so their students transition into high school before entering college (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003).

Cluster schools are broken into one, two or three grade levels and have been designed for the consolidation of teachers and resources for specific grade levels. Some cluster schools include grades K-1, K-2, 2-3, 3-5, 4-5 or single grade levels in some elementary schools (Craig, 2006). One advantage of the cluster school concept is the consolidation of teachers and resources for specific grade levels. Disadvantages include loss of parental involvement when parents/guardians have children attending a number of different schools, the loss of older students as mentors, and an increase in the number of school-to-school transitions (Craig, 2006). The Princeton Plan, which was devised by Princeton University 50 years ago to address desegregation, modified the neighborhood school model into schools grouped by grade levels and is a type of cluster school configuration (Reeves, 2005).

According to Howley (2002b), because these cluster schools are often comprised of students from only one or two grade levels, they can be among the largest in the nation, if the number of students per grade level is used as the determinant of school size. Merely reducing the total enrollment in a school by creating narrower grade span configurations actually creates “larger” schools (Howley, 2002b). In addition, it can become difficult to preserve a sense of school identity and to provide continuity and stability for students in schools where the students transition in and out at such a rapid rate (Renchler, 2002). In these cluster schools, all or half of the population may turn over every year. Some of the more familiar grade-span configurations are as follows:

***Primary and preprimary schools.*** Primary schools typically contain grades K-2 or K-3 and were developed to provide a more developmentally appropriate education. They fall

under the “cluster schools” heading. Schools with these configurations make it easier to match students with teachers that complement students’ learning styles and provide increased opportunities for teacher collaboration and grade-level mentoring, since there are many teachers per grade level in one school setting. A study by Burkam, Michaels, and Lee (2007) found that preprimary school students (students who attend schools with only preschool and kindergarten students) have been shown to experience less growth than students who attend schools with older students. Some reasons for this finding may include that the kindergartners do not have the opportunity to interact with older students and that their teachers may not be aligning the curriculum with the first-grade teachers’ expectations (Burkam et al., 2007). While these primary and preprimary schools can serve an important role in the education of the youngest students, they are not without their critics.

***Middle schools.*** The majority of literature regarding grade configuration focuses on the middle grades and is primarily concerned with the methods and organizational structures employed for students in this middle grade span (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Formerly known as junior high schools, middle schools generally contain two or three grade levels, usually grades 6, 7 and 8, although the placement of sixth grade students is often debated. According to Hough (2003a), “The most prudent approach to the grade span configuration issue is to develop a bona fide middle school first, then determine which children are at the young adolescent stage before assigning them to grades in that organizational structure. Too often in the past, the reverse has been tried...” (p. 3). Middle school was referred to as the “bridge institution between elementary and high school” by William Alexander, who is considered to be the father of the modern middle school (Reeves, 2005, par. 18).

According to *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), middle schools should focus on three essential elements: excellence, responsiveness to the unique needs of young adolescents, and social equity. When these elements are not implemented, the middle school may be just another name for school structure once known as the “junior high” or “intermediate” school (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). To keep the important role of the middle school at its forefront, the mission of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) promotes the establishment and continuation of these institutions, which were designed to serve the young adolescent. The AMLE website provides links to a variety of useful sources that offer information and guidance to policymakers and stakeholders regarding effective middle grades practices, and strongly believe in offering a separate and distinct educational experience for adolescents (AMLE, n.d.).

Middle schools reached their peak in the 1980s, but began to fall from favor in the 1990s, predominantly due to too much emphasis on the social-emotional needs of the students and not enough on the academics (Mizelle, 2005). “The academic mission of middle schools frequently took a back seat to addressing students’ social-emotional needs. It was not until the schools experienced the full impact of the accountability, standards, and assessment movements that many of them adopted a meaningful academic focus” (Mizelle, 2005, par. 14). In the 1960s, the paradigm was, ‘think high schools, build junior high schools. Today the paradigm is ‘think middle schools and build elementary and high schools’” (DeJong & Craig, 2002).

**K-8 schools.** K-8 schools have been labeled “elemiddle” schools by Hough (2005), if they implement the middle-level best practices within the elementary school setting; Hough

(2002) favors this school configuration because it eliminates one transition for students (from elementary into middle school) and more easily facilitates the child-oriented programs conducive to young adolescent learning. Students in K-8 schools have a strong sense of community and have been known to have fewer discipline issues (Hough, 2005). According to Howley (2002a), middle-level students can be well-served in K-8 schools. Based on his definition of small schools, K-8 schools are among the smallest, since they serve fewer students per grade level than other configurations (Howley, 2002a). “Because the middle school philosophy is more closely aligned with the child-centered philosophy of the elementary school than with the subject-centered approach of the high school, middle school practices are more acceptable and easier to achieve with elementary-trained teachers” (Hough, 2003b, p.1).

The popularity of K-8 schools declined from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, but they have become the configuration of choice—especially in large cities—in recent years (Hough, 2005). Many larger cities are returning to this configuration, including Cleveland, Cincinnati, Philadelphia and Baltimore, and are experiencing success with the K-8 schools (Hough, 2005). According to Diller (2010), students perform better academically in schools with more grade levels; the more years a student attends the same school, the better known he or she will become to the principal and faculty. Parents have more time to form a bond with the school, especially if they have more than one child enrolled (Diller, 2010). According to Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein, and Zabel (2009), schools with more grade levels produce students who perform better. This finding was based upon the academic achievement of eighth grade students from New York City; students who attended eighth grade in a K-8 school outperformed their peers who attended schools with shorter grade-spans.

However, the creation of K-8 schools violates professional norms about developmentally appropriate education (Howley, 2002a). According to Pardini (2002), critics of K-8 schools believe that there are fewer resources to enrich the middle school level, and reason that students at the middle school level should have their own unique educational experience that is not available in a K-8 school setting. In addition, some students benefit socially from transitions if they have had few or no social ties in their previous school; transitions can also serve as a new beginning (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). The debate over the value of the K-8 configuration continues to yield both positives and negatives for students and districts.

### **School Size**

School size is not determined by the total student population. Grade-span configurations affect school size because the configuration determines the number of students assigned to each grade level. “Schools of differing grade-span configuration but the same enrollment are not really the same size in terms of their impacts on students; the one with fewer grades is larger” (Howley et al., 2000).

**Definition.** Schools with a larger grade span are considered “smaller schools” due to the fact that there are fewer students per grade. Although narrower grade span configurations cater to the separate developmental needs of primary, elementary, and secondary school students, they are actually creating larger schools (Howley, 2002a). “Students do best in places where they can’t slip through the cracks, where they are known by their teachers, and where their improved learning becomes the collective mission of a number of trusted adults” (Wasley, 2002, para. 22). Howley (2002b) advises that a total school enrollment of 1,000

students should be the absolute upper limit for high schools and that a total of 500 students should be the absolute upper limit for K-8 or K-6 elementary schools.

**Historical Background.** Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most U.S. schools were small because they had a broad grade-span and fewer students per grade. Over the years, small schools have been consolidated into bigger ones, based on the belief that larger schools (with an increased student population at each grade level) are able to provide a more comprehensive curriculum, in a more cost-effective manner (Stevenson, 2006b). In addition to the recommendations by Edward Cubberley of Teachers College, the Committee of Ten in 1894 (which focused on improving the implementation of the mathematics curriculum) and the Conant Report created in 1959 (which focused on the science curriculum), proponents of the school consolidation movement suggested that schools would be more efficient and effective if they were larger (Howley, 2002a; Stevenson, 2006a; Wasley, 2002). This began the move towards larger schools in the United States. By means of comparison, in 1930, 262,000 U.S. public schools served 26 million students; in 2010, approximately 98,700 U.S. public schools served about 50 million students (NCES, 2010).

**Effects of grade-span configurations on school size.** For many years, some educators struggled to ensure that students would be educated within cluster school settings, where they could receive a developmentally appropriate education, particularly for early childhood instruction; this created large schools with the number of students per grade being higher than it had ever been (Howley, 2002a). As stated by Howley (2002a), “Large size is the price for expertise” (p. 26). Howley explains, “The evidence rather clearly suggests that the tendency to create narrow grade-span configurations reinforces the bad habit of building

larger and larger schools. Larger schools damage educational equity for everyone...” (2002a, p. 30).

One method of creating smaller schools is by reconfiguring grade levels so that students get the benefits from attendance in a “small school” (such as a K-8 school with a larger grade span), since educators are given the opportunity to bond with and teach students over a number of years. Although the cost of educating students is a constant area of concern for a district, the reconfiguration of schools to incorporate wider grade spans enables students to derive the benefits of a small school “feeling” within a large school “setting.” Students develop a greater sense of belonging in smaller sized schools than in larger sized schools; when schools are smaller, students get to know their teachers and their classmates on a more personal level (E. Anderman, 2002).

Bickel, Howley, Williams, and Glascock (2001) found that schools with broader grade spans provide equal levels of performance at a lower cost than schools with restricted grade spans (such as cluster schools). One factor behind this finding is that schools with narrowly configured grades actually create larger schools by housing more students per grade level in the same school. With the increase of school size, as defined by Howley (2002b), student achievement decreases. Another factor impacting the lower cost is that inclusion of all grade levels in the same setting fosters a common organizational purpose, and thwarts the usual articulation problems that characterize relationships among elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools; the broader grade span configuration provides a seamless articulation of the curriculum between all grade levels (Bickel et al., 2001). Thus, the broader grade-span configuration is viewed as the best configuration for a district, in terms of fiscal responsibility; a more seamless transition creates improved student academic achievement

and fewer resources devoted to repairing discontinuity (Bickel et al., 2001). Educators are continually looking for strategies that will enable all students to succeed on the new assessments and enhance students' learning opportunities; creating small schools may be one such strategy (Wasley, 2002).

**Summary of School Size.** The grade-span configuration of schools in the United States has been altered over the years by fluctuating student populations, the development of educational theories, and available educational structures. Districts also vary greatly in the student populations served by each of their schools. Grade-span configuration is a subject that is growing in popularity as districts focus on improving student test scores in the most logical ways for their student populations. As districts look ahead to pursue the most educationally-sound environments for their students, they must answer the questions posed by Paglin and Fager (1997) and do what is best for their communities. They must also consider the issues created by the various grade-span configurations, and one of the most important is school-to-school transitions.

### **School-to-School Transitions**

“Transitions between schools are a by-product of the organization into distinct schooling forms—popular configurations of grades into distinctive school types...” (Weiss & Bearman, 2007, p. 397). Some researchers argue that it is not the grade-span configuration itself, but the subsequent school-to-school transitions which create a significant impact on the education of the students within a district (Hooper, 2002; Howley, 2002a; Renchler, 2000). The effects of school-to-school transitions created by various grade-span configurations are the main focus of this section.

**Definition.** A school-to-school transition is defined as the movement of a student from one school building to another. It is a term typically used in education to refer to the significant

shifts that students encounter before, during, and after their school experience (Fleischer, 2010). As a result, the grade-span configuration of a district determines the number of school-to-school transitions that students will experience in their educational career (Brown, 2004). School-to-school transitions are determined by a student's age and/or when the student has concluded one phase and is ready to begin the next (Westminster Institute of Education, 2006).

**Research findings.** Students make many transitions during their years of schooling; these transitions are usually major events in the lives of students and their families (Schumacher, 1998). According to Akos (2006), school-to-school transitions can have a profound impact on students academically, socially, and psychologically; however, not all students have the same response following a transition. Students who transition to a new school encounter a new building, new teachers, new administrators, new rules of conduct, and (in some cases) a new student population. While this can be unsettling and worrisome for some students, for others, it provides an opportunity for a new beginning and is a welcome change. Whether students react in a positive or negative manner, transitions between schools can serve as turning points for youth (Weiss & Bearman, 2007).

School-to-school transition research began with the pioneering efforts of Simmons, Blyth and their colleagues in the public schools of Milwaukee in the mid- to late-1970s (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Blyth, Simmons, and Bush (1978) found that the transition into seventh grade was experienced differently by girls, depending upon the type of school environment they were attending. Seventh-grade girls in K-8 schools were more confident, participated in more activities and felt less anonymous, while seventh-grade girls who transitioned into junior high felt less positive, experienced decreased participation in activities, and felt a high degree of anonymity within their school environments (Blyth et al., 1978).

“Simmons and Blyth attributed their findings to the greater intimacy of the K-to-8 environment, to students having greater opportunity to be ‘top dog’ in their schools for longer periods, and to their not having to face the stress of school transition until they were developmentally more suited for it” (Offenberg, 2001, p. 24). With the trailblazing research begun by Blyth et al. (1978), the field of grade-span configurations and subsequent school-to-school transitions became an area of interest for the educational community.

**Transition challenges.** Weiss and Bearman (2007) contend that transitions can be stressful, are sometimes disruptive to the social structure in which learning takes place, and may have a detrimental effect on students’ well-being. Transitioning from one school to another appears to disrupt the social structure, lower academic achievement, and reduce involvement for many students (Howley, 2002a). With each transition, students must adapt to a new school culture with its own academic and social expectations, and this can be chaotic and stressful (Turner, 2007). Akos (2004b) states that there are three separate but interrelated categories of school transitions: academic, procedural, and social. Although this research focused primarily on the transition from middle school to high school, some of its findings might be generalized to transitions into other school settings. Academic concerns primarily focus on coping with increased homework and more difficult courses; procedural concerns involve navigating a larger school environment and coping with multiple classes taught by different teachers; social concerns involve making new friends and fitting in, as well as coping with bullies or older students (Akos, 2004b). According to Alsbaugh (1998a), students experience a substantial loss of self-esteem and self-perception during transitions, which may be an underlying cause of students’ academic decline at the time of transitions into a new school.

Students “in transition can develop both overt (e.g., stomachaches, loss of appetite, nightmares) and covert (e.g., low self-esteem, low motivation, less classroom responsiveness) stress symptoms” (Turner, 2007, par. 2). These symptoms sometimes manifest themselves in a decline in student attendance, as found by Crockett, Petersen, Grabert, Schulenberg & Ebata, 1989, or declines in academic progress, noted by Alspaugh (1998a). The complexities associated with the physical transitions of puberty experienced simultaneously with a school transition can create even more stress in a young student’s life and heighten the negative outcomes of a school-to-school transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004a). If school transitions occur at an age when adolescents have not yet developed sufficient personal coping resources, they may be even more disruptive than transitions occurring at a younger or older age (Akos & Galassi, 2004a). “Transitions that coincide with other changes requiring substantial adaptive efforts (e.g., puberty or the development of heterosexual relationships) may overload the adolescent’s capacity to cope” (Crockett et al., 1989, p. 184). Thus, students between the ages of 10 and 14 may need more attention by school staff members at the times of school-to-school transitions as physical changes within the students may impact the school-to-school transition process.

***Multiple transitions.*** Linnenbrink (2010) found that transitions appear to be more damaging for students if they occur more than once. Researchers Seidman et al., (1994) refer to making two transitions as “double jeopardy.” Additional research by Alspaugh (1998a) found that students who transitioned from multiple elementary schools and merged into one middle school experienced greater achievement loss compared to those students who transitioned from a single elementary school into one middle school, known as a “pyramid transition.” When the reverse configuration is present and school districts have students transitioning from one school into a number of different schools, friendships and other social ties can be severed if students are

transitioned into schools separate from their friends (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). In summary, school-to-school transitions are complex, especially when other factors, such as puberty or multiple transitions, are involved; a single transition between schools may be stressful, but when other issues are added, school-to-school transitions can have a more profound impact on students and thus their academic performance.

Some school-to-school transitions have immediate implications, while others have a more long-lasting impact. According to Alspaugh (1995), “High school dropout rates are positively related to school size and negatively related to the high school grade span” (p. 1). Alspaugh (1998b) also found that multiple transitions were a significant predictor of subsequent high school dropouts and that achievement loss during the transition from middle school to high school was a strong predictor of high-achieving students subsequently leaving college. If educators are not aware of, and attentive to, the impact of school-to-school transitions on students, the long-term effects can be significantly negative.

**Transition advantages.** Although transitions have been determined to have a negative impact on the educational experience of many students, this is not always the case. At times, transitions can prove to be beneficial to the educational experience of students. Turner (2007) found that transitioning between schools can be challenging and full of new hope for some students. Students with limited social ties to other students in their former school setting may discover that they are more connected after a school-to-school transition; a transition can be a “fresh start” for some students (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). They further conclude that students who are strong academically and socially do not suffer as a result of transitions, and those with “more checkered social, academic, and behavioral pasts could benefit” (Weiss & Bearman, 2007 p. 417). Not all students struggle with school-to-school transitions. Students with a strong

foundation in their current school have a less difficult time transitioning to a new school environment (Eccles, Lord, McCarthy, Harold, Wigfield and Yoon, 1991). The greater the extent to which students have confidence in their abilities in academic, social and athletic domains, the better their adjustment to transitions (Eccles et al., 1991).

**Transitions associated with different ages.** “Transitions are described as times of change,” state Bruns & Fowler (2001) and these times of change can vary significantly (par. 2). Although each transition can have a profound impact on students, the experience varies significantly from individual to individual. In this section, transitions into school—beginning with the entrance into school from home for preschool or kindergarten and concluding with the transition into high school—are represented.

***Transitions from home to school.*** A child’s transition from an Early Intervention Program to a preschool may be the first of many educational transitions (Matrix Parent Network and Resource Center, 2006). Students entering school for the first time encounter a unique set of circumstances as they transition from home-to-school into full-time schooling. “The transition to formal schooling is a landmark event” (Pianta, 2002, par. 1). Although research is available about students transitioning into preschool, it predominantly focuses on the parents’ role in assisting their children as they leave the security of their home. The research encourages parents to talk to their children and to help them develop the skills necessary to be independent upon entering school (Stewart, 2010). Bruns & Fowler (2001) discuss the transitions necessary for children with disabilities and point to the role of early intervention services to aid in the process.

Entwistle and Alexander (1998) found that “the transition into full-time schooling drastically reconfigures the child’s social roles because social roles and expectations for children’s behavior change a great deal over the primary years” (p. 353). A child’s initial

transition into school has been shown to impact later academic and social success; those who experienced poor transitions demonstrate a higher vulnerability to mental health and adjustment problems and have more difficulty with peer relationships (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). Upon entering kindergarten, children are rated according to how well they are doing in comparison to their peers for the first time (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). Children's ability to form meaningful relationships is crucial to their successful transition and influential in their later school careers (Augst & Akos, 2009). "Ensuring that children start school ready to learn requires that attention be paid to one of the most complex and significant changes they will experience—transition to kindergarten" (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002, p. 1).

The majority of the research for elementary school transitions conducted has been about the transition into kindergarten. Kindergarten is usually the start of formal education for children in public schools and is a significant transition period (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). According to Schiffman (2001), the lack of research on the effects of transitions at the elementary school level after kindergarten appears to be due to the fact that very few districts have children attending more than one school from kindergarten through grade five.

***Transitions from elementary to middle school.*** In the United States, 88% of young adolescents transition from elementary school into middle school (NMSA & NAESP, 2002). "Regardless of when it occurs, the transition to middle school tends to destabilize many students, requiring them to re-establish a sense of their identity in a more mature and demanding environment" (Elias, 2001, par. 1). According to Akos (2006), student declines related to the transition from elementary school to middle school are both academic and psychosocial. The affective and behavioral domains (specifically self-esteem, class preparation, and reported GPA) decline following a school-to-school transition into middle school (Seidman, Allen, Aber,

Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Declines in students' self-perception and self-esteem are associated with the transition from the elementary to the middle school (Seidman et al., 1994).

According to Cohen and Smerdon (2009), puberty has been shown to play a significant role in the transition to middle school, compounding physical and chemical changes with social and emotional changes. Adams (2008) purports that when students don't have a smooth transition from elementary to middle school, the experience can be overwhelming. "It's a time of increased risk for smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, violence, truancy, damage to self-esteem, and referrals to mental health services" (Adams, 2008, p. 46). Middle schools can be alienating environments and can negatively influence students' sense of school belonging or connectedness to their school (Eccles et al., 1991; Seidman et al., 1994). After transitioning to a middle school, students often find the environment to be anonymous and unpleasant (Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

***Transitions from middle to high school.*** According to Weiss and Bearman (2007), the first year of high school is very difficult for many students. Research from numerous sources has documented a decline in grades, an increase in the likelihood of course failure, and an increase in behavioral issues and absences (Eccles et al., 1991; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Akos and Galassi (2004b) found that 40% of students generally suffer problems after the transition into high school. This transition is more difficult for those who did not perform well in the middle grades (Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003). Although students highlight their social and emotional concerns regarding the middle to high school transition, their academic fears often prove to be more serious and lasting (Akos & Galassi, 2004b). One of the factors distinguishing successful from unsuccessful transitions was that students who made a successful transition into a new school reported having friends who supported their academic goals (Tomada, Schneider, de Domini, Greenman, & Fonzi, 2005).

It has been shown that “students who make a successful transition from the middle school to the high school are better prepared for the challenges facing them throughout their high school years” (Langenkamp, 2009, p. 69). The transition from middle school to high school is often disruptive to peer and teacher relationships and can result in students exhibiting problems with lower self-esteem; some students have fears about facing new social situations that involve older students, effectively budgeting their time, and coping with increased academic stress (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). “The transition to high school is difficult for many students, but especially for those who have adjustment problems in middle school” (Hamed, Reyes, Mocerri, Morana & Elias, 2011, p. 72). This transition is more difficult for students who struggled in middle school, but is not exclusive to this group (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

**Support for transitions.** Students may benefit from a variety of assistance during times of transition, including support from peers and parents. When educators emphasize the need for collaboration, communication, and cooperation between the home and the school, as well as between the sending and receiving schools, students benefit and transitions are less stressful (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). A successful transition between schools can help students form an identity as successful students (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

**Peer support.** Since social relationships ranked the highest regarding what is most important to middle school students, assistance from friends and peers would probably help middle school students to adjust during the transition period (Akos, 2004a). Strobino and Salvaterra (2000) found that integration into the academic and social components of school may reduce the potentially negative effects of multiple school transitions. Supportive interpersonal relationships have been found to ease the stress that accompanies changes after transitions (Tomada et al., 2005). When students have peers with whom they can interact and share the new

experiences following a school-to-school transition, the process does not cause as much stress. Akos (2006) established that participation in extracurricular activities helped to ease some of the anxiety experienced by students in each of these categories and assisted students in the transition process. Strobino and Salvaterra (2000) found that adolescent children of military service members experience many school changes yet maintain average or above-average academic grades; extracurricular activities provide them with opportunities to meet new friends and help them to adjust to a new environment.

***Parental support.*** Transitions between home and school, and between schools, are of great importance if students are to have a positive educational experience. According to former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2000), “...we need to do a much better job of helping parents understand the enormous difference they can make in helping their children get ready for school. Teachers need to make the connection with parents even before their children start school to lay the groundwork for a smooth transition” (par. 20). It appears that strong parental involvement is necessary if students are to experience success during stressful times of change. Students whose parents intervened positively were more likely to have a smooth transition from middle to high school (J.S. Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008). The Carnegie Corporation of New York (1995) emphasizes that schools must “re-engage” parents following a transition—especially for students in early adolescence. Students should be assisted during the transition process through collaboration between the home and the school, and between the sending and receiving schools. It is imperative that educators understand the importance of including the parents as part of the transition team; when the school and home work together, students benefit.

***Collaboration, communication, and cooperation.*** “Teachers, parents, and other members of the community must collaborate to support children’s adjustment during [the] crucial time of transition” (Daniels, 2011, p. 22). A team that includes the school district, the students’ family, and the sending and receiving teachers and staff plays an important role during school-to-school transitions (Fenlon, 2011). Ongoing communication and collaboration following a child’s entrance into school should not be overlooked (Fenlon, 2011). The National Education Goals Panel’s *Ready Schools* (Shore, 1998) identified ten major conditions that schools need to meet; the first two conditions are important in the transition process. The first of these conditions stresses the need for schools to work toward positive transitions from home to school. The second condition emphasizes the importance of continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools (Shore, 1998).

Viadero (1999) highlights the importance of understanding that transitions cannot be thought of as a set of activities that occur only at the end of one school year to prepare children for the next; there needs to be ongoing collaboration and support for transitions to be successful. Although educators recognize transitions as opportunities to promote development for students, if they are left unmanaged, transitions can result in anxiety or stress that affects learning and relationships (Turner, 2007). Transitions must be recognized as a *process*, not an *event* (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002). The initial adjustment following a transition is critical for a child’s development and well-being and has an impact on the child’s continued educational progress (Margetts, 2007). “The most obvious requirement of good transition arrangements is a rich relationship between...schools” (Westminster Institute of Education, 2006, par. 12). Students need to be given the skills to successfully optimize the transition process, which will enable them

to engage in more positive transitions throughout their lives (Turner, 2007). It is the responsibility of the educators to assist in this important process.

**Summary of school-to-school transitions.** In summary, although transitions are a part of life for everyone, school-to-school transitions can have a profound impact on the academic achievement of students. Some students can experience a transition as a disadvantage while others can use it to their advantage. Ultimately, it is important for educators to understand the many and varied aspects of school-to-school transitions in order to help their students experience smooth transitions both into and out of a school. Akos and Galassi (2004a) found that “school connectedness is a variable that can affect the likelihood of a successful school transition as well as serve as an indicator of the actual success of that transition” (p. 103). An effective transition program should create a sense of belonging for the student in the new school (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Thus, the sense of belonging as it relates to grade-span configuration is an important aspect of this research.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose that all people have an innate need to belong to social groups and to form positive interpersonal relationships with others. Goodenow (1992) contends that “students’ sense of belonging or psychological membership may play an important role in promoting school success...” (p. 2). People must identify with an organization if they are to feel connected; in the field of education, students need to feel connected to their schools before they can truly become part of the organization. A sense of belonging is created when all involved perceive that they are welcomed and “feel that they are valued members who contribute to the collective identity, destiny, and vision” (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008, p. 41).

**Definition.** School belonging refers to students' perception of acceptance and respect within their schools (L. Anderman, 2003). According to E. Anderman, (2002), perceiving a sense of belonging or connectedness with one's school is related to positive academic, psychological, and behavioral outcomes. Students need to feel that school is a safe place where people will care about them, where they will have support, where they will be respected and where they will find friendship; they also feel a sense of belonging if they can find people who will help them work out their problems (KidsMatter, 2009). "School connectedness is a variable that assesses a student's integration and feelings of belonging to school" (Akos & Galassi, 2004a, p. 104). Students' self-esteem is the most important indicator of their sense of belonging (Ma, 2003).

The concept of peer support is an important component of many operational definitions of sense of belonging in a school (E. Anderman, 2002). Students perceive a sense of belonging or connectedness by developing friendships and participating in the social activities of a school. "Students who identify with school have an internalized conception of belongingness—that they are discernibly part of the school environment and that school constitutes an important part of their own experience...[and thus they] value success in school-relevant goals" (Finn, 1989, p. 123). Having friends in class, interacting with peers, participating in class activities and earning good grades all indicate a sense of belonging (Ma, 2003). Students who experience acceptance by peers and teachers are more likely to be interested in and enjoy their school and their classes (Osterman, 2000). "A sense of community conveys a relationship of unity, belonging and cooperative interdependence among peers" (Newmann, Rutter, & Smith, 1989, p. 223).

Educators must work to facilitate a sense of belonging within their students, since motivation, achievement, and attitude result in more positive educational experiences (Mertens & Anfara, n.d.). Successful students develop a sense of identification with the school while less

successful students do not (Finn, 1989). Edwards (1995) advocates that school administrators make certain that their teachers feel a sense of belonging to school so that they can help their students also feel a sense of belonging. Center for Mental Health in Schools (2006) emphasizes that a sense of school belonging is produced in a school when the teachers, staff, and students are focused on, and committed to, the school's goals and values. Everyone within the school community needs to feel welcome, supported, respected and connected if they are to feel valued and appreciated; there must be a conscientious effort by all to work together in a supportive manner (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2006). According to E. Anderman (2002), a sense of belonging varies as a function of school characteristics; two of these characteristics are school size and grade-span configuration.

**School size.** Schools with a larger grade span are considered “smaller schools” due to the fact that there are fewer students per grade (Howley, 2001b; Offenber, 2001). Students in small schools have a greater sense of belonging and a stronger sense of personal efficacy within their schools than students in large schools (Cotton, 1996). The development of small schools or learning communities within large schools may help facilitate greater personalization which, in turn, may lead to healthy social-emotional development (Mertens and Anfara, n.d.). Students may develop a greater sense of belonging in smaller rather than larger schools because they are more likely to get to know their teachers and classmates on a more personal level; this may help them to form social relationships, which, in turn, creates a better sense of belonging (E. Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to Cotton (1996), one of the key features of small schools is that everyone is encouraged to participate in the school's clubs, teams, and student government; otherwise there would not be enough members for the groups to function. Cotton (1996) also notes that it is less likely that students would be overlooked or

isolated in a smaller school setting, thus students are more engaged; when schools have wider grade-spans, they feel more like smaller schools due to a smaller number of students in each grade level.

Conversely, schools with narrow grade-spans experience higher levels of student turnover as students transition in and out of a school within a period of one or two years; this can also negatively influence the school's identity and sense of community (Paglin & Fager, 1997; Renchler, 2002). Educators may find it challenging to help students develop and maintain a sense of belonging when students attend a school for such a short period of time. One example of student turnover occurs in cluster schools, in which between 50% and 100% of the student population transitions each year since the schools are configured to educate students for only one or two grade levels. These schools may actually be thought of as larger schools due to the large number of students per grade level (Howley, 2001b). Schools organized with other grade-span configurations, such as those in which students transition to a new school after sixth grade and again after ninth grade, also change the ability of the educational organization to maintain a core population over long periods and thus influence the social structure of the schools (Franklin & Glascock, 1996; Wihry, Coladarci, & Meadow, 1992).

In contrast, students in K-to-8 schools have been shown to display better self-esteem, higher extracurricular participation, and greater leadership skills due to the fact that they attend the same school for a longer period of time (Pardini, 2002). Offenber (2001) purports K-to-8 schools offer conditions that provide better opportunities for teacher-teacher, teacher-student, and teacher- parent relationships; these relationships have a profound impact on the students' sense of belonging in the school. Simmons and Blyth (1987) observed that as students progress within their own elementary school, they feel an increased sense of belonging to the school and

express more positive feelings, due to the comfort level attained when they remain in the same school environment for a number of years. E. Anderman (2002) purports that students report higher levels of belonging in K-8 or K-12 structured schools as compared to school configurations which include middle school and high school. A study by Jones and Gerig (1994) emphasizes the link between students' comfort level and classroom participation; if students are uncomfortable with their classmates, participation declines and a negative sense of community develops.

The main focus for educators should be to help students develop into confident participants in their learning environments; this is better accomplished when students feel more comfortable within their schools (Jones & Gerig, 1994). Finn (1989) posits that students who identify with their schools develop a perception of school belonging. Finn (1989) suggests small school size as one of the six guidelines for reducing student alienation and increasing a sense of belonging. *Turning Points* from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) advises: "Create small communities for learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental for intellectual development and personal growth...to ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult" (p. 9). This coincides with the sense of belonging that is imperative for every learning environment that involves young students.

**Grade-span configuration.** Lashway (2000) purports that schools are beginning to view themselves as communities based on relationships, shared values, and concern for the development of their students, which will ultimately have an impact on the students' sense of belonging. The sense of belonging is also influenced by the grade-span configuration of the schools within a district. When students remain in a school for a number of years, it allows

teachers to get to know them better and helps students to identify with that school rather than focusing on the school they just left or the one to which they will subsequently transition. According to Osterman (2000), “organizational options intended to increase the sense of community...would extend the time that students remained with the same peers and teachers” (p. 359).

Options to increase a sense of community might include the development of smaller schools, the use of block scheduling, the creation of departmental teaming, grouping students into teams for specific learning opportunities, inter-age grouping, and assigning students to the same teachers over several grade levels; each of these organizational techniques would increase the time students remain with the same peers and work with the same educators (Osterman, 2000). Since school size is sometimes an issue for educators over which they have no control, the aforementioned options may be used to increase a sense of belonging in less than optimal environments. Furthermore, the sense of belonging as a result of grade-span configuration influences extracurricular participation, student achievement, and school-to-school transitions.

***Extracurricular participation.*** Holland and Andre (1987) report that there exists “an inverse relationship between school size and student participation” (p. 446). When schools are large, many students are unable to participate in school activities because there is more competition for each position on the team or in the club; this can, in turn, impact their perception of school belonging (Holland & Andre, 1987). Extracurricular participation has the potential to influence students’ sense of belonging and promote positive academic and psychosocial outcomes (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). According to Osterman (2000), there is little evidence demonstrating that the sense of belonging is *directly* related to achievement; there is considerable evidence suggesting that the sense of belonging influences achievement as a result of its effect

on engagement. Students' participation in school activities may be key to students' sense of belonging to school (Ma, 2003).

Student engagement “usually comprises a psychological component pertaining to students' sense of belonging at school and acceptance of school values, and a behavioral component pertaining to participation in school activities” (Willms, 2003, p. 8). The term “student engagement” refers to the extent to which students identify with their schools, and also focuses on students' participation in academic and non-academic school activities (Willms, 2003). This coincides with the findings of Finn (1989), who contends that students who spend extra time in the school environment increase their feelings of school belongingness; extracurricular and social activities may be the primary source of attachment for students whose academic skills are weak. Participation in social activities, extracurricular activities, athletics, and student government offer alternative routes by which the student who is not strong academically may develop a sense of school belonging; for some students these activities may remain as the only method of internalizing a feeling of belongingness (Finn, 1989).

***Student achievement.*** Osterman (2000) contends that when students experience a sense of acceptance they have a more positive attitude toward school, class work, and teachers; in addition they are more likely to be interested in and enjoy school and their classes. Students' sense of acceptance was “also reflected in their commitment to their work, higher expectations of success, and lower levels of anxiety” (Osterman, 2000, p. 331). Specifically, Ladd (1990) found that students with a larger number of friends beginning at the entrance to formal schooling developed a more immediately favorable perception of school and higher academic gains. Wentzel and Calwell (1997) purport that there exists a significant link between peer relationships and children's academic achievement; they found that peer acceptance and group membership

had a strong association with academic achievement for middle school students. Ultimately, the goal of educators is to educate their students; student achievement must remain the main focus.

Combs (1982) states that successful student learning depends on four highly effective variables, one of which is the sense of belonging. According to Goodenow (1992), “a student’s subjective sense of belonging in the school—of being liked, including being respected by teachers and others in the school—appears to have a significant impact on several measures of motivation, and through motivation on engaged and persistent effort in difficult academic work” (p. 15). A sense of belonging is associated with important psychological processes; students who experience a sense of relatedness have a strong supply of inner resources which in turn, predict engagement and performance (Osterman, 2000). A sense of belonging and motivation to achieve are so intertwined that it can be difficult to determine which is the cause and which is the effect (Goodenow, 1992). Nonetheless, Cockshaw and Shochet (2007) believe, “When an individual’s need for belonging is met, positive outcomes occur.”

***Transitions.*** The concept of school-to-school transitions has been explored at length in previous sections. Students’ sense of belonging can both influence and serve as an indicator of the actual success of school-to-school transitions; if students feel connected to school prior to and following a school-to-school transition, they will experience a more successful transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004a). According to Anfara and Schmid (2007), studies of students’ resiliency identify a strong sense of belonging as key to the existence of effective coping and confidence traits, which indicate changes such as transitions will turn out well. Since adjustment to a new situation requires flexibility and resources to manage the change, students who experience a sense of belonging have a number of resources to assist them with the transition. Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Mac Iver (1993) indicate that school engagement

might provide protection during times of transition. When students are involved in aspects of the school outside of the classroom, their contacts are numerous and they can go to any number of trusted adults and peers with their questions and concerns. “Belonging is one of the primary concerns for new middle-level students; addressing it is crucial for a successful transition” (Wormeli, 2011, p. 49).

**Summary of sense of belonging.** “Belonging is very important for mental health” (KidsMatter, 2009, p. 1). Teachers and administrators are in an important position of influence over students’ sense of belonging to school (Ma, 2003). They must recognize that the failure to create a sense of belonging for students may result in diminished motivation, participation, and academic achievement; eventually, some students may ultimately withdraw from school completely (Goodenow, 1993). Thus, it is imperative that there be a focus on the importance of the sense of school belonging, and the necessity for students to internalize such a sense. School size, grade-span configuration, and school-to-school transitions can impact the students’ sense of belonging. Educators must focus on each of these factors in order to avoid a negative impact on the sense of belonging and, finally, on student academic achievement, which must remain the ultimate goal of a quality educational experience.

### **Academic Achievement**

When No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law in 2002, states became more accountable to the federal government than ever before in the history of the United States (Dove, et al., 2010). Student performance on standards-based academic assessments has become the main focus of education, and the results of achievement tests contribute to every academic decision made within a district (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002a). It is imperative that educators examine every aspect of the educational system—including the structural aspects of the

configuration of the district's schools. The impact of grade-span configurations and the subsequent school-to-school transitions must become a focal point for both administrators and educators. "While there are no clearly defined academic benefits, there are potential consequences associated with certain configuration patterns that...can potentially have an adverse effect on student achievement" (Napier, 2008, par. 5).

**Definition.** Academic achievement is based on how well students meet the standards set forth by the academic institution or government; an array of achievement measures can be used to provide measurement for student achievement (Franklin & Glascock, 1996). Depending upon the choices of the individual district, achievement measures used in the research include: grades on teacher-made tests, test scores on standardized tests, honor roll membership, subject-area achievement, and assessment of higher-order thinking skills (Cotton, 1996). According to Coladarci and Hancock (2002b), "what ultimately matters...to educators, policy makers, business persons, and the general public is how much students learn" (par. 3). Simply stated, academic achievement can be defined as "how much students learn."

**Implications of grade-span configuration.** As discussed previously in this document, the grade-span configuration of a district determines the number of school-to-school transitions students must make during their educational experience. Grade-span configurations are often created without considering the impact on students' academic achievement; instead districts consider cost effectiveness, transportation efficiency, making the best use of school personnel, materials and other resources, or the preferences of the community (Howley, 2002b; Paglin & Fager, 1997; Napier, 2008; Seller, 2004). According to Mertens and Anfara (n. d.), there exists no particular sequence of grade spans that can guarantee student success or improved academic achievement; however, school-to-school transitions have been shown to negatively impact

student academic progress. Galton, Gray, and Ruddock (1999) found that school-to-school transitions have been shown to produce in students a decline in academic achievement, a loss of enjoyment in school, and a decrease in motivation.

When Alspaugh and Harting (1995) conducted a study of the impact of grade-span configuration on students' academic achievement, they found that as students transitioned from one school to another, there was a consistent and significant achievement loss for that school year, which was not recovered until the following school year. According to Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman (2008), students may perform lower on group standardized tests during their first year in a new building, taking two to three years to get their test scores back up to where they were before the transition. This decline may be a result of the stressful nature of the transition to a new school (Napier, 2008). During the transitions, students may also experience a loss of self-esteem which may be the underlying cause of the academic decline (Alspaugh, 1998a). Sanders, Saxton, Schneider, Dearden, Wright, and Horn (1994) found that there is a major disruption in a student's academic progress associated with a school-to-school transition; for some students that means a transition from primary to elementary school, elementary into middle school, and middle into high school. As a result of findings such as these, some researchers emphasize that schools should be configured to minimize school-to-school transitions (Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein, & Zabel, 2009). School-to-school transitions can be minimized by configuring schools with broader grade-spans.

***School-to-school transitions.*** Changing schools in late childhood and early adolescence can create challenges for students (Malaspina, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Seidman et al., 1994; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). As a result, some students experience a decline in academic achievement following a school-to-school transition (Eccles et al., 1993; Malaspina & Rimm-

Kaufman, 2008). Transitioning between schools has been shown to lower academic achievement and increase the risk of dropping out of school (Alspaugh, 1998b; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Seidman et al., 1994).

Studies by Mullins and Irvin (2000) found that the most dramatic drop in grade point average (GPA) was seen in students who experienced a school change between grades six and seven. Middle school classes offer larger and less child-centered environments, more impersonal relationships with teachers, and competition, compared to elementary schools; this may be the cause of this dramatic drop in GPA following the transition into middle school (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, p. 2). Following the stress of a transition, most of a student's attention and resources may go to adjusting to the new environment, leaving little to no resources to focus on the academics being presented in the new school setting (Linnenbrink, 2010). "It seems as if the stressors involved in school-to-school transition are so critical that they neutralize or even diminish the achievement gains that were made in elementary school" (Wren, 2003, p.11). Further complicating school-to-school transitions, Alspaugh (1998a) explains that students experienced a greater achievement loss if they were part of a "pyramid transition" of multiple elementary schools into a single middle school than did the students in a "linear transition" of a single elementary school into a single middle school.

Additionally, Alspaugh (1998a) found that students from K-8 schools experienced less of an achievement decline than students who had to make two transitions—first into a middle school and then into a high school, which Alspaugh refers to as "double jeopardy." The GPA of students who make more than one school-to-school transition is consistently lower than students who only made one school-to-school transition (Alspaugh, 1998a; Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Unfortunately, the experience of making a previous transition does not moderate the

achievement loss during the transition into high school (Alspaugh, 1998a). Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman (2008) also contend that “students who experience double transitions appear to fare worse with respect to course grades” (par. 11). Students do not become accustomed to transitions by making more than one during their educational careers; school-to-school transitions result in lower academic achievement levels, which are compounded by experiencing more than one transition.

***Broad grade span configurations.*** Schools configured with broader grade spans reduce the number of transitions students must make, which improves student performance (Napier, 2008). According to Alspaugh (1998a), students achieve better academically by remaining in the same school for longer periods of time. “As grade span increases, so does academic achievement. The more levels that a school services the better the students perform. The more transitions a student makes, the worse the student performs...” (Wren, 2003, p. 9). Limiting school-to-school transitions by allowing students to remain in schools for a longer period of time has been shown to have a positive effect on student achievement. According to M. MacIver and D. MacIver (2006), when students attend schools for longer periods of time, older students benefit from greater age diversity, because there are fewer students facing difficult adolescent transitions—both physical and educational—at the same time; this results in a more orderly environment.

Students who attend schools serving broader grade spans—especially K-8 schools—have significantly larger reading and math test score gains between third and eighth grades (Schwartz et al., 2010). Offenberg (2001) found that eighth grade students displayed higher achievement levels when they attended a K-8 school setting than when they were in a middle school setting; one contributing factor for lower achievement may have been a higher number of students at each grade level (Closen, 2008). Middle level students in a K-8 school obtained higher

achievement levels than those attending schools with a middle level grade-span configuration (Klump, 2006). Wihry, Coladarci, and Meadow (1992) found that eighth grade students in K-8, K-9, and 3-8 buildings outperformed students in middle school or high school settings. Coladarci and Hancock (2002b) suggest that “in a K-8 configuration, absence of school-to-school transitions and greater continuity of experience arguably may be behind the higher achievement that has been reported for middle-grade students attending such schools” (par. 11). M. MacIver and D. MacIver (2006) found that the reduction in the number of students in grades 6 through 8 in a K-8 school “may reduce the middle school behavioral ‘chaos’ factor so drastically that it is possible for more learning to occur in these schools, and more individual attention can be paid to students struggling to master academic subject matter” (p. 108).

Students in K-12 schools have also been shown to perform better academically than their peers attending a 9-12 school; K-12 schools often segregate age groups to create a schools-within-a-school model that share core facilities (Elovitz, 2007). Franklin and Glascock (1998) discovered that sixth and seventh graders in K-6, K-7 and K-12 schools performed significantly higher than students in middle schools (6-8 and 7-9) in state achievement tests; they also found that students in K-12 schools had fewer behavioral problems in addition to higher achievement levels in tenth grade. Bickel et al. (2001) found a statistically significant advantage for K-12 schools when compared to all other configurations containing tenth grade. Additional research by Alspaugh (1998a) found that students who attend the same school for longer periods of time tend to experience less achievement loss upon transitioning into a new school. Gregg (n. d.) states that the most equitable and cost efficient means of delivering high student achievement is with broader grade spans in smaller schools. As discussed earlier, the size of a school can be determined by examining the number of students per grade level (Howley, 2002b). According to

Howley (2002a), when schools are configured to educate students for only one or two grade levels, the number of students per grade level increases; this creates a larger school (based upon the number of students per grade level) with shorter grade spans.

***Narrow grade span configurations.*** Students attending schools that educate students for only one or two grade levels experience more transitions than students who attend schools with broader grade-spans (Alspaugh, 1998a). Since school-to-school transitions have been demonstrated to negatively impact academic achievement, students attending narrowly configured schools may experience more loss of achievement. In addition to school-to-school transitions, Offenbergl (2001) noted that the number of students at a grade level may contribute to the differences in achievement between K-8 and middle school buildings; as the number of students in a grade increases, performance gains decrease. Additionally, when there are fewer students per grade level, students receive more mentoring and attention from teachers and have less competition for attention from peers, which might enable them to achieve at a higher standard (Linnenbrink, 2010). According to Alspaugh (1998b), "...school size and school-to-school transitions may be working jointly to increase high school dropout rates" (par. 22). Academic achievement is negatively compounded by narrow grade-span configurations; the increased number of school-to-school transitions appears to be the most frequently researched cause.

***Accountability.*** Tucker and Andrada (1997) examined the test results of sixth graders who took the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and found that students who attended the K-5 (Type I) school scored lower than students who attended the K-6 (Type II) school. The researchers found that student test scores were higher when schools were held accountable for the test results of their students (Tucker & Andrada, 1997). One theory regarding the lower

test scores suggested that students who entered a new school for sixth grade may not have been given the attention needed to prepare for the test by their fifth grade teachers. This may have resulted in poorer test results for the students who transitioned into a new school than the students who remained in the K-6 school for CMT testing. Another theory about the poorer scores for the Type I students states that information about the testing program may not have been disseminated or promoted accurately (Tucker & Andrada, 1997). Articulation between sending and receiving schools is imperative in order to ease the impact of school-to-school transitions on academic achievement.

**Summary of academic achievement.** “Grade-span configuration and school-to-school transition must be given serious consideration given their obvious impact on student achievement” (Wren, 2003, p. 12). Research indicates that academic achievement is negatively impacted by school-to-school transitions, which are created as a result of the configuration of grade spans. Although some students experience a more significant academic achievement loss resulting from the timing and frequency of school-to-school transitions, all transitions have been shown to negatively impact student performance (Alspaugh, 1998a). As a result, reducing the numbers of school-to-school transitions students must experience has been strongly suggested (Wren, 2003). However, when transitions are inevitable, communication and continuity between sending and receiving schools is imperative. Schools need to place increased importance on the academic rather than the social aspects of school-to-school transitions; such significance will bring an increased emphasis on curriculum and instruction (Galton, Gray, & Ruddock, 2003). “Academic work is at the heart of the school experience. Two aspects of academic tasks are important: the content of the curriculum and the design of instruction” (Eccles & Roeser, 2009, p. 410).

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

Curriculum can be defined as *what* is to be taught, and instruction can be defined as *how* the curriculum is to be taught. When schools share information about curriculum content, it improves the continuity of students' learning and progress (Catholic Education Office of Melbourne Student Wellbeing Unit, 2010). When teachers develop a shared understanding of how students learn, there is greater alignment of teaching practices between schools (Catholic Education Office of Melbourne Student Wellbeing Unit, 2010). According to Sink, Edwards, and Weir (2007), collaboration is especially important at student transition points. This section of chapter two will focus on curriculum and instruction, and the importance of these two interconnected topics as they relate to grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

**Curriculum.** Curriculum describes the learning expectations of each subject area for students in grades K-12 (Reyes, Dingman, Sutter, & Teuscher, 2005). Curriculum decisions have been traditionally planned at the local level; individual school districts would decide what their students would learn and when they would learn it. However, as more students choose post-secondary education, there has been a move towards centralizing curriculum decisions so that students are prepared for further education regardless of where they receive their K-12 education (English, 2000). It has become important for students to have a common curriculum with the aim of sharing a common educational experience with their future college peers (English, 2000). Consistency between districts as it relates to curriculum provides continuity for students when they move beyond their K-12 district. Equally important is curriculum articulation within a district so as to provide continuity and consistency as students transition between schools.

**Curriculum articulation.** Curriculum articulation is communication about the curriculum, and is necessary in order to implement the curriculum in a manner most beneficial to students.

Curriculum articulation can help to provide a smooth and logical transition between grade levels and between schools (Wilson, 1998). According to English (2000), curriculum articulation refers to communication about the curriculum between educators in a school or between the schools of a district. When curriculum articulation is encouraged and practiced, it can assist in providing a smooth and logical transition for students between grade levels and between schools (Wilson, 1998). “Successful articulation...requires continuous and open communication with teachers at all levels” (Wilson, 1998, par. 4).

Curriculum articulation is one element of the educational system that has been affected most notably by the NCLB legislation, particularly as it relates to academic achievement (Reyes et al., 2005). Educators must articulate the curriculum so that the appropriate information to be learned by students is taught; this will provide for more consistency as students move from grade to grade and from school to school. Reeves (2005) emphasizes the importance of providing teachers with in-service days for articulation of material between grade levels (and between schools) to be sure that the expectations remain consistent as students move from one school to another. Curriculum meetings “enable teachers to share their essential learning outcomes—the pieces of the curriculum that all students should master” (Felton & Akos, 2011, p. 30). There are two types of curriculum articulation:

*Horizontal articulation.* Horizontal articulation refers to the outcomes, teaching strategies, materials, and evaluation methods within a grade level (Wilson, 1998). Horizontal articulation focuses on communication between educators in an attempt to provide students in one grade with a similar educational experience, regardless of the individual teachers assigned to the classroom; it should include meetings and other opportunities for collaboration during which educators can share materials, teaching methods, and assessment techniques (Wilson, 1998). When the same

grade is taught in more than one school, horizontal articulation may be more challenging, but is even more important in order to ensure a quality educational experience for all students at each grade level (Wilson, 1998).

*Vertical articulation.* Vertical articulation refers to outcomes, teaching strategies, materials, and evaluation methods between grade levels and, at times, schools (Wilson, 1998). Vertical articulation focuses on educators communicating with other educators at the grade levels before and after their present grade level; it encourages the sharing of materials, teaching methods, assessment techniques, and student outcomes (Wilson, 1998). Vertical articulation allows for a more seamless transition for students between grade levels since teachers spend less time reteaching curriculum, and can implement teaching strategies that were successful in the previous grade level (Wilson, 1998).

*Curriculum alignment.* “Alignment implies a lining up of standards, curricula and assessments...and coordination reflects an ongoing effort by skilled teachers and strong leadership to achieve the effective education of [students]” (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005, p. 6). It is imperative that students’ current instructional programs are aligned with the expectations they will encounter in the next grade level (Napier, 2008). Coordination of the standards, curricula and assessments provides a shared vision of specific goals to be accomplished within a specific period (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005). Curriculum alignment provides guidelines for educators and administrators to utilize during curriculum articulation.

Curriculum alignment can be achieved through: a sequenced curriculum, a set of principles to guide student learning, a set of instruments to assess academic achievement, teachers who are prepared to educate students from each grade level, and a philosophy which emphasizes the importance of a consistent educational experience for students (Bogard &

Takanishi, 2005). Alignment practices involve a master plan and continuing professional development so that students will be successful in the next grade level or school (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005). Consistency within a district, as it relates to curriculum, provides continuity as students experience school-to-school transitions within a district.

***Curriculum continuity.*** Curriculum continuity occurs when educators work together so that both the sending and receiving teachers are informed about the topics and materials that have already been covered, the skills and understandings that have been well-established, and the pace and style of previous lessons for each subject area (Department for Education, 2004). This knowledge can then be used to carefully plan and seamlessly implement the curriculum for the school year; this will act to reassure, challenge, and quickly move the students forward (Department for Education, 2004). Research by Galton et al. (2003) has emphasized the need for schools to work more on curriculum continuity and to pay attention to the specific strategies that will help to sustain students' progress.

One of the main aspects of a successful transition for students includes experiencing curriculum continuity; students want to know that the schoolwork they have already completed and the information they have already learned will assist them as they entered a new grade level (Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). In addition to teachers sharing standardized test scores and assessments, material such as illustrative examples of student work—especially for gifted and talented students—ensures continuity of learning (Westminster Institute of Education, 2006). Curriculum continuity is achieved when there is effective curriculum articulation, curriculum alignment, and continuity of instruction.

**Instruction.** Instruction describes *how* the curriculum is to be taught; it is composed of the teaching practices utilized by teachers to educate the students about the curriculum. One of

the key principles of educational programs is the coordination and integration of curriculum and teaching practices (Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2006). Galton et al. (1999) emphasize that sending and receiving schools must share information to improve students' learning and progress. These researchers also stressed that teachers should develop and share effective teaching practices that align the two settings (Galton et al., 1999). When the teaching strategies vary too widely between grade levels, students struggle following a transition; this is further complicated when the students are adjusting to a new school setting in addition to a new grade level. It is important that students experience consistency in teaching instruction in order to avoid wasting valuable learning time following a transition. "Good instruction requires good planning" (Bottoms, 2003, par. 11). When teachers plan across grade levels and between schools, good instruction will lead to better academic achievement.

***Continuity of instruction.*** Galton et al. (2003) report that when primary and secondary teachers are engaged in joint planning, there is continuity and a greater variety of activities for students; both keep students' motivation sustained after the school-to-school transition. According to Masters (2005a), learning is enhanced when educators are familiar with the knowledge that students bring to the new grade level; this enables them to use this information as a starting point for new instruction with little or no academic time wasted. Bringing together teachers from a number of schools with varying grade levels can lead to greater collaboration and enriched curriculum opportunities for students (Prince George's County Public Schools, 2009). Opportunities for collaboration and articulation create a mutual understanding of the curriculum requirements of the sending and receiving schools, which will enable students to transition without the added anxiety of not being prepared academically for the challenges that await them (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

***Discontinuity of curriculum and instruction.*** A disruption in a student's academic progress following a school-to-school transition may be indicative of a "breakdown in communication between sending and receiving schools that leads to excessive reteaching and lack of continuity of instruction" (Sanders et al., 1994, 14). According to English (2000), the loss of connectivity of curriculum can be exacerbated by the isolation of separate school buildings. Providing the opportunity for curriculum articulation between sending and receiving schools can help improve this situation. Sanders et al. (1994) also suggest that the "acclimation and processing of entering students may infringe upon instructional time" (par. 14). However, if communication between sending and receiving schools occurs before students transition, instructional time would not be negatively impacted.

*In primary schools.* One of the main sources of discontinuity between schools occurs in the early grades, when students from preschools—which use developmentally appropriate play-based learning approaches—transition into traditional primary and elementary schools, which tend to be more structured and teacher-directed (Center for Community Child Health, 2008). This can be a difficult transition for students. The continuation of programs that are developmentally appropriate through all the primary grades will promote successful transitions (Reynolds et al., 2006). It is imperative that instruction be developmentally appropriate; this is especially important for children entering preschool (Myers, 1997).

Greater alignment between the early years and the formal school setting provides a more seamless introduction to formal education (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Center for Community Child Health, 2008). "Children's experiences from PK to kindergarten and kindergarten experiences through third grade should be linked. Transition activities are not sufficient" (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005, p. 17). It is not enough to provide a transition program for students

as they depart from one school and enter a new school. Continuity of curriculum and developmentally appropriate instruction will help to ease anxiety and lead to less loss of instructional time (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005).

*In elementary schools.* Since “each new school year begins with a ‘clean slate,’ and because it is assumed that students are more or less equally ready for the curriculum of their new grade, little information is passed” between sending and receiving schools (Masters, 2005b, p. 4). As students move between grade levels each year in elementary school, districts discard a year’s worth of relationships developed between students and their teachers, and abandon all the knowledge those teachers have gained about their students (Marshak, 2003). “Each year, we tell every child and teacher to start over again” (Marshak, 2003, p. 4). These discontinuities create environments in which student achievement is negatively affected by grouping students by age or grade level, as opposed to ability level (Marshak, 2003). Articulation between the educators of the sending and receiving schools and grades can provide the new teachers with the documentation necessary to begin instruction in a timely manner and at the correct level at the start of the new school year (Marshak, 2003).

*In middle and high schools.* In addition to the complexities associated with a middle or high school transition, students at this level may be struggling with the onset of adolescence. The onset of puberty can further complicate the school-to-school transition because the students may be coping with physical and psychological changes within themselves as they change schools. Each of these issues is beyond the control of the student, which can cause frustration and a distraction from learning (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003). However, if students were held responsible for their own learning, taught strategies for learning on their own, and were provided a more challenging curriculum before transitioning, the difficulties of discontinuous

curriculum and instruction in a school-to-school transition could be circumvented (McGee et al., 2003; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Further complicating the issue of curriculum continuity, when a receiving school accepts students from a large number of sending schools, there may be discontinuities in the students' learning experiences, even if the sending schools covered the same curriculum (Galton et al., 2003; Wihry et al., 1992). This is when consistent and coordinated teaching practices could prove to be most valuable. Articulation about the curriculum and coordination of instruction would assist the students as they transition, and would also enable educators to begin instruction in a more timely manner (Marshak, 2003). Bogard and Takanishi (2005) emphasize that schools should be structured so that all students have learning experiences that build on those in previous years and connect closely with those to come.

*Wider grade levels.* As discussed previously, schools with broader grade-span configurations are able to avoid some of the difficulties associated with school-to-school transitions, including those that involve the curriculum content and instructional techniques of sending and receiving schools:

The inclusion of all grade levels in the same setting fosters a common, perhaps strongly tacit, understanding of organizational purpose. A K-12 school, for example, includes all personnel who teach and administer in all grades in the same location. This may foil development of the usual articulation problems that characterize relationships among elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools, diminishing the need for costly monitoring and supervision. (Bickel et al., 2001, par. 65)

Thus, the proponents of K-8 and K-12 schools have additional rationale to support their choice of this grade-configuration. However, when broad grade spans are not part of the configuration of a district's schools, additional procedures must be implemented to ensure that there is consistent

and effective communication between sending and receiving schools, to provide the necessary continuity of curriculum content and consistency of instructional practices between the schools.

**Summary of curriculum and instruction.** When the grade-span configuration of a district requires students to make school-to-school transitions, steps must be taken to reduce the adverse effects on students (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002). One such step should be an emphasis on the importance of curriculum continuity and articulation. Since schools can make a significant difference in students' health and well-being, the World Health Organization's Health Promoting Schools (HPS) Framework for 2011-2015 emphasizes that schools review and update their curriculum content and instructional practices to ensure continuity of learning for students as they experience school-to-school transitions (International Union for Health Promotions and Education, n.d.). Continuity in learning is facilitated by a shared understanding of the progress of learning "...across the years of school" (Masters, 2005b, p. 10). Transition programs viewed as best by school administrators provided opportunities for personnel from the sending and receiving schools together to learn about one another's curriculum and requirements (D. MacIver, 1990). Other aspects of successful transition programs will be discussed in the next section.

### **Transition Programs**

"To meet the goals of No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, schools must understand the impact of transitions and establish a range of transition supports" (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008, par. 2). One such support is the development of successful transition programs. *Transitions: Turning Risks into Opportunities for Student Support* encourages the implementation of transition programs that can assist students as they transition between grades or schools (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008). According to Paglin and Fager (1997), each school system must develop

articulation and transition programs to lessen the decline in academic achievement following a school-to-school transition, and to help its students assimilate into their new academic setting.

Underlying successful transition programs are activities that bring administrators, counselors, and teachers together to learn about the programs, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools (D. MacIver, 1990; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Transition programs are based on the philosophy that students will adjust better to school if they are familiar with the new situation, if parents are informed about the new expectations, if the sending school's teachers are knowledgeable about the expectations of the receiving school, and if the teachers from the receiving school are knowledgeable about their incoming students (Margetts, 2007).

The primary goal of transition planning is to ensure that every student has “the opportunity to experience academic excellence and a strong sense of well-being” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCPDI], 2007, p. 3). Students struggle academically when faced with an unsuccessful school-to-school transition; transition planning is essential in order to encourage continued academic achievement for all students (Augst & Akos, 2009). According to *Transition Planning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, the positive implications of successful transition planning may include: lower retention rates of students, higher graduation rates, more students from underrepresented populations being placed in higher-level courses, fewer behavior problems, fewer expulsions and more satisfied parents (NCPDI, 2007). The importance of implementing transition programs has been encouraged by multiple researchers, including D. MacIver (1990), Mizelle and Irvin (2000), NMSA and NAESP (2000), and Paglin and Fager (1997). However, it is imperative that school transition programs be developed for each individual community based on their individual needs (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; NCPDI, 2007).

“Transition practices are implemented by a range of partners, in a variety of settings, and in multiple domains of continuity” (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002, p. 3). Personalizing the transition experience is imperative, since the best plan for each school district is the one developed specifically for their students, families, and community. However, it is important to remember that family involvement must be an integral part of transition programs and policies for schools (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002). When parents play a role in their child’s school-to-school transitions, they are more likely to stay involved in their child’s school experiences (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; D. MacIver, 1990; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

**Home, school, and community involvement.** In 2002, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) together with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) published a position paper about the elementary to secondary transition and suggested involving families in the transition process. Building relationships between and among students, families, and educators is a critical aspect of successful transition programs (NMSA & NAESP, 2002). The development of these relationships can have a profound influence on children’s sense of belonging in the new school setting (Dockett & Perry, 2001). As discussed previously, a sense of belonging is an important aspect of a successful school experience.

Successful transitions build respect for individual differences, encourage understanding of the whole child, create a sense of trust and belonging, and reduce child and family anxiety toward school. Transitions that bring together home, school, and community to continue the collaborative effort and promote the common goal of providing successful school experiences for all children. (NCPDI, 2007, p. 15)

Most parents and teachers express a preference for transition programs that are focused on the individual needs of families and children, and are planned and implemented by a team of

people involved in the transition (Dockett & Perry, 2001). By building relationships with families prior to the beginning of formal schooling, educators can smooth the transition for students and focus their attention on instruction (Laverick, 2008). It is also important to remember that parents who already have children in the school are an excellent resource for other parents, and may help encourage new parents to be more involved in school activities (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

**Key elements of transition programs.** School districts should be encouraged to design transition programs that enhance successful transitions, prevent transition problems, and use transition periods to increase positive attitudes toward school and learning (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008). Transition programs can range from informational assemblies for incoming students, to comprehensive monthly meetings with teams of educators from both the sending and receiving schools (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Transition programs should include information and transition counseling, orientation visits, training teachers and support staff to quickly identify potential transition problems, teaching the students the skills needed in the new environment, ensuring social support, and ensuring that the family is prepared to provide support for the student (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008).

According to Cauley and Jovanovich (2006), “effective transition programs are defined as ones that improve student attendance, achievement, and retention” (p. 18). D. MacIver (1990) stresses that effective transition programs have five or more diversified activities in order to address the needs of various populations. The most common activities are bringing students to the new school for a visit, meetings between the administrators of the sending and receiving schools, and holding meetings for the counselors from both levels (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). “The attributes of successful transition programs include a sensitivity to the anxieties

accompanying such a move...and the recognition that becoming comfortable in a new setting is an ongoing process, not a single event” (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000, par. 14).

Observations by teachers from other schools with different grade levels can prove to be a very valuable experience (Department for Education, 2004). Teachers have noted that observations have allowed them to learn more about the curriculum coverage, gain insight into the teaching strategies being employed in the sending or receiving schools, experience firsthand the level of expectation being set, and reflect on the issue of classroom organization (Department for Education, 2004).

**The role of the school counselor.** According to Dimmitt and Carey (2007), school counselors can be instrumental in assisting students as they make significant transitions. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model can be used to address the multiple needs of transitioning students and can address school-to-school transitions positively and systematically in an effort to support all learners (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). The ASCA National Model school counseling program has four components: the foundation, the delivery system, the management system, and the accountability system (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). This program can help to deliver group guidance lessons, individual student planning, responsive services, and systems support (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). According to Shoffner and Williamson (2000), arranging for school counselors to meet with each incoming student can help to alleviate some of the concerns and anxieties associated with school-to-school transitions. By encouraging more collaboration among all stakeholders at the times of transition, school counselors can help children, teachers, and parents through these critical times and make school-to-school transitions less stressful and more positive through the use of prevention-oriented interventions (Sink et al., 2007).

Augst and Akos (2009) and Dockett and Perry (2001) recommend that primary school counselors use a COPE framework: Collaborate, Outreach, Promote and Evaluate.

- Collaborate: When positive relationships are established between families and schools, there are positive feelings about the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2001).
- Outreach: School counselors are encouraged to reach out to preschools and to the families of students at risk for difficult kindergarten transitions (Augst & Akos, 2009).
- Promote: By assessing family strengths, school counselors can reinforce that parents have the capacity to assist their children (Augst & Akos, 2009).
- Evaluate: Evaluating the transition programs that have been implemented establishes the credibility of the programs and demonstrates their value (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

**Primary and elementary school transitions.** “As research on children’s early school experiences has evolved, children’s transition to school is no longer viewed as one distinct point in time...; rather, transition to school is considered a multiyear process with each new setting or grade having unique demands for children, families, and teachers” (LaParo & Pianta, 2000, p. 65-66).

*Preschool.* Entwisle and Alexander (1998) found that a child’s preschool experiences had a profound impact on later academic and social success. During the transition process, there must be communication between the child, family, and service providers, and continuity in service delivery and programs. Rous, Hallam, Harbin, McCormick, and Jung (2007a) emphasize the importance of individualizing services by focusing on the strengths and needs of individual children, the unique qualities of each family, and the resources available within the community.

The involvement of families early and often has been linked to more positive results as the child moves through the educational system (Rous et al., 2007a).

**Kindergarten.** Literature shows that kindergarten is one of the most significant transitions faced by elementary school students (Augst & Akos, 2007; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). The transition into kindergarten represents a distinct shift in a child's life (Augst & Akos, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2001; NCDPI, 2007). Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2000) maintain that "nearly half of all kindergarten teachers nationally report that 50 percent of children experience some degree of difficulty in the transition to formal schooling and 16 percent face serious adjustment problems" (p. 79). Activities which improve connections between early childhood programs and elementary schools, and reach out to families *before* they enter kindergarten will assist in smoothing a child's transition to school (McGann & Clark, 2007). Laverick (2008) emphasizes that building relationships is the foundation for making a successful transition, and that a child's adjustment is a product of the collaboration between the school and home. Dockett and Perry (2001) suggest that effective transition programs for students entering kindergarten focus on building and enhancing relationships with peers, family, and teachers. Rous et al. (2007a) emphasize that collaboration between early childhood programs is crucial to the successful transition of students. "The transition to kindergarten is a process among partners rather than an event happening to a child" (McGann & Clark, 2007, p. 79).

**First grade.** The transition to first grade represents a distinct period of adjustment for students and families (LaParo & Pianta, 2000). As discussed previously, one of the factors in the National Education Goals Panel guidelines for *Ready Schools* emphasizes the need for continuity between early childhood educational programs and elementary schools (Shore, 1998). For many children, the transition into first grade initiates their entry into full-time formal schooling (NCES,

2010). Transitioning from a child-centered kindergarten environment to less flexible first-grade classroom can be quite a struggle for students and their families (Sink et al., 2007).

Entwisle and Alexander (1998) have referred to this transition as a critical period for young children's social and academic development. Sink et al. (2007) state, "Grade 1 is the onset of formal learning for most school districts, and it presents children with a far more ritualized and structured learning environment" (par. 6). It is imperative that kindergarten and first grade teachers are preparing students for the transition early in the school year; parents and guardians also need to be included in the collaborative process (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Sink et al., 2007).

**Third grade.** Teachers, school counselors, and administrators recognize the importance of the transition into third grade, since this is the year standardized testing begins and children have more demands placed upon them (Augst & Akos, 2007; Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). Students who make a smooth transition from second to third grade are better able to succeed academically (NCDPI, 2007). In third grade, elementary school curriculum evolves from basic reading instruction to a focus on independent reading in core subjects; this makes the transition difficult for struggling readers (Kainz & Vernon-Feagans, 2007). According to Augst & Akos (2007), the COPE framework described for use by school counselors, can assist with this process. Second and third grade teachers should be *collaborating*, and school counselors should be *reaching out* to inform families and students about the demands of the new learning environment (Turner, 2007). Counselors can *promote* test preparation activities for all third grade students, especially those at risk for academic failure; using testing data, the school counselor can identify academic gaps between second and third grade, in addition to *evaluating* the effectiveness of the program (Augst & Akos, 2007).

***Middle school transitions.*** According to Akos, Creamer, and Masina (2004), middle school transition programs should focus on three areas to form the basis for orientation or transitional activities in order to prepare students for middle school:

- Organizational—for instance, using lockers and lunchtime procedures;
- Personal/social—providing opportunities to build peer networks and teambuilding;
- Academic—such as introducing students to using agenda books to keep track of assignments and important dates as well as the importance of teamwork and collaboration when working in groups.

D. MacIver (1990) found that when middle school students participated in a high school transition program with several diverse articulation activities, fewer students were retained in the transition grade as compared to those who did not participate in such a program. Deb Schrock, executive director of the Association of Illinois Middle-Level School, encourages a year-long transition program that spans from January of the fifth grade year through December of the first year of middle school (Adams, 2008). Activities should include an orientation and school tours, but Schrock stresses that communication should be about building *excitement*, not purely offering information (Adams, 2008). “Some of the most effective programs use student ambassadors or assign buddies to incoming students to help them learn the ropes” (Adams, 2008, p. 46-48).

According to the position paper on supporting students in their transition to middle school, developed by the NMSA and the NAESP (2002), “a well-designed transition plan can restore the strong sense of belonging the entering middle-school student once felt in elementary school—a key element associated with the positive motivation to enjoy and succeed in academic tasks” (par. 3). The NMSA and the NAESP (2002) further emphasize that successful transition

programs must include: a sensitivity to the anxieties accompanying a move to a new school setting, an understanding of the importance of parents/guardians and teachers as partners in this effort, and the recognition that becoming comfortable in a new school setting is an ongoing process, not a single event (par. 5).

Niesen and Wise (2004) emphasize that students entering middle school should be prepared for the academic challenges that await them, be taught problem solving and study skills, and be exposed to opportunities for cooperative learning. Following their entrance into middle school, students should be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities and parents should be encouraged to be involved (Niesen & Wise, 2004). “In smoothing the transition from elementary to middle school, educators need to provide adolescents with inspiration, imagination, joy, optimism, humor, love, support, firmness, safety, clear values, and—perhaps most important—respect” (Elias, 2001, par. 14).

Adams (2008) offers the following practical suggestions for educators, to help ease students’ transition into middle school:

- Be positive: avoid sensationalized warnings, such as, “Just wait until you get into middle school.”
- Shift expectations: start shifting classroom expectations—both behavioral and academic—to what will be encountered in middle school.
- Start a dialogue between elementary and middle grade colleagues.
- Incorporate a team structure in which students travel from class to class.
- Formalize procedures—not rules, which can be broken.
- Compare notes and collaborate.
- Stay current with teaching strategies.

***High school transitions.*** “A student’s ability to cope with the transition to secondary school is likely to depend on several factors, including personal maturity and coping resources, the nature of the new school environment, and the level of preparation and social support available prior to and during the transition” (Crockett et al., 1989, p. 182). Hertzog and Morgan (1998) stress that high school transition programs should begin in the fall of eighth grade and continue through the spring of the ninth grade in order to be most successful.

According to the Texas Comprehensive Center website, “the transition from eighth grade to high school results in a higher drop-out rate than any other grade” (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). However, when effective transition programs are developed and implemented, those negative results can be improved. J.B. Smith (1997) reported lowering of the drop-out rate and ninth grade retentions in schools who implemented programs which used multiple transition strategies. The investment made by schools to aid students in making a transition to high school is critical; the most effective transition programs were the ones which encouraged the full participation of students, parents and staff members (J.B. Smith, 1997). Richard Riley, former U.S. Secretary of Education, speaks of the challenge of transitioning students into high school and encourages summer academies, smaller schools or schools-within-schools, freshman academies or houses, and adults who are willing to serve as role models for young people (USDOE, 2000). Langenkamp (2009) stresses the social challenges facing students as they enter high school, including harassment, teasing, and difficulty making new friends, which can make the transition even more difficult.

***Students with special needs.*** While the transition process is unique to all students and their families, students with disabilities can experience even more significant challenges during transitions (Kinney, 2006; Rous et al., 2007b). Thus, transition planning must focus on the

transition process for these students, in addition to whether or not there are appropriate environments into which they can transition. Social workers can assist families to identify and use their own strengths and resources to support the educational experiences of their child (Strobino & Salvaterra, 2000). Maras and Eveling (2006) suggest that there are a number of ways to reduce the stress associated with a transition for a student with special needs, such as learning the school layout before the start of school, establishing a network of friends to act as guides, and staggering arrival and dismissal times in an effort to make the volume of traffic less overwhelming.

According to LaCava (2005), following specific procedures during school-to-school transitions for students with special needs can assist them in achieving success in their new educational settings. Some procedures include starting planning early, including the student in the process, familiarizing the incoming student with his/her new school, identifying new staff who can build a rapport with the student, and remembering that transitioning is an ongoing process (LaCava, 2005). “Students who earn poor grades or demonstrate inappropriate classroom behavior or hostile or inappropriate relationships with peers are most likely to have difficulty with transition. These students will need more intensive supports before and after [a] transition” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 24).

“The Timeline for Early Successful Transition (TEST) facilitates an effective and well-planned transition that supports the child, family and service personnel” (Brandes, Ormsbee, & Haring, 2007, p. 204). An important aspect of preparing a child with special needs for transition is to link the sending program with the receiving program; in addition, establishing positive communication with the parents and guardians helps to ease the potential stress associated with formal assessment, placement meetings, and collaboration with so many service personnel

(Brandes et al., 2007). An instrument such as TEST helps to coordinate, communicate and plan for a student's transitions in an effort to make the process more successful (Brandes et al., 2007).

**Canadian transition programs.** Whitley, Lupart, and Beran (2007), purport that Canadian students do not experience the same academic declines following school-to-school transitions as their peers in the United States. The reason for such a finding is that middle school reform began in Canada in the early 1970s, and the subsequent programs put in place at both the elementary and middle school levels, "have focused on preparing students for the many changes associated with the change in school environments" (Whitley et al., 2007, p. 663). As a result of the implementation of successful transition programs, Canadian students' academic achievement remains stable as they transition from elementary to middle school; these programs may be a matter worthy of further study.

**Representative transition programs.** Effective transition programs, according to the NMSA and NAESP (2002):

- promote collaboration among elementary and middle school teachers, students and parents;
- encourage school leaders to become more knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of students in transition;
- provide counseling at both the elementary and secondary levels to address transition concerns and assure students of ongoing support; and,
- assist students in turning their anxieties into positive action by learning about the new school's rules, routines, and expectations.

Although many transition programs are utilized to assist students as they experience a school-to-school transition, the following programs—appearing in alphabetical order—were cited by researchers for their effectiveness:

***Bridge.*** Sheets, Izard-Baldwin, and Atterberry (1997) reported on Bridge, a program designed to ease the transition between middle and high school. This one-semester program provided incoming ninth grade students with activities to promote academic achievement, responsibility, school spirit, and acceptance (Sheets et al., 1997).

***Coping power program.*** According to Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman (2008), the Coping Power Program can assist adolescents in meeting the new demands associated with transition; this prevention/intervention program is implemented the year before and immediately following the middle school transition.

***Jumpstart.*** The week before school starts in Daviess County, Kentucky, the new middle school students and their parents attend a half-day program at their new school called Jumpstart, which consists of 10-minute mini-sessions for all of the students' classes, in addition to emphasizing arriving to class on time, using combination lockers, and being around older students (Adams, 2008).

***Talking with TJ.*** Described by Elias, Bryan, Neft, Parker, Rosenblatt, and Schoenholz (2004), the TJ series emphasizes the importance of cooperation and teamwork and is used with students in kindergarten through grade 5. This series focuses on skills in three areas: (1) making group plans; (2) appreciating differences and including people of diverse backgrounds in group activities as opportunities for learning; and (3) playing as a cooperative team in competitive situations. Each skill is reinforced using “power phrases,” and “Talk Time” is included to allow discussion and help students relate the program to their own lives.

***Texas ninth grade transition and intervention (TNGTI).*** In 2008-2010, in an effort to achieve the goals of keeping students in school and promoting college and career readiness, the Texas Ninth Grade Transition and Intervention (TNGTI) program was developed (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). This program is designed to transition students from ninth grade to tenth grade on time, and includes a summer transition program, an early warning system, and interventions for students falling behind in the ninth grade (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

TNGTI program suggests three initial actions:

- organize a transition team with a representative from each of the stakeholder groups: teachers, administrators, curriculum specialists, counselors, parents, students, government-funded support staff, and local service organizations;
- develop a counseling team to increase the amount of individual time each student receives with a counselor; and,
- create special programs and initiatives to prepare students and their families for the transition to high school. (Texas Education Agency, n.d.)

Additionally, types of activities that a transition team might consider as they develop their transition plan should include:

- Involving parents and families in the transition process.
- Promoting collaboration among middle and high school staff to support the transition process.
- Increasing awareness of academic programs offered at the high school level.
- Increasing comfort and reducing anxiety through orientation activities.
- Providing resources designed to make the transition easier.
- Designing activities for the first weeks of ninth grade.

- Continuing the use of counseling teams to maintain support throughout the ninth grade year.
- Developing special interventions to support ninth graders who may be struggling academically or socially. (Texas Education Agency, n.d.)

***Zippy's friends.*** Zippy's Friends is a 24-week school-based program for preschool and first grade students; its main focus is to train children to cope with everyday adversities and negative life events (Monkeviciene, Mishara, & Dufour, 2006). The sessions are divided into six modules with each one focusing on a particular theme; these modules include understanding feelings, communication, making and breaking relationships, conflict resolution, dealing with change and loss, and general coping skills (Monkeviciene et al., 2006).

**Importance of transition programs.** “Successful transitions build respect for individual differences, encourage understanding of the whole child, create a sense of trust and belonging, and reduce anxiety toward school. Transitions that bring together home, school, and the community continue the collaborative effort and promote the common goal of providing successful school experiences for all children” (NCPDI, 2007, p. 15). Before developing transition programs, districts may benefit from examining the extensive literature on facilitating the transition to college, because colleges have been implementing effective programs for many years (J.S. Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). In addition, evaluating the effectiveness of the transition activities being utilized is imperative (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Through the development of transition programs which are appropriate to a specific population, success can be achieved. “Comprehensive transitions that include numerous activities geared toward the needs and concerns of students, parents, and teachers can be effective in helping students

transition to a new school with less anxiety and more academic success” (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 23).

**Summary of transition programs.** Although varied in their strategies, transition programs are an integral aspect of assisting with school-to-school transitions. When the home, school, and community are united in assisting students as they transition from school to school, students are more likely to experience academic success following a school-to-school transition. It is critical that students transitioning between schools receive assistance prior, during, and following their move into a new school (Koppang, 2004). While transitions have the potential to be stressful, anxiety can be reduced and an appreciation for learning can be developed and enriched in students through the implementation of effective transition programs (Myers, 1997).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter summarized the available literature on grade-span configurations and subsequent school-to-school transitions. A review of the history of grade-span configurations in the United States culminated in the fact that there are more than thirty configurations currently used in school districts across the nation. Some of the more common grade-span configurations were then reviewed, including primary, elementary, middle and high schools; the history, and strengths and weaknesses of each configuration were also examined.

Recently, as a result of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) becoming law in January 2002, school districts have become more focused on the importance of student achievement, and strictly monitoring student assessment scores since they are now tied to federal funding (Sanders, 2003). School districts are analyzing methods of increasing student achievement without increasing costs, and thus, have been focusing on grade-span configurations and their effect on student achievement. Also included in this chapter was a list of factors, from the research of

Paglin and Fager (1997), for each district to consider as educators deliberate the best grade-span configuration for their students and community.

Depending upon the grade-span configuration of a given district, students will have to make multiple school-to-school transitions as they complete the grade levels offered by any given school; the transitions can impact student performance, and have advantages and disadvantages. After exploring the available research on these topics, three major areas became the focus of the remainder of this chapter. First, students' sense of belonging, or feeling of connectedness to school, was examined, including its development and factors that increase or decrease the sense of belonging for students. Second, curriculum articulation was presented, as educators deliberate how to provide continuity of the curriculum between schools. Finally, academic achievement, which is the main purpose for all education, was discussed. The chapter concluded with a discussion about transition programs, since, with the exception of a K-12 grade-span configuration, all students will experience school-to-school transitions, and the implementation of effective transition programs can help to ease the stress and anxiety associated with a change of schools. The methodology and research design for this action research study is delineated in chapter three.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

The purpose of this mixed-method, action research study was to determine the effects of the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions on students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and students' academic achievement in the Bearwood Township School District. Students who attend school in the district experience five school-to-school transitions as a result of the grade-span configuration. This study focused on the overall quality of the educational experience for the students of the district as it relates to the aforementioned topics.

The primary stakeholders of the district were included in order to provide valuable information in each of these areas. Faculty members were invited to participate in a survey, to elicit their perceptions of each of these topics. The parents and guardians of the students who attend the district's schools were invited to participate in a survey that focused on their children's sense of belonging in school. All guidance counselors (with the exception of the counselor who worked in the school in which the researcher is the principal) were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview, to share their insights about students' sense of belonging. The principals of the Bearwood Township School District were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview to share their expertise in the areas of continuity of curriculum and instruction, and students' academic achievement. Randomly selected ninth grade students who had been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were invited to participate in one-to-one interviews with the researcher, to share their insight about their sense of belonging within the

district. The curriculum directors and supervisors of the district were invited to participate in a focus group to also discuss these two topics. Student achievement scores on a variety of instruments provided information about students' academic achievement.

As a result of the literature review on these topics and exploratory research conducted in the district, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood School District?
2. How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood School District?
3. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood School District?

This chapter describes the study's research methodology and includes discussions of the following: (a) study setting, (b) participants and sampling, (c) overview of information needed, (d) research design overview, (e) data collection methods, (f) data analysis and synthesis, (g) ethical considerations, (h) issues of trustworthiness, and (i) limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a brief culminating summary.

### **Study Setting**

Located in northern New Jersey, Bearwood Township encompasses a total area of 70.5 square miles and originally served as a summer lake community; before 1970, few of the residents lived in the township on a year-round basis (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). There are currently 23,943 persons residing in the township. The rapid growth in residents necessitated the building of schools to accommodate the growing population, and the district constructed five of its six schools in the twenty year period between 1968 and 1988. The Bearwood School District

adopted the current grade-span configuration in September 1994; its six schools are organized as follows:

- One primary school houses students in preschool through grade 1;
- One primary school houses half of the students in grades 2 through 4;
- One primary school houses the other half of the students in grades 2 through 4;
- One middle school houses students in grades 5 through 6;
- One middle school houses students in grades 7 through 8;
- The high school houses students in grades 9 through 12.

Students make five school-to-school transitions throughout their educational careers in the district.

The Bearwood Township School District educated a total of 4,013 students during the 2010-2011 school year. This was a decline of 1,353 students over a ten-year period. According to the State of New Jersey Department of Education website, the District Factor Group (DFG) for the Bearwood Township School District is FG (NJDOE, n.d.). Further details about the Bearwood Township School District can be found in chapter one.

### **Participants and Sampling**

According to Stringer (2008), for the researcher, “the first task is to identify the *primary stake-holding groups*—that is the groups most centrally involved or affected by the issue studied” (p.43); this is also referred to as the “critical reference group.” For purposes of this action research study, participants were selected for their ability to provide information about the students’ sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and students’ academic achievement. Since the issues covered by this study affect a wide range of people, the participants needed knowledge of the varied topics being investigated. The participants included

faculty members, guidance counselors, principals, students, curriculum directors and supervisors, and parents/guardians of the students of the Bearwood Township School District.

**Faculty members.** Faculty members were one of the primary stakeholder groups for this action research study. There were 345 teachers in the Bearwood Township School District at the time of the study. Each faculty member was invited to complete a survey online via an email from the researcher, which was distributed district-wide. The survey was completed using SurveyMonkey and data was compiled for each of the three categories being investigated: students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and academic achievement of students. Every faculty member who taught in the district was given the opportunity to participate in the survey. Table 4 delineates the total number of faculty members in each school and grade level as applicable.

Table 4

*Number of Faculty Members in the Bearwood Township School District*

School	Classroom Teachers by Grade Level		Special Education Teachers	Special Area Teachers	Total Teachers
Primary School I	Preschool	4	4	10	37
	Kindergarten	10			
	Grade 1	11			
Primary School II	Grade 2	12	13	19	69
(A & B)	Grade 3	13			
	Grade 4	12			
Middle School I	Grade 5	14	13	16	57
	Grade 6	14			
Middle School II	Grade 7	15	15	30	63
	Grade 8	13			
High School			19	100	119
<b>All Schools</b>					<b>345</b>

Note. <sup>a</sup>Special area teachers teach multiple grade levels.

<sup>b</sup>At the high school level, all teachers are considered special area teachers.

**Guidance counselors.** Another stakeholder group consisted of the guidance counselors who worked in each of the six district schools; their expertise and contact with students in the

district provided insight into the students' sense of belonging in the Bearwood Township School District. There were 15 guidance counselors employed throughout the district at the time of the study; the three primary schools each have one full-time counselor, the two middle schools each have three counselors, and the high school has six counselors. Using the district email account, school counselors from each of the schools were invited to participate in an interview about the students' sense of belonging in the Bearwood School District. They were asked to respond via email if they were willing to participate in the interview, and one-to-one interviews were conducted for each school counselor who volunteered to participate. The participating guidance counselors were contacted as to the location, date, and time of the interview via email.

**Principals.** The Bearwood Township School District had a principal serving each of its six schools. Each principal was invited via email to participate in an interview for this action research study. Principals were asked to respond positively or negatively via email. The principals of each of the schools review student achievement, work collaboratively with the curriculum directors, and supervise the faculty members who are implementing the curriculum for each school in the district. As the leaders of the schools, this stakeholder group provided valuable insight into the areas of curriculum and instruction, and academic achievement. Since the number is manageable, every principal in the district, with the exception of the researcher, was given the opportunity to be interviewed. The researcher is one of the principals; this will be further discussed in the limitations section in this chapter.

**Students.** Fifteen ninth-graders who have been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were randomly selected as potential participants in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. As these students have experienced five school-to-school

transitions during their attendance in the district's schools, their views were essential to the creation of a well-informed study.

Once a student was identified as a possible participant, a letter from the researcher explaining the study was mailed to the parents/guardians of the student; this letter also requested that, if the parent/guardian is willing to give permission, he/she will speak to his/her son/daughter to determine if the student is willing to be interviewed. The letter was accompanied by a permission form. Once the permission form was returned, the student was notified via email of the scheduled date, time, and location for his/her one-to-one interview.

**Curriculum directors and supervisors.** With the goal of deriving the insight of the curriculum directors and supervisors of the Bearwood School District, each of these individuals was invited via email to participate in a focus group. After receiving responses from these nine individuals, those who volunteered were provided with a date, time, and location for the focus group session. At the time of this action research study, three directors oversaw the district curriculum, as the Director of Math and Science, the Director of Humanities, and the Director of Visual and Performing Arts; in addition, there were six supervisors who focused on specific subject areas. These positions had been created during the two years prior to this study for the purpose of overseeing the development and implementation of the preschool-12 curriculum. The curriculum directors and supervisors were a valuable resource for this action research study, especially in the areas of continuity of curriculum and instruction, and students' academic achievement. All directors and supervisors who worked in the area of curriculum were invited to participate in the focus group.

**Parents and guardians of students.** The parents and guardians of the students who attend the schools of the Bearwood Township School District were invited to share their insight

about their children's sense of belonging as they attended the district's schools. Since email addresses were not available for the parents and guardians of all of the students who attended the district's schools, this group was surveyed using two different methods. If the district had been provided with email addresses, those parents and/or guardians were invited to participate via an email invitation. The email invitation included a hyperlink to the parent survey on SurveyMonkey. The parents and/or guardians for whom the district did not have an email address were mailed a paper copy of the survey accompanied by a letter from the researcher and a stamped and self-addressed envelope in which to return the completed survey.

Two email reminders were sent for the parents and guardians who had email addresses, and one reminder was sent out via U.S. Postal Service to the participants who received the survey by mail. The superintendent of the Bearwood Township School District also granted permission to post a message on the district website. The message reminded the parents and guardians of the district about the nature of the research study and the importance of their participation; the message remained on the website for the duration of the two-week study.

### **Overview of Information Needed**

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), the information needed for most qualitative studies falls into four categories: "contextual, perceptual, demographic, and theoretical" (p. 69). This action research study furnished information for each of these areas. The *contextual* information needed for this action research study was more completely delineated in chapter one; a summary of that information has been included in the study setting section of this chapter. *Perceptual* information about the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions was obtained from faculty members, parents, and guardians of the students, guidance counselors from each of the district's schools, school principals, and the curriculum

directors and supervisors. *Demographic* information was obtained from each of the stakeholders as they were surveyed, interviewed, or participated in focus groups, as applicable. The *theoretical* category was based upon a thorough and ongoing review of the research literature available on these topics.

An overview of information needed is depicted in Table 5, which delineates more succinctly the exact information to be gleaned from each of the previously mentioned stakeholders as they relate to the research questions.

Table 5

*Overview of Information Needed*

Research Question	Information Needed	Method
1. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?	Do the students feel a sense of belonging? Is there school spirit? How do students adjust following a transition?	Faculty Survey
		Parent/Guardian Survey
		Guidance Counselor Interviews
		Student Interviews
2. How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood Township School District?	Is there articulation between grade levels? Is there articulation between schools? Do teachers know what is taught prior and following their grade level? Do teachers know the aspects of curriculum and instruction that will affect student success at the next grade level and/or in the next school?	Faculty Survey
		Principal Interviews
		Focus Groups with Curriculum Directors and Supervisors

Table 5

*Overview of Information Needed*

Research Question	Information Needed	Method
3. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?	How well are students achieving academically?  Is there a difference in student test scores following a school-to-school transition?  At which grade levels do students perform best academically?	Faculty Survey
		Principal Interviews
		Focus Group with the Curriculum Directors and Supervisors
		Standardized and Teacher-created Assessments

**Research Design Overview**

Action research is conducted to *research* an area of concern and to take *action* based on the findings of that research. Action research is appropriate when educators become cognizant of an issue and want to find an answer. It is a systematic inquiry often conducted to gather information about how schools operate, how teachers teach, and how well students learn (Mills, 2007). In the case of this action research study, exploratory research identified areas of concern in the Bearwood Township School District as the educators deliberated about the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions for the students in the district. Creswell (2008) purports that “the aim of action research is to address an actual problem in an educational setting” (p. 605). However, action research is not limited to the field of education.

Action research can provide a management tool for methodically resolving a challenging situation, engaging in program development and evaluation, and/or developing initiatives with the school community (Stringer, 2008). Mertler and Charles (2008) emphasize that action research is not a linear process, but is more cyclical in nature. It is important to note that “whereas action research has a clear beginning, it does not have a clearly defined endpoint” (Mertler & Charles, 2009, p. 30). Since the late 1930s, the field of education has shown great interest in action research, which is focused on immediate application in a local setting (Best & Kahn, 1997).

According to Mills (2007), “it is generally accepted that researchers should not rely on any single source of data, interview, observation or instrument” (p. 56). Subsequently, this action research study used a concurrent mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data sources. According to Creswell (2008), “*quantitative* data provide for generalizability...*qualitative* data offer information about the context or setting” (p. 558). Mixed-methods research collects both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously during the study (Creswell, 2008). A concurrent triangulation, mixed-methods research design was utilized for this action research study; quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, merged, and analyzed to better understand the topics of focus for this action research study (Creswell, 2008).

**Quantitative research.** Quantitative research includes minimal personal interaction with the participants being studied; most data are gathered using noninteractive instruments (Mills, 2007). In this action research study, quantitative data was garnered from survey responses of the faculty of the Bearwood School District, and survey responses of the parents/guardians of the

students attending the district's schools. Additional quantitative archival data was composed of both standardized and teacher-made assessment materials:

- The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) by Pearson, Inc., used to analyze students' reading levels for students in kindergarten through second grade;
- The results of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) scores for students in third through eighth grade; and
- The teacher-created End-of-the-Year math assessments for students in kindergarten through grade four.

This archival data was available to the researcher, but was not directly a result of assessments conducted by this researcher.

**Qualitative research.** Qualitative research uses narrative, descriptive approaches to collect data (Mills, 2007). This data can “help explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). Qualitative data was collected from interviews with school counselors and principals; in addition, a focus group with the curriculum directors and supervisors was conducted. The open-ended questions from both of the parent/guardian and faculty surveys also yielded qualitative data. The results from all data sources were reviewed and compared for this action research project.

**Triangulation.** “The credibility of a study is enhanced when multiple sources of information are incorporated” (Stringer, 2007, p.58). Information from five distinct groups of individuals involved with the Bearwood Township School District was compared: faculty members, parents and guardians of the students, guidance counselors, principals, and directors and supervisors. The use of surveys, interviews, and focus groups further ensured the reliability of the research data. James, Milenkiewicz, and Bucknam (2008) define triangulation as “the

comparison of one data set to another, often derived from very different methods of collection or from different populations” (pp. 90-91). Both quantitative and qualitative data were compared. When a researcher employs more than one data-gathering procedure in order to judge the reliability of an outcome, the process is known as triangulation (Creswell, 2008; Wiseman, 1999). Triangulation involves the use of different sources, methods, and ideas to confirm, expand, or explain the action research study (Stringer, 2008). Defined by Merriam (1998), triangulation uses multiple investigators, sources of data or methods “to confirm the emerging findings” (p. 204).

***Triangulation matrix.*** Originally developed by Sagor (2000), a triangulation matrix depicts the various data sources used to answer each research question. The matrix allows the researcher to present, in a clear format, the information studied and the data sources that provided that information. The research questions for this study are depicted in Table 6, which presents the grade-configurations and school-to-school transitions triangulation matrix for this action research study.

Table 6

*Grade-span Configurations and School-to-School Transitions Triangulation Matrix*

Research Question	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3	Data Source 4
1. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?	Faculty survey	Interviews with guidance counselors	Parent/guardian survey	Interviews with students
2. How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood Township School District?	Faculty survey	Interviews with principals	Focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors	
3. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?	Faculty survey	Interviews with principals	Focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors	Review of NJ ASK results, DRA levels, End-of-the-Year Math Assessments

Data collection occurred from October 2011 through November 2011. The researcher analyzed the data once all data had been collected, beginning in November 2011. This information is listed in Table 7 and delineates the timeline developed by the researcher for the collection of data for each of the instruments listed.

Table 7

*Data Collection and Analysis Timeline*

Data Collection Method	Dates
Faculty Survey	October 2011 – November 2011
Parent and Guardian Survey	October 2011 – November 2011
Interviews with Principals	October 2011 – November 2011
Interviews with Guidance Counselors	October 2011 – November 2011
Interviews with Students	October 2011 – November 2011
Focus Group with Curriculum Directors	October 2011 – November 2011
Review of Archival Documents	November 2011 – December 2011
Data Analysis	November 2011 – January 2011

**Data-Collection Methods**

The three research questions were used as a framework to develop questions for the surveys, the one-to-one interviews, and the focus group; these instruments collected information from the faculty members, the parents and guardians of the students, the guidance counselors, students, directors and supervisors, and the principals of the Bearwood Township School District.

Qualitative data was collected from focus groups, interviews and the two open-ended questions from the surveys. This information was utilized to derive stakeholders' perceptions about the grade-span configurations and subsequent school-to-school transitions in the Bearwood Township School District. Qualitative data from the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews, and the information derived from the open-ended questions on the two surveys were coded to make the analysis more efficient (Pine, 2009).

**Surveys.** Surveys are used to acquire information from a large number of people in a limited time frame and attain information about people's perspectives on a topic (Stinger, 2008). According to McKinney (2007), surveys provide a useful tool to gather feedback from a select population. One of the most advantageous aspects of their use is that surveys can provide anonymity and efficiency (Anderson & Herr, 2009); this is particularly true when a web-based survey such as SurveyMonkey is utilized. Both the Faculty Survey and the Parent/Guardian Survey used in this action research study were developed in a cross-sectional survey design; they collected data at one point in time (Creswell, 2008). Both surveys were developed to use a Likert Scale with four possible responses, which were used to record the level of the participants' responses to each question (Stringer, 2008).

A survey format was determined to be the most appropriate method of collecting data for faculty members and the parents and guardians of the students, due to the large sample size of each population. According to Wiersma (1995), the questions and statements should be kept as simple as possible to obtain the necessary data. The survey format should be attractive and straightforward; the items should be listed in a logical sequence and the respondents should find the survey convenient and easy to use (Wiersma, 1995). Prior to the development of each of these surveys, the questions to be used in the survey were developed by the researcher in consultation with three fellow doctoral students, a faculty advisor, and the Director of Institutional Research for the College of St. Elizabeth, to ensure clarity, bias, and validity. Each of these individuals had experience with the development of such instruments through the participation in their own action research, and by providing assistance to other researchers as they conducted research. The questions were reviewed for content and clarity, and were analyzed with the research questions from the triangulation matrix in order to establish content validity; it

was imperative that each question aligned with a specific research question. Changes were made to the surveys as necessary following consultation with each of these individuals.

**Faculty survey.** A survey for faculty members (see Appendix A) was created using SurveyMonkey. An email distribution list was developed for the Bearwood Township School District and was utilized for distribution of the Faculty Survey. Faculty members were invited to participate in the survey via an email, which was sent to every faculty member in the district; the email invitation contained the hyperlink to the survey (see Appendix B) on SurveyMonkey. Informed consent was obtained from each faculty member when they read the introductory statement and chose to continue to participate by completing the survey. Since the faculty members of the school district were familiar with each of the areas being studied, they were asked to answer questions about each of the research questions, namely students' sense of belonging, curriculum and instruction, and students' academic achievement, which were the main topics of focus for this action research study. The individual faculty survey questions as they relate to the three study research questions (presented in Table 5) are depicted in Table 8.

Table 8

*Faculty Survey Questions Matrix*

<b>Faculty Survey Questions</b> (Participants were asked to select the following in response to each: <i>Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, or Rarely</i> )	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
1. Are you familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) before the one(s) you teach?		X	
2. Students are prepared for school-to-school transitions.	X		
3. There is ample time provided for articulation about the curriculum and instruction.		X	
4. Student academic achievement is positively impacted by school-to-school transitions.			X
5. I spend a lot of time helping students adjust into our school.	X		
6. I am provided with the opportunity to visit the grade(s) into which my students will transition.		X	
7. Students feel nervous when they first enter this school.	X		

Table 8

*Faculty Survey Questions Matrix*

<b>Faculty Survey Questions</b> (Participants were asked to select the following in response to each: <i>Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, or Rarely</i> )	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
8. Teaching strategies are discussed between schools.		X	
9. Are you familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) after the one(s) you teach?		X	
10. Students proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo.	X		
11. I believe that my students arrive to my classroom ready for the grade level.			X
12. I believe that my students leave my classroom ready for the next grade level.			X
13. Students' academic achievement is negatively impacted by the grade-span configuration.			X
14. I am provided with the opportunity to visit the previous grade/course to the one I teach.		X	
15. I believe there is curriculum continuity in the schools throughout the district.		X	

Table 8

*Faculty Survey Questions Matrix*

<b>Faculty Survey Questions</b> (Participants were asked to select the following in response to each: <i>Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, or Rarely</i> )	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
16. I spend a lot of time re-teaching concepts which should have been learned in the previous grade level.			X
17. Students enjoy attending this school.	X		
18. I am adequately involved in students' placement in the next grade level.		X	
19. There are adequate supports for students when they enter our school.	X		
20. I provide input to the educators who will teach my students in the upcoming year.		X	
21. Students feel like they belong in this school.	X		
22. Open-ended question: Please share any thoughts about any aspect of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district.	X	X	X

The SurveyMonkey link was open for a two-week period. Two days following the initial distribution of the email inviting the faculty members to take the survey, a reminder email was sent out using the original email distribution list (see Appendix C). A second and final reminder email was distributed from the researcher one week before the close of the survey (see Appendix D).

**Parent/guardian survey.** A survey designed for the parents and guardians of the students who attend school in the Bearwood Township School District derived information about students' sense of belonging. Due to the fact that the district did not have email addresses for the parents and guardians of every student, this survey was developed in two formats: an online survey on SurveyMonkey and a paper survey (see Appendices E and F). Both of these surveys asked the same questions, but derived their information in different formats. Both surveys began with an introductory statement. Informed consent was obtained from each parent and guardian when they read the introductory statement and chose to continue to participate by completing the survey. The main difference between the two survey methods was that the online survey allowed the participants to complete the survey anonymously; while the paper survey could provide confidentiality, it could not provide anonymity.

The district's access to the email addresses for parents and guardians determined which parents and guardians received the online survey. The school district used ADT Select Link to broadcast alerts to multiple communication devices simultaneously via a web-based administrator interface powered by IRIS. The parents and guardians of the district had input their own data into the system, and chosen the method with which they should be contacted depending upon the type of information they wished to receive. For example, parents and guardians could choose to input their home, work, and cell phone numbers, and their home or work email

addresses. A list of all available parent/guardian email addresses was compiled using that information. Parents and guardians of students attending the district were invited to complete the survey, which was distributed to the email addresses from the ADT Select Link information (see Appendix G); the email contained the link to the survey on SurveyMonkey.

The SurveyMonkey link was open for a two-week period. A reminder email was sent out five days following the initial email invitation (see Appendix H). A second and final reminder email from the researcher (see Appendix I) was sent to the same email address list utilized for the invitation five days before the close of the survey. Each reminder email provided the parents and/or guardians with the hyperlink to the survey on SurveyMonkey (see Appendix E).

Parents and/or guardians who had not provided an email address via ADT Select Link were identified, and address labels were printed using PowerSchool, a web-based data base that stores all student data for the district. The parents and guardians who had not provided email addresses to the district were mailed a paper copy of the survey (see Appendix F) with a letter (see Appendix J) inviting them to participate in the survey. They were instructed to mail the completed surveys in the stamped, self-addressed envelope, which was provided in the same envelope as the survey (see Appendix K). As delineated in the letter, the return envelope had to be postmarked by a specific deadline in order to be included in the study. Both the mailing and return addresses belonged to the researcher, in an effort to provide further confidentiality for the participants. After receiving the completed and returned paper surveys, the researcher inserted all of the data from the paper surveys into SurveyMonkey using the Collect Tab feature, so that all of the data could be analyzed together.

A reminder was also posted on the Bearwood Township School District's website for the two-week duration during which the parents and guardians could complete the survey (see

Appendix L). One week after the initial mailing, a reminder (see Appendix M) was mailed to each parent/guardian who originally received a paper copy of the Parent/Guardian Survey. This reminder thanked them for their participation if they had already completed and returned the survey (or completed the survey online), and served as a reminder for those who had not already participated. Once the Parent/Guardian Survey closed, and the researcher received all completed paper surveys by the deadline date postmarked on the envelope, the information from each paper survey was inserted by the researcher into SurveyMonkey. Although their formats were different, the questions for the online and paper copy of the Parent/Guardian Survey focused on students' sense of belonging as perceived by the students' parents and guardians; the only exception was the demographic question, which was utilized to determine the students' grade levels as depicted in Table 9.

Table 9

*Parent/Guardian Survey Questions Matrix*

<b>Parent/Guardian Survey Questions</b> (Participants were asked to select the following in response to each: <i>Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, or Rarely</i> )	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
1. My child feels safe in school.	X		
2. My child feels happy attending school.	X		
3. My child feels comfortable in school.	X		
4. My child feels like he/she belongs to his/her school.	X		
5. My child feels proud to be part of his/her school.	X		
6. My child feels close to the principal of his/her school.	X		
7. My child feels close to the teachers at his/her school.	X		
8. My child feels close to the support staff of his/her school.	X		

Table 9

*Parent/Guardian Survey Questions Matrix*

<b>Parent/Guardian Survey Questions</b> (Participants were asked to select the following in response to each: <i>Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, or Rarely</i> )	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
9. My child would proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo.	X		
10. The principal is friendly to my child.	X		
11. The teachers are friendly to my child.	X		
12. The support staff is friendly to my child.	X		
13. The teachers respect my child.	X		
14. The teachers are interested in my child.	X		
15. My child has at least one teacher in the school in whom to confide.	X		
16. I felt prepared to have my child change schools when he/she moved into the next grade level.	X		
17. There was an adjustment period for my child when he/she moved into a new school.	X		
18. There was an adjustment period for my family when my child moved into a new school.	X		

Table 9

*Parent/Guardian Survey Questions Matrix*

<b>Parent/Guardian Survey Questions</b> (Participants were asked to select the following in response to each: <i>Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, or Rarely</i> )	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
19. The school provided information about the new school prior to my child's move.	X		
20. The school prepared my child to move into a new school.	X		
21. There were adequate supports provided for my child when he/she moved into a new school.	X		
22. My child was given the opportunity to visit and tour his/her new school prior to the move into the new school.	X		
23. My child was given the opportunity to meet the teachers in his/her new school prior to the move into a new school.	X		
24. My child was given the opportunity to review his/her class schedule prior to the move into a new school.	X		
25. I felt welcome in my child's new school.	X		

Table 9

*Parent/Guardian Survey Questions Matrix*

<b>Parent/Guardian Survey Questions</b> (Participants were asked to select the following in response to each: <i>Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, or Rarely</i> )	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
26. I felt comfortable volunteering in my child's school.	X		
27. Open-ended question: Please use the space below to comment about <u>any</u> aspect of the move(s) into new school(s) for <u>any</u> of your children.	X	X	X

**Interviews.** People are sometimes more willing to communicate orally than in writing, and will, therefore, provide data readily and fully in an interview (Van Dalen, 1973). According to Stringer (2008), “interviews not only provide a record of...views and perspectives, but also symbolically recognize the legitimacy of...points of view” (p. 56). Although interviews can reveal information about the “worldview of a single individual,” it can be a time-consuming form of data-collection (James et al., 2008, p.69). “The one-on-one interview is a data-collection process in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time” (Creswell, 2008, p. 226). Of the fifteen guidance counselors who were invited to be interviewed, three guidance counselors accepted the invitation and participated in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. Since this researcher is a principal in the Bearwood

Township School District, each of the other five principals in the district was invited to participate in a one-to-one interview; four principals chose to participate. Finally, 15 ninth-graders who had been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were randomly selected as potential participants in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. Eight of the students who accepted the invitation and provided parental approval were interviewed by the researcher.

***Guidance counselor interviews.*** There were 16 guidance counselors employed throughout the district at the time of this action research study; the three primary schools each had one full-time counselor, the two middle schools each had three counselors, and the high school had six counselors. The guidance counselors interact with students on a daily basis and manage students' emotional and academic needs. Their perceptions of students' sense of belonging were integral to this study. Since the researcher evaluates one of the primary school guidance counselors, this counselor was not invited to participate in a one-to-one interview. Each of the other 15 guidance counselors were invited, via the use of their district email addresses, to participate in a one-to-one interview. Input from the guidance counselors made a significant contribution to data collected on research question number one, which focuses on students' sense of belonging.

Following a compilation of the list of volunteers, appointments for conducting the interviews were scheduled via email for the month of November 2011 (see Appendix O); the date, time, and location of each interview was determined following a mutual agreement between the interviewee and interviewer. The protocol and questions used during the interviews are provided in Appendix Q; in order to establish continuity and consistency between interviews the same protocol was read to the participants before the presentation of questions. In addition,

permission to audiotape the interview was requested before conducting each one-to-one interview. Consent forms were completed by each participant (see Appendix P); the consent forms delineated the purpose of the study, the benefits and risks of participation, and the contact information for the researcher. Each one-to-one interview with a guidance counselor lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded digitally utilizing Pulse smartpen by Livescribe and a digital voice recorder. Permission to audiotape the interview was requested before conducting the one-to-one interview. Transcripts of the interview were produced by Verbal Ink, a transcription service. Handwritten notes were limited in an effort to eliminate any distractions during the interview process.

The questions posed to the guidance counselors all pertained to research question one, and focused on the sense of belonging for students in the district. The questions posed to the guidance counselors during their one-to-one interviews are delineated in Table 10.

Table 10

*Guidance Counselor Interviews Question Matrix*

<b>Guidance Counselor Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
1. Please describe some of the advantages for students as they transition into your school.	X		
2. Please describe some of the challenges students face as they transition into your school.	X		
3. Are there any initiatives and/or programs in place to assist students as they transition into your school?	X		
4. Please describe some of the advantages for students as they transition out of your school.	X		
5. Please describe some of the challenges students face as they transition out of your school.	X		
6. Are there any initiatives and/or programs in place to assist the students as they transition out of your school?	X		
7. What is the most challenging time of the school year for your students? Please explain.	X		

Table 10

*Guidance Counselor Interviews Question Matrix*

<b>Guidance Counselor Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
8. Please describe the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of your school as they relate to the sense of belonging for the students who attend your school.	X		
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about students' sense of belonging in this district?	X		

***Principal interviews.*** As the curriculum leaders in each of their respective schools, the principals were in the position to provide input and insight into curriculum articulation and academic achievement. The researcher was employed as one of those principals of one of the six schools in the Bearwood Township School District at the time of this action research study. The goal of the researcher was to interview each of the remaining five principals; the principals were invited via email to participate (see Appendix R). Following a compilation of the list of volunteers, each volunteer was assigned a mutually-agreeable location, date, and time for their one-to-one interview via email (see Appendix S). The questions asked of each principal pertained to research questions two and three and focused on curriculum and instruction as well

as student achievement. The protocol and questions used during the interviews are provided in Appendix U. In order to establish continuity and consistency between interviews, the same protocol was read to the participants before the presentation of questions.

Consent forms were completed by each participant (see Appendix T); the consent forms delineated the purpose of the study, the benefits and risks of participation, and the contact information for the researcher. The alignment of the interview questions to the research questions is delineated in Table 11.

Table 11

*Principal Interview Questions Matrix*

<b>Principal Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
1. Describe communication about curriculum and instruction between grade levels and schools in this district.		X	
2. Is there a connection between curriculum and instruction and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.		X	
3. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to curriculum and instruction?		X	
4. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.			X
5. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and school-to-school transitions? Please explain.			X

Table 11

*Principal Interview Questions Matrix*

<b>Principal Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b>  Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b>  Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b>  Students' academic achievement
6. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to student academic achievement?			X
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the curriculum, instruction and/or the academic achievement of students in this district as these topics relate to the grade-span configuration and/or school-to-school transitions?		X	X

Each one-to-one interview with a principal lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded digitally utilizing Pulse smartpen by Livescribe and a digital voice recorder. Permission to audiotape the interview was requested before conducting each one-to-one interview. Transcripts of the interview were produced by Verbal Ink, a transcription service. Handwritten notes were limited in an effort to eliminate any distractions during the interview process.

***Student interviews.*** Student perceptions and opinions are important to the research, so this study also included student interviews. Fifteen ninth-graders who had been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were randomly selected as potential participants in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. Since these students had experienced five school-to-school transitions during their attendance in the district's schools, their views were essential to the creation of a well-informed study.

A list of students who had been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten and were presently enrolled in the ninth grade at Bearwood Township High School was compiled using PowerSchool. In an effort to ensure anonymity when selecting students for possible participation in the one-to-one interviews, the student list consisted solely of the Student ID Numbers which had been assigned to each student by the district. A Table of Random Numbers from the StatTrek.com website was utilized to select fifteen students who fit the criteria mentioned above.

Since none of the ninth grade students were yet 18 years of age, parent/guardian permission was necessary in order to have them participate as research subjects. Once a student had been identified as a possible interviewee, a letter from the researcher explaining the study was mailed to the parents/guardians of the student; this letter also requested that, if the parent/guardian was willing to give permission, he/she would speak to his/her son/daughter to determine if the student was willing to be interviewed (see Appendix V). If both the parent/guardian and the student agreed that the student would like to participate in the interview, the parent/guardian was asked to complete the Parent/Guardian Permission Form (which had accompanied the letter) and return it to the researcher within a week of receipt (see Appendix W).

A stamped and self-addressed envelope accompanied each mailing to return the Parent/Guardian Permission Form.

Once the permission form was returned, the student was notified via email of the scheduled date, time, and location for his/her one-to-one interview (see Appendix X). Each interview was held in the conference room off the lower library of the high school during the student's lunch period. To ensure privacy, participants were not visible to those outside the conference room.

A Student Assent Form was given to each student at the time of his/her scheduled interview (see Appendix Y). It is important to note that student participation was voluntary and that each student volunteer was given the right and opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any time. There was no penalty for withdrawal and there was no coercion to continue with the interview process. The same protocol was used for each interview (see Appendix Z). The questions posed to the students pertained to research question one and focused on students' sense of belonging. The questions posed to the students during their one-to-one interviews are delineated in Table 12.

Table 12

*Student Interview Questions Matrix*

<b>Student Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
<p>1. As you think back to the schools you have attended, did you feel more or less comfortable in some schools than in others?</p> <p>1a. What made you feel more or less comfortable?</p>	X		
<p>2. As you think back to the schools you have attended, did you ever feel like you were an important part of your school?</p> <p>2a. Why did or didn't you feel that way?</p> <p>2b. Did you think that other students knew you? Did a lot of them know you by name?</p> <p>2c. Did you think that the adults in the school knew you? Did a lot of them know you by name?</p>	X		

Table 12

*Student Interview Questions Matrix*

<b>Student Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
3. Have you ever felt proud to be part of a school?  3a. If so, why? If not, why not?  3b. Have you ever worn a t-shirt or sweatshirt with a school's name on it? What was the school's name?	X		
4. What was the best thing about changing schools—or transitioning?	X		
5. What was the worst thing about changing schools—or transitioning?	X		
6. How long did it take you to adjust after transitioning from one school to another?  6a. What helped make transitioning to a new school easier?  6b. Who helped make transitioning to a new school easier?	X		

Table 12

*Student Interview Questions Matrix*

<b>Student Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
7. Were you ever excited about starting a new school? When? Why?	X		
8. Were you ever scared about starting a new school? When? Why?	X		
9. Do you have anything else about transitioning that you would like to share?	X	X	X

Each one-to-one student interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded digitally utilizing Pulse smartpen by Livescribe and a digital voice recorder. The Parent/Guardian Permission Form and the Student Assent form both included permission to audiotape each one-to-one interview. Transcripts of the interview were produced by Verbal Ink, a transcription service. Handwritten notes were limited in an effort to eliminate any distractions during the interview process. Each student who participated in a one-to-one interview was verbally thanked at the end of the interview session.

**Focus group.** A focus group is defined by Pine (2009) as an “open-ended, discursive group, which is used to gain a deeper understanding of respondents’ attitudes and opinions” (p. 269). Focus groups may encourage results from shy or hesitant participants, but run the risk that

“group dynamics may interfere with complete and accurate data” (James et al., 2008, p.69).

Focus groups can be effective in eliciting broad overviews of issues of concern for the participants (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). Focus groups can elicit both a shared understanding and individual views (Creswell, 2008). They can be a particularly useful tool when interactions between participants lead to shared understanding of the question being posed (Mills, 2007).

***Focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors.*** As the curriculum leaders for the schools of the Bearwood Township School District, these directors and supervisors were in the position to provide input and insight into curriculum articulation and academic achievement. This group of administrators were invited via email to participate in this focus group (see Appendix Z), and each volunteer was asked to respond via an email to the researcher. Following a compilation of the list of volunteers, an email listing the location, date, and time of the focus group session was sent to each participant (see Appendix Aa). The protocol and questions used during the curriculum directors and supervisors focus group are provided in Appendix Cc. Prior to the focus group, the participants were provided with a consent form (see Appendix Bb), which delineated the purpose of the study, the benefits and risks of participation, and the contact information for the researcher. In addition, permission to audiotape the focus group was requested prior to beginning the session. The focus group session ran for approximately 60 minutes. The questions posed to the curriculum directors and supervisors pertained to research questions two and three, and focused on curriculum and instruction, in addition to students’ academic achievement. The questions and their relationship to the research questions are delineated in Table 13.

Table 13

*Curriculum Director and Supervisor Focus Group Questions Matrix*

<b>Director and Supervisor Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b>  Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b>  Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b>  Students' academic achievement
1. Describe communication about curriculum and instruction between grade levels and schools in this district.		X	
2. Is there a connection between curriculum and instruction and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.		X	
3. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to curriculum and instruction?		X	
4. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.			X
5. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and school-to-school transitions? Please explain.			X

Table 13

*Curriculum Director and Supervisor Focus Group Questions Matrix*

<b>Director and Supervisor Interview Questions</b>	<b>RQ1</b> Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b> Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b> Students' academic achievement
6. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to student academic achievement?			X
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the curriculum, instruction and/or the academic achievement of the students in this district as these topics relate to the grade-span configuration and/or school-to-school transitions?		X	X

The focus group was recorded digitally using Pulse smartpen by Livescribe and a digital voice recorder. Transcripts of the interview were produced by Verbal Ink, Inc., a transcription service. Handwritten notes were limited in an effort to eliminate any distractions during the interview process. The importance of confidentiality was discussed with all focus group participants before any questions were posed.

**Archival document review.** Through the use of archival data, the researcher can gain valuable historical insights and identify trends (Mills, 2007). Action research sometimes

necessitates the gathering of data originally collected for a reason other than the action research study, but is now being used as data for the study (Mertler, 2009). Archival documentation analyzed in this study consisted of both standardized and non-standardized tests.

The New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) test has been standardized in both administration and interpretation, as opposed to teacher-made assessments. Since the Bearwood Township School District is located within the state of New Jersey, these statewide assessments are required for each student attending a public school within the state. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is a standardized assessment that provides students' reading levels; however, they were administered by individual teachers and, thus, may not be completely uniform as a result. The End-of-the-Year Math assessments were non-standardized, teacher-created and administered. Thus, the data derived from these archival documents will vary in their reliability, with the data from the standardized tests providing more reliability and validity than the teacher-created assessments.

The matrix created in Table 14 demonstrates the alignment of archival documents to research questions two and three, namely, continuity of curriculum and instruction and students' academic achievement.

Table 14

*Test Specification Matrix*

<b>Archival Documentation</b>	<b>RQ1</b>  Students' sense of belonging	<b>RQ2</b>  Curriculum and instruction	<b>RQ3</b>  Students' academic achievement
1. Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) scores			X
2. New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) scores			X
3. End-of-the-Year teacher-made Math assessment scores			X

**Data Analysis and Synthesis**

**Qualitative data.** Data analysis in qualitative research often overlaps with data collection, and the researcher must organize large quantities of information (Wiersma, 1995). Data analysis is the process of moving from raw data to evidence-based interpretations of the data (Wiersma, 1995). Analysis includes classifying, comparing, weighing and combining material from the qualitative data sources to create a coherent narrative (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 2005). Data analysis of qualitative research can be described as:

a process of successive approximations toward an accurate description and interpretation of the phenomenon. The report of the research is descriptive in nature and contains little

technical language. The emphasis is on describing the phenomenon in its context and, on that basis, interpreting the data. (Wiersma, 1995, p. 216)

The process of reorganizing and reducing data is known as coding (Wiersma, 1995). Specific categories usually emerge from the data and are discovered as the researcher looks for “patterns of thinking or behavior, words or phrases, and events that appear with regularity or for some reason appear noteworthy” (Wiersma, 1995, p.217).

In terms of this action research study, transcription of the interviews and focus group were conducted by Verbal Ink, Inc. Following the transcription of the data, these large quantities of data were categorized, or coded; the major task of this procedure was to identify themes from the data (Stringer, 2007). Computer programs are available to assist with this process and the researcher utilized NVivo9 software to assist with this procedure; however, the researcher was responsible to carefully review all data and come to conclusions about the information derived from the information provided by the participants. The open-ended question from each of the surveys also provided qualitative data, which was coded for common themes or ideas.

Once the information was analyzed and coded, the researcher consulted with two fellow doctoral students who have each been CITI-certified by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative to assist as raters or coders for this study (see Appendices Cc and Dd). These colleagues were provided with samples of representative transcripts which were devoid of identifiable information and codes. These raters were asked to code the documents, and the researcher compared the codes to determine inter-rater reliability. If there was a discrepancy between the coding of the researcher and that of the raters, the researcher reviewed the data and reconciled the differences. Throughout the process of the analysis of the data, the researcher kept a detailed journal of how all data was analyzed and interpreted.

Qualitative research is much less structured and standardized than quantitative research, thus the researcher's perspectives are highly influential (Wiersma, 1995). Quantitative data will be discussed in the following section.

**Quantitative data.** Utilizing the tools supplied by SurveyMonkey, the data was analyzed using graphs, statistics, and a compilation of open-ended responses for the online survey. The researcher inserted all data from the paper surveys for parents and guardians, using the Collection Tab feature of SurveyMonkey, so that all data could be analyzed together. The data was analyzed, compared for common themes, and interpreted by the researcher. The reading levels and test scores compiled from the data sources below were analyzed as follows:

- The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) scores were used to analyze students' reading levels for students in kindergarten through second grade. Scores were compared by grade levels;
- The results of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) scores were reviewed for students in third through eighth grade. Scores for language arts and math were compared by grade levels; and,
- The teacher-created End-of-the-Year math assessments were studied for students in kindergarten through grade four. Scores were compared by grade levels.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The National Research Act (as cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979) was signed into law on July 12, 1974; this act created the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. Based upon The Belmont Report, three core principles form the universally accepted basis for research ethics:

- Respect for persons: the researcher is committed to ensuring the autonomy of research participants and protecting people from exploitation;
- Beneficence: the researcher is committed to minimizing the risks associated with research; and
- Justice: the researcher is committed to a fair distribution of the risks and results from research. (Mack et al., 2005)

“Some bioethicists have suggested that a fourth principle, *respect for communities*, should be added” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 11). This principle would help to respect the values and interests of the community and to protect the community from harm (Mack et al., 2005). “Whenever we conduct research on people, the well-being of research participants must be our top priority” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 9).

It is the belief of this researcher that all ethical considerations were carefully considered during the development of this research. To the best of her knowledge, no persons were harmed by participation in this action research study. Through the use of anonymity of participants whenever possible, and confidentiality when anonymity was not possible, all participants were protected from harm. Pseudonyms concealed identities and information was reported in general terms whenever possible. There was no deception of any participants during this action research study.

The faculty and parent/guardian surveys were completed anonymously online through the use of SurveyMonkey, so the anonymity of all of those who voluntarily completed the surveys was maintained. Paper surveys could not be completed anonymously, but the researcher endeavored to maintain the utmost confidentiality by following specific guidelines. Paper surveys completed by parents and guardians were returned in the stamped, self-addressed

envelopes included with the letter and survey mailed to each home; both the return address and mailing address on the return envelope were that of the researcher. Parents and/or guardians were instructed to refrain from using any names while completing the surveys, and they were asked not to sign the completed document. Informed consent was obtained from each faculty member when they read the introductory statement and chose to continue to participate by completing the survey.

Associated with confidentiality is the duty the researcher has to all participants (Stringer, 2008). Before the start of all interviews and focus groups, each participant signed the Standard Adult Consent Form, and was notified that the session would be digitally recorded. The consent form for those who participated in the focus group included a statement about the confidentiality of all interviews, and emphasized that the participants should not discuss the interview with anyone. All information was stored securely so that no one would have the opportunity to see it. Following the interviews and focus group sessions, all documentation, including consent forms, audio files, transcripts, and handwritten notes, were stored in two separate locked file cabinets in the researcher's home. Any documentation which could identify an individual participant, such as a signed consent form, was stored separately from any from materials that contain unidentifiable data.

The goal of the Internal Review Board (IRB) of a university is to ensure the ethical conduct of research engaged in by students and faculty (Stringer, 2008). Before conducting this research study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the College of St. Elizabeth approved this study. All steps were taken to protect the rights of the individuals participating in this study. Upon analysis of the procedures and instrumentation utilized in this study, it is the belief of this

researcher that there was no physical or psychological harm to any of the participants as a result of this research.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

“Trustworthiness is established by examining the credibility and dependability of qualitative data. Credibility involves establishing that the results of the research are believable from the perspective of the participant in the research...the concept of dependability emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs” (Mertler, 2009, pp. 114-115). If research is valid, it will reflect the world being described; if the research is reliable, then two researchers studying the same trend will develop compatible observations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). One method of ensuring validity and reliability of qualitative data is through the use of triangulation, which has been discussed in detail earlier in this chapter; the use of multiple data sources and data-collection methods can support the findings of the study (Mertler, 2009; Pine, 2009).

**Validity/credibility.** The validity of research data deals with the extent to which the data collected accurately measures what they purport to measure (Mills, 2007). By asserting validity, the researcher asserts that the data actually measures what it claims to measure (Sagor, 2000). Researchers are essentially concerned with the trustworthiness of the data when dealing with the validity of both qualitative and quantitative data (Mertler, 2009). Validity refers to the “*appropriateness, correctness, meaningfulness, and usefulness* of the specific *inferences* researchers make based on the data they collect” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003, p. 158).

The researcher needs to make inferences based on the data collected from a specific instrument; it is those inferences which must be appropriate, correct, meaningful, and useful, so the research will yield data from which to draw conclusions about the topics being studied

(Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). In an effort to yield valid and credible data from this action research study, the researcher triangulated the methods of data collection to include surveys, interviews and a focus group. In addition, a variety of stakeholder groups were invited to participate in the research in order to collect data from a variety of sources.

The most critical factor related to the validity of the research data is whether or not the questions asked of the stakeholders in the surveys, interviews, and focus groups are appropriate and related to the research questions being studied (Mertler, 2009). In an effort to ensure that the questions for this study related to the three research questions, the researcher first created a triangulation matrix, which was presented in Table 6 of this chapter. The triangulation matrix presented each of the research questions followed by a list of data sources that could be utilized to answer each question. The next instrument used to clarify the validity of this action research study was the creation of the matrix an overview of information needed, presented in Table 5, which presented the pertinent research questions which would be used to derive questions for the participants through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Through careful analysis of the research questions, questions for each instrument were developed and reviewed by three fellow doctoral students, a faculty advisor, and the Director of Institutional Research for the College of St. Elizabeth for content validity.

The questions used for the two surveys, the interviews, and the focus group were developed by the researcher in consultation with three fellow doctoral students, a faculty advisor, and the Director of Institutional Research for the College of St. Elizabeth for clarity, bias, and validity. Each of these individuals had experience with the development of such instruments through the participation in their own action research and by providing assistance to other students as they conducted research. The questions were reviewed for content and clarity and

were analyzed with the research questions from the triangulation matrix in order to establish content validity; it was imperative that each question be aligned with a specific research question. Changes were made as necessary following consultation with each of these individuals.

**Reliability/dependability.** Reliability relates to the accuracy of the data (Sagor, 2000). “Reliability refers to the consistency of the scores obtained—how consistent they are for each individual from one administration of an instrument to another and from one set of items to another” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003, p. 165). Reliability refers to the extent to which the findings can be duplicated (Merriam, 1998). “The concept of dependability emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs” (Mertler, 2009, p. 115). It is possible for scores from an instrument to be reliable (consistent), but not valid (measuring something other than what was intended); however, scores cannot be both valid and unreliable—reliability is a necessary condition for validity (Mertler, 2009).

In terms of qualitative research, Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) emphasize that establishing dependability is achieved by providing full and comprehensive explanations of how the data was collected and analyzed, and by establishing inter-rater reliability by having colleagues independently code representative samples of the transcripts from interviews and focus groups. Following the collection of data from this action research study, the researcher had two fellow doctoral students, who had been certified by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), assist in providing inter-rater reliability by independently coding representative samples of the transcripts and the results of the open-ended research questions. If more than an 80% discrepancy was found between the coding of the researcher as compared to the coding completed by the CITI-certified doctoral students, the researcher reviewed the data and

reconciled the differences. All of this data was maintained in a journal kept by the researcher which detailed how all of the data was analyzed and interpreted.

**Transferability.** Transferability focuses on how well the study can be matched to contexts outside that of the study. By providing complete descriptions and detailed information, the researcher will ensure that others can utilize the findings from this study and transfer them to their own setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Although it was not the goal of this researcher to create a study which would be generalized to other school districts, this action research study could be valuable to other educational settings because the researcher has collected detailed descriptive data and detailed descriptions of the context for the study (Mills, 2007). By creating a study which could be replicated, this researcher has provided future researchers with the opportunity to transfer the findings of this study to their own contexts by the development of clear and accurate descriptions of the stakeholders who served as participants in the study, the instrumentation utilized, and the process of analyzing the data.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This action research study contains three key limiting conditions, which will be discussed separately. First, the fact that the researcher worked as a principal in a school in the Bearwood School District was one limiting condition; this may have caused specific implications of familiarity and bias. The researcher was beginning her seventh year in the district; for each of those years, she had worked as the principal of the same primary school for students from preschool through grade one. The parents and guardians of the district who have had students attend school under this administrator may have been more likely to complete the Parent/Guardian Survey, since they were more familiar with the researcher. Parents and/or guardians who were unfamiliar with the researcher may not have had the personal connection

some may need to take the time to complete the survey. Although the ninth grade students who were interviewed had never had the researcher as a principal, there may be some intimidation as a result of the researcher's role as an administrator in the district.

One of the downsides of interviews, according to Van Dalen (1973) is that the opinions and attitudes of the interviewer may influence the answers given by participants. Recognizing this as one of the limitations, the researcher began each interview and the focus group session by reading a protocol (see Appendices P, T, Y and Cc) which was consistently followed; the researcher was cognizant of the importance of being clear and succinct in all directions given to participants during the interview and focus groups sessions. Since the researcher evaluated guidance counselors as one of her job responsibilities, there may have been a tendency by some participants to tell the researcher what they thought she wanted to hear, thus invalidating the results. This may have been most notable for the guidance counselor interviews. Confidentiality was stressed and the researcher encouraged honesty and openness so as to collect the most accurate data. The researcher refrained from adding any comments or reacting to responses to questions during the interviews. No personal questions were asked of the participants and no reports contained any statements which would connect an individual counselor to information contained in the reports. Finally, each guidance counselor was assured that the interviews would have no role in their evaluations, and were strictly for research purposes.

Secondly, the archival data utilized in this research study posed a limitation. As discussed previously, the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) test is administered to students in third through eighth grades. This leaves a gap in archival data for students in kindergarten through second grade, as there are no standardized statewide assessments given before third grade in New Jersey's public schools. Since there is no standardized test

administered to students in ninth and tenth grade, there is no standardized data available to assess student achievement immediately following the transition into high school. Students do not take the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) until they are in eleventh and twelfth grades. The Developmental Reading Inventory (DRA) provided reading levels for students in kindergarten through second grade, but since they were administered by individual faculty members, there may have been discrepancies in the results due to variations and/or errors in testing practices.

In addition, the End-of-the-Year Math Assessments were developed and administered by teachers; thus, they are not standardized test assessments. A test constructed by teachers is less likely to be as expertly designed as a professional, standardized test (Best & Kahn, 1997). Although these math assessments provide a measurement tool to judge cumulative student performance for the school year at each grade level, they have not been standardized on the general population; thus their reliability may not be as consistent as standardized tests. Additionally, since these math assessments were in use for just one year, their reliability as compared to standardized math tests has yet to be evaluated.

Thirdly, action research, in and of itself, is a limitation. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), qualitative researchers do not often expect their findings to be generalizable or transferable to other settings. However, through the detailed descriptions of the study, another district may be able to benefit from the findings of this action research. In addition, according to Anderson and Herr (2009), “Administrators doing action research may also have to decide how comfortable they are with controversy as action research often makes visible those dark corners of the organization in which power and privilege hide” (p. 164). In the case of this study, the researcher had the full support of her district; however, that may not always be the case.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a description of this action research study's methodology, in order to provide enhanced insight into the research on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions for the students of the Bearwood Township School District. The effect on the sense of belonging for students, curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement were the main focal points of the study. Input from the key stakeholders in the district, namely, parents and guardians, faculty members, principals, students, curriculum directors and supervisors, and guidance counselors, was derived through the use of surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Reading levels from the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) for students in kindergarten through grade 2, New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) test results for students in grades 3 through grade 8, and the End-of-the-Year Math Assessment results for students in kindergarten through grade 4, will also be analyzed.

The researcher used a triangulation, mixed-methods approach for this action research study. Steps were taken to address the validity and reliability of the data. Inter-rater reliability provided reliability of the findings. Finally, transferability was developed through the creation of a study with procedures and findings that were described in a clear and distinct manner. Through the review of both qualitative and quantitative methods, the researcher provided the Bearwood Township School District with valuable information about the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions for the students of the district.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

#### **Overview of Study**

The Bearwood Township School District is configured with one primary school for students in preschool through first grade, two additional primary schools for students in second through fourth grades, a middle school for students in fifth and sixth grade and another middle school for students in seventh and eighth grades. Bearwood has a high school for students in ninth through twelfth grades. The district's grade-span configuration requires students to make five school-to-school transitions during their educational experience in the district. Exploratory research on the topic of grade-span configuration and the subsequent school-to-school transitions indicates a number of concerns expressed by the faculty, staff and administrators. First, frequent student turnover as students transition from school to school results in most schools losing half of their student population each year; there are indications that this may have an impact on the sense of belonging or sense of community in each school setting. Additionally, the educators in the district have also expressed a concern that the grade-span configuration may have an influence on communication, continuity and collaboration between the schools, especially as it affects the curriculum. This is perceived to have a negative impact on student achievement; in addition, there is a prevailing concern that students are not scoring as well on standardized tests as would be indicative of a district of its size and caliber.

#### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The students of the Bearwood Township School District attend five schools during their educational experience in the district. As a result, students must make five school-to-school

transitions, predominantly after spending only two years in the same building. This creates frequent turnover of students for the staff of each school and may cause additional stress for students and their families. The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions on the sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and student academic achievement for the Bearwood Township School District. Exploratory research into this topic has established that the present grade-span configuration is an area needing further study. This study enabled a more in-depth analysis of the effects of the present grade-span configuration by answering the following three questions:

1. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?
2. How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood Township School District?
3. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?

### **Overview of Chapter**

This chapter begins with a brief description of the instruments that were utilized to gather data; this is followed by a narrative about the researcher and the participants who were included in this study. The process used for the data analysis, which includes coding, integration and inter-rater reliability of the data sources, is then detailed. Finally, the findings are presented for each research question that guided the study. The findings were developed through careful analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data

## **Research Instruments**

The instruments which were utilized to collect information were surveys, one-to-one interviews, and a focus group. The three research questions used for this study provided a framework for the development of the questions in each instrument; it was imperative that each question be aligned with a specific research question. The questions used for the surveys, the interviews, and the focus group were developed by the researcher in consultation with three fellow doctoral students and a faculty advisor, and were reviewed for clarity, bias, and validity. The Director of Institutional Research for the College of St. Elizabeth also reviewed the survey questions. The individuals chosen to assist with this process were either in the process of conducting their own research studies or had completed research and were assisting students with their action research studies.

**Surveys.** A survey format was determined to be the most appropriate method of collecting data for faculty members and the parents and guardians of the students, due to the large sample size of each population. Two separate surveys were utilized in this action research study; both surveys were developed to use a Likert Scale with four possible responses (Almost Always, Frequently, Occasionally, and Rarely) which were used to record the participants' responses to each question (Stringer, 2008). The surveys included one demographic question which helped distinguish the grade level taught by the faculty member or the grade level of the parent or guardian's child. Each of the surveys also concluded with an open-ended question, which provided qualitative data for the researcher.

The survey for faculty members was created using SurveyMonkey. An email distribution list was developed for the Bearwood Township School District and was used for distribution of the Faculty Survey. Since the faculty members of the school district were familiar with each of

the areas being studied, they were asked to answer questions pertaining to each of the research questions, namely students' sense of belonging, curriculum and instruction, and students' academic achievement.

A survey designed for the parents and guardians of the students who attend school in the Bearwood Township School District provided information about students' sense of belonging. Because the district did not have email addresses for the parents and guardians of every student, this survey was developed in two formats: an online survey on SurveyMonkey and a paper survey. The main difference between the two survey methods was that the online survey allowed the participants to complete the survey anonymously; while the paper survey could only provide confidentiality and not provide anonymity. After receiving the completed and returned paper surveys, the researcher inserted all of the data from the paper surveys into SurveyMonkey using the Collect Tab feature, so that the data could be analyzed together.

**Interviews.** Each guidance counselor and each principal from the Bearwood Township School District who volunteered to be interviewed participated in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. Additionally, 15 ninth-graders who have been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were randomly selected as potential participants in a one-to-one interview with the researcher.

Since the guidance counselors interact with students on a daily basis, their input about students' sense of belonging was integral to this study. Input from the guidance counselors is a significant part of research question number one, which focuses on students' sense of belonging. The questions posed to the guidance counselors all pertained to research question one.

As the academic leaders in each of their respective schools, the principals of each school were in the position to provide input and insight into curriculum articulation and academic

achievement. The questions asked of each principal pertained to research questions two and three and focused on curriculum and instruction as well as student achievement.

It was important to include the voices of the students, so this study also included student interviews. Since these students have experienced five school-to-school transitions during their academic careers in the district's schools, their views were essential to the completion of a well-informed study. Fifteen ninth-graders who had been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were randomly selected as potential participants in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. Eight permission forms were returned to the researcher.

**Focus group.** As the curriculum leaders for the schools of the Bearwood Township School District, the directors and supervisors were also in the position to provide input and insight into curriculum, instruction, and academic achievement. The questions posed to the curriculum directors and supervisors pertained to research questions two and three and focused on curriculum and instruction, in addition to students' academic achievement.

**Archival document review.** This study included the analysis of three sources of archival documentation comprised of both standardized and non-standardized tests. The first source included the analysis of scores from the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), a statewide assessment which is administered to each third through eighth grade student attending a public school within the state. Next, reading levels derived from the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), a standardized assessment of students' reading levels, were studied. The DRAs were administered by teachers and/or reading specialists teaching in the district. Finally, the End-of-the-Year Math assessments, which were teacher-created and administered, were analyzed.

## **Research Participants**

**Researcher.** This researcher was a principal in one of the three primary schools in the Bearwood Township School District. Thus, the principals who were interviewed for the study were her colleagues. In addition, the directors and supervisors who participated in the focus group worked collaboratively with the researcher in the areas of curriculum and instruction. The researcher was never the principal of a school in which the ninth grade student interviewees were in attendance. Some of the parents and guardians who completed the survey had personal experience with the researcher as a principal, but it is not clearly definitive due the structure of the survey.

**Faculty members.** There were 345 teachers in the Bearwood Township School District at the time of this study. Each faculty member was invited to complete the survey online via an email from the researcher which was distributed district-wide. The survey was completed using SurveyMonkey and the data was compiled for information on each of the three categories being investigated: sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and academic achievement for students. A total of 45% of the faculty members accepted the invitation to participate in the faculty survey. Survey question number 22 from the faculty survey was a demographic question that asked those completing the survey to choose one category to describe the grade level taught. Table 15 delineates the total number of faculty members who participated in the survey, according to their response to the question: "I presently teach:"

Table 15

*Grade Levels Taught by Faculty Survey Participants*

Grade Level Taught	Number of Participants
Preschool or Kindergarten	7
First Grade	10
Second Grade	5
Third Grade	8
Fourth Grade	6
Fifth Grade	11
Sixth Grade	10
Seventh Grade	9
Eighth Grade	10
Ninth Grade	4
Tenth Grade	6
Eleventh Grade	4
Twelfth Grade	3
Multiple grade levels	47
Provided no response	15
Total	155

**Guidance counselors.** There are 15 guidance counselors employed throughout the district. The three primary schools each have one full-time counselor, the two middle schools each have three counselors, and the high school has six counselors.

***Guidance counselor interview.*** Using the district email account, school counselors from each of the schools were invited to participate in an interview about the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood School District. One-to-one interviews were conducted for each of the three school counselors who volunteered to participate.

***Faculty survey.*** It is important to note that since the guidance counselors teach classes, they are also considered faculty members and may have participated in this study by completing the faculty survey online. Thus, the opinions of these individuals may have been gleaned through SurveyMonkey.

**Principals.** The Bearwood Township School District had a principal serving each of its six schools at the time of this study. Since the researcher is one of the principals, the five remaining principals were invited via email to participate in an interview for this action research study. Four of the five principals agreed to participate in a one-to-one interview. As the leaders of each of the schools, this stakeholder group provided valuable insight into the areas of curriculum and instruction and academic achievement.

**Students.** Fifteen ninth graders who have been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were randomly selected as potential participants in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. As these students have experienced five school-to-school transitions during their attendance in the district's schools, their views were essential to the creation of a well-informed study. The researcher mailed a letter explaining this study and a parent/guardian permission form to the parents/guardians of these randomly selected students.

Eight signed parent/guardian permission forms were returned to the researcher, thus one-to-one interviews were conducted for the eight ninth graders. The interviews focused on question one and sought the students' input about the sense of belonging.

**Curriculum directors and supervisors.** With the goal of deriving the insight of the curriculum directors and supervisors of the Bearwood School District, each of these individuals was invited to participate in a focus group via email. Two directors and four supervisors responded to the researcher's request and a focus group was held with these participants. These individuals had been assigned to these newly developed positions within a two-year period prior to this study; the focal point for each of these directors and/or supervisors was the oversight of the development and implementation of the preschool-12 curriculum. The curriculum directors and supervisors were a most valuable resource for this action research study, especially in the areas of continuity of curriculum and instruction and students' academic achievement.

**Parents and guardians of students.** The parents and guardians of the students who attend the schools of the Bearwood Township School District were invited to share their insight about their children's sense of belonging in the district's schools through participation in a survey. Since email addresses were not available for the parents and guardians of all of the students who attend the district's schools, this group was surveyed using two different methods. If the district had been provided with email addresses, those parents and/or guardians were invited to participate via an email invitation; that email invitation included a hyperlink to the parent survey on SurveyMonkey. The researcher emailed 1,778 invitations to participate in the survey. The parents and/or guardians for whom the district did not have an email address were mailed a paper copy of the survey accompanied by a letter from the researcher and a stamped and self-addressed envelope in which to return the completed survey. There were 382 surveys

mailed to the parents and guardians of students attending the Bearwood Township District Schools and a total of 619 (29%) of the parents or guardians participated in the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Since this study generated both quantitative and qualitative data, it is considered a mixed methods study. “The purpose of using multiple methods in studies where quantitative and qualitative data are treated separately is generally to attempt to validate the findings by having corroborative evidence derived from different methods...to explain or complement findings from one method by using another” (Bazeley, 2006, p. 65). In this study, the quantitative data was analyzed by reviewing test scores and levels and the responses from the surveys. The review of the qualitative data involved the careful examination of the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups as well as the responses to the open-ended questions from the surveys. Through the development of codes and the coding of the data, connections were drawn between the sections of coded data and the researcher discovered the story being told by the participants. “The results from the quantitative and qualitative components of a study are considered in relation to each other primarily as conclusions are being drawn” (Bazeley, 2006, p. 64).

### **Analyzing and Interpreting Quantitative Data**

Some of the quantitative data derived for this study was created through the use of the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. Both the faculty and parent/guardian surveys were developed, implemented, and analyzed utilizing the functions available from this online website. Survey questions were answered utilizing a Likert scale with four possible responses: *Almost Always*, *Frequently*, *Occasionally*, and *Rarely*. This data was reported by the percentage of responses for each survey question.

For ease of analysis, the survey questions and responses were sorted according to the research question on which they were focused. Faculty survey questions 2, 5, 7, 10, 17, and 21 corresponded to research question one and focused on students' sense of belonging. Faculty survey questions 1, 3, 6, 8 9, 14, 15, 18 and 20 corresponded to research question two and focused on continuity of curriculum and instruction. Faculty survey questions 4, 11, 12, 13 and 16 corresponded to research question three and focused on student academic achievement.

The other sources of quantitative data analyzed for this study were the NJ ASK scores for students in grades 3 through 8, the DRA levels for students in kindergarten, first and second grade, and the End-of-the-Year Math Assessments for students in kindergarten through fourth grade. Scores from each grade level were averaged to derive one cumulative score/level for each of the aforementioned assessments. The scores analyzed were all taken from assessments given during the 2010-2011 school year.

### **Coding and Interpreting Qualitative Data**

“Qualitative research creates ‘mountains of words’” (Johnson, Dunlap, & Benoit, 2010, p. 648). Those “mountains of words” for this study were derived from a number of sources:

- Three guidance counselor interviews
- Four principal interviews
- Eight ninth grade student interviews
- One focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors
- 40 comments from the open-ended question on the faculty survey, and
- 190 comments from the open-ended question on the parent/guardian survey.

“Qualitative research methods require transparency to ensure the ‘trustworthiness’ of the data analysis. The intricate processes of organizing, coding and analyzing the data are often rendered

invisible in the presentation of the research findings, which requires a ‘leap of faith’ for the reader” (Ryan, 2009, p. 142). This researcher utilized a priori codes, which were developed before examining the data (Moran, 2004). These codes were developed by reading about the concepts of grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions and research completed by other researchers during the literature review. The researcher also used inductive codes, which were developed by direct examination of the data of this study (Moran, 2004).

“One of the central requirements in qualitative analysis is clear thinking on the part of the analyst” (Bergin, 2011, p. 7). Qualitative data has been traditionally been analyzed manually, using a filing system developed by the researcher (Moran, 2004). This process has changed somewhat in recent years with the development of computer software programs. Utilizing qualitative data analysis (QDA) software can provide the researcher with the ability to easily access material and to handle large amounts of data with consistent coding schemes (Bergin, 2011). This researcher enlisted NVivo9 software to assist with the analysis of the qualitative data produced from the interviews, focus group and open-ended questions associated with this study.

“The use of a QDA program such as NVivo [9] allows for consistent coding schemes and provides the analyst with the tools to query and audit the coding processes” (Bergin, 2011, p.12). Thus, although a QDA program allows the researcher to organize inordinate amounts of qualitative data, the researcher must still create the codes and input the data into the software program. According to Ryan (2009), the researcher must still decide upon the methods used to code the data; the codes are not generated by the software program. “Software programs such as *NVivo* do not do the intellectual work for the researcher, nor do they assume context free analysis; rather they facilitate creative management of multiple data sources and enable researchers to

make visible their methodological processes for a more ‘trustworthy’ study” (Ryan, 2009, p. 158).

Most qualitative research is designed to create information that is not easily transformed into numeric codes (Johnson et al., 2010); thus the need for the researcher to be intensely immersed in the data is imperative. Qualitative data was garnered from the open-ended responses on both the faculty and parent/guardian surveys. The faculty survey included Question 23, which stated: “Please share any thoughts about any aspects of the grade span configuration and school-to-school transitions in this district.” Twenty-six percent of the respondents chose to provide comments for this item on the faculty survey. The parent/guardian survey included Question 28, which stated: “Please use the space below to comment on any aspect of the move(s) into new school(s) for any of your children.” Thirty-one percent of the parents/guardians who participated in this survey took the opportunity to provide comments for this item.

## **Findings**

### **Research Question One**

*How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?* The findings for research question one were determined by the data garnered from the faculty survey, the guidance counselor interviews, the parent/guardian survey, and the student interviews. This data matrix for research question one is presented in Table 16.

Table 16

*Data Matrix for Research Question One*

Data Source	Questions Related to Research Question One
Faculty Survey	2, 5, 7, 10, 17, 19 and 21 elicited Likert Scale responses 22 elicited demographic information 23 (open-ended question)
Interviews with Guidance Counselors	1-8 9 (open-ended question)
Parent/Guardian Survey	1-25 elicited Likert Scale responses 26 elicited demographic information 27 (open-ended question)
Interviews with Students	1-8 9 (open-ended question)

**Finding one.** *The parents, guardians and faculty members believe that students in the district feel a sense of belonging and are proud to attend their schools; however, students report feeling a sense of belonging only if they participate in extra-curricular or community service activities.*

The data sources that support Finding One include the parent/guardian survey, the faculty survey, guidance counselor interviews, and student interviews. The data garnered from each of these sources is explained separately.

**Parents and guardians.** When the parent/guardian survey presented statements about their children feeling safe and happy and comfortable while attending schools, the majority of

parents/guardians reported that their children felt safe, happy, and comfortable in the Bearwood Township School District. Survey statement 1 read, “My child feels safe in school.” A total of 617 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 80% responded “Almost Always,” 16% responded “Frequently,” 3% responded “Occasionally” and less than 1% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children feel safe while in attendance at school. The survey responses for statement #1 are illustrated in Figure 1.

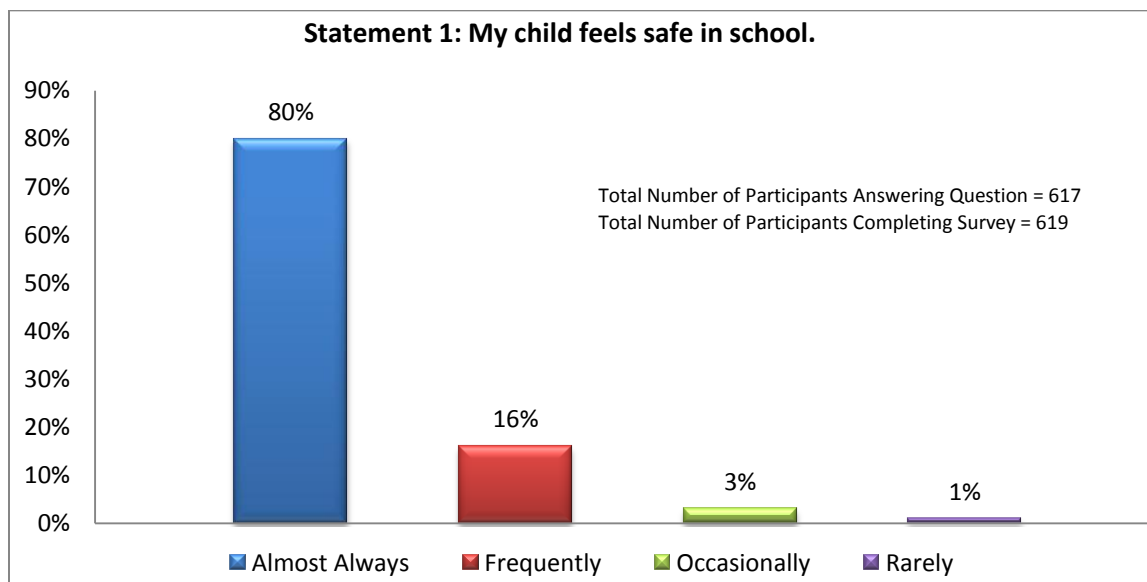


Figure 1. Parent/guardian survey responses regarding their children feeling safe in school.

As discussed earlier, the parent/guardian survey also provided participants with the opportunity to complete an open-ended statement so they could share any additional information regarding the current grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions for students in the district. The statement read, “Please use the space below to comment about any

aspect of the move(s) into new school(s) for any of your children.” The only open-ended responses that mentioned the topic of safety included one parent/guardian who spoke of his/her child being bullied and feeling unsafe and another who spoke about children saying mean things, which caused his/her child to feel unsafe.

Survey statement 2 read, “My child feels happy attending school.” There were 617 out of 619 parents and guardians who responded to this statement; 59% responded “Almost Always,” 29% responded “Frequently,” 10% responded “Occasionally” and 2% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children feel happy while in attendance at school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 2

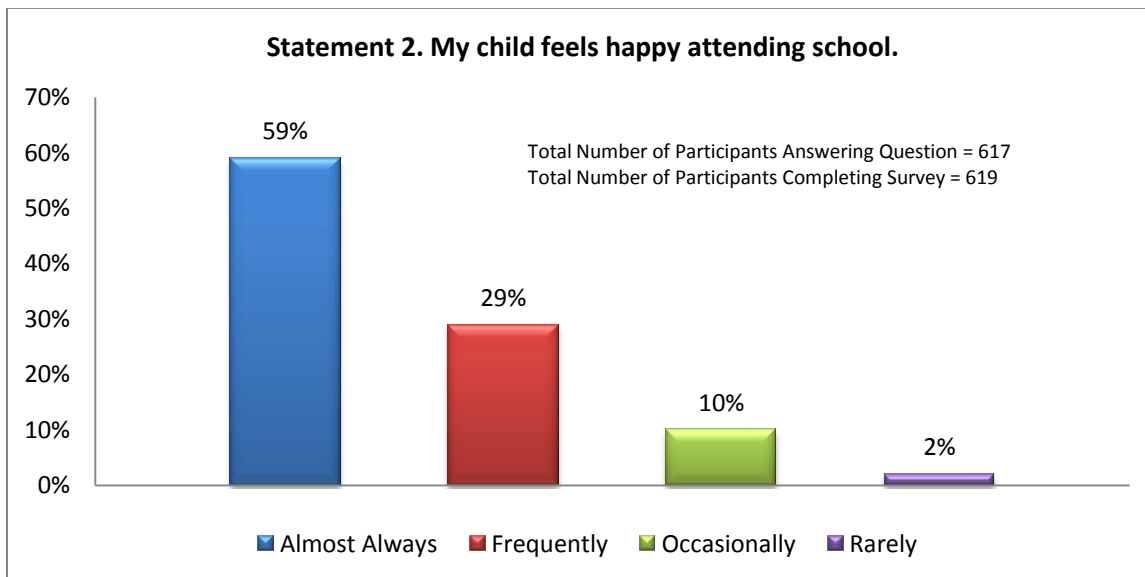


Figure 2. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding children feeling happy attending school.

The only open-ended responses that mentioned children being happy included one parent/guardian who stated, “My child is always happy going to school.” Another personalized the concept of happiness and stated, “I as a parent am very happy with the Bearwood schools.”

Survey statement 3 read, “My child feels comfortable in school.” There were 616 out of 619 parents and guardians who responded to this statement; 64% responded “Almost Always,” 28% responded “Frequently,” 7% responded “Occasionally” and 1% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be determined that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children feel comfortable while in attendance at school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 3.

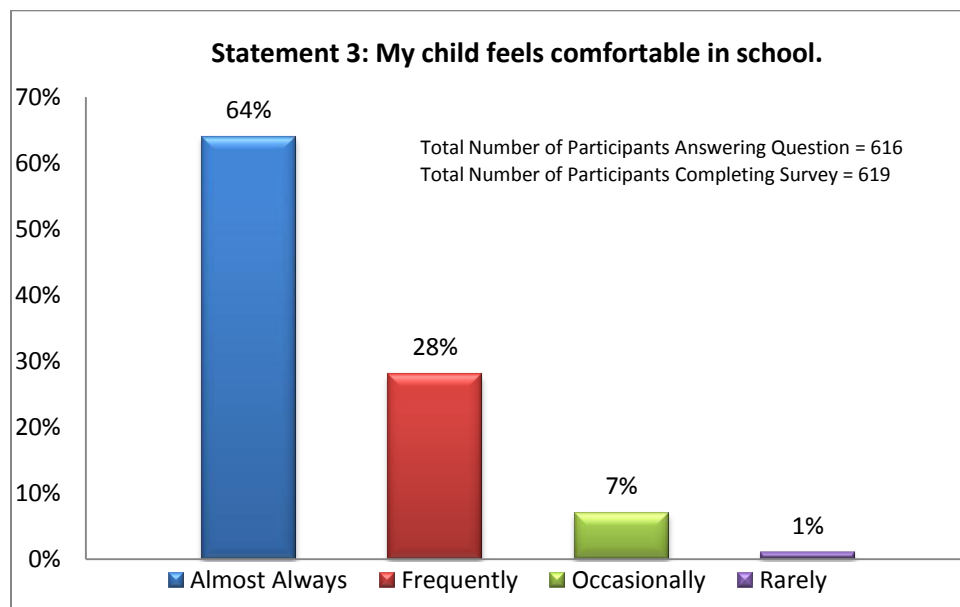


Figure 3. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding children feeling comfortable in school.

When responding to the open-ended question on the parent/guardian survey, many of the parents and guardians commented that their children were comfortable attending school; one maintained, “[T]he transition was difficult for my child at first but then my child became more

comfortable in her surroundings.” While another parent/guardian shared, “Overall, I believe my child is doing well and is comfortable in her surroundings.”

However, a few of them took the opportunity to share some concerns about the current grade-span configuration as it relates to their child’s comfort level. One shared, “[It] may be difficult to maintain a level of comfort in your school when it is continually changing.” Another stated, “I feel that just when they feel comfortable in the school they have to move on.” A third shared, “I feel that if a child is at the same school for a longer period of time, they are more likely to succeed in the older grades because they are comfortable and secure in their surroundings.” “The students move from schools every two years...it does not give them enough time to become comfortable with the school and teaching staff,” revealed another parent/guardian. Finally, another parent/guardian shared, “I feel that if a child is at the same school for a longer period of time, they are more likely to succeed in the older grades because they are comfortable and secure in their surroundings.”

Some parents/guardians shared that the concept of comfort may be more challenging for a child with special needs. One parent/guardian shared, “My 4th grader is comfortable in her current school; it has taken her a lot of time to reach that level of comfort...She has special needs, and relies on the relationships she has developed with her teachers.” Another stated, “[A] child with [a] learning disability feels uncomfortable when moving to a new environment. [It] takes time to gain the confidence needed to feel secure.”

Parent/Guardian survey statement 4 read, “My child feels like he/she belongs to his/her school.” A total of 611 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 66% responded “Almost Always,” 24% responded “Frequently,” 8% responded “Occasionally” and 2% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with

children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children feel a sense of belonging while in attendance at school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 4.

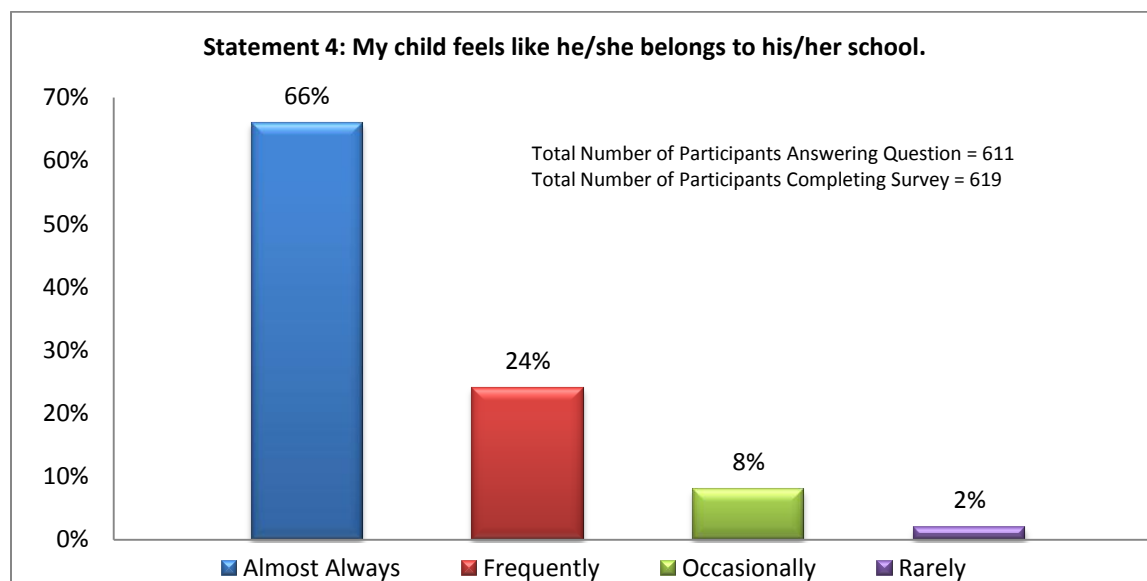


Figure 4. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding children’s sense of belonging.

The opportunity to provide comments on the survey yielded a number of parents/guardians offering viewpoints about the sense of belonging. Some of the parents and guardians commented that it was difficult for their children to feel a sense of belonging due to the frequent transitioning in and out of schools. One contended, “I personally feel that the way our district’s schools are designed, many children do not feel a sense of belonging to any one school.” Although this comment is related to configuration, it depicts the perception by some parents/guardians that the current grade-span configuration affects the sense of belonging for their children.

Parent/Guardian survey statement 5 stated, “My child feels proud to be part of his/her school.” A total of 612 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 62%

responded “Almost Always,” 25% responded “Frequently,” 8% responded “Occasionally” and 4% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children feel proud to be part of their schools. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 5.

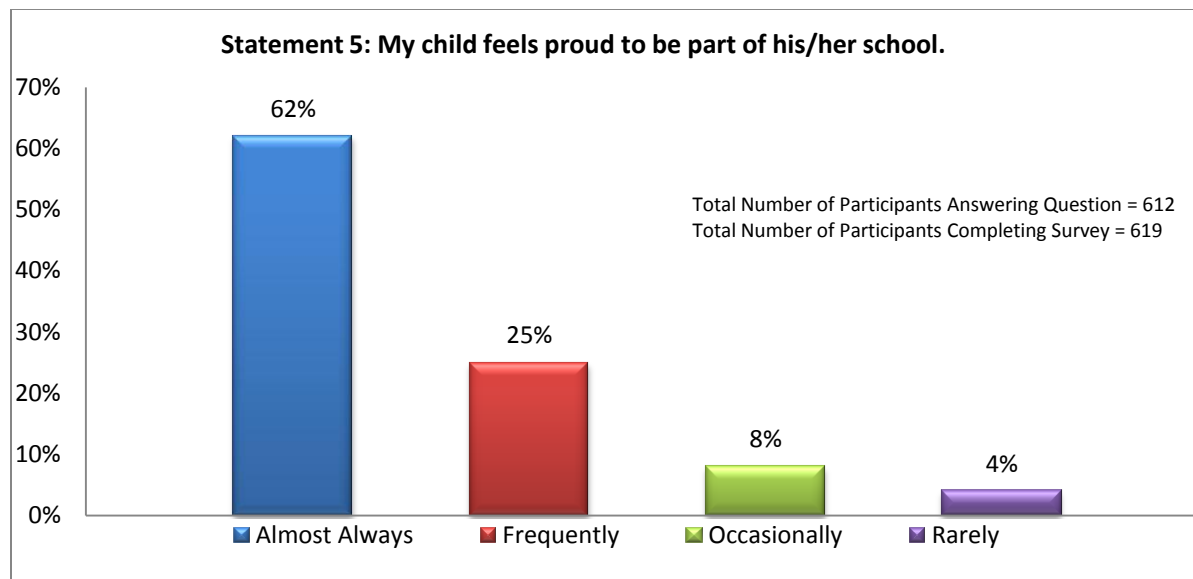


Figure 5. Parent/guardian survey responses regarding children feeling pride in their schools.

The opportunity to provide comments for one of the survey questions resulted in only one parent/guardian making a statement about children feeling pride in the schools. The parent/guardian stated, “I have two children currently enrolled in the Bearwood schools, one who has gone through the school system and is now a college junior and one who will be attending in two years.....we have always been proud of our school system.” This statement does not comment on being proud of one school in particular, but the school system as a whole.

Survey statement 9 on the Parent/Guardian survey stated, “My child would proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo.” This statement was included in the survey to

determine how students might demonstrate a sense of belonging or pride in their school.

However, due to the wording of the statement, “My child *would* wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo,” it did not necessarily indicate that students were actually wearing such clothing, but that they *would* wear it *if* such clothing was available to be worn. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that clothing is not actually available for the individual schools.

Clothing which is worn and sold in throughout the district bears the district name and a picture of a bear—the district logo. A total of 614 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 54% responded “Almost Always,” 23% responded “Frequently,” 14% responded “Occasionally” and 9% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children *would* proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo.

The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 6.

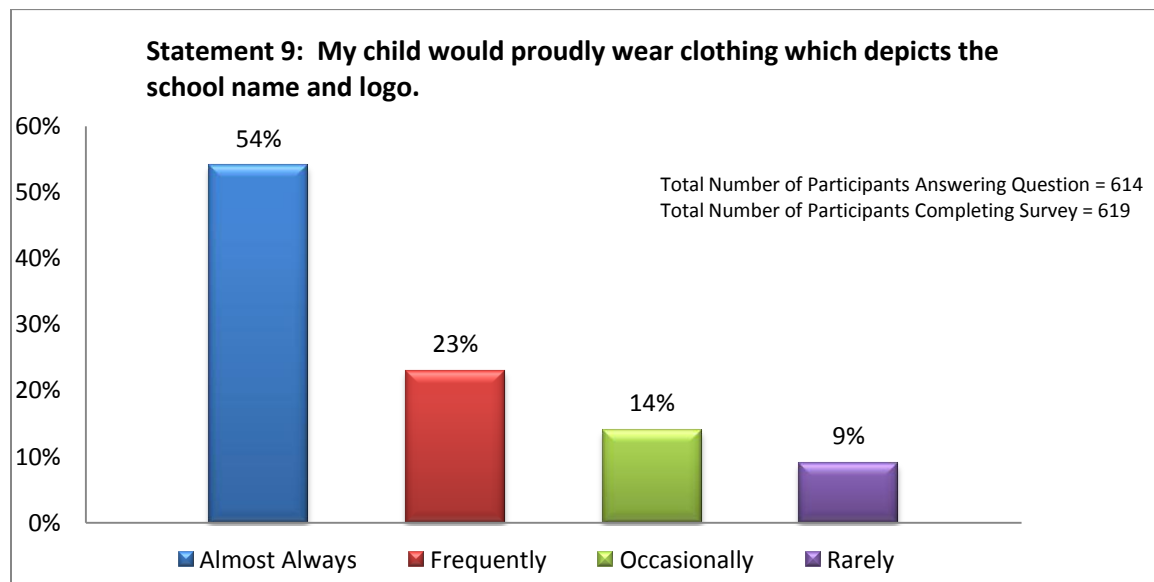


Figure 6. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding school clothing being worn by students.

None of the parents/guardians commented about their children wearing school clothing as part of the open-ended responses.

**Faculty members.** The faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District were also asked to provide their insight and opinions regarding grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions by participating in a survey. Some of the statements on the faculty survey focused on students' sense of belonging. Statement number 17 on the faculty survey stated, "Students enjoy attending this school." In their responses to this statement, the majority of the faculty members reported that students enjoy attending their schools. A total of 144 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 50% responded "Almost Always," 44% responded "Frequently," 6% responded "Occasionally" and 0% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the students enjoy attending schools. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 7.

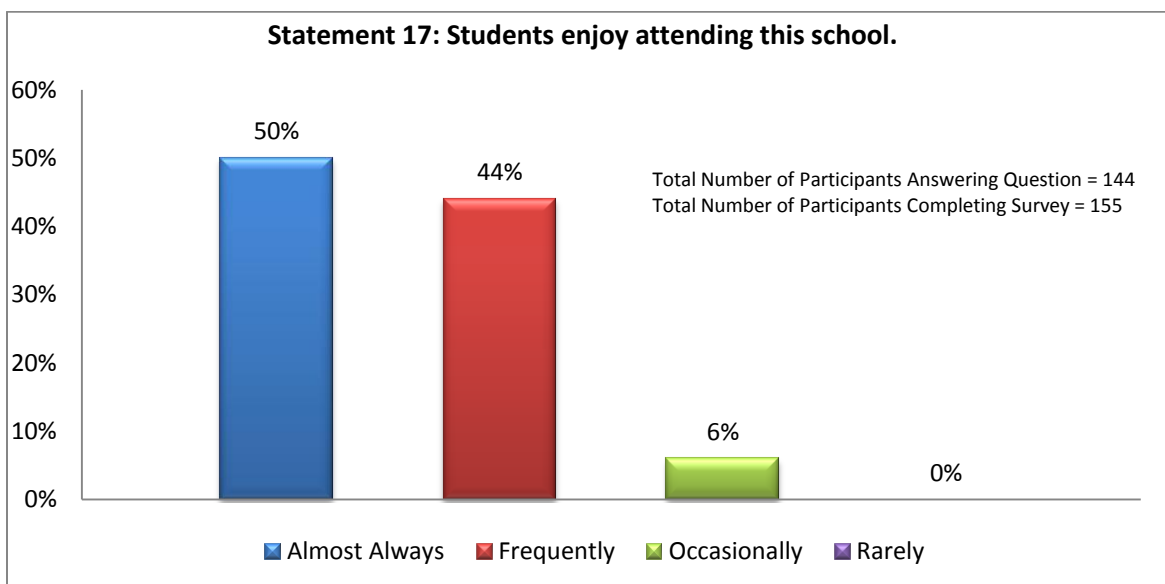


Figure 7. Faculty survey responses regarding students enjoyment of school attendance.

None of the faculty members shared any statements specifically about students enjoying attending schools.

Another statement on the faculty survey which focused on students' sense of belonging was statement 21, which read, "Students feel like they belong in this school." In their responses to this statement, the majority of the faculty members reported that students feel like they belong. A total of 140 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 52% responded "Almost Always," 41% responded "Frequently," 7% responded "Occasionally" and 0% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the students feel like they belong in their schools. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 8.

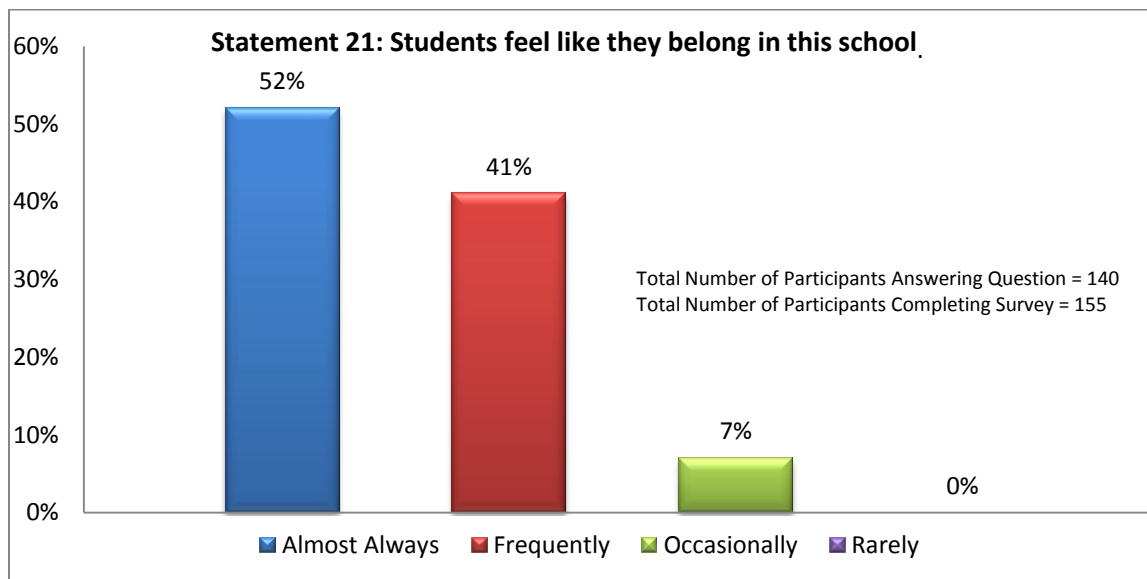


Figure 8. Faculty survey responses regarding students sense of belonging.

When provided with the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question on the survey, none of the faculty members shared any positive feedback about the students' sense of belonging. However, a few faculty members took the opportunity to discuss what they perceived as a lack of belonging on the part of the students. One of them commented: "I don't feel that students are in a school for a length of time needed to make a connection, to feel a part of 'a family,' to know that someone is looking out for them." Another shared, "I think the sense of a 'family' and school spirit is hampered by our district changing schools every 2 and 3 years. The feeling of school being a second home to students is lost because of the frequent changes." A third faculty member offered, "Years ago the district changed the configuration to 2 grades per-middle school...It seems the change has weakened the community of both students and faculty."

Faculty survey statement 10 also focused on students' sense of belonging and read, "Students proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo." The responses to this statement varied from the other statements about sense of belonging. A total of 153 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 12% responded "Almost Always," 26% responded "Frequently," 32% responded "Occasionally" and 30% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District are of the opinion that students do not proudly wear clothing depicting the school name and logo. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 9.

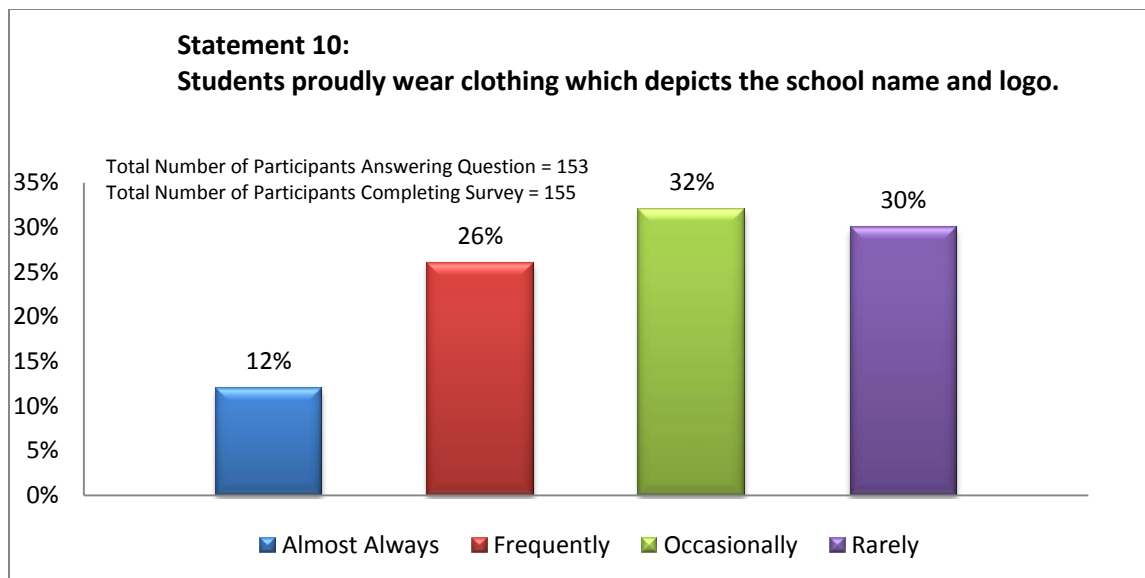


Figure 9. Faculty survey responses regarding students wearing clothing with school name and logo.

None of the faculty members commented about student clothing as part of the open-ended responses of the faculty survey. It should be noted that the wording for this survey statement is different than the statement for the parent/guardian survey, which enquired if students *would* wear school clothing, while the faculty survey asked if students *wear* such clothing. However, clothing with the school name and logo is not actually available for students to wear.

**Guidance counselors.** Three guidance counselors volunteered to participate in a one-to-one interview for this study; the interviews focused primarily on students' sense of belonging. During one of the interviews, a guidance counselor stated, "... [in the past] there was more of that sense of pride in the high school...more of a sense of belonging. I don't feel that the kids are connected now..." This was the only comment from the guidance counselors which referred directly to students' sense of belonging.

**Students.** Student input was garnered by conducting eight interviews with students who have been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten. The students were asked questions about the sense of belonging. Each of the ninth grade students interviewed expressed that it took one or two days, but never more than two weeks to feel comfortable in their new school settings. Once they knew their way around a new school building, they expressed that they were comfortable. However, students only reported feeling like they were proud to be part of a school when they were part of an afterschool activity, such as the band or a sports team. Some of the students also connected feeling part of a school (or a sense of belonging) when they performed outreach activities for the community—especially in Middle School II. Although they did not give specific responses, the students shared that they had raised money for various needs throughout the community. Responding to the question, “Have you ever felt proud to be part of your school?” one student responded, “Yes. I love the Bearwood school system...I stand up for Bearwood...I think it’s a great school.” This student responded to an inquiry about his/her school with a response about his/her pride in the district as a whole.

When students were interviewed about wearing clothing with a school logo, a few of them responded that they wear t-shirts on which “Class of 2015” was printed on the front and had all of the students’ names printed on the back; the t-shirts had been distributed to them when they attended Primary School II-B in fourth grade. Others stated that they had band shirts and shirts with sports teams which they would wear, but that they had nothing with a school name per se. One of the students stated that he/she would proudly wear a t-shirt which depicted a Bear, which is the symbol used for the entire district. The student stated, “I am proud to be a Bear.” Another shared that he/she has worn a Bearwood sweatshirt, which represented “Bearwood in

general,” inferring that wearing clothing which depicted the entire school district was more common than wearing clothing with a particular school and/or logo displayed for this student.

**Finding two.** *The faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District are perceived to be friendly to, interested in, and respectful of their students and the majority of students can identify at least one teacher in whom they can confide; however, the parents and guardians do not have the same conviction that their children feel close to the adults in the school.*

The data sources that support Finding Two include the parent/guardian survey, guidance counselor interviews, and student interviews. The data obtained from each of these sources will be discussed separately.

**Parents and guardians.** Parent/guardian survey statement 10 read, “The principal is friendly to my child.” A total of 599 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 54% responded “Almost Always,” 23% responded “Frequently,” 16% responded “Occasionally” and 7% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the principal of their child’s school is friendly. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 10.

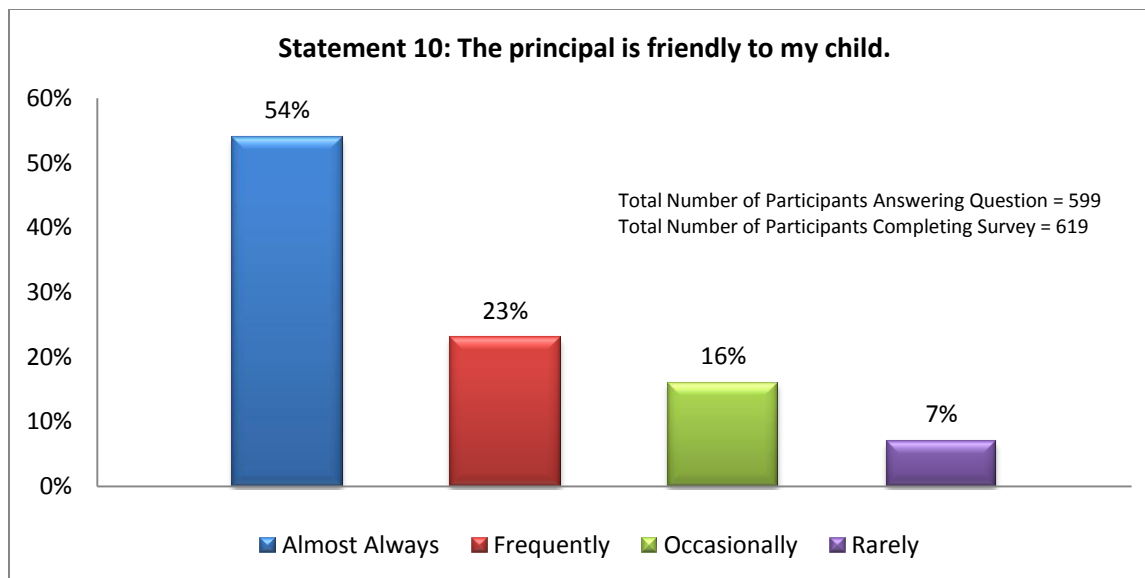


Figure 10. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding perception of friendliness of principal.

When provided with the opportunity to respond to an open-ended statement, one parent/guardian commented, "...the school teachers and the school principal are all friendly." There were two negative comments; one stated, "My son has never met the principal, and has an idea that he is 'mean' because that's what the older children have said...I think it is unacceptable that he and his classmates have not met their own principal." Another shared, "[My child is] scared/fearful of the principal."

Survey statement 11 read, "The teachers are friendly to my child." A total of 593 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 60% responded "Almost Always," 32% responded "Frequently," 7% responded "Occasionally" and 1% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the teachers in their child's school are friendly. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 11.

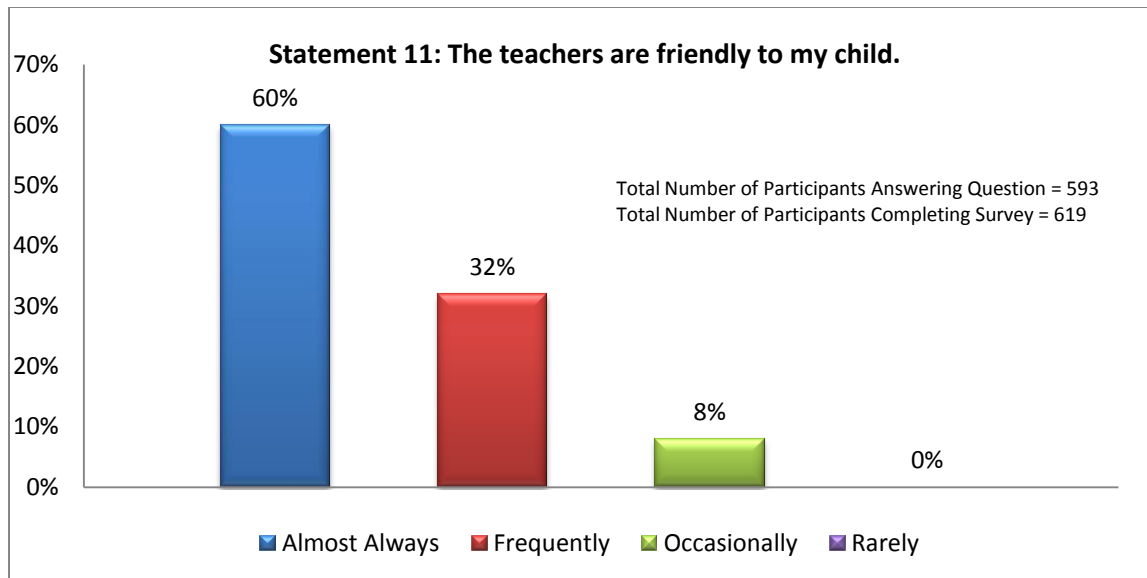


Figure 11. Parent/guardian survey responses regarding perception of friendliness of teachers.

In response to the open-ended statement, a few of the parents/guardians shared feelings about their children’s teachers. “Both [children] like their school and the teachers appear to care and help more than most.” Another shared, “None of the four [children] have ever had any dealings with the principal, but have had some wonderful teachers along the way, especially in the older grades, which has helped the kids adjust easier.” “The high school has been a great experience for my oldest daughter and all of her teachers have been awesome,” shared a third. A parent/guardian who had relocated from out-of-state wrote, “We have been impressed with the schools our children have attended and with the teachers and support staff.” Another shared, “Based on the P/T [parent/teacher] conferences and Back-to-School Nights we've attended it is apparent that the teachers and staff in the [Bearwood] system have a sincere passion for teaching.” Another parent/guardian with a positive experience wrote, “On the whole, I think Bearwood's teachers are excellent and my children are flourishing because of it.” There were two negative comments about teachers; one shared, “[Some] teachers are nasty, mean and not very

caring to the students.” Another parent/guardian shared a perception about teachers not being friendly and wrote, “I see a deep need for change here. [They are] sarcastic, embarrass children, rude—not enough kindness.”

Parent/guardian survey statement 12 read, “The support staff is friendly to my child.” A total of 590 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 52% responded “Almost Always,” 36% responded “Frequently,” 9% responded “Occasionally” and 2% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the support staff of their child’s school is friendly to their child. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 12.

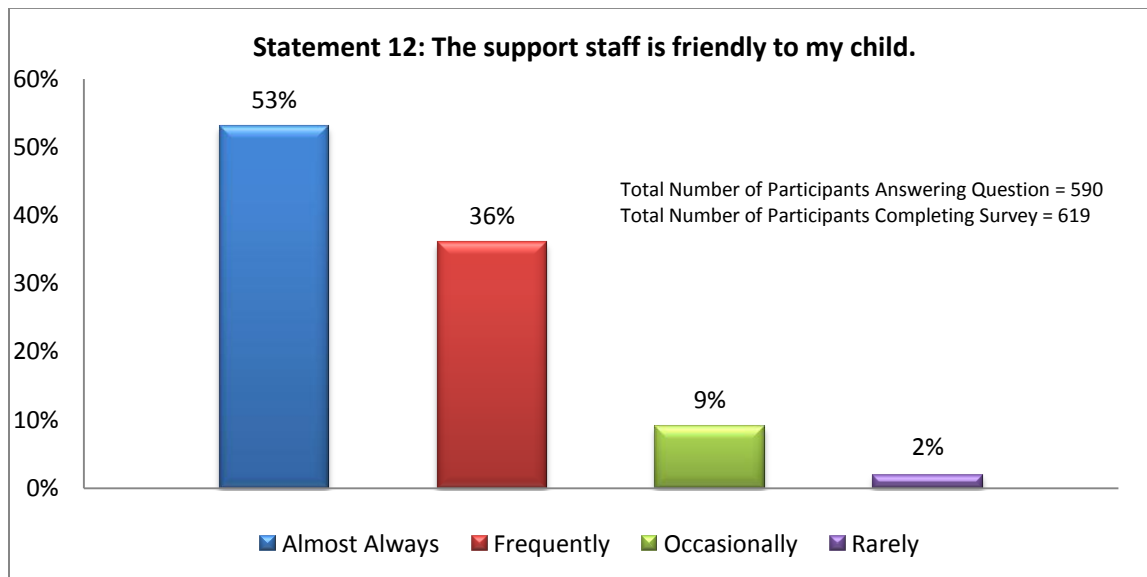


Figure 12. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding perception of friendliness of support staff.

Most of the comments from the open-ended responses were positive. These responses are a representative sample of those comments: “The educators and staff in each of the schools have always been professional, accessible, friendly and helpful.” “I love our school district and couldn't be more proud of our staff!” “Teachers and staff were always professional from school to school.” “We have been impressed with the schools our children have attended and with the teachers and support staff.”

The only negative comments were regarding the office staff members of some of the schools. One parent/guardian related this to the frequent school-to-school transitions and shared that it was sometimes difficult to deal with office staff members when they lack patience with the parents/guardians who are new to the school.

Survey statement 6 read, “My child feels close to the principal of his/her school.” A total of 599 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 19% responded “Almost Always,” 22% responded “Frequently,” 26% responded “Occasionally” and 33% responded “Rarely.” Thus, there are more parents/guardians who perceive that their children *do not* feel close to the principal than those who *do* feel close. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 13.

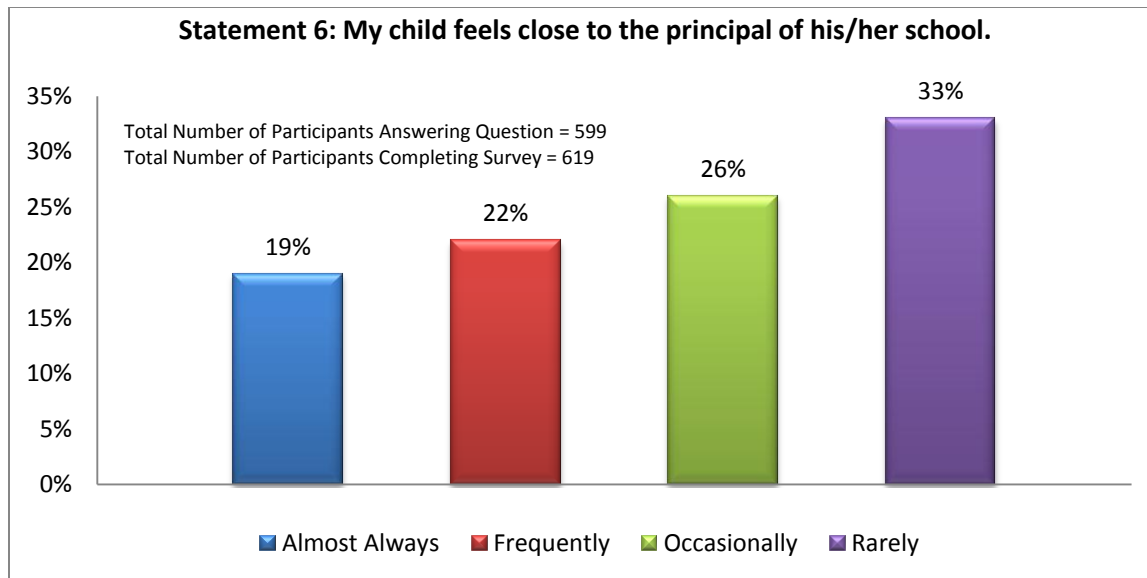


Figure 13. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding students feeling close to their principals.

In the open-ended comments one parent/guardian wrote, “[There is] no need to feel close to the principal.”

Survey statement 7 stated, “My child feels close to the teachers at his/her school.” A total of 612 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 41% responded “Almost Always,” 34% responded “Frequently,” 22% responded “Occasionally” and 3% responded “Rarely.” Thus, the majority of students feel close to the teachers in their schools, as perceived by their parents and guardians. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 14.

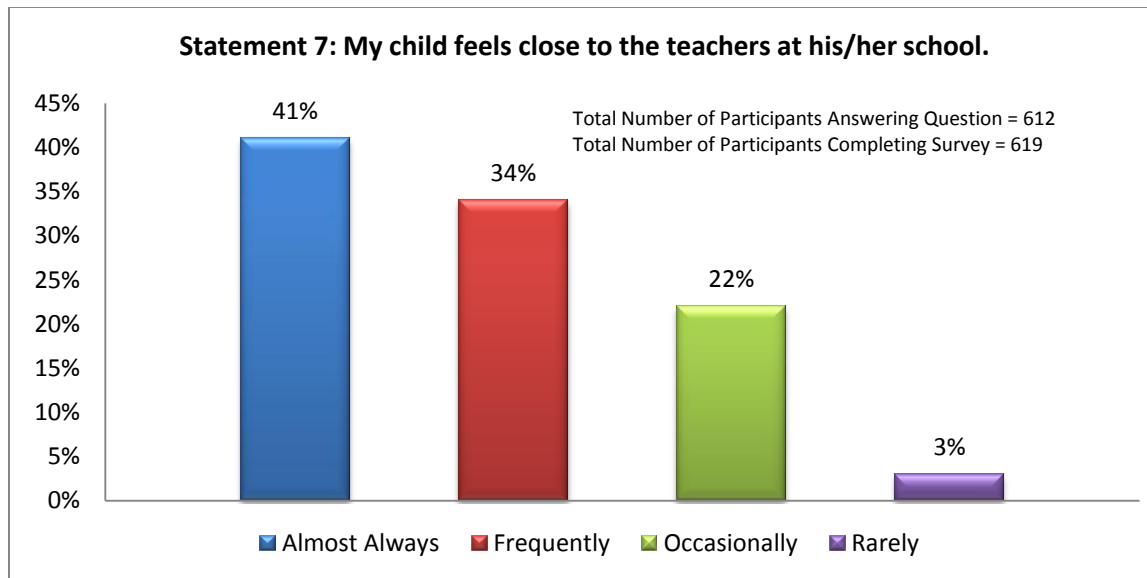


Figure 14. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding students feeling close to the teachers.

None of the parents/guardians commented on their children feeling close to the teachers.

Survey statement 8 stated, “My child feels close to the support staff at his/her school.” A total of 608 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 27% responded “Almost Always,” 35% responded “Frequently,” 2% responded “Occasionally” and 13% responded “Rarely.” Thus, the majority of the parents/guardians who responded to this survey statement believed that their child felt close to the support staff, but not quite as close as they do to their teachers. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 15.

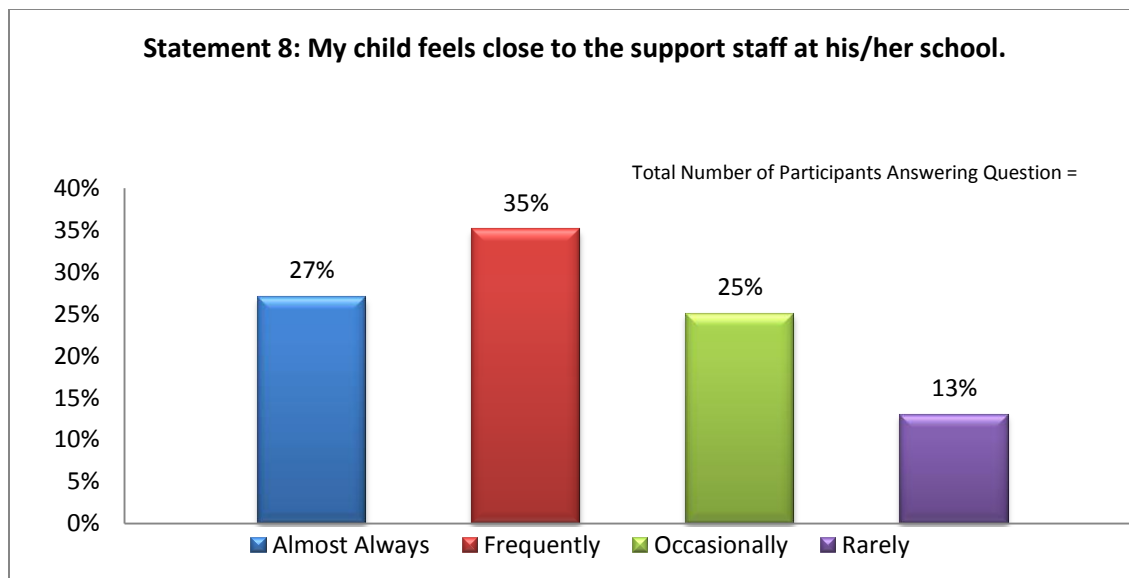


Figure 15. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding students feeling close to the support staff.

None of the parents/guardians shared comments about their child feeling close to the support staff.

Another category which might have an impact on students' sense of belonging is being treated with respect by their teachers. Information was gleaned from the parents/guardians when they responded to statement number 13, which read, "The teachers respect my child." A total of 590 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 58% responded "Almost Always," 33% responded "Frequently," 8% responded "Occasionally" and 2% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians with children attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children are treated with respect by their teachers while in attendance at school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 16.

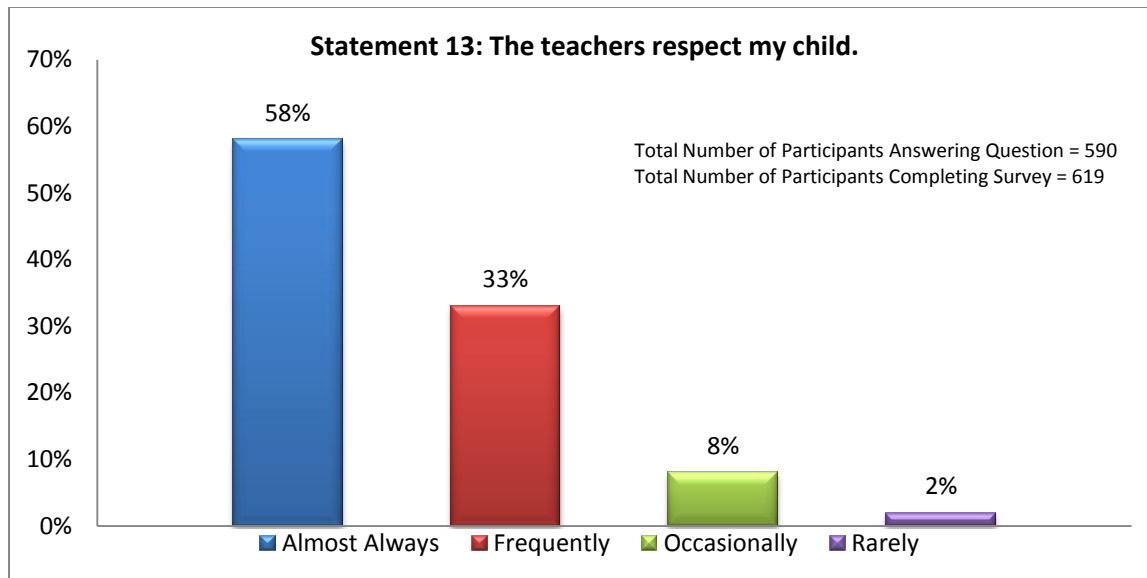


Figure 16. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding teachers respecting their children.

None of the parents/guardians provided positive statements about the respect shown by teachers to students. However, a few of the parents/guardians took the opportunity to share what they perceive as a lack of respect shown by some teachers. One parent/guardian summarized these sentiments when he/she shared, “Most of my responses to the questions were based upon the fact that I feel that the teachers in the schools do not respect the students. Many times I have heard children speak of the ways that the teachers speak to the students...Children learn by example.”

Survey statement 14 read, “The teachers are interested in my child.” A total of 593 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 51% responded “Almost Always,” 35% responded “Frequently,” 12% responded “Occasionally” and 2% responded “Rarely.” Thus, the majority of the parents/guardians surveyed believe that the teachers are interested in their children. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 17.

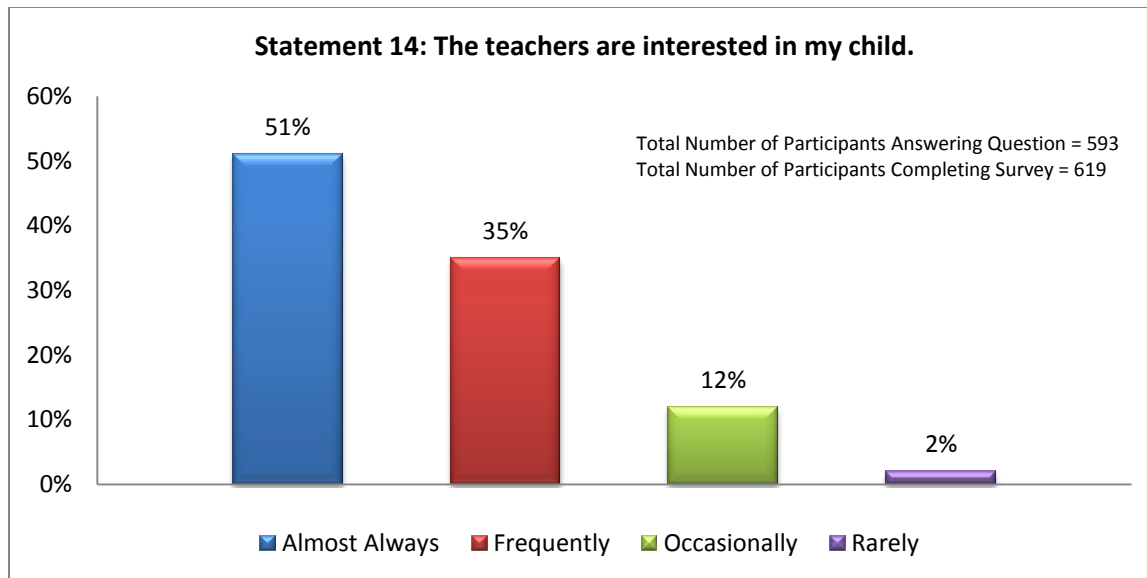


Figure 17. Parent/guardian survey responses regarding teachers' interest in their children.

None of the parents or guardians commented directly about the teachers being interested in their children as part of the open-ended statement.

Survey statement 15 read, "My child has at least one teacher in the school in whom to confide." A total of 583 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 49% responded "Almost Always," 24% responded "Frequently," 13% responded "Occasionally" and 14% responded "Rarely." Thus, based on the opinions of the parents and guardians who completed the parent/guardian survey, most students have at least one teacher in whom their child can confide. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 18.

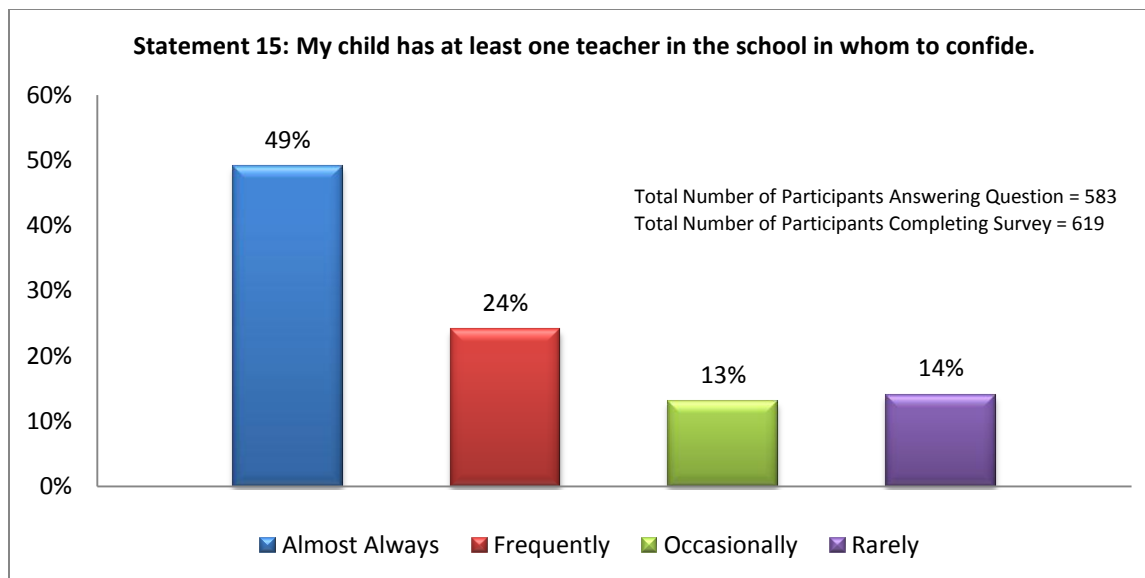


Figure 18. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding a teacher in whom their children can confide.

The parents and guardians did not elaborate on this topic when they completed their open-ended statement responses.

**Guidance counselors.** Three guidance counselors volunteered to participate in one-to-one interviews and shared their viewpoints and expertise about students' sense of belonging. One of the counselors shared some insight on students feeling close to the staff members as follows: "You have your orientation day, but you don't get that bonding because you don't see them—you only see them for two years." "...as adults, we feel it more, because we don't get to really get a feel for them, because they're gone, but I think the children are all right with it." Thus, in her opinion, students adjust well to the school-to-school transitions and do not seem bothered by the lack of bonding; however, the adults who work with the students sometimes feel the loss of bonding as a result of the frequent school-to-school transitions.

**Students.** Student input was attained by conducting eight interviews with students who have attended school in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten. The students were asked questions about their sense of belonging. In their responses to many of the questions, students discussed their relationships with their teachers. Students who were interviewed said that the teachers in the school knew them within a week or two following their transition into the school. They also said that the teachers understood if a student was late during the first week in school. One of the students interviewed described the teachers as kind and helpful. She stated, “They were just very comforting. Whenever something was wrong, I always had that one specific teacher I could go to.” Another said that friends and teachers helped them transition into their new schools.

One student said, “I was very social with a lot of the teachers—not students. So, it’s a good thing to know a lot of the teachers, which I find helpful ‘cause if you have a problem with one teacher you can go to another.” This student also shared that in his/her opinion, the best thing about changing schools was the opportunity to meet and work with new teachers, and commented, “With teachers, after a while you kinda’ just wanna get away from them because I think that’s how every student feels and you make new teachers just like you make new friends. So I think switching really does help.” So, in the opinion of at least one of the students, even if they enjoy the teachers in their schools, they seem to be ready, willing and able to move onto another school to meet new ones.

**Finding three.** *The students of the Bearwood Township School District are provided assistance before, during, and following each school-to-school transition, and, although there is an adjustment period for both students and their families, most reported feeling comfortable in each new school setting.*

The data sources that support Finding Three include the parent/guardian survey, faculty survey, guidance counselor interviews, and student interviews. The data obtained from each of these sources will be discussed separately.

**Parents and guardians.** Some of the statements on the parent/guardian survey were designed to elicit responses regarding the assistance provided for students and their families before, during and following each school-to-school transition. They were also intended to derive information from parents and guardians about the adjustment period for students and/or their families following each transition. The first of these statements was survey statement 16, which read, “I felt prepared to have my child change schools when he/she moved into the next grade level.” A total of 579 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 53% responded “Almost Always,” 26% responded “Frequently,” 15% responded “Occasionally” and 6% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that most of the parents and guardians who responded to the survey believed that they were prepared when their child’s move into the next grade level necessitated a transition into a new school building. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 19.

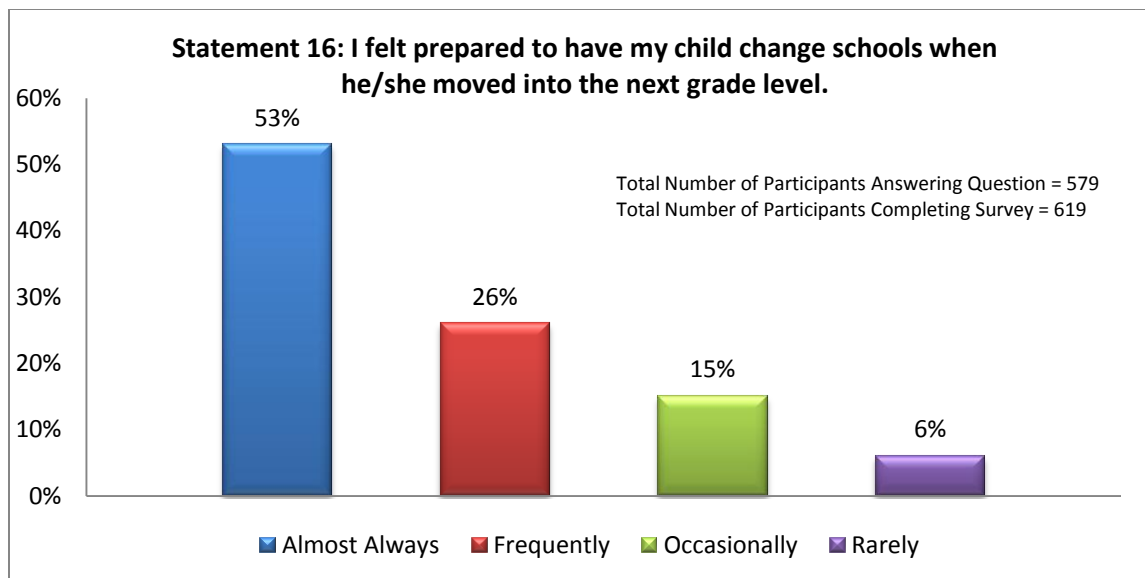


Figure 19. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding feeling prepared for school changes.

The open-ended responses that directly mentioned this topic stated, “I felt that the school district does a good job with the children transferring schools.” “It was a very smooth transition period. What helps the most is when they have a parents’ meeting to review what to expect when their child moves into the new school. The meetings are very informative.” One parent/guardian shared a frustration by adding, “Each school has their own ways of doing things and when a change is made, it is very frustrating...Also learning how the school nurse deals with issues versus the past school nurse is hard as well.”

Survey statement 17 read, “There was an adjustment period for my child when he/she moved into a new school.” A total of 572 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 53% responded “Almost Always,” 26% responded “Frequently,” 15% responded “Occasionally” and 6% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the parents and guardians believe that their children experienced an adjustment period following a transition into a new school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 20.

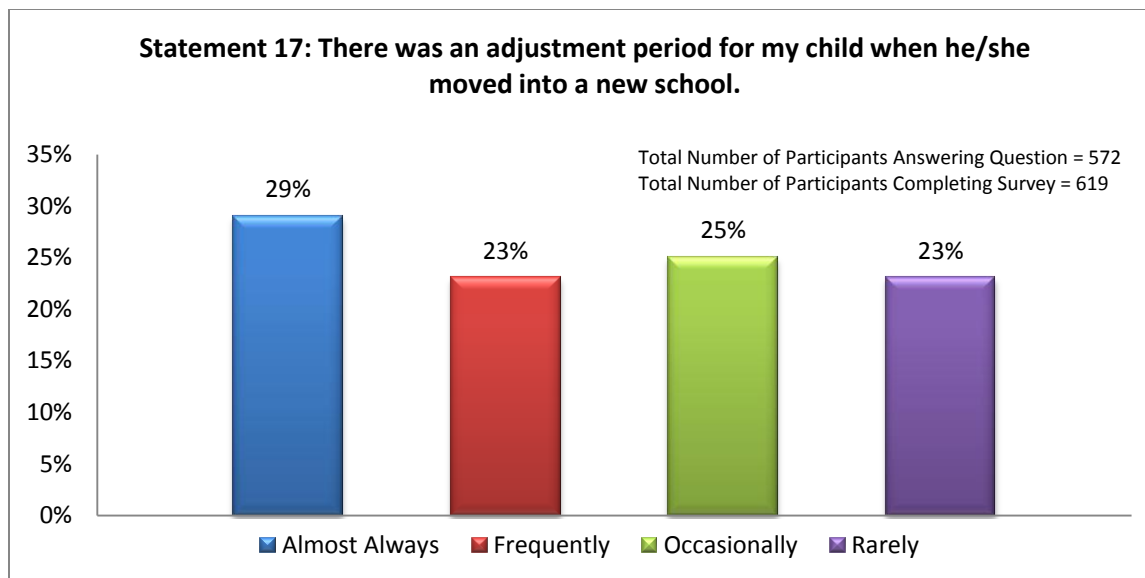


Figure 20. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding child’s adjustment following school change.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. Some of the responses included one parent/guardian who shared, “The transition so far was quite at ease; my child is always happy going to school.” One parent/guardian wrote, “All in all, I think most kids go with the flow and deal with each change of scenery along the way.” Another stated, “...the change in cafeteria styles is difficult for my children. It does not seem like a big deal to adults, but for children it is very hard to adjust to something such as buying lunch or a snack.” However, another parent/guardian shared a positive comment: “I feel that the move to a new school every few years really helps [children] understand adapting to a new environment, which might help them in the future adjust quicker to new surroundings.” Another shared, “My child was very excited to move schools—made him feel more mature!”

One parent/guardian shared,

My oldest child is a typical student and he weathered the transition into middle school fairly well. My youngest child is in a self-contained special education classroom and did not do well with the transition to a new school in second grade. (He was forced to move on before he was academically/emotionally ready). I am not sure how well he will do with the transfer in middle school. He is in fourth grade now and very nervous about going to middle school next year.

However, another parent/guardian wrote, “All three of my children moved over to the schools with no problem. My son is in special education and he had no problem as well.”

Survey statement 18 read, “There was an adjustment period for my family when my child moved into a new school.” A total of 564 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 23% responded “Almost Always,” 21% responded “Frequently,” 26% responded “Occasionally” and 30% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the parents and guardians have mixed views about the effect of a school-to-school transition on the families of children who are moving into a new school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 21.

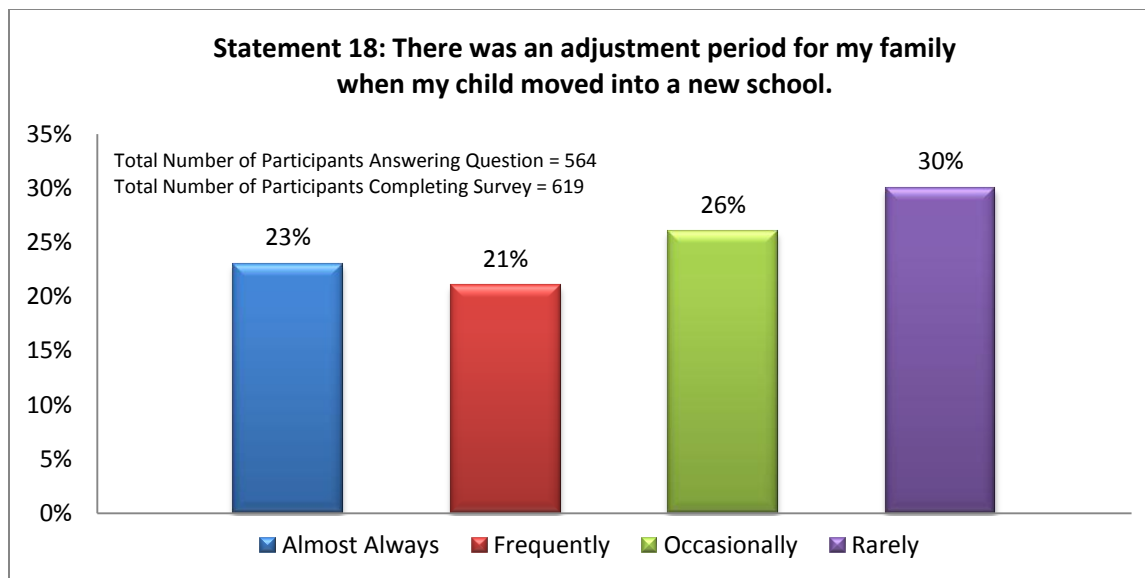


Figure 21. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding family’s adjustment following school change.

When provided with the opportunity to respond to the open-ended statement, one parent/guardian shared, “The transition...was an easy transition for our family.” Another stated, “Early intervention and the Bearwood School District made it easy for us to make the transition to the...preschool.” One parent/guardian wrote, “I was nervous with each school change only because my child was nervous. I knew they would adjust and be fine.” Another stated, “We have learned that switching school requires a transition phase. In Bearwood, there is a bit more switching than in any other districts that I know of. Every change has its difficulties...Whatever you are contemplating to make the transition phase easier...go for it!” One parent/guardian offered, “It turned out that I was more concerned [than my daughter] about my child changing schools so often. She is always disappointed to be leaving one school for another, but has made the adjustment to the new school quickly each time, and always liked the new school right away.” A final sentiment offered, “There is always a transition from one school to another...the

transitions have been easier once they started at the new school than during the summer when they do not have concrete experiences to base their thoughts and concerns on.”

Survey statement 19 read, “The sending school provided information about the new school prior to my child’s move.” A total of 552 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 52% responded “Almost Always,” 28% responded “Frequently,” 12% responded “Occasionally” and 8% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the parents and guardians feel that the sending school provided them with information prior to their child’s transition into a new school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 22.

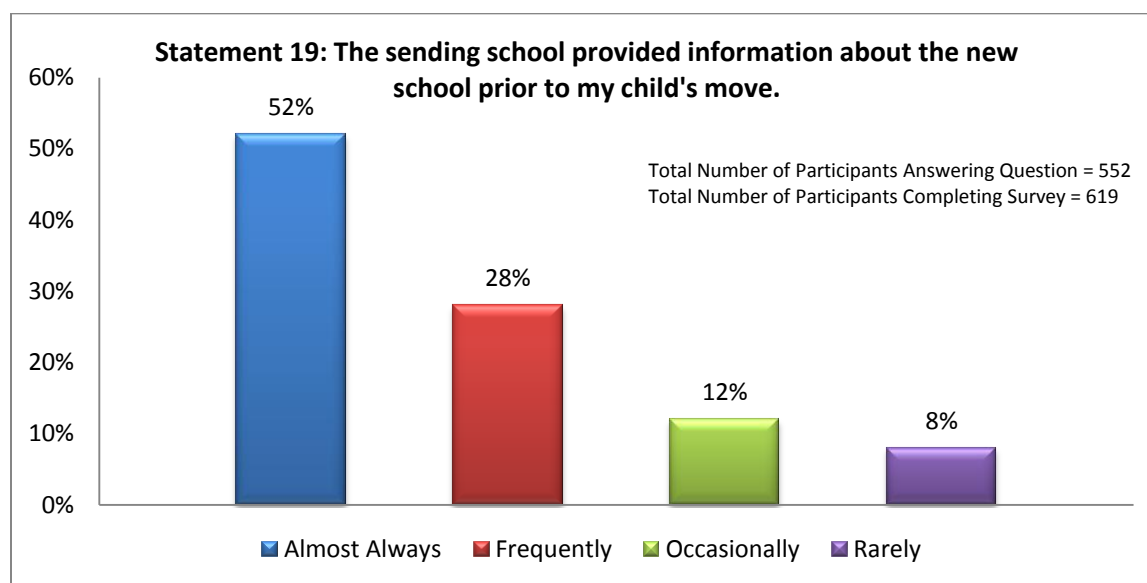


Figure 22. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding information provided prior to school move.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. One response said, “I found Bearwood particularly informative, with letters sent home and website communication. I liked...that we received supply lists.”

Survey statement 20 read, “The sending school prepared my child to move to a new school.” A total of 551 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 45% responded “Almost Always,” 34% responded “Frequently,” 14% responded “Occasionally” and 7% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the parents/guardians who completed the survey feel that the sending school prepared their child for the school-to-school transition(s). The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 23.

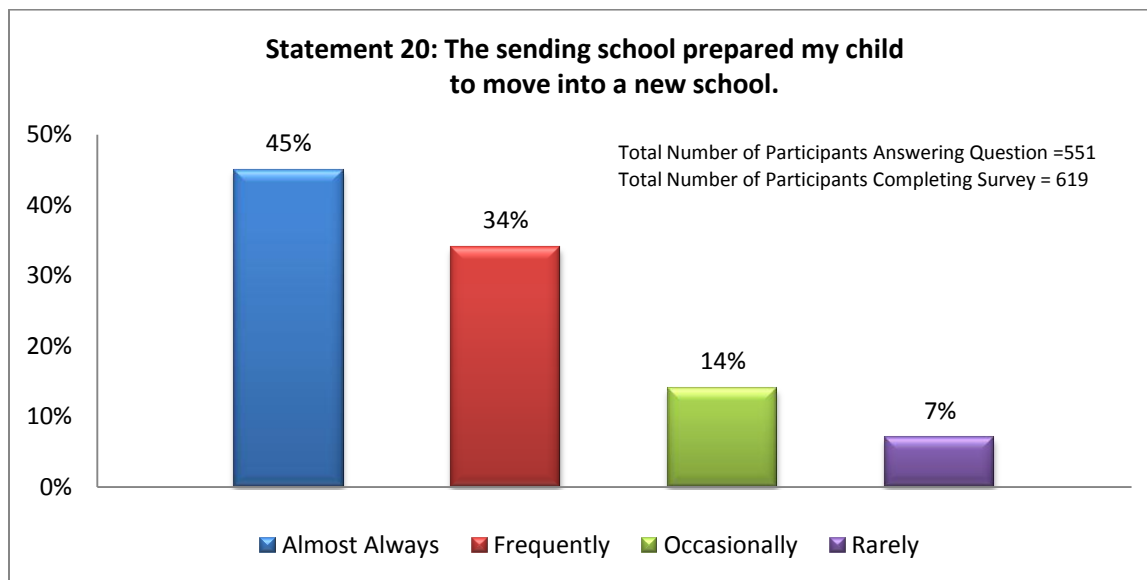


Figure 23. Parent / guardian responses regarding the sending school preparing children for school move.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. The responses included one from a parent/guardian who stated, “My children have always had a very easy transition into their new schools. They are very outgoing and social children. I think the preparation given to them by the sending school was very helpful.” “We feel that almost all of the Middle School II teachers prepared our child for the transition into high school.” “I think that Bearwood Township High School in conjunction with Middle School

“I have done a great job getting my child prepared for the high school.” One parent/guardian described the transition as “seamless.”

Survey statement 21 read, “There were adequate supports provided for my child when he/she moved into a new school.” A total of 548 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement: 41% responded “Almost Always,” 37% responded “Frequently,” 18% responded “Occasionally” and 4% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the parents/guardians who completed the survey felt that there were adequate supports provided for their children as they transitioned into a new school in the Bearwood Township School District. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 24.

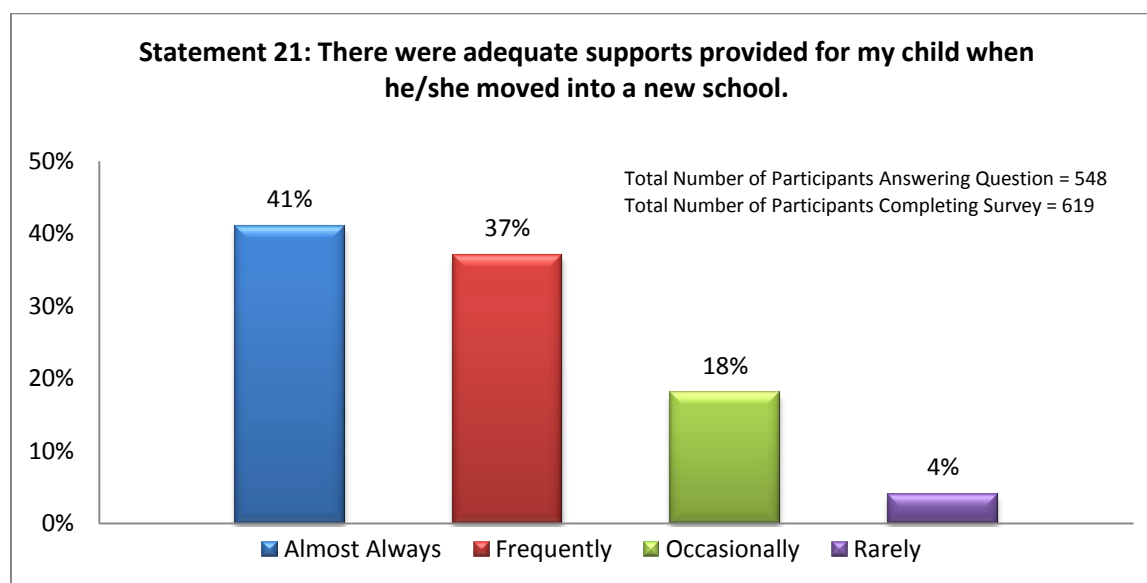


Figure 24. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding supports following move into new school.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. The responses included one parent/guardian who shared, “The schools provide a lot of support for transitions.” A different viewpoint posed, “My oldest has done well

with the transition because he is a flexible child. I think more needs to be done for children who, for whatever reason, struggle more with change.”

Survey statement 22 read, “My child was given the opportunity to visit and tour his/her new school prior to the move into a new school.” A total of 565 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 81% responded “Almost Always,” 11% responded “Frequently,” 5% responded “Occasionally” and 3% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the parents/guardians who completed the survey feel that their child was provided with the opportunity to visit and tour his/her new school before transitioning. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 25.

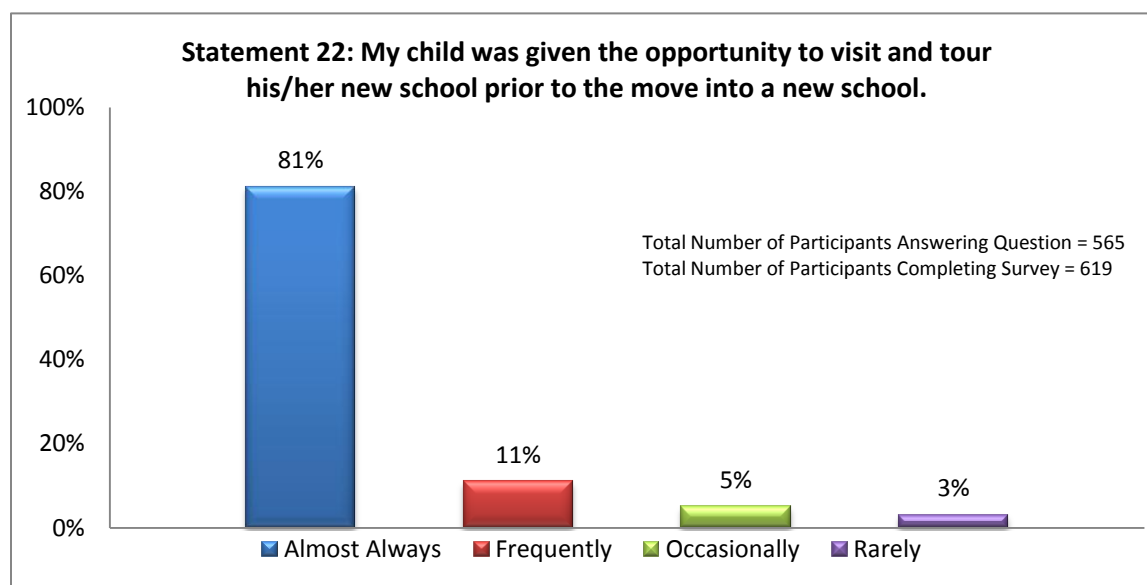


Figure 25. Parent / guardian survey regarding the opportunity to visit and tour new school before move.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. The responses included one from a parent/guardian who shared, “Even if we missed the ‘visiting your new school’ day, we were able to make our own day and made arrangements to visit. I am very pleased when the school visited the child’s new school for the

next year. It was convenient and nonthreatening for my child to visit with classmates.” Another offered, “My children had no problem moving up...I think there could have been a better one-on-one meeting regarding this, but all in all, they have been successful students.” Additional positive statements included, “I have been very satisfied with the moves from one school to another; we have always participated in the open house available at the next school as we felt it was very important for my son to get to know the school prior to the start of the school year.” “[The] opportunity to visit the new school the year before is important; thank you...It helps lower the anxiety for the students.”

Survey statement 23 read, “My child was given the opportunity to meet the teachers in his/her new school prior to the move into a new school.” A total of 562 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 33% responded “Almost Always,” 20% responded “Frequently,” 22% responded “Occasionally” and 25% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the parents/guardians who completed the survey have diverse viewpoints on this topic; the responses to this statement are divided almost equally between those who responded that their child did have the opportunity to meet his/her new teachers and those who were not provided with that opportunity. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 26.

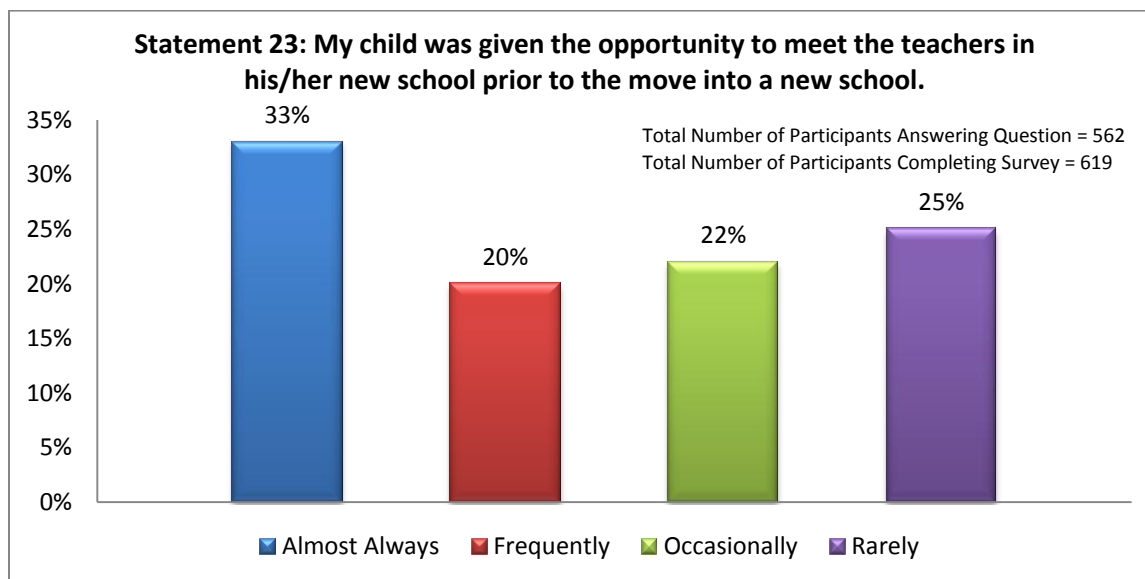


Figure 26. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding meeting teachers in new school before move.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. Some of the responses included, “We were pleased with how our children were prepared and able to visit their new schools—especially with how the kindergarten students were able to Meet/Greet their teacher before school started! That was wonderful and helped ease our son’s anxiety. Thank you!”

One parent/guardian shared the other side of that opinion when he/she wrote, “It would [have been] nice for my child to have met the teacher prior to starting school.” That sentiment was also shared by another parent/guardian who stated, “I do wish there was some tour or meet your teachers/school prior to the move from one school to the next BEFORE the school year started. I normally bring my kids to visit the school in the summer just for them to get a layout of where things are but I wish we had back to school night once before school started whenever our

kids move from school to school.” A third parent/guardian offered, “At the school visitation days prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> day, ALL teachers should be there to meet their kids.”

Survey statement 24 read, “My child was given the opportunity to review his/her class schedule prior to the move into a new school.” A total of 558 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 29% responded “Almost Always,” 18% responded “Frequently,” 18% responded “Occasionally” and 36% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the parents/guardians who completed the survey also have diverse viewpoints on this topic; the responses to this statement are divided almost equally between those who responded that their child did have the opportunity to view his/her schedule prior to a school-to-school transition and those who were not provided with that opportunity. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 27.

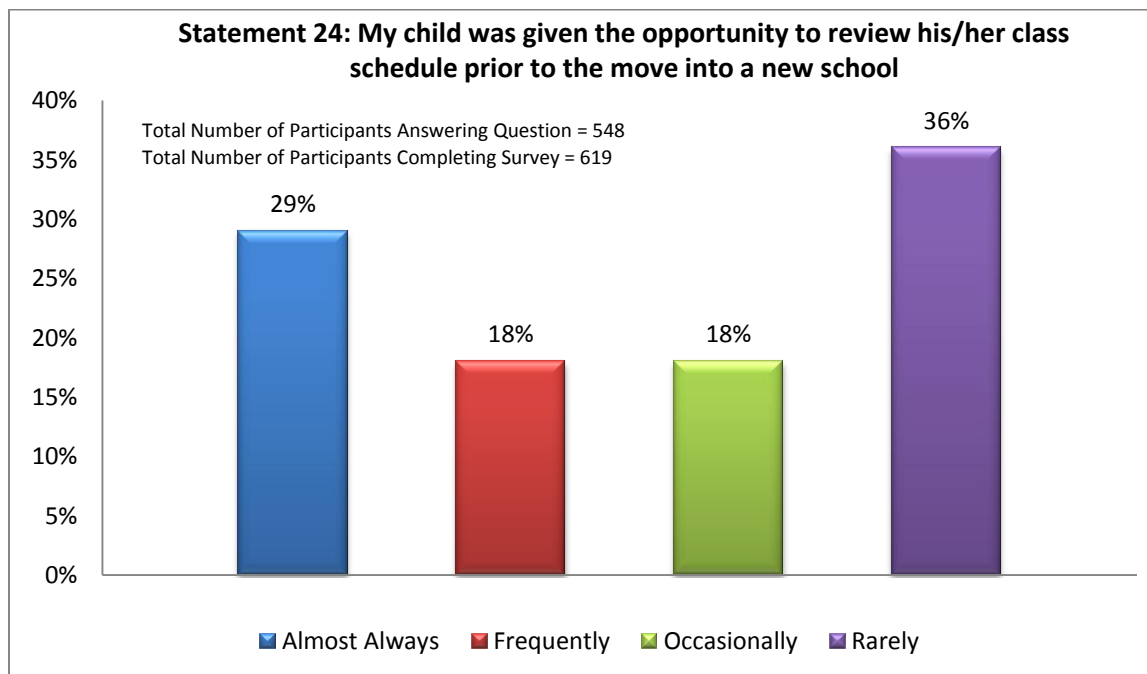


Figure 27. Parent / guardian survey responses regarding receipt of class schedule before school move.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. One of the parents/guardians shared, “[My children] were not given schedules ahead of time; they had to ‘wing it’ the first day!” While another stated, “I wish the schedules for the middle schools were mailed home prior to school starting. I have a classified child who has done well, but I think with any kid who has any anxiety about a new school, having the schedule beforehand would alleviate any fears.” On the other hand, one parent/guardian shared, “It was nice this year being able to see the class schedule before the first day of school...it eliminated some of the stress that comes with the first day of school.” Another stated, “...it was only this year that the schedule was made available to us ahead of time. We didn’t have any problems in the past regarding their schedules, but the kids sure enjoyed know ahead of time this year!”

Survey statement 25 read, “I felt welcome in my child’s new school.” A total of 566 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 54% responded “Almost Always,” 29% responded “Frequently,” 12% responded “Occasionally” and 5% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of parents/guardians who completed the survey are comfortable in their child’s new school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 28.

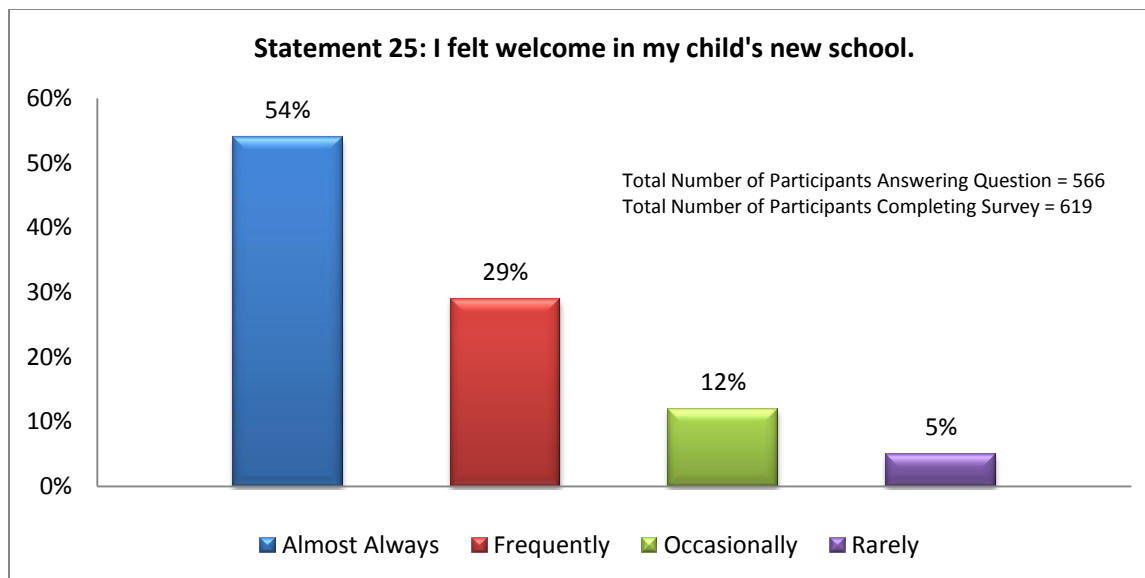


Figure 28. Parent / guardian survey responses to feeling welcome in child's new school.

Some parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question and discussed this topic. One parent/guardian shared, "Something is 'lost' when school changes are made. As a parent, I do not like having to get to know a whole new principal, new school and new teachers." Another parent/guardian wrote, "Teachers and staff are always professional from school to school. I didn't get warm and fuzzy feelings as a parent though." One parent/guardian commented that it is sometimes difficult working with new staff members when their children start a new school.

Survey statement 24 read, "I felt comfortable volunteering in my child's school." A total of 559 out of 619 parents and guardians responded to this statement; 46% responded "Almost Always," 26% responded "Frequently," 17% responded "Occasionally" and 11% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the parents/guardians who completed the survey felt comfortable volunteering in their child's school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 29.

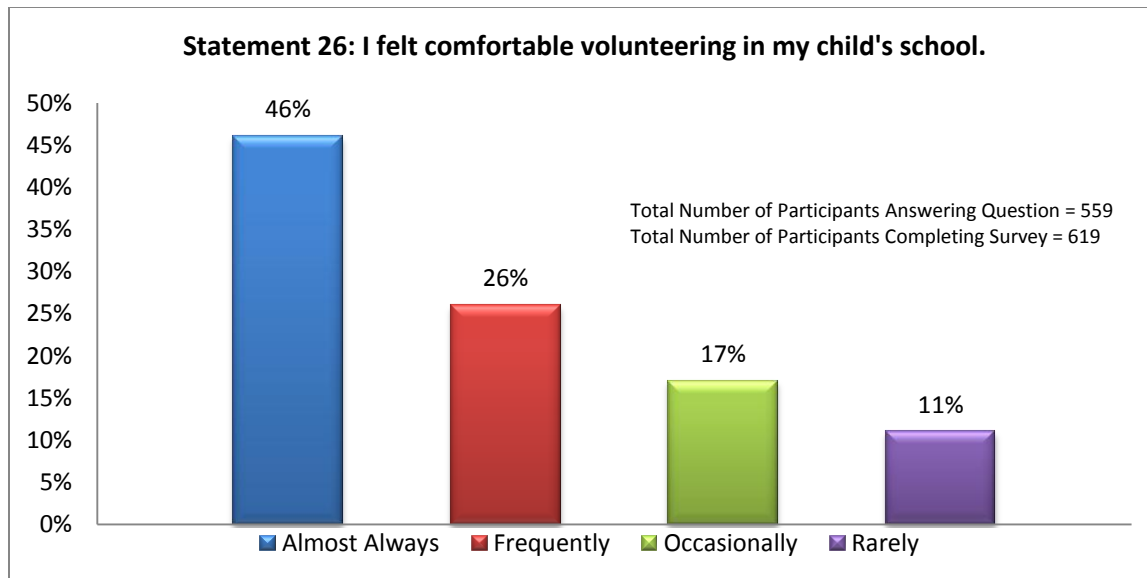


Figure 29. Parent / guardian survey responses to feeling comfortable volunteering in child's school.

None of the parents/guardians took the opportunity to respond to the open-ended question to discuss the topic of volunteering in his/her child's school.

**Faculty members.** The faculty survey also included statements related to students' sense of belonging. The faculty member responses to these statements began with survey statement 2 and read, "Students are prepared for school-to-school transitions." A total of 153 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 16% responded "Almost Always," 46% responded "Frequently," 36% responded "Occasionally" and 2% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the faculty members perceive that the students are usually prepared for school-to-school transitions. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 30.

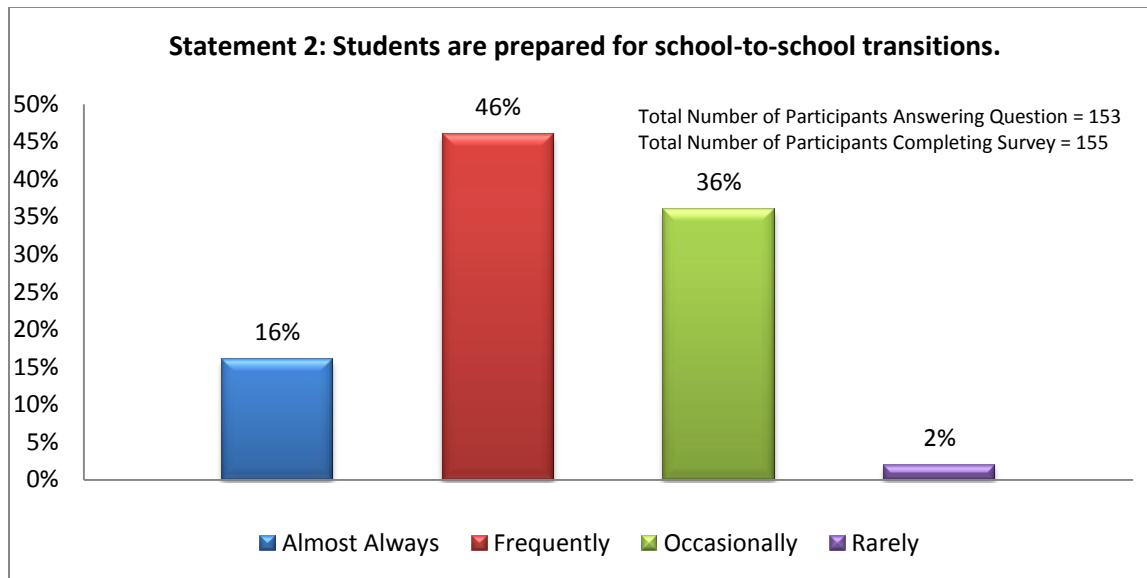


Figure 30. Faculty survey responses regarding student preparation for school-to-school transitions.

One of the faculty members used the opportunity presented by the open-ended responses to provide some insight on the topic of students' preparation for school-to-school transitions, and stated, "I believe that Bearwood provides a variety of positive transitional opportunities for students as well as faculty and staff."

Survey statement 5 read, "I spend a lot of time helping students adjust to our school." A total of 152 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 22% responded "Almost Always," 32% responded "Frequently," 31% responded "Occasionally" and 15% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the faculty members perceive that they spend a lot of time helping students adjust following a transition into a new school. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 31.

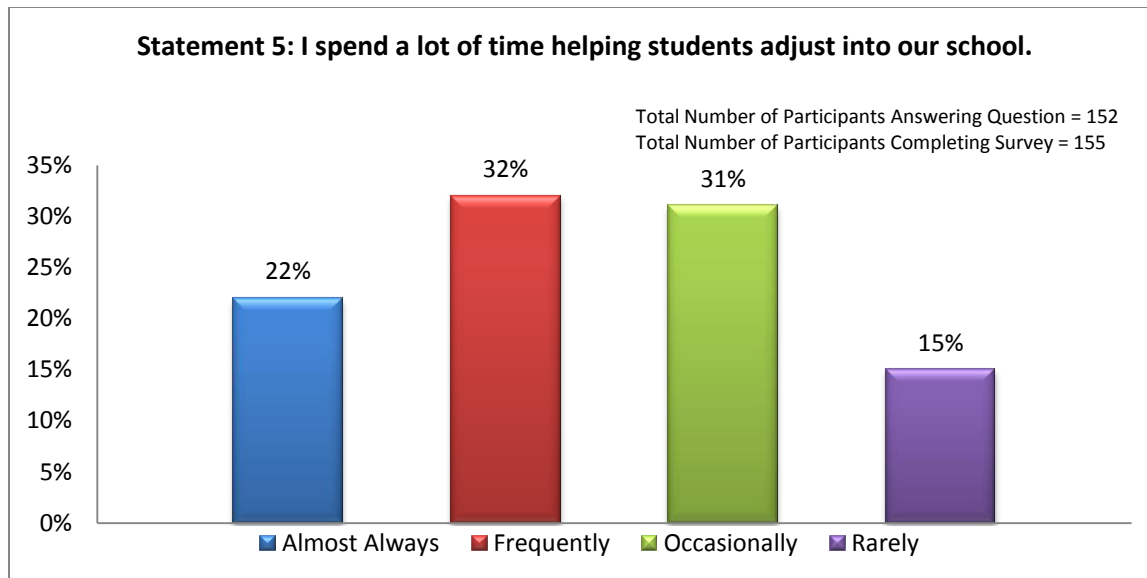


Figure 31. Faculty survey responses regarding spending a lot of time helping students adjust to school.

One of the faculty members used the opportunity presented by the open-ended response statement to provide insight on the topic of student adjustment and shared that he/she makes an effort to go back to *last* year’s teacher(s) in order to best teach her students *this* year. The faculty member offered, “I feel that it benefits the students when teachers can communicate year to year which is difficult in this district. I personally make an effort to talk to the teachers that have had my students to ask what works and what may not if they seem to be struggling; this often helps a great deal.”

Survey statement 7 read, “Students feel nervous when they first enter this school.” A total of 152 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 25% responded “Almost Always,” 41% responded “Frequently,” 29% responded “Occasionally” and 5% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the faculty members perceive that students feel nervous when they first enter their schools. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 32.

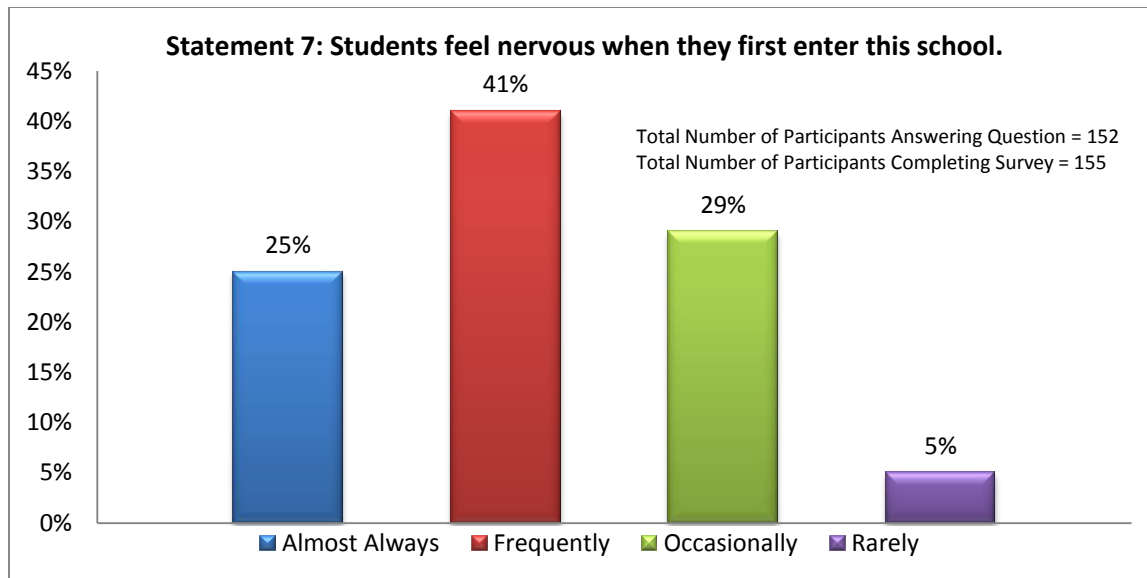


Figure 32. Faculty survey responses regarding new students feeling nervous at start of new school.

None of the faculty members used the open-ended statement to comment on students feeling nervous when they enter a new school.

Survey statement 19 read, “There are adequate supports for students when they enter our school.” A total of 144 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 41% responded “Almost Always,” 40% responded “Frequently,” 15% responded “Occasionally” and 4% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the faculty members perceive that there are adequate supports in place when students enter their schools. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 33.

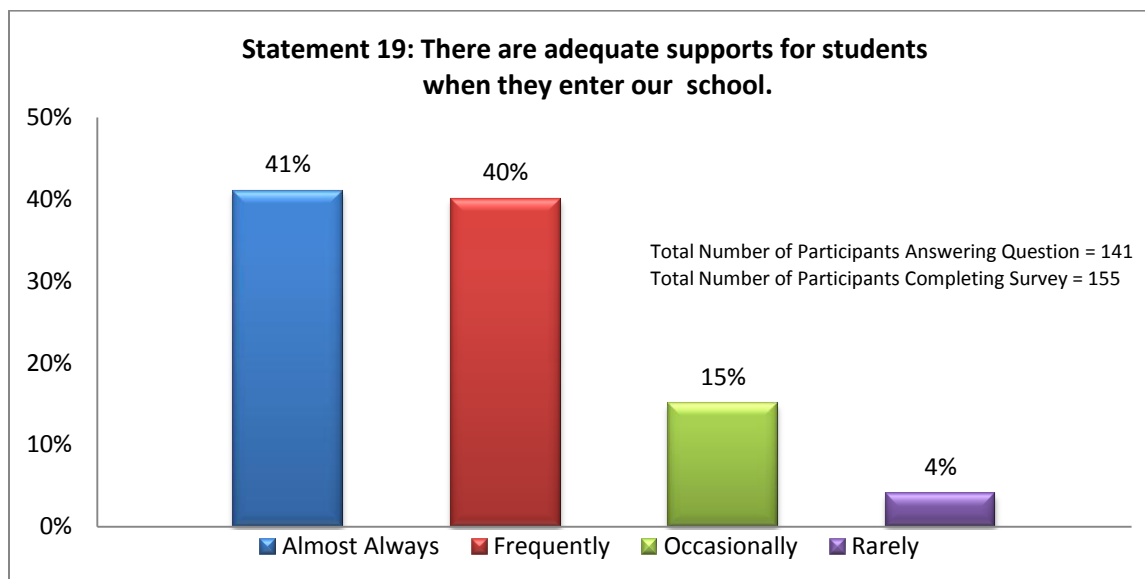


Figure 33. Faculty survey responses regarding adequate supports when students enter a new school.

There were no responses to the open-ended statement related to the topic of supports for students.

**Guidance counselors.** Three guidance counselors volunteered to be interviewed for this study. During their interviews, the guidance counselors shared that September and October were the busiest months for them, mainly due to the students who were newly transitioning into their schools and needed their assistance adjusting. While discussing transitions, one of the counselors shared, “Yes, the children are here only two years, but the pace of the world, the way it is, the children are used to moving fast. They really are. In some instances, they’re not even in their home that many years. Unfortunately, they go and they come, so—they’re used to transitioning.” Thus, this counselor did not see any issue with the school-to-school transitions for the students, because she has witnessed the students adjusting quickly to their ever-changing environments.

A second counselor spoke of the importance of putting supports in place for the students who just don't "roll with it!" One of the supports discussed by the guidance counselors was a Freshmen Academy. This program would provide the freshmen with the opportunity to adjust to the high school with their peers before taking on the stress associated with being mixed with the upperclassmen, in addition to getting to know the high school facility, faculty and curriculum. All three of the guidance counselors shared the importance of focusing on the future as soon as the students arrive in the building. One of the counselors shared the perspective of both a counselor and a parent and stated, "It would make me berserk when I would do Back-to-School Nights and I would hear, in second grade, 'We have to prepare for third grade.' And in fourth grade, 'We have to get ready for fifth grade.' "It's September. Let's do fourth grade!" When questioned further, this counselor wondered if frequent transitioning had anything to do with this situation, since the teachers "have to make sure my kids look good when they go to that....building."

However, when discussing the parent/guardian component associated with transitions, one guidance counselor shared, "The parents, definitely, have challenges with it. They express challenges with it. No doubt about it. [Because] the parent is trying to get used to the administration, get used to the way of the schedule, of the building, then, all of a sudden, two years—they're gone." The counselor went on to say, "Not all the parents, but the parents of the children who are the shy, the quiet type, the reserved. For them, this kind of transition is challenging."

**Students.** Eight ninth grade students who have been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten were interviewed in order to elicit their points of view. When asked about transitioning and the subsequent adjustments, the students shared that

each school-to-school transition was seen as an opportunity to mature, have more freedom and feel more “like an adult.” When asked if he/she was ever scared of transitioning, one student shared, “...it’s routine. Everyone goes through it, so I figured if everyone goes through it, it must not be a big deal.” Another student offered, “You get bored of one school, and then something fresh and new happens, so it’s fun. But [you’re] also kind of nervous right away, because you have to learn where all your classes are.” One student simply shared, “I didn’t really feel that uncomfortable, but it’s always the first day where you’re nervous, unsure on how the school’s gonna be...but then, after the second day, you’re like, ‘All right, I got this.’”

When asked about adjusting following a school-to-school transition, students primarily credited their friends and upperclassmen for helping them to adjust and shared that they were adjusted within days. After being asked, “What helped you transition to a new school?” The student responded, “My friends having confidence that everything’s gonna be okay...my friends are always there to calm me down.” Another student shared, “I like the orientations. The orientations were good. It’s a little nerve-wracking, not knowing where your classes are the first day—but I guess that goes for every grade.”

**Finding four.** *Some participants disliked some effects of the narrow grade-span configuration of the Bearwood Township School District and suggested alternative configurations with wider grade spans.*

The data sources that support Finding Four include the open-ended responses from the parent/guardian and faculty surveys, guidance counselor and principal interviews, and the focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors. The data obtained from each of these sources will be discussed separately.

Although there are some aspects of the present grade-span configuration which the participants in the study view as positive, many of those who participated in the surveys, the interviews and the focus group believe that the narrow grade-span of the Bearwood Township School District negatively impacts students' friendships and peer mentoring opportunities, and creates the need for too many school-to-school transitions.

**Parents / guardians.** Many of the parents/guardians discussed aspects of this topic in their open-ended responses.

**Friendship.** Some of the parents/guardians focused on the current configuration of the district and its impact on students' friendships. "For the most part, children transition with classmates, which I believe, adds a certain comfort and familiarity when changing schools," wrote one parent/guardian. One parent/guardian shared the positive relationship between student transitions and friendships by stating, "...[it] keeps them meeting new friends and new administration, to help them motivate themselves to stand out and achieve more!" A few parents/guardians shared that they do not like the fact that the students from Primary School I are sent to two different second grades when they finish with first grade. One shared, "Switching to grades 2, 3, & 4 is difficult because the town is split between 2 elementary schools. This means that some of the social school relationships our kids began to develop over the previous two years may be put on hold." Another parent/guardian shared a similar point of view, "While we understand why the children are divided between two schools in 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> grade, none of us like it. With the majority of our child's friends attending the "other" school, he/she had a harder time with the loss of friends than he/she had with the transition to his/her new school."

An additional parent/guardian wrote, "I think they should try to put a child with at least 1 or 2 other children they are familiar with. It is a hard adjustment for some children if they don't

know any of the children.” Another offered, “My son adjusted poorly to the move from Primary School I to Primary School II-A. Everyone that he was friendly with was sent to Primary School II-B. Needless to say, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade was a very difficult adjustment for him.” “It was tough for my child when friends in her grade attended a different school even though they were in the same district.” A final quote summed up this topic by sharing, “...I feel that the children lose a sense of friendship ties and bonding due to the changing of schools so frequently.”

An additional situation caused by the separation of students in grades 2, 3 and 4 is the fact that parents/guardians are not informed as to which school their child will attend until the end of first grade; this decision is made based on bus routes and the number of students attending each of the schools. A few of the parents/guardians would have liked that information earlier in their child’s educational career in the district.

***Mentors and role models.*** Other parents/guardians focused on older students serving as mentors and role models. When the students are all in the same grade and/or of a similar age level, there is a missed opportunity to have older students mentor the younger students and to serve as appropriate role models. One parent/guardian shared that when students are in a school for a longer period of time, “...they are also able to mentor younger children, be role models to the younger children and take on more responsibilities in a safe environment.”

***Grade-span configuration.*** Finally, some of the parents/guardians focused on the grade-span configuration itself, offering both the positive and negative aspects. Some of the parents/guardians took the opportunity to share that they are happy with the present grade-span configuration for a number of reasons. One shared, “I like having the children divided up by grade level in town. I strongly believe that it gives the younger children the opportunity to learn with less bullying and influence from older children.” Another stated, “I always liked the way

the schools are divided in Bearwood.” A parent/guardian who teaches in another district offered, “I think one of the best things about Bearwood is that the students are with their peer group in each school... The bus ride alone, being with similarly-aged students is SO much better than the situation in the district I work in.”

However, some of the parents/guardians responded to the open-ended statement by sharing their dislike of the grade-span configuration and offering some alternatives. A parent/guardian wrote, “...switching schools, teachers being bounced all over creation...it stinks. [It’s] very unsettling.” Another shared, “I feel there are too frequent changes in school. A more defined grade structure would benefit the student.” A third shared, “If I had the option, I would opt to not have them transfer so much—especially in the primary years.” One parent/guardian was very clear about the difficulties he/she sees with the current grade-span configuration:

My daughters are currently in grades K and 2<sup>nd</sup>... While they are happy with their schools and I am very happy... with the district as a whole, I do wish that they were able to spend more time in one school during the elementary years. I felt that the Primary School I faculty was just getting to know my older daughter and her needs when it was already time for her to move on to the next building. While Primary School II-B has also been very welcoming and supportive and I am happy with the staff, we have now begun a whole new learning process with all of the support staff getting to know my child and her needs all over again. I feel that during these formative years it would be more valuable for the children to have a stable environment in which the classroom teachers, support staff, and administration could be more of a constant. This would benefit both the student and the faculty in gaining knowledge and understanding of one another.

One of the parents and guardians who responded to the open-ended question on the survey responded that they would like to see a K-5 elementary school, a 6-8 middle school and a 9-12 high school. One commented, “[I] feel like there are too many transitions and like the idea of K-4 primary school as it once was.” Another stated, “I sometimes wonder if the children wouldn’t be better served to stay in one school K-6 or 8 based on where they live to develop relationships with their mentors.”

**Faculty members.** When responding to the open-ended statement on the survey, some faculty members shared their views about the current configuration.

***Mentors and role models.*** A number of faculty members view the current grade-span configuration as limiting younger students from learning from their older peers; this was a similar viewpoint as that shared by the parents/guardians. One faculty member wrote, “Our youngest students would benefit greatly by having students who are one or two grades older than they are, house in the same building.” “Students lack role models and the opportunity to be role models with the current configuration,” shared another. When discussing the former grade-span configurations, one faculty member offered, “Younger students had older role models. The opportunities for younger and older students to interact were invaluable.”

When focusing on student behavior as an issue of the grade-span configuration, one faculty member shared, “I have also noticed a negative impact on behavior. There are different ways of disciplining when there are younger students with older students. When the buildings were K-4, 5-8, 9-12 there was more accountability for the older students to be role models.” An additional aspect of the grade-span configuration impacts family dynamics, which was explained by one faculty member, “Having an older sibling in the same school building has many positives for the younger student as well as for the families of those children.”

**Grade-span configuration.** A few of the faculty members focused on the grade-span configuration in their open-ended responses. One purported, “[I] would like to have K-4 housed together as once was the case.” Simply put, another commented, “The configuration of the younger grade levels doesn’t allow for consistent growth.” “I would like to see the primary grades K-4 in one building as opposed to the current configuration. I very much like the 5-6, 7-8 configuration as there is a great difference between a 5<sup>th</sup> grader and an 8<sup>th</sup> grader,” stated another. One faculty member shared, “I’d recommend K-2; 3-6; 7-8—at least that’s one less transition.” One faculty suggested a P-4 configuration while another shared that a K-5 or K-6 school could be followed by a 6-8 (or 7-8) before attending the high school. Focusing on the middle school levels, a faculty member stated, “I feel there is too much transition and that this negatively impacts some children. I most especially feel this is true in the 5-8 grade span.”

One faculty member explained, “A more ‘vertical’ configuration of grade levels would be beneficial, and studies support this; ex. K-5 for the elementary level.” Another faculty member focused on special education students and said, “School to school transition is extremely difficult for special education students and I believe this has a very negative impact on many areas of the classified student’s development, including but possibly not limited to social, emotional, behavioral, academic, as well as standardized test scores.” The sentiments were summarized by one faculty member who shared, “The longer students spend here the better we can serve them.”

**Principals.** Four principals were interviewed for their insight on curriculum and instruction and academic achievement; during those interviews they shared their perspectives on the current grade-span configuration in the district.

**Grade-span configuration.** During the interview, the principals were asked to share their opinions of the advantages and disadvantages of the current grade-span configuration and

subsequent school-to-school transitions for students in the district. Regarding to the frequency of school-to-school transitions, one principal offered, “[It’s]...just too many jumps...It’s not good.” “I would think there would be more disadvantages than advantages because the children are changing schools...frequently,” offered another. Some of the discussions focused on student needs and one principal shared:

The disadvantage is that you just don’t have as much time to track and be with a particular child. Sometimes, there ends up being a little redundancy, because they go from one grade level to the next...I think the advantage of a larger grade span would be that you’re going to be a little more aware of the needs of that particular child and I think it would probably be a little more efficient in terms of getting the supports that a child needs.

Regarding the separate schools for students in grades 2, 3, and 4, a principal shared, “...they’re together...as first graders; now they’re split...they’re going to join together in fifth grade after not being together for three years...that’s a disadvantage.”

One principal focused on the advantages of the narrow grade-span configuration and stated, “You are in ‘your own little world,’ so you can really focus in...and...develop strategies for our own building at our very, very specific developmental stage.” Looking at students individually as they relate to the narrow grade-span, one principal offered:

It almost is case by case...some kids...they’re going to be unfazed. They have good family support; they’re average to above-average kids; they’re resilient. It doesn’t matter. They do fine. They have their friends. They have support at home. They take advantage of everything that is [offered] at school. A lot of kids, though, don’t respond that way,

and they need that “I need to be in a place and a home for a long time, and I need to know the teachers down the hall, because I had them three or four years ago.”

Another principal shared, “...if I had to weigh it, probably there are more kids that would be better suited for...less transitions.” When speaking of wider grade-spans, one principal shared, “...it seems if you just have two years in one school, the kid is just getting accustomed to that school and now it’s time to move to another school. So maybe that benefits some students by going to a new school every couple of years. Other kids, maybe it hurts them. I guess we’d have to look at the data to see that.”

**Guidance counselors.** Three guidance counselors participated in interviews focused on students’ sense of belonging in the Bearwood Township School District. Some of them commented on friendship, role models, and mentoring in addition to the grade-span configuration.

***Friendship.*** During an interview, one of the guidance counselors shared that one of the initiatives when students enter Middle School I from the two separate Primary School II buildings is to have Friendship Groups so that the students who have been separated for the past three years will once again connect as a class or grade level.

***Mentors and role models.*** The development of a peer mediation group has met some challenges in the middle school as a result of such a narrow grade-span. This program had been abandoned many years ago, but has been reorganized as part of the recently adopted Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) Law. The difficulty lies in seeking mature, highly communicative students to be mentors when the students are so close in age.

***Grade-span configuration.*** In regard to grade-span configuration, one counselor did share that one of the disadvantages of the narrow grade span is, “...only having two years here...

It's a quick two years." In contrast, one of the advantages of the narrow grade span is that the students are "...pretty much (maturation-wise)...on the same level...you're not getting the poor role modeling."

**Directors and supervisors.** The focus group discussion with the curriculum directors and supervisors concentrated mainly on the continuity of curriculum and instruction and academic achievement in the district; however, the topic of the current grade-span configuration and its challenges entered the conversation. One participant shared, "...I think going to five different schools, or possibly six, you know, the transition is an issue...teachers...find it hard...to get used to the kids, and the kids find it hard to get used to the school." The comment continued with the assertion that students are no sooner comfortable in one grade level when they are forced to focus on transitioning to another school the following year. Another participant explained the complications created by the school-to-school transitions,

I think the two-year span that we're seeing in some of the schools is problematic all on its own. In the first year, a child is assimilating into the culture of the school and trying to decide who they are and where they fit in. And then, in the second year, halfway through the year, they're already transitioning out of that building and thinking about the next building. And I really think that, if they had three or four years in a building, they would go through the process more like high school students do, which is that first year is a tough transition, the second year they find their feet, the third year is either academic excellence or they're starting to head in another direction. But if we looked at the high school as a model, and we only had two years there, where a child transitioned into 11<sup>th</sup> grade...and transitioned out in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the response of the staff would be, "I hardly knew the child."

The participant concluded that using the high school as a model for grade-span configuration, the district most likely has an ineffective configuration for the rest of its schools. Another participant shared, “I think the best solution would be to try to figure out how we can reconfigure, so they don’t have as many transitions.”

**Finding five.** *Some participants voiced some concern about the present grade-span configuration of Middle School I due to the perception that fifth graders are too young for the rigors and responsibilities associated with a middle school setting.*

The data sources that support Finding Five include the open-ended responses from the parent/guardian and faculty surveys, guidance counselor interviews, and the focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors. The data obtained from each of these sources will be discussed separately.

Many of those who participated in the surveys, the interviews and the focus group perceived that the Middle School I’s 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade-span configuration is not the most advantageous setting for the ten-year-old students in the Bearwood Township School District.

**Parents and guardians.** The faculty survey also provided participants with the opportunity to offer open-ended comments about the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions. Statement 28 read, “Please use the space below to comment about any aspect of the move(s) into new school(s) for any of your children:”

Although none of the survey statements referred directly to any specific grade level, of the 190 parents and guardians who responded to the open-ended question, 19 expressed concerns or made comments about the transition of students from a primary school into a middle school for grade 5. Most of the comments shared similar sentiments. A parent/guardian shared, “The adjustment from 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade is very difficult for those that school doesn’t come easy for. It

seems like this is an issue... There needs to be MORE support for those kids that are having a hard time transitioning in academics and socially. The ‘support system’ that I have seen is great but it’s nowhere near enough.” Another one shared, “As a parent I feel that it’s just as big a transition from 8<sup>th</sup> [grade] to high school as it is from 4<sup>th</sup> to middle school.” “I think that 5<sup>th</sup> grade (10 y/o) is too young to be expected to take on the responsibilities of a middle school... My 5<sup>th</sup> grader no longer likes to go to school. THAT BREAKS MY HEART!” Another parent/guardian focused on academics and wrote, “Transition to 5<sup>th</sup> grade academic program was unexpected from the parent as well as the student. It took the entire first marking period to adjust.” A focus on grading practices highlighted, “I think that...the hardest thing in the move [to 5<sup>th</sup> grade] is the grading and how much a percentage each [assignment] is [worth].”

Another parent/guardian wrote: “I feel that the transition from 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade is way too much on a 10 year old. There are way too many new things [such as] lockers, changing [for] every class, changing for gym, the [starting time scheduled for] 1 hour earlier. I feel that they are still too young for all of this...the teachers need to remember that they are 10 and 11 not 15 and 16.” One parent/guardian commented, “Here...students go from a self-contained class to 5 different teachers, a locker, after school activities and other changes, not to mention PAL dances where their social lives go from play dates to boyfriends and girlfriends. It’s too much too soon.” A few additional parents/guardians shared that they did not think their children were prepared for the transition into middle school, that there is too much discipline for students at this age level and that parents/guardians are not prepared for the amount of homework. One parent/guardian shared, “My concern is that the school expects a high level of independence from a 5<sup>th</sup> grader without guidance from teachers...my son needs some guidance with this transition.” One parent/guardian shared that her son states, “I am nervous.”

One parent/guardian expressed appreciation and offered, “The move into Middle School I went much smoother and he adjusted wonderfully to the school and its environment.” Another commented, “Middle School I was the best school experience for my child.” Another shared, “The staff made the transition easier for my child and recommended ways to help. We were very happy with the staff and administration’s response to our concerns and questions at the time.”

A parent/guardian expressed gratitude for the orientation program and wrote, “I feel the move up to fifth grade was the biggest transition for my daughter. The orientation took some anxiety away.” Looking towards the future, another parent/guardian wrote, “I am worried about my youngest child moving to 5<sup>th</sup> grade as it is an age where they should still be in elementary school and they are forced into a middle school and the atmosphere totally changes with no transitional period.”

Conversely, one parent/guardian expressed a fondness for the transition of fifth graders into the middle school setting and shared;

I think one of the best things about Bearwood is that the students are with their peer group in each school. Transitioning to middle school in 5<sup>th</sup> grade is brilliant as the students aren’t so self-conscious and basically make the transition smoothly. I work in a 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade middle school and our 7<sup>th</sup> graders have a tough time transitioning from elementary. I feel they are at a much more self-conscious stage of development.

**Faculty members.** None of the survey statements referred specifically to fifth grade, but a few of the faculty members took the opportunity presented by Statement 23, which read: “Please share any thoughts about any aspect of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district.” Four of the faculty members commented on the fifth grade in particular. One faculty member stated, “5<sup>th</sup> grade is too young for issues like lockers and

switching classes. It is my strong belief that it rushes the social maturation process...” Another shared, “I think 5<sup>th</sup> grade is early to be switching classes.” One positive aspect of the fifth grade at the time of the survey was shared by a faculty member who wrote, “I very much like the 5-6, 7-8 configuration as there is a great difference between a 5<sup>th</sup> grader and an 8<sup>th</sup> grader.”

**Guidance counselors.** Three guidance counselors were interviewed for this study; one of the counselors shared the challenges which face fifth graders when they enter the middle school. One of those challenges focuses on organization; the counselor spoke of the challenges for fifth grade students (at ten years of age) to be sharing a locker, changing for class 8 or 9 periods a day, changing for physical education class and keeping an detailed agenda to keep track of their assignments. The counselor shared, “There’s a lot of challenges for them at ten years old.”

According to one counselor, when “they transition out, they have a solid two years of middle school.” They will have the locker situation under control, will be able to change classes and will have developed some organizational skills. They will once again have to “re-invent” themselves to get readjusted to the next school’s level of organization for the next middle school.

**Directors and supervisors.** A group of curriculum directors and supervisors participated in a focus group session to discuss the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions. During the session, a conversation ensued about the configuration of the middle schools and the fact that fifth graders attend middle school in this district. Since Middle School I houses fifth and sixth graders, the fifth graders are following a middle school model.

When the discussion turned to standardized testing, one participant began to speak about the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge test. The test dates are determined by the State Department of Education, which has consistently scheduled the NJ ASK5 and NJ ASK6 to be administered during different weeks. Thus, one participant shared, “...if you think about the

way the state bundles the grade levels, perhaps the fifth grade should be self-contained and they should have maybe one or two teachers.” Another participant continued, “...we have fifth graders who have to get a waiver in order to take the [NJ ASK] with the sixth graders...because they’re supposed to be testing on a different week...Which indicates to us that we really have the wrong model in the wrong place at fifth grade.”

Speaking of the challenges discussed earlier regarding sharing lockers, changing for classes, changing for physical education class, one of the participants stated, “...this is all a high school model that has been adopted too early in our children. And basically, it’s because of the way we house them, not because of any kind of ideological statement that we’re trying to make.”

In the area of mathematics instruction, one focus group participant shared, “Fifth grade is the first stage where you...demand that they apply the concepts, and that they start looking at fractions, and it’s very critical.” The discussion continued with an emphasis on the fact that in addition, since the district’s students are transitioning into Middle School I from two primary schools in fifth grade, it makes the situation worse. As these fifth graders take time to get adjusted to a new school setting, they are missing important mathematics concepts. According to one participant, “It is affecting them. It is affecting them big time!” In the area of language arts instruction, “up until this year they...had a [book] study approach, which was a design for high school and middle schools,” shared another participant. One participant with a contrasting opinion added that due to the present grade-span configuration, there are teachers who are certified in their subject areas teaching fifth grade classes, which has resulted in the standardized science assessments achieving good results.

## **Summary for Research Question One**

The parents and guardians of the students who attend schools in the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their children are safe, happy, and comfortable while in attendance at school. They also believe that their children feel a sense of belonging and pride in their schools. However, students reported feeling a sense of belonging or pride in being part of a school if they were involved in sports, afterschool clubs, or community service projects. Students also shared that they felt part of the district as a whole, or part of a group within the school, but never feel a sense of belonging or pride in being part of any individual school. Students expressed they felt comfortable following each school-to-school transition within a few days. The faculty members believe that the students of the district enjoy attending school and feel like they belong to their schools.

The parents and guardians believe that the principal, teachers, and support staff are friendly to their children and that their children feel closer to their teachers than the other staff members. They also believe that the majority of the teachers are interested in and respectful of their children, and that their children have at least one teacher in whom they can confide. It appears that students are comfortable with the frequent transitioning between schools and that it is the adults who have difficulty bonding with students in such a short period of time. The students spoke favorably about their teachers and described them as nice and helpful. Students also shared that they are very willing to move to a new school when it is time to transition, and that they like to “make new teachers,” like they “make new friends.”

According to the parents and guardians who completed the survey, there is ample preparation for students and their families prior to transitioning to a new school and there are adequate supports in place for students following each school-to-school transition. Additionally,

most parents/guardians feel welcome in their children's schools and are comfortable volunteering. However, the parents/guardians also reported that the opportunity to meet their child's new teachers and/or view students' schedules prior to the new school year was not consistently offered. Although most parents/guardians reported an adjustment period for their children, there were mixed perspectives regarding the family's adjustment following one of their children transitioning into a new school setting.

Faculty members believe that students are usually prepared for school-to-school transitions, but that they spend a lot of time helping students adjust to the school. Faculty members also reported that the students are nervous when they first enter a new school following a transition, but that there are supports in place for new students. The students who were interviewed reported that they anticipated each transition with excitement and that their peers helped them quickly adjust to each new school setting.

Some parents/guardians provided positive feedback for the current grade-span configuration and liked that students were interacting only with students of a similar age. Other parents/guardians would like to have a wider grade-span so that students could remain in a familiar environment for a longer period of time. According to faculty members and parents/guardians, the current narrow grade-span configuration impacts student friendships and limits younger students' exposure to older role models and mentors. Some faculty members and parents/guardians offered a few suggestions for alternative wider grade-span configurations so that students could remain in one school building for a longer period of time. One of the principals shared that the present grade-span presents disadvantages for the student who does not have all of the skills and supports necessary to succeed.

Although Middle School I is comprised of fifth and sixth graders, some parents/guardians and faculty members perceive that ten-year-olds are too young for the rigors and responsibilities associated with a middle school setting. The curriculum directors and supervisors purport that there appears to be no academic ideology behind this placement and, as a result, these students are being taught using a middle school model before they are mature enough to handle the academic, social and emotional challenges of a middle school environment.

### **Research Question Two**

*How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood Township School District?* The findings for research question two were determined by analysis of the data garnered from the faculty survey, interviews with the principals, and the focus group with the curriculum directors and supervisors. This data matrix for research question two is presented in Table 17.

Table 17

*Data Matrix for Research Question Two*

Data Source	Questions Related to Research Question Two
Faculty Survey	1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18 and 20 elicited Likert Scale responses  22 elicited demographic information  23 (open-ended question)
Interviews with Principals	1, 2 and 3  7 (open-ended question)
Focus Group with Curriculum Directors and Supervisors	1, 2 and 3  7 (open-ended question)

**Finding six.** *Although not consistently provided with the opportunity to visit the grade before and/or after the one they presently teach, the faculty members of the district reported being somewhat more familiar with the curriculum before the grade they teach than the curriculum of the next grade level.*

The data sources that support Finding Six include the parent/guardian survey, the faculty survey, interviews with principals, and the focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors. The data garnered from each of these sources is explained separately.

**Parents and guardians.** Although the parent/guardian survey did not explicitly include any statements about the continuity of curriculum and instruction, some of the participants took advantage of the opportunity to provide open-ended responses to statement 28, and commented

on the continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district. Specifically, survey statement 28 read, “Please share any thoughts about any aspects of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district:”

Each of the three comments explicitly related to mathematics instruction. One of the parents/guardians shared, “...the move from primary school to middle school revealed a discrepancy in Math, in particular, between what the primary schools taught and what the middle schools expected the children to have already learned. This happened with two of my children. I had to fill in the gaps.” Another stated, “The mathematics...was lacking in maintaining a pre-algebra to algebra transition. This required us to get a tutor in order to adequately prepare our child for high school.” A third offered, “It seems like the kids are rushed through weekly learning concepts like subtracting...without getting down the fundamentals first.”

**Faculty members.** The faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District were also asked to provide their insight and opinions regarding grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions by participating in a survey. Statement number 14 on the faculty survey read, “I am provided with the opportunity to visit the previous grade/course to the one I teach.” A total of 142 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 16% responded “Almost Always,” 40% responded “Frequently,” 35% responded “Occasionally” and 9% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District are inconsistent in their responses that they are provided with the opportunity to visit the grade(s) before to the grade/course they presently teach. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 34.

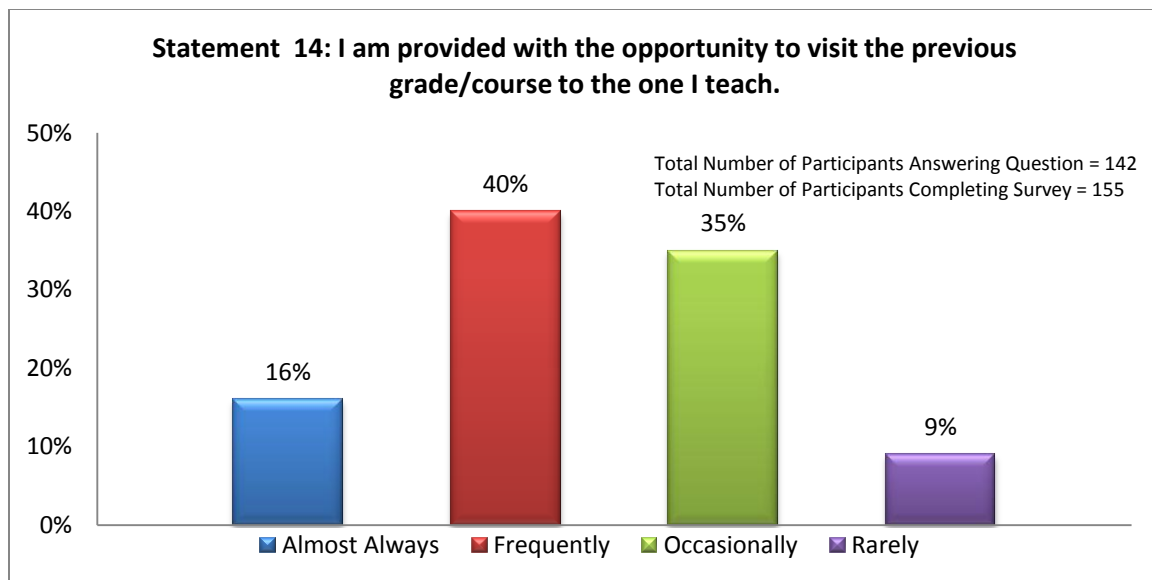


Figure 34. Faculty members' opportunity to visit the grade(s) previous to the one(s) they teach.

When provided with the chance to share open-ended comments, none of the faculty members shared comments about the opportunity to visit the previous grade/course to the one(s) they teach.

Statement number 6 on the faculty survey read, "I am provided with the opportunity to visit the grade(s) into which my students will transition." A total of 151 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 7% responded "Almost Always," 5% responded "Frequently," 31% responded "Occasionally" and 58% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District do not believe that they are provided with the opportunity to visit the grade(s) into which their students will transition. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 35.

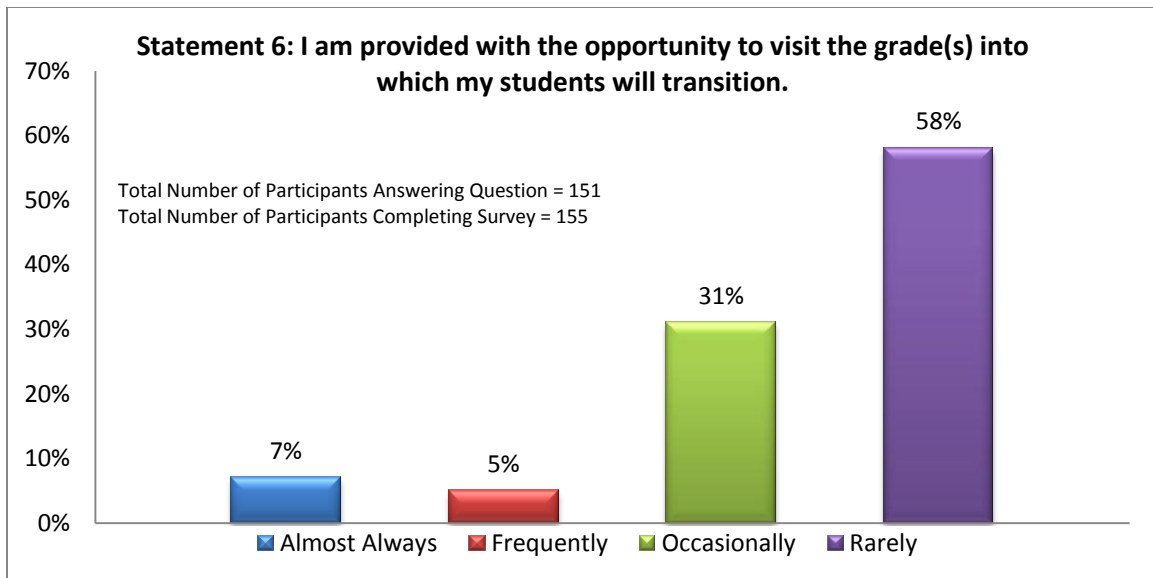


Figure 35. Faculty members' opportunity to visit the grade(s) into which their students will transition.

When provided with the chance to share open-ended comments, one teacher shared, “I am a special education teacher and had to beg and plead to have the opportunity to go visit the program my last year’s students were entering in their new school. I wished I was given the opportunity earlier in the year to visit so that I had a better idea of what tools my students needed to prepare for the higher grade level.”

Statement number 1 on the faculty survey read, “I am familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) before the one(s) I teach.” A total of 153 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 45% responded “Almost Always,” 27% responded “Frequently,” 19% responded “Occasionally” and 9% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District believe that they are familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) before the one(s) they teach. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 36.

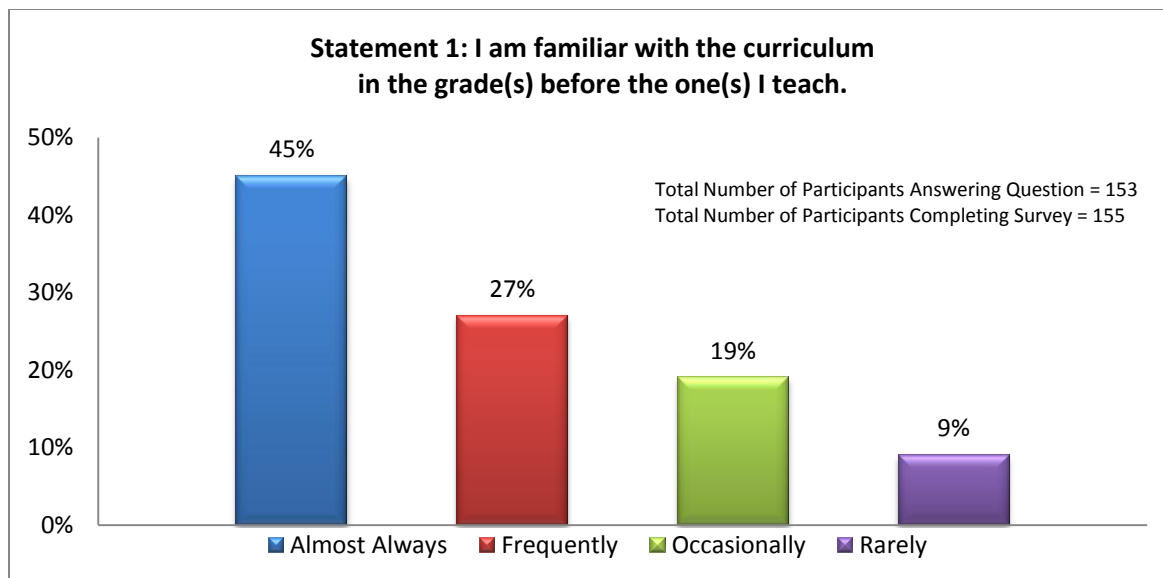


Figure 36. Faculty members' familiarity with the curriculum before the grade they teach.

When provided with the chance to share open-ended comments, one teacher shared, "I believe that teachers in the grade levels below mine are doing their best to teach these students."

Statement number 9 on the faculty survey read, "I am familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) after the one(s) I teach." A total of 152 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 34% responded "Almost Always," 29% responded "Frequently," 26% responded "Occasionally" and 11% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District believe that they are familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) after the one(s) they teach, but not with the same certitude as their familiarity with the grade level(s) before the ones the teach. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 37.

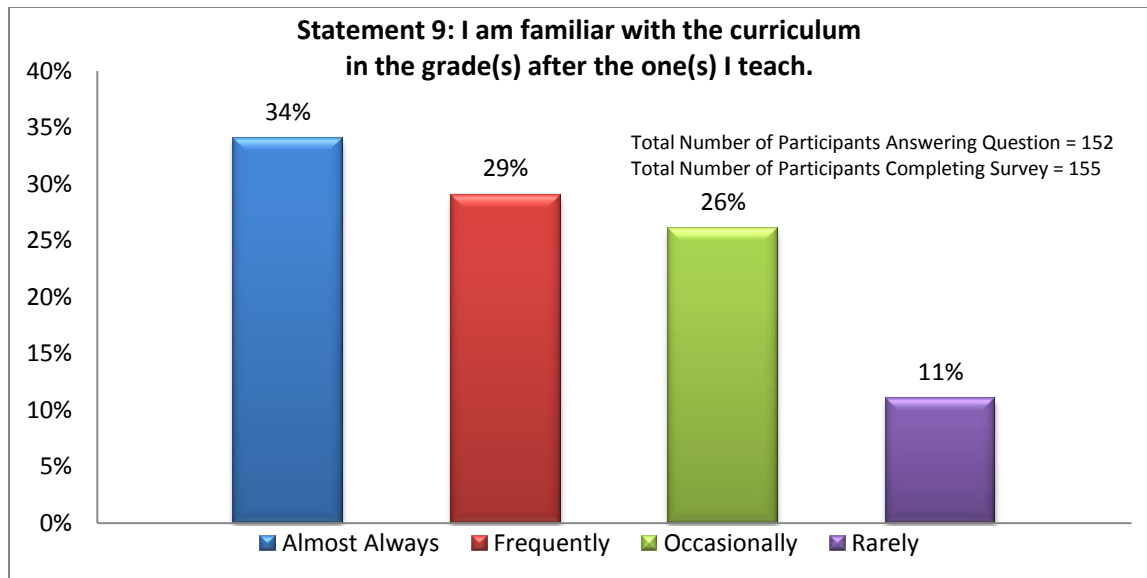


Figure 37. Faculty members' familiarity with the curriculum after the grade they teach.

When provided with the chance to share open-ended comments, some of the faculty members shared sentiments about their familiarity with the curriculum in the grade(s) after the one(s) they teach. One faculty member wrote, "Students are resilient but like to know what is expected of them and work best when they know exactly what needs to be done to be successful, as I do."

**Principals.** Of the four principals who participated in interviews for this study, one principal shared that he/she perceives that there should be a connection between grade levels as they relate to curriculum and instruction. This principal shared,

I hope that there is. There should be...a link between one grade to the next...spiraling and connecting and building on past learning, and students' exposure to or depth of the curriculum is then addressed and taught at the next level in the next grade level. I do believe there is a direct link in the curriculum. I do believe it is contiguous...knowing what my teachers teach, they are working on their grade level curriculum. They're not

skipping anything... They're not having to spend a great deal of time re-teaching something... They're reviewing and revisiting as needed, and that's really differentiating instruction. I don't feel there's holes where teachers come to me saying, 'They didn't cover this whole concept.'

Commenting on the grade-span configuration and its relationship to this topic, this principal then added, "Maybe there are gaps at times because we're not in buildings together." Another principal shared the following about the connection between grade-span configuration and instruction, "I would say that within the grade levels that are within your own building there is some degree of scope and sequence and continuity. However, because we have such small increments of grade level groupings, something is lost...we try to provide some mixed articulation." This principal went on to share that sometimes at the end of the year there may be some ambiguity about whether or not the teachers from one grade level actually participated in constructive articulation about the curriculum across grade levels.

**Curriculum directors and supervisors.** The curriculum directors and supervisors are relatively new to their roles, having been appointed to these positions over the past two years. They now supervise the K-12 curriculum and are able to view the district from a more "global perspective of our K-12...district." They participated in a focus group for this study and shared their expertise and opinions on the topic of continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the Bearwood Township School District.

One participant shared that when they first began working with the teachers throughout the district, the teachers would make statements such as, "'Well, we don't know what they teach there, so we're gonna review this, and we're gonna do that.'"' This participant went on to add, "...they were adding things into the curriculum that didn't need to be added, because they

weren't sure what the previous grade levels were teaching." Although the district had provided some opportunities for teachers to shadow teachers from the grade level before the one they taught, one participant shared that, "nothing [was] written down, but in an informal way, the teacher realized what was being taught on... [that] grade level."

During the focus group, one participant commented, "...there were certain [curricular] things that were not being followed...[and] teachers were teaching things that should have been taught by a different group of teachers...that has been addressed in the last two school years." Thus, the directors and supervisors believe that having the opportunity to work on the curriculum with teachers throughout the entire K-12 district has provided them with a unique perspective of the curricular challenges posed by the present grade-span configuration. They purported, "...the real disconnect comes when you switch schools..."

**Finding seven.** *Faculty members are split in their perceptions about curriculum continuity within the Bearwood Township School District; they recognize that there are factors that inhibit curriculum continuity, such as inadequate time for articulation between faculty members regarding curriculum, instructional strategies, and individual student needs.*

The data sources that support Finding Seven include the faculty survey, interviews with guidance counselors and principals, and the focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors. The data garnered from each of these sources is explained separately.

**Faculty members.** The faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District were asked to provide their insight and opinions regarding grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions by participating in a survey. Statement number 3 on the faculty survey read, "There is ample time provided for articulation about the curriculum and instruction." A total of 155 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 8% responded "Almost Always,"

20% responded “Frequently,” 43% responded “Occasionally” and 29% responded “Rarely.”

Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District believe that there is not sufficient time provided for articulation about curriculum and instruction. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 38.

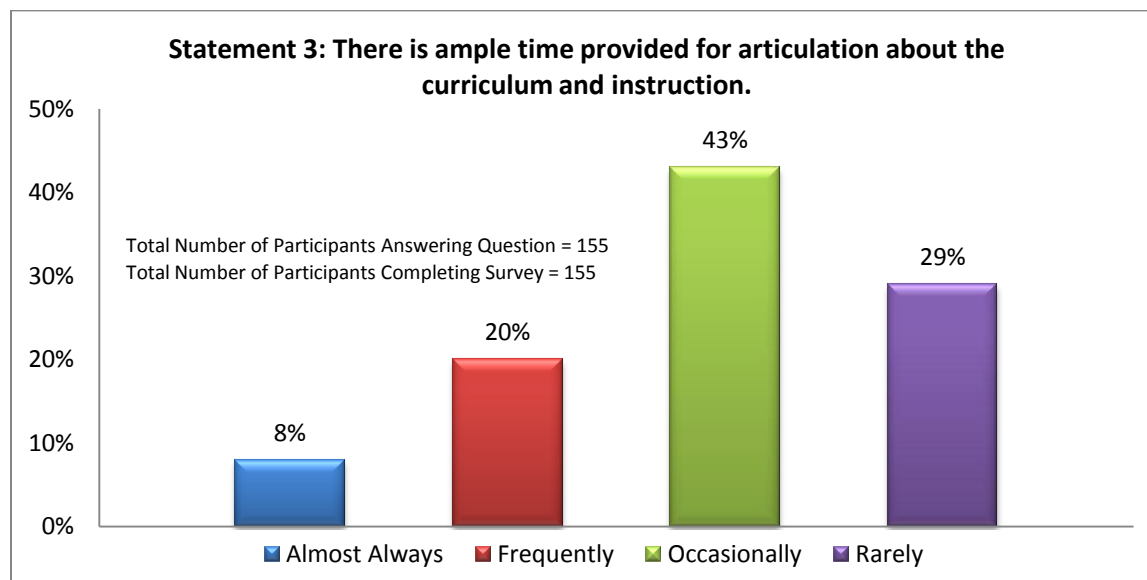


Figure 38. Faculty members’ perception of time for articulation about curriculum and instruction.

The faculty survey also provided participants with the opportunity to complete an open-ended statement so they could share any additional information regarding the current grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions for students in the district. Survey statement 23 read, “Please share any thoughts about any aspects of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district.” Some of the faculty members shared sentiments regarding ample time being provided for articulation about the curriculum and instruction. One faculty member shared, “...the lack of communication between grade levels, particularly at the middle school level, seems to be impacting test scores.” Another wrote, “[We] need more curricula articulation between the grade levels.” A third stated, “Teachers need more time to

connect with teachers in their own school as well as in the grades before and after a grade level.”

One final comment offered,

...perhaps because of the grade configuration, the articulation between grade levels is nearly nonexistent...There is little time to collaborate with my colleagues in my school and discipline, never mind other schools. The occasional cross school department meetings are nice in theory but useless with no follow through...If we are ever going to realistically work with and collaborate with others in our district, more time throughout the day must be created...then we will see a positive impact on students’ achievement.

Statement number 6 on the faculty survey read, “Teaching strategies are discussed between schools.” A total of 152 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 5% responded “Almost Always,” 10% responded “Frequently,” 47% responded “Occasionally” and 38% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District do not believe that they discuss teaching strategies between schools. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 39.

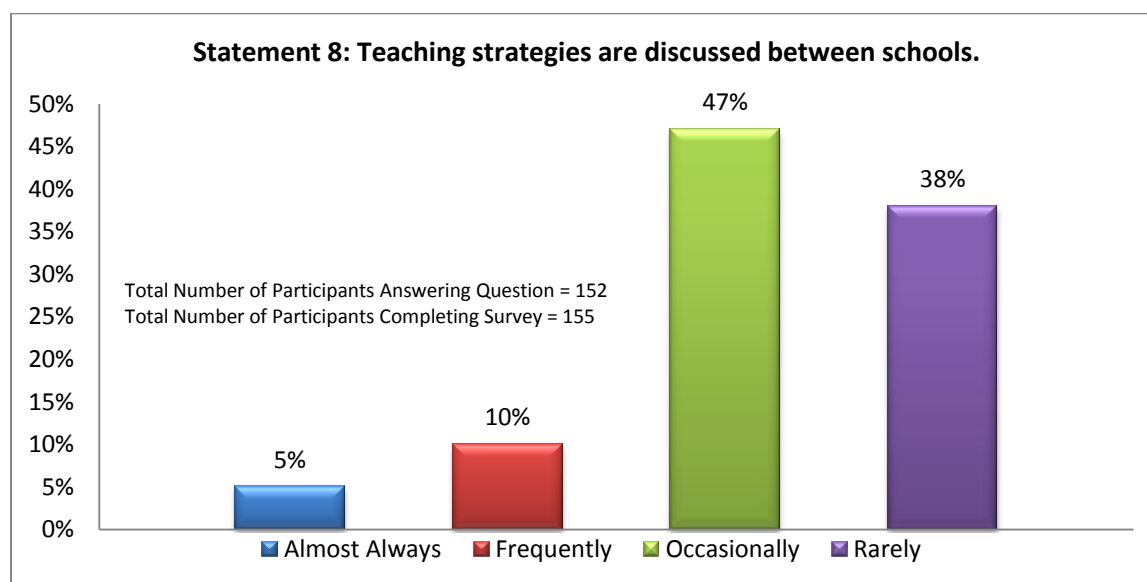


Figure 39. Faculty members' responses regarding teaching strategies being discussed between schools.

Survey statement 23 read, "Please share any thoughts about any aspects of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district." Some of the faculty members shared comments about being provided with the opportunity to visit the grade(s) into which their students will transition. A few faculty members were proponents of the present grade-span configuration as it relates to the discussion of teaching strategies and offered, "Having teachers of the same grade level is advantageous because of the sharing of lessons and activities. Another stated, "I think Bearwood does a great job at configuring grade levels...It...allows greater collaboration between the teachers."

Statement number 15 on the faculty survey read, "I believe there is curriculum continuity in the schools throughout the district." A total of 143 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 34% responded "Almost Always," 22% responded "Frequently," 20% responded "Occasionally" and 25% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that there are diverse views on the continuity of curriculum throughout the district, with approximately half of the faculty members believing that there is curriculum continuity and half believing that there is not curriculum continuity in the schools of the Bearwood Township School District. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 40.

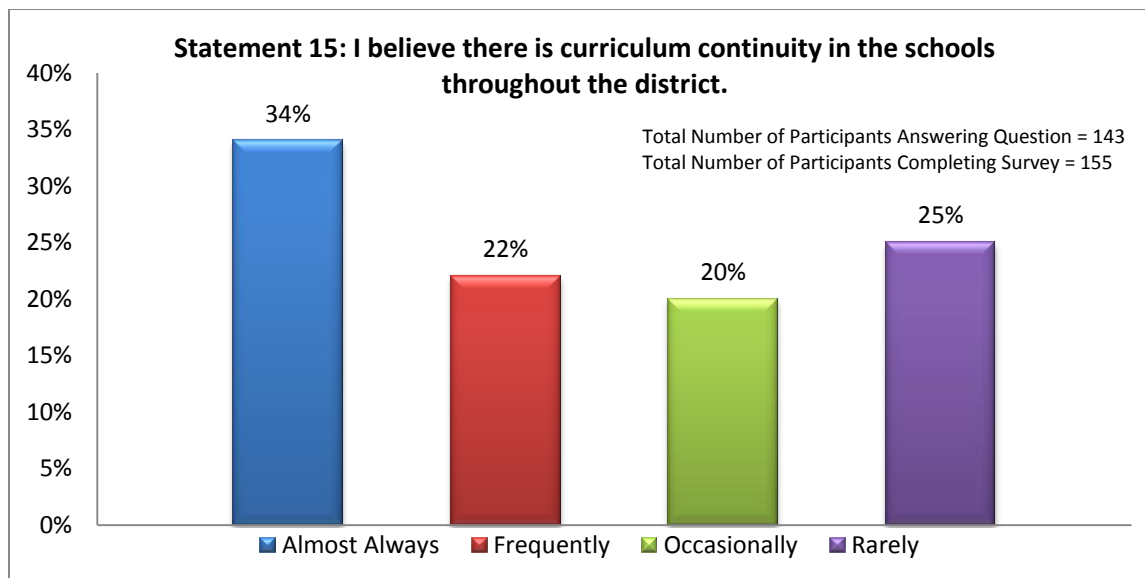


Figure 40. Faculty members' perception of curriculum continuity throughout the district.

Survey statement 23 read, "Please share any thoughts about any aspects of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district." One of the faculty members shared comments about curriculum continuity, "I would love to see the district move to a K-4 building configuration. I feel there [would be] more continuity between teachers...the...district is too spread out when it comes to continuity between grades."

Statement number 18 on the faculty survey read, "I am involved in students' placement in the next grade level." A total of 143 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 34% responded "Almost Always," 22% responded "Frequently," 20% responded "Occasionally" and 24% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the views of the faculty members are wide-ranging regarding students' placement in the next grade level; the responses were almost equally positive and negative. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 41.

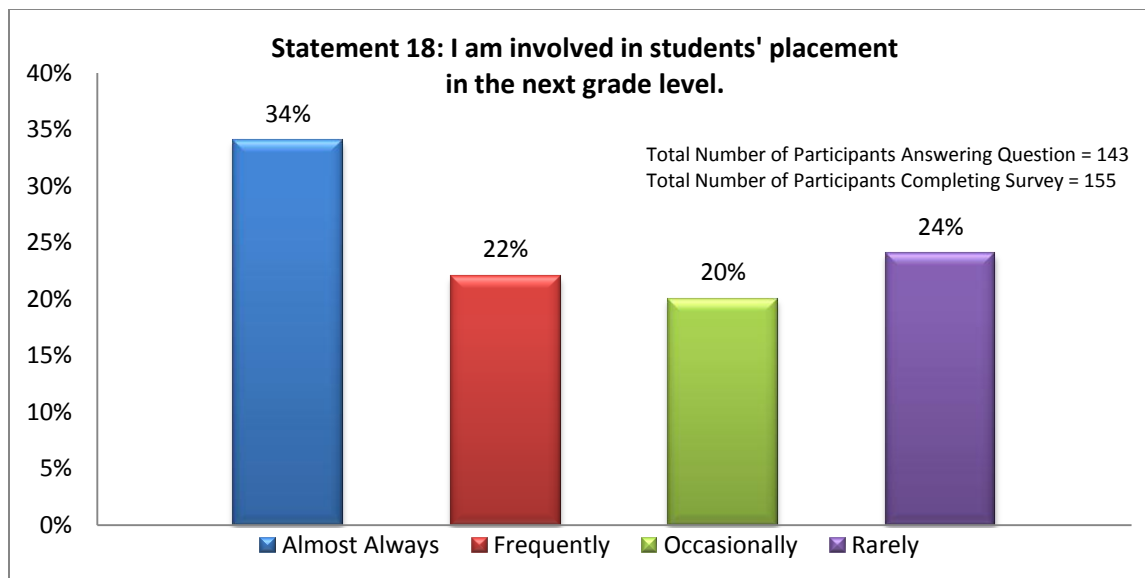


Figure 41. Faculty members' responses regarding involvement in student placement for next grade.

None of the faculty members shared comments about their involvement in students' placement in the next grade level.

Statement number 20 on the faculty survey read, "I provide input to the educators who will teach my students in the upcoming year." A total of 141 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 28% responded "Almost Always," 31% responded "Frequently," 20% responded "Occasionally" and 21% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the opinions of the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District are varied on the topic of providing input to the educators who will teach their students in the upcoming year. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 42.

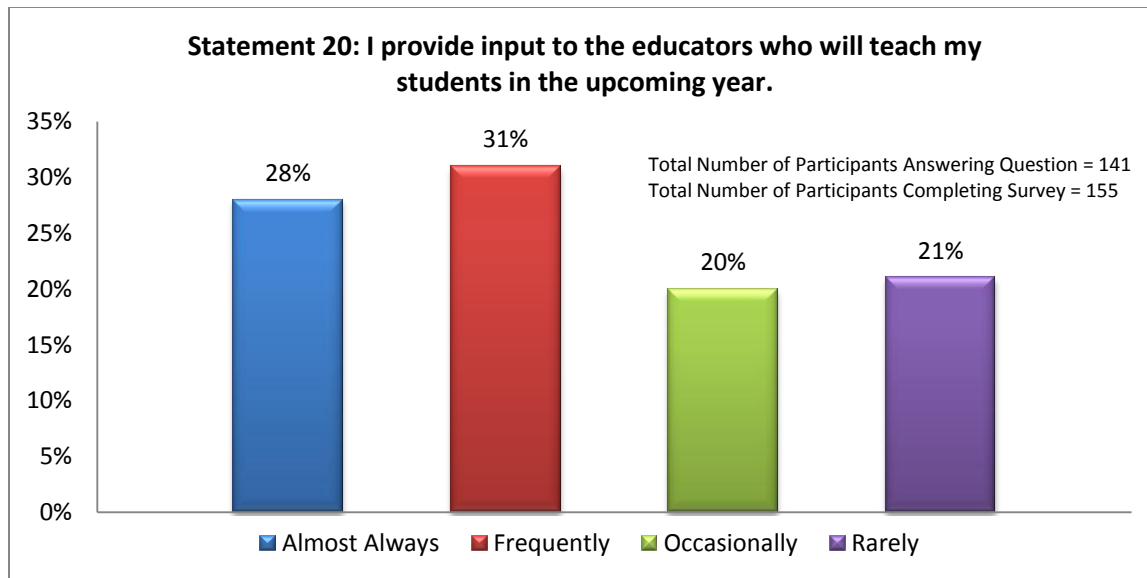


Figure 42. Faculty members' responses regarding providing input about students to upcoming grades.

Survey statement 23 read, "Please share any thoughts about any aspects of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district." Some of the faculty members shared comments about being afforded the opportunity to provide input to the educators who will teach their students in the upcoming year. One teacher shared, "As it turned out, because of my personal contact with the following year's teachers, my students were able to integrate smoothly with the right set of prerequisite skills." Another wrote, "As a special education teacher, I believe that we need more articulation between the K-12 teachers in order to understand transition and retention methods and ideologies." Regarding the need for a wider grade-span configuration, one faculty member stated, "Teachers will confer more about students from year to year, which [would] especially help students at risk."

**Principals.** Four principals participated in interviews as part of this study. When asked about communication about curriculum and instruction, one principal shared the role played by the curriculum directors and supervisors,

It comes from the top down. Oftentimes, it is directly from the central office or...the curriculum directors...they will see what instruction is happening to basically encourage teachers or set up opportunities for teachers to work together on reviewing the curriculum, rewriting the curriculum, revisiting, mapping, looking at spiraling of the curriculum and just dialogue about the curriculum. Usually, that occurs in the building first.

Another principal shared a perspective about the challenges faced when trying to develop curriculum continuity throughout the district with the present grade-span configuration. This principal's insight included that educators can more easily develop instructional strategies within their own schools than is possible when the strategies must be shared between schools. This principal commented that it is often difficult to understand why there are gaps in learning when students begin struggling in specific subject areas. This difficulty is exacerbated when the investigation into their learning difficulties necessitates communication between buildings. However, this principal also shared that the research into the particulars of what is being taught and how it is being taught can now be performed by the directors and supervisors. The directors and supervisors can be relied upon to act as liaisons between schools to provide a curriculum which provides greater continuity.

**Guidance counselors.** Although the focus of the interviews with the three guidance counselors was on the sense of belonging for students, a few of the comments gleaned from the interviews focused on curriculum and instruction. One counselor shared, "We are one district and we can't align the curriculum. We need clarification and articulation across the schools."

Another shared that the biggest challenge for students entering the high school is “the academic piece.” When students are recommended for certain high school classes for which they may not be prepared, it becomes a scheduling challenge when students have to be placed in different sections of a course. “As a guidance counselor, one of my main concerns when I see kids come in, are how many are not ready to be here...the gap in skill level is pretty significant.” Thus, without articulation about curriculum and instruction between schools, student academics suffer.

**Directors and supervisors.** During the focus group the directors and supervisors shared a number of ideas regarding the articulation of curriculum and instruction. In their opinion, articulation did not exist at a level that was conducive to the development of curriculum continuity. However, the directors and supervisors purported that there is improved articulation between faculty members and schools. One director/supervisor shared,

I think there’s been vertical articulation amongst teachers within the same building on an informal basis, in which they talk to each other about what each other is teaching. So [it existed] horizontally, in grade level, and vertically with the two or three grades that are in the school.

Another participant continued by sharing that when they had organized day-long meetings with teachers from 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, they had to force some discussions between the groups, since “people tend to gravitate towards what they’re comfortable with.” So they will work to “lead by example” to encourage collaboration and articulation between grade levels and schools. Bringing teachers from every school and grade level together to write curriculum will help to increase articulation between schools and grade levels. One director/supervisor offered the following perspective about the effect of the grade-span configuration on the continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district:

...all of the efforts of communication, for the most part, are pretty contrived...A little bit top down, just in an attempt to get communication going and dialogue between the buildings. As for that organic-like conversation that teachers have when they pass each other in the hallway, or they share a building and see each other in the lunchroom, that doesn't happen here, because of all of the different...buildings...

Continuing with the theme of articulation, the supervisors and directors shared that very often simple articulation about students is sometimes thwarted as a result of the current grade-span configuration; the configuration often creates a lack of articulation between last year's and this year's teachers because they are teaching in separate schools.

### **Summary of Research Question Two**

While there is a perception that there is some curriculum continuity within the Bearwood Township School District, there is recognition that there are factors which inhibit such continuity; such factors include inadequate time for articulation about the curriculum, the sharing of instructional strategies and the placement of students as they transition between grade levels and schools. The main focus of the guidance counselors was the necessity for consistent communication to ensure appropriate student placement.

The directors and supervisors believe that they have begun to open up the lines of communication between the educators of the district and have created additional opportunities for consistent and productive articulation. The principals recognize that the efforts of the directors and supervisors will continue to lead to curriculum continuity throughout the Bearwood Township School District.

### Research Question Three

*How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?* The findings for research question three were determined by analysis of the data garnered from the faculty survey, the interviews with principals, the focus group with curriculum directors and supervisors and the review of the NJ ASK results, the DRA levels, and the End-of-the-Year Math Assessments. This data matrix for research question three is presented in Table 18.

Table 18

*Data Matrix for Research Question Three*

Data Source	Questions Related to Research Question Three
Faculty Survey	4, 11, 12, 13 and 16 elicited Likert Scale responses 22 elicited demographic information 23 (open-ended question)
Interviews with Principals	4, 5 and 6 7 (open-ended question)
Focus Group with Curriculum Directors and Supervisors	1, 2 and 3 7 (open-ended question)
Review of Archival Documents	NJ ASK scores DRA levels End-of-the-Year Math Assessment scores

**Finding eight.** *There is a measurable negative impact on student academic achievement following each school-to-school transition for students in the Bearwood Township School District.*

The data sources that support Finding Eight include the 2010-2011 scores from the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) for language arts and math, the End-of-the Year Math Assessment, the reading levels from the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), as well as the faculty survey, principal interviews, and the focus group with directors and supervisors. The data garnered from each of these sources is explained separately.

***The New Jersey assessment of skills and knowledge (NJ ASK).*** “National trends in support of standards-based education and educational accountability led to the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)” (New Jersey Department of Education, 2001, p. 11). NCLB required that every state establish standardized assessments in reading and mathematics annually in grades 3 through 8 no later than 2005-2006. As a result of these requirements, New Jersey established additional statewide assessments for students in grades 3 through 8. Since 2010, the collection of assessments is known as the NJ ASK 3-8.

Based on NJ ASK test results’ scale scores, a student’s performance is categorized as being Partially Proficient (100-199), Proficient (200-249), or Advanced Proficient (250-300). From this point on, the term “scores” refers to the “scale scores” for each grade level.

This study analyzed the scores from 2003-2004 through 2010-2011 school year for the students of the Bearwood Township School District on the NJ ASK 3-8 for math and language arts literacy (LAL). Since the district’s objective is to have its students score in the Proficient or Advanced Proficient categories, the percentage of students who perform at the Proficient and Advanced Proficient have been combined and are presented in Table 19 and Table 20. The

Partially Proficient scores do not appear in these tables, but constitute the remaining percentage after the displayed totals shown by the Proficient and Advanced Proficient categories.

It is important to note that new math and LAL NJ ASK tests were administered in 2008 for students in grades 5 through 8, and in 2009 for grades 3 and 4. Consequently, new standards were then adopted for the proficiency levels on the new NJ ASK tests. Thus, the scores for the older tests cannot be definitively compared to the scores for the new tests.

***NJ ASK 3-8 for mathematics.*** The NJ ASK 3-8 math scores are presented in Table 19 for the Bearwood Township School District's students from grades 3 through 11, excluding the years for which there were no NJ ASK scores available. For clarification purposes, the NJ ASK 3 and 4 are administered while the students are in attendance in Primary School II A and B; these schools house students in grades 2 through 4. Following a school-to-school transition into Middle School I (which houses grades 5 and 6), the NJ ASK 5 and NJ ASK 6 are administered. Following another school-to-school transition into Middle School II (which houses grades 7 and 8), the NJ ASK 7 and NJ ASK 8 are administered. As mentioned earlier, new tests were administered in 2008 for the NJ ASK 5-8 and in 2009 for the NJ ASK 3-4; these tests are delineated in the tables by an asterisk (\*) for clarity of analysis.

Since this study is focused on student achievement following school-to-school transitions as a result of the grade-span configuration, the discussion will center predominantly on the scores following a transition into a new school. Since the Class of 2020 and Class of 2019 do not have scores available to compare achievement or lack thereof following a transition, the discussion will begin with the Class of 2018.

- The Class of 2018 took the NJ ASK 5 following a school-to-school transition into Middle School I; the percentage of students scoring Proficient/Advanced Proficient status for math declined by 8.7%.
- The Class of 2017 took the new NJ ASK 4 in 2009; their math scores declined by 11.3% from the math scores obtained on the NJ ASK 3. As a result, when they took the NJ ASK 5 following a transition into middle school, the growth of 5.3% *may* not be attributable to the school-to-school transition, but rather to the newly revised test taken in fourth grade. Thus, the data for the Class of 2017 is difficult to analyze.
- The Class of 2016 demonstrated a decline in Proficient/Advanced Proficient status following both of the transitions into Middle School I and Middle School II. The NJ ASK 5 math scores demonstrated a decline of 14.7% from the results of the NJ ASK 4 math scores and the NJ ASK 7 math scores demonstrated a decline of 5.6% from the NJ ASK 6 math scores.
- The Class of 2015 demonstrated a considerable decline in their math scores between the results of the NJ ASK 4 and the NJ ASK 5, but it must be noted that these students took the new NJ ASK 5 in 2008. The results demonstrated a decline of 31.4% in math, which may be attributable to the new test, the school-to-school transition, or a combination of the two variables. When these students transitioned into Middle School II and took the NJ ASK 7, their math scores declined by 3.7% from the math scores obtained on the NJ ASK 6.
- The Class of 2014 also took both the NJ ASK 5 and NJ ASK 7 following school-to-school transitions. The percentage of students who scored at Proficient/Advanced Proficient status in math declined for both assessments. The math scores obtained on

- the NJ ASK 5 declined by 4.7%. The new NJ ASK 6 was administered to these students for the first time in 2008, resulting in lower scores on the NJ ASK 5 test; however, the students' scores declined again by 14.7% following the transition into Middle School II.
- The Class of 2013 showed a decline following the transition into Middle School I; the scores on their NJ ASK 5 assessment declined by 1.6%. Following the transition into Middle School II, the scores on the NJ ASK 7 declined by 12.3%, but it must be noted that the NJ ASK 7 was administered to these students in 2008, which was the first year this new test was taken by students. Thus, the decline could be a result of the new assessment, the school-to-school transition, or a combination of the two variables.
  - The Class of 2012 did not take the NJ ASK 5 as they completed their first year of school Middle School I in 2005, and the assessment was not yet available. However, when these students transitioned into Middle School II and took the NJ ASK 7, their math scores declined by 2.1% from the results they had achieved on the NJ ASK 6 in Middle School I.

Thus, with the exception of the administration of the new NJ ASK assessments which further complicate the analysis of the math scores from the NJ ASK 3-8, the math scores consistently declined following a school-to-school transition. This information is presented in Table 19.

Table19

*New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge 3-8 Math Proficient/Advanced Proficient Scores*

2010-2011 Grade Level	NJ ASK 3	NJ ASK 4	NJ ASK 5	NJ ASK 6	NJ ASK 7	NJ ASK 8
	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP
3 (Class of 2020)	82.8% (2011)	-	-	-	-	-
4 (Class of 2019)	83.4% (2010)	82.9% (2011)	-	-	-	-
5 (Class of 2018)	69.5% (2009)*	80.8% (2010)	72.1% (2011)	-	-	-
6 (Class of 2017)	88.3% (2008)	70.0% (2009)*	75.3% (2010)	77.9% (2011)	-	-
7 (Class of 2016)	89.7% (2007)	82.3% (2008)	67.6% (2009)	70.9% (2010)	65.3% (2011)	-
8 (Class of 2015)	88.9% (2006)	86.2% (2007)	54.8% (2008)*	66.4% (2009)	62.7% (2010)	73.8% (2011)
9 (Class of 2014)	87.9% (2005)	90.7% (2006)	86.0% (2007)	71.6% (2008)*	66.9% (2009)	73.5% (2010)
10 (Class of 2013)	81.9% (2004)	86.7% (2005)	85.1% (2006)	76.2% (2007)	63.9% (2008)*	78.3% (2009)
11 (Class of 2012)	-	77.5% (2004)	-	70.6% (2006)	68.5% (2007)	66.9% (2008)*

\*Denotes first year of administration of new assessment exams.

**NJ ASK 3-8 for Language Arts Literacy (LAL)**

The NJ ASK 3-8 Language Arts Literacy (LAL) scores are presented in Table 20 for the Bearwood Township School District's students from grades 3 through 11, excluding the years for which there were no NJ ASK scores available. Following a school-to-school transition into

Middle School I (which houses grades 5 and 6), the students take NJ ASK 5 and NJ ASK 6.

Following another school-to-school transition into Middle School II (which houses grades 7 and 8), students take NJ ASK 7 and NJ ASK 8. As mentioned earlier, new tests were administered in 2008 for the NJ ASK 5-8 and in 2009 for the NJ ASK 3-4; these tests are delineated in the tables by an asterisk (\*) for clarity of analysis.

Since this study is focused on student achievement following school-to-school transitions as a result of the grade-span configuration, the discussion will predominantly center on the language arts literacy (LAL) scores following a transition into a new school. Since the Class of 2020 and Class of 2019 do not have scores available to compare achievement or lack thereof following a transition, the discussion will begin with the Class of 2018.

- The Class of 2018 took the NJ ASK 5 following a school-to-school transition into Middle School I; the percentage of students scoring Proficient/Advanced Proficient status for LAL declined by 6.1%.
- The Class of 2017 took the new NJ ASK 4 in 2009; their LAL scores declined by 22.0% from the LAL scores obtained on the NJ ASK 3. When the Class of 2017 took the NJ ASK 5 following a transition into Middle School I, their scores again declined by 8.5%; these results *may not* be attributable to the school-to-school transition, but rather to the newly revised test taken in fourth grade. Thus, the data for the Class of 2017 is difficult to analyze.
- The Class of 2016 demonstrated a decline in Proficient/Advanced Proficient status following both of the transitions into Middle School I and Middle School II. The NJ ASK 5 LAL scores demonstrated a decline of 24.7% from the results of the NJ ASK

- 4 LAL scores and their NJ ASK 7 LAL scores demonstrated a decline of 6.0% from the NJ ASK 6 LAL scores.
- The Class of 2015 demonstrated a decline in their LAL scores between the results of the NJ ASK 4 and the NJ ASK 5, but it must be noted that these students took the new NJ ASK 5 in 2008. The results demonstrated a decline of 34.4% in LAL, which may be attributable to the new test, the school-to-school transition, or a combination of the two variables. When these students transitioned into Middle School II and took the NJ ASK 7, their math scores increased by 1.0% from the LAL scores obtained on the NJ ASK 6.
  - The Class of 2014 also took both the NJ ASK 5 and NJ ASK 7 following school-to-school transitions; this class showed growth following each school-to school transition. The percentage of students who scored at Proficient/Advanced Proficient status in LAL increased for both assessments. The LAL scores obtained on the NJ ASK 5 increased by 7.2%. The new NJ ASK 6 was administered to these students for the first time in 2008, resulting in a drop in scores from the NJ ASK 5 test. These students' NJ ASK 7 LAL scores increased by 21.7% following the transition into Middle School II; these results *may* be attributable to the newly revised test taken in sixth grade. Thus, the scores for the Class of 2014 is also difficult to analyze.
  - The Class of 2013 showed an increase of 2.3% on their LAL scores following the transition into Middle School I. However, following the transition into Middle School II, the LAL scores on the NJ ASK 7 declined by 5.4%, but it must be noted that the NJ ASK 7 was administered to these students in 2008, which was the first year this

new test was taken by students. Thus, the decline could be a result of the new assessment, the school-to-school transition, or a combination of the two variables.

- The Class of 2012 did not take the NJ ASK 5 as they completed their first year of Middle School I in 2005, and the assessment was not yet available. However, when these students transitioned into Middle School II and took the NJ ASK 7, their math scores increased by 9.2% from the results they had achieved on the NJ ASK 6 in Middle School I.

Thus, it can be noted that the majority of classes showed a decline in performance following a school-to-school transition with the exception of the Class of 2014, who demonstrated an increase in their LAL scores following each transition, the Class of 2013, who showed an increase in their LAL scores following the transition into Middle School I, and the Class of 2012 who demonstrated an increase in their LAL scores following their transition into Middle School II. This information is presented in Table 20.

Table 20

*New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge 3-8 LAL Proficient/Advanced Proficient Scores*

2010-2011 Grade Level	NJ ASK 3	NJ ASK 4	NJ ASK 5	NJ ASK 6	NJ ASK 7	NJ ASK 8
	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP
3 Class of 2020	67.4% (2011)	-	-	-	-	-
4 Class of 2019	68.6% (2010)	76.3% (2011)	-	-	-	-

Table 20

*New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge 3-8 LAL Proficient/Advanced Proficient**Scores*

2010-2011 Grade Level	NJ ASK 3	NJ ASK 4	NJ ASK 5	NJ ASK 6	NJ ASK 7	NJ ASK 8
	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP	P/AP
5 Class of 2018	64.5% (2009)*	67.5% (2010)	61.4% (2011)	-	-	-
6 Class of 2017	91.6% (2008)	69.6% (2009)*	61.1% (2010)	67.0% (2011)	-	-
7 Class of 2016	89.4% (2007)	91.0% (2008)	66.3% (2009)	72.7% (2010)	66.7% (2011)	-
8 Class of 2015	90.4% (2006)	89.2% (2007)	54.8% (2008)*	74.5% (2009)	75.5% (2010)	87.7% (2011)
9 Class of 2014	90.8% (2005)	84.9% (2006)	92.1% (2007)	56.7% (2008)*	78.4% (2009)	89.8% (2010)
10 Class of 2013	86.4% (2004)	87.4% (2005)	89.7% (2006)	78.5% (2007)	73.1% (2008)*	86.8% (2009)
11 Class of 2012	-	90.7% (2004)	-	78.8% (2006)	88.0% (2007)	88.6% (2008)*

\*Denotes first year for administration of new assessment exam.

***End-of-the-year math assessment.*** In 2010-2011, the teachers in kindergarten through grade 4 developed an End-of-the-Year Mathematics Assessment under the tutelage of the

Director of Math and Science and the K-12 Mathematics Supervisor. The assessment was administered at the end of the 2010-2011 school year for the first time and yielded a percentage score for each student. The individual scores were totaled and then divided by the number of students who took the assessment to provide an average score for each grade level. The average score for the kindergarten students was 82%, the average score for the first grade students was 90%, the average score for the second grade students was 78%, the average score for the third grade students was 81%, and the average score for the fourth grade students was 77% on the End-of-the-Year Mathematics Assessment.

It is important to note that the scores are for distinct groups of students. These percentages are not comparing a group of students as they progress through the grade levels, as was possible when utilizing the NJ ASK 3-8 scores. Since this was the first year that students took the End-of-the Year Math Assessment, there are not yet scores available from other years to use as a means of comparison. That being said, in 2011, the score for kindergarten (the first year in Primary School I) was lower than the score for first grade (the second year in Primary School I). Similarly, following their first transition into a new school, the score for the second grade students was lower than the score for the first graders; in addition, the second grade scores were lower than the score for the third graders, who were completing their second year in Primary Schools II-A and II-B. The results for fourth grade revealed the lowest score. This information is illustrated in Figure 43.

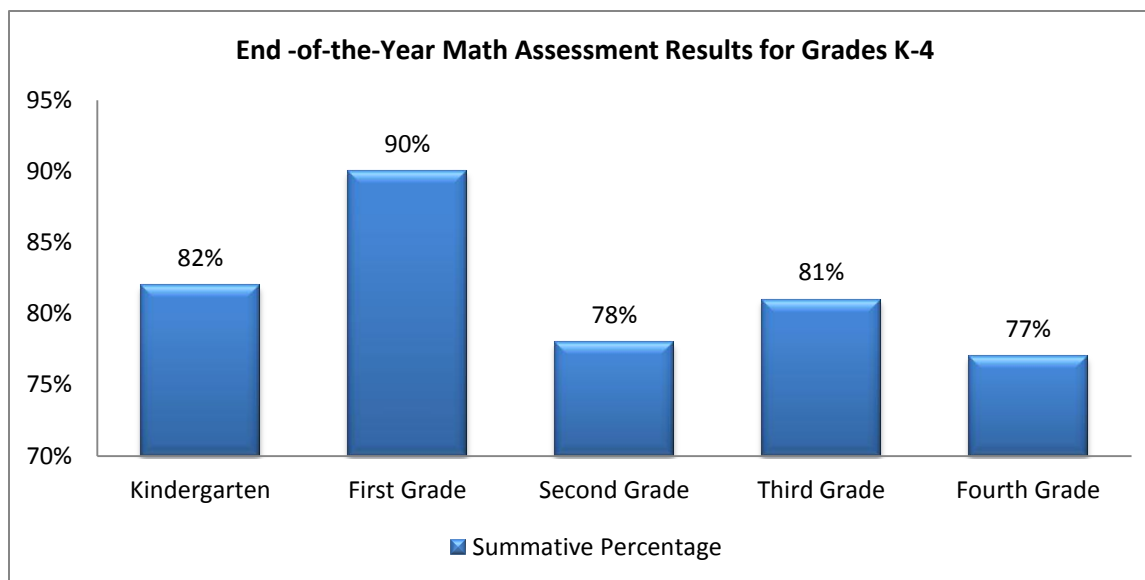


Figure 43. End-of-the-year math assessment results for 2010-2011.

***Developmental reading assessment.*** The Developmental Reading Assessment, Second Edition, or DRA®2 by Pearson, Inc. was utilized for the first time in the Bearwood Township School District during the 2010-2011 school year. This assessment is designed to help teachers observe, record, and evaluate students' reading engagement, oral reading fluency, and comprehension. Each student is assigned to a specific level following the administration of the DRA. Students' progress is demonstrated by progression from one level to another.

Students reading at Levels A, 1, 2, or 3 are considered Emergent Readers; these levels are primarily achieved by kindergarteners. (The only level not depicted by a number is Level A; that is the starting point for all readers). Students reading at Levels 4, 6, 8, 10 or 12 are considered Early Readers; these levels are primarily achieved by first graders. (There are no odd numbered levels for Early Readers). Students reading at Levels 14, 16, 18, 20, 24 or 28 are considered Transitional Readers; these levels are primarily achieved by second graders. (There are no odd numbered Levels at the Transitional stage and there is no Level 22 and no Level 26). As students show reading progress, they are moved to the next level; it is desirable for students to progress a

number of levels between assessments. For means of clarification, if a student progresses from Level 3 to Level 4, he/she has progressed one “step” and has moved from an Emergent Reader status to an Early Reader status. If a student progresses from Level 4 to level 12, he/she would still be considered an Early Reader, as he/she progressed 4 “steps.” Student progress is indicated by the number of DRA levels that the students advance between assessments. Figure 44 shows the average growth between DRA levels attained by the kindergarten, first, and second grade students in the 2010-2011 school year.

In Primary School I, the DRA was administered twice to every kindergarten and first grade student during the 2010-2011 school year. First and second graders were assessed using the DRA at the start of the school year (in September) and at the end of the school year (in May or June). The DRA was administered to kindergartners in January for the first time and at the end of the school year for the second time. Delaying the administration until January allowed these younger students additional time in a formal school setting prior to the first assessment, as is advised by the DRA directives. However, in Primary School II-A and II-B, DRA levels were only available for grade 2-4 students who were receiving extra reading assistance. As stated in the previous section on the End-of-the-Year Math Assessments, these DRA results demonstrate the progress of *individual* students in distinct grades. These levels do not demonstrate the growth of a specific population of students as they progress through the grades.

The graph shows the average growth between the first and final DRA levels for the students who were assessed in kindergarten, first, and second grade. The kindergarten students progressed by 1 level, the first grade students progressed by 4 levels and the second grade students who were assessed with the DRA progressed by 3.8 levels. The second graders showed less growth than the growth demonstrated by the first graders; however, it is important to note

that the scores from the second grade population were incomplete, as only students who were struggling with reading were assessed. Thus, it is problematic to compare the scores between schools since the nature of the populations differs. As a result, it is difficult to compare students' reading progress based on the DRA results. This information is illustrated in Figure 44.

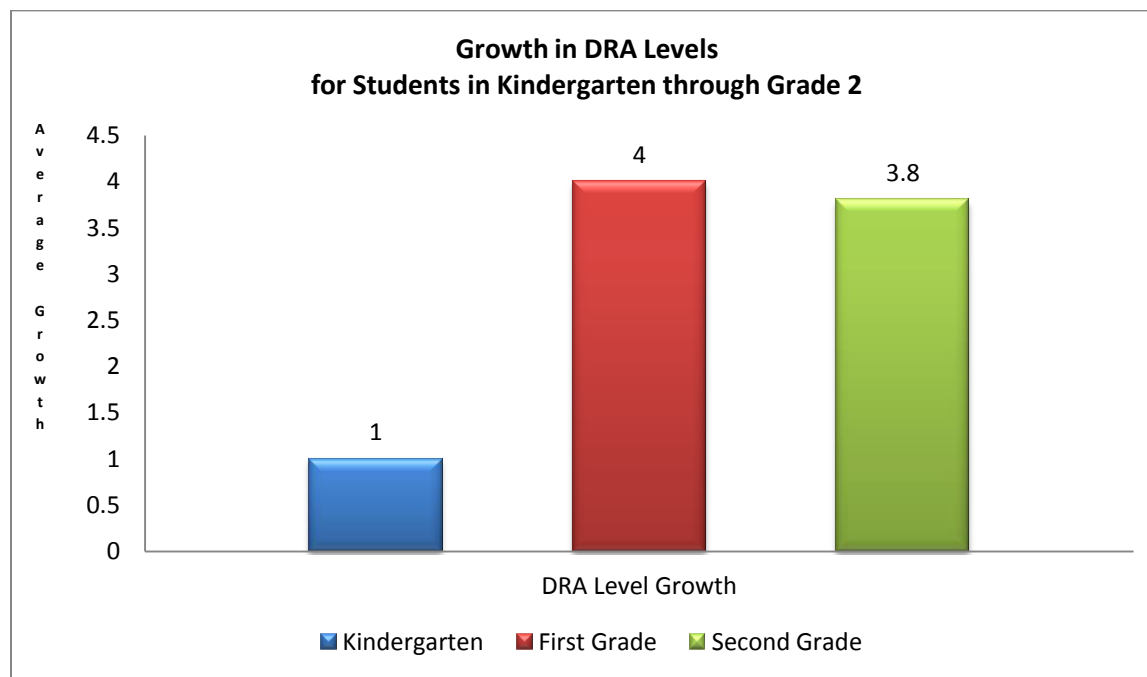


Figure 44. Growth in developmental reading assessment levels for kindergarten through grade 2.

**Faculty members.** The faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District were asked to provide their insight and opinions regarding grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions by participating in a survey. Some of the statements on the faculty survey focused on student academic achievement. Statement number 4 on the faculty survey read, “Student academic achievement is positively impacted by school to school transitions.” A total of 153 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 16% responded “Almost Always,” 34% responded “Frequently,” 39% responded “Occasionally” and 11% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District

perceive that student academic achievement is “Frequently” or “Occasionally” positively impacted by school-to-school transitions. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 45.

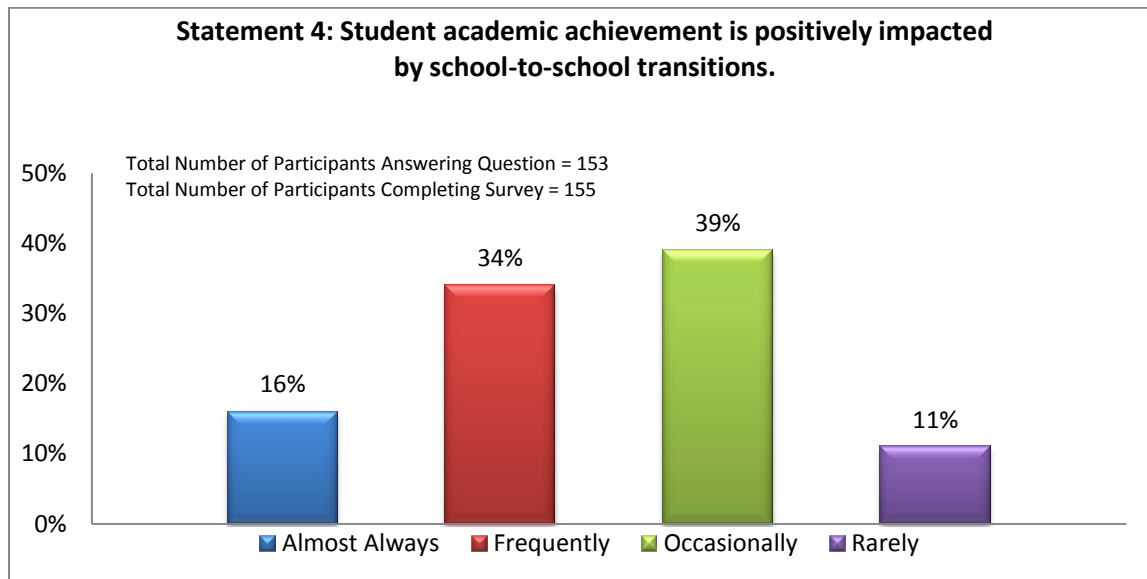


Figure 45. Faculty member responses to the positive impact of transitions on academic achievement.

When provided with the opportunity to share open-ended comments, none of the faculty members made any comments directly related to the positive impact of school-to-school transitions as they relate to student academic achievement.

Statement number 13 on the faculty survey read, “Student academic achievement is negatively impacted by the grade-span configuration.” A total of 138 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 5% responded “Almost Always,” 19% responded “Frequently,” 53% responded “Occasionally” and 23% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District perceive that student academic

achievement is sometimes negatively impacted by school-to-school transitions. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 46.

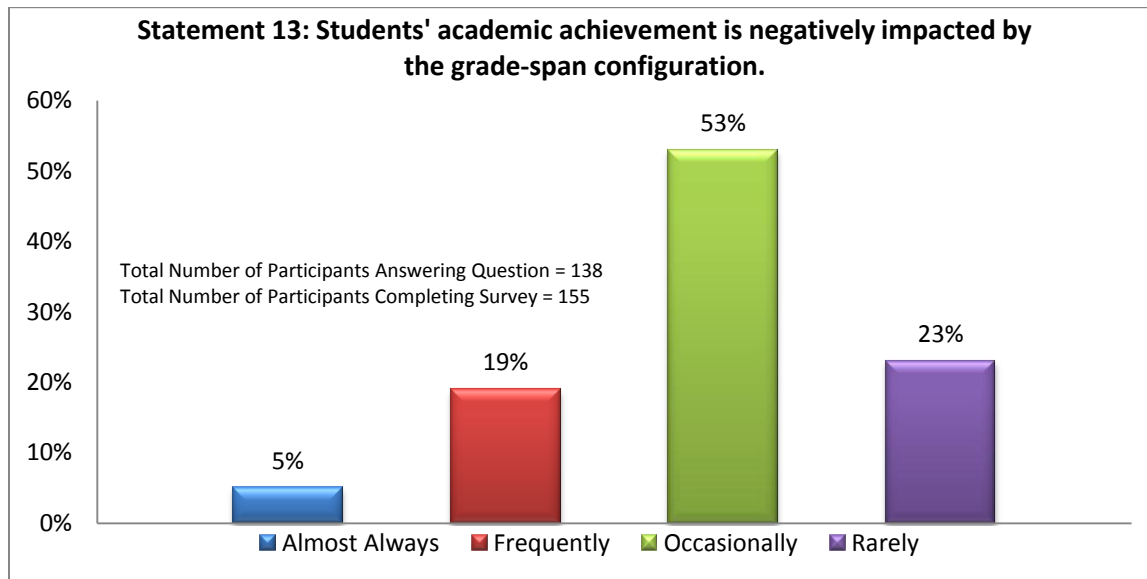


Figure 46. Faculty responses to the negative impact of transitions on academic achievement.

When provided with the opportunity to share open-ended comments, one faculty member made the comment that the current grade-span configuration is “...very disruptive to the academic flow... You also don’t have the continuity of academics when the grades are spread out in so many areas.” Since the grade-span configuration determines the number of school-to-school transitions; this relates to the sentiment of another faculty member who wrote, “School-to-school transition is extremely difficult for special education students and I believe this has a very negative impact on many areas of the classified student’s development, including...academic as well as standardized test scores.”

**Principals.** Four principals were interviewed for this study; some of the interview questions focused on student academic achievement, which generated discussion about this topic. One principal shared, “I don’t know if there really are too many advantages because it’s so

chopped...Every time you transition, you've got that period of time where the student has to readjust to that new location, so I would argue that presents as more of an obstacle to student achievement than it does benefiting it." Another shared an uncertainty about the impact of the current grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions on student academic achievement by stating, "I wouldn't know. That would have to be studied more closely."

A third principal shared uncertainty about the impact of the grade-span configuration and the impact on students' academic achievement, "...regardless of whether the configuration was altered or not, I'm not sure if it would make a significant impact on seeing higher academic achievement...I won't [want to] bet that it would."

**Directors and supervisors.** A focus group comprised of curriculum directors and supervisors shared their insight regarding the current grade-span configuration and its impact on student academic achievement for students in the district. Focusing on the school-to-school transitions, one participant shared, "...obviously, the transitioning is affecting our students...every time they switch a school, their grades seem to...drop...they seem to struggle with the transition." The conversation continued with one of the participants sharing that in order to definitively decide if academic achievement is connected to the current grade-span configuration, one would have to conduct a "blind study in order to be able to figure that out, and no one wants to do that with children."

Another participant offered, "But we all do have a gut feeling about it," to which another added, "...it's visceral, that [the current grade-span configuration] isn't working." The discussion continued, "But we really can't prove it, other than when we look at the numbers...but it seems there's a dip in the scores, at least at the state level, as they transition." Further discussion on this topic proposed, "... [But] we don't have those scores for the eighth grade-ninth grade transition,

and by the time [they are in] eleventh grade, all of that would be mitigated by what's happening in the classroom for those two years..." Thus, the absence of scores for every student who experiences a school-to-school transition leaves some participants hesitant to definitively state that the grade-span configuration is effecting student achievement in the district.

**Finding nine.** *Although the majority of faculty members responded that students leave their classrooms ready for the next grade level, they did not have the same conviction when responding that students arrive to their classrooms ready for that grade level.*

The data sources that support Finding Eight include the faculty survey, guidance counselor and principal interviews, and the focus group with directors and supervisors. The data garnered from each of these sources is explained separately.

**Faculty members.** Statement number 11 on the faculty survey read, "I believe my students arrive to my classroom ready for the grade level." A total of 144 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 13% responded "Almost Always," 49% responded "Frequently," 35% responded "Occasionally" and 3% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that the majority of faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District perceive that their students arrive to their classrooms ready for the responsibilities and academic expectations associated with their grade level. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 47.

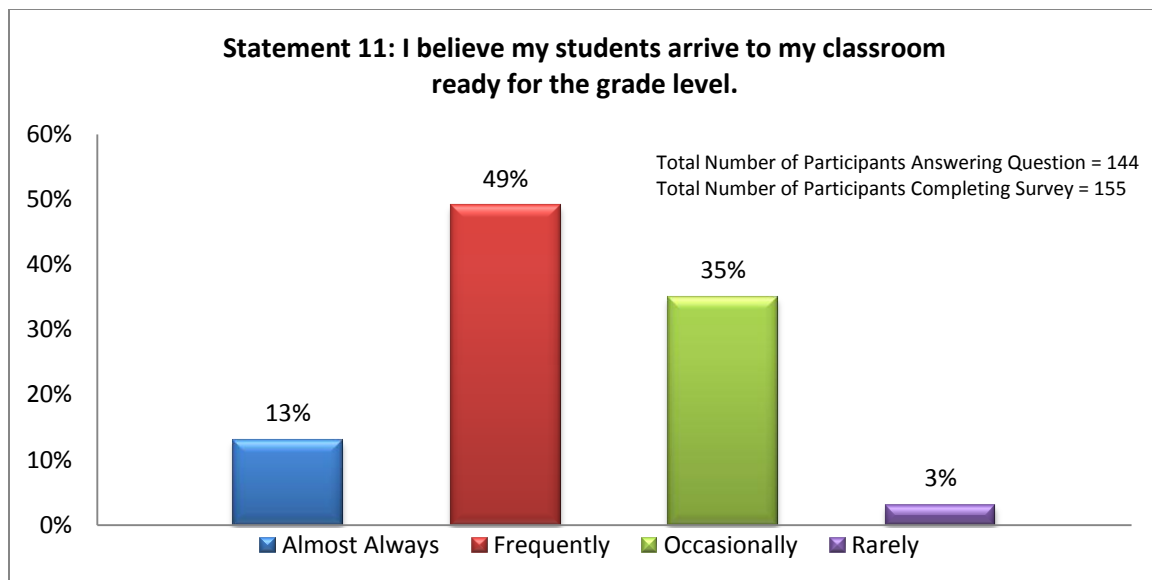


Figure 47. Faculty members' perception that students arrive to their classrooms ready for grade level.

When provided with the opportunity to share open-ended comments, one faculty member stated, "I believe that teachers in the grade levels below mine are doing their best to teach these students. I feel that students' home lives and extra-curricular activities take priority over their studies." Another shared, "Students will say more often than not that they have not heard of concepts/procedures when in fact we all know it was taught in the previous year." However, the majority of the faculty members believed that students are not prepared to move to the next grade. One faculty member shared, "The configuration of the younger grade levels doesn't allow for consistent growth." Commenting on specific grade levels, one faculty member shared, "I feel a relatively high number of 6<sup>th</sup> graders are not...prepared for 7<sup>th</sup> grade, both content and behavior-wise." Another faculty member shared, "I feel that having 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade building, two 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade buildings, a 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9-12 building is very disruptive to the

academic flow... You don't have the continuity of academics when the grades are spread out in so many areas." Another faculty member wrote,

The math curriculum tries to teach too many concepts every year. The students come to 8<sup>th</sup> grade and don't know any of the concepts well because they haven't gone into depth on any of the previous concepts. We have far too many 8<sup>th</sup> graders struggling with multiplication facts and basic division facts. They don't know their operations with fractions and decimal rules and they still have a very poor number sense. This makes the 8<sup>th</sup> grade skills of pre-algebra very difficult to teach.

Survey statement 16 read, "I spend a lot of time reteaching concepts which should have been learned in the previous grade level." A total of 142 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 16% responded "Almost Always," 40% responded "Frequently," 35% responded "Occasionally" and 9% responded "Rarely." Thus, it can be concluded that just over half of the faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District believe that they spend a considerable amount of time having to reteach concepts that should have been taught in a previous grade level. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 48.

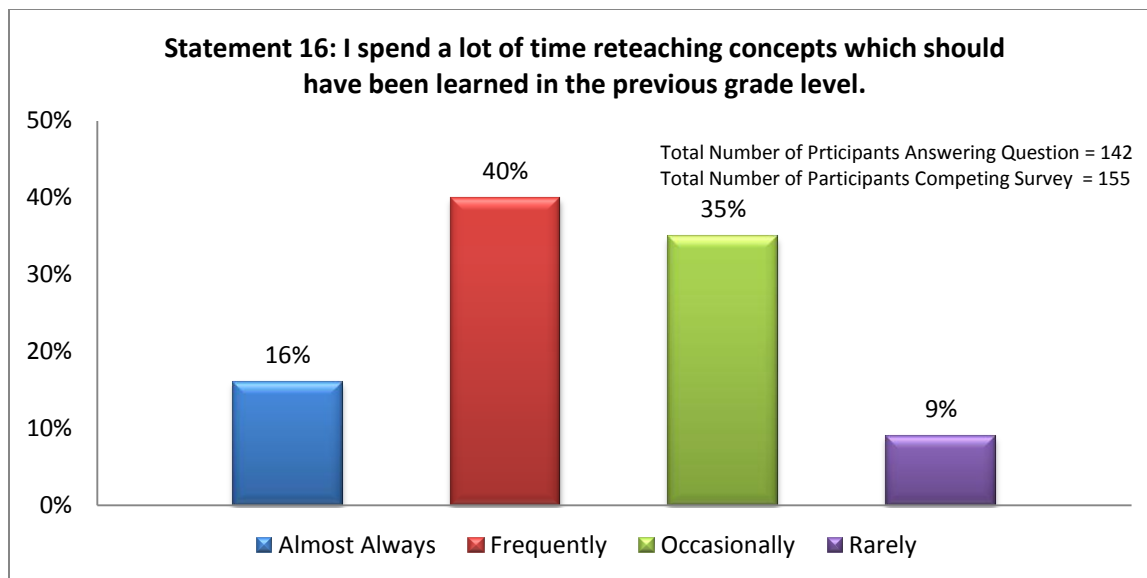


Figure 48. Faculty members responses to spending a lot of time reteaching concepts from prior grade.

When provided with the chance to share open-ended comments, one faculty member wrote, “Students are not being taught for mastery with the assumption that they will ‘do it again’ next year.” Another responded to this statement by sharing comments specific to the teaching of mathematics and commented,

The math curriculum tries to teach too many concepts every year. The students come to 8<sup>th</sup> grade and don’t know any of the concepts well because they haven’t gone into depth on any of the previous concepts. We have far too many 8<sup>th</sup> graders struggling with multiplication facts and basic division facts. They don’t know their basic division facts. They don’t know their operations with fractions and decimal rules and they still have a very poor number sense. This makes the 8<sup>th</sup> grade skills of pre-algebra and algebra difficult to teach.

Statement number 12 on the faculty survey read, “I believe that my students leave my classroom ready for the next grade level.” A total of 142 out of 155 faculty members responded to this statement; 39% responded “Almost Always,” 52% responded “Frequently,” 9% responded “Occasionally” and 0% responded “Rarely.” Thus, it can be concluded that the vast majority of the faculty members from the Bearwood Township School District believe that their students are ready to attend school in the next grade level when they leave their classrooms. The survey responses for this statement are illustrated in Figure 49.

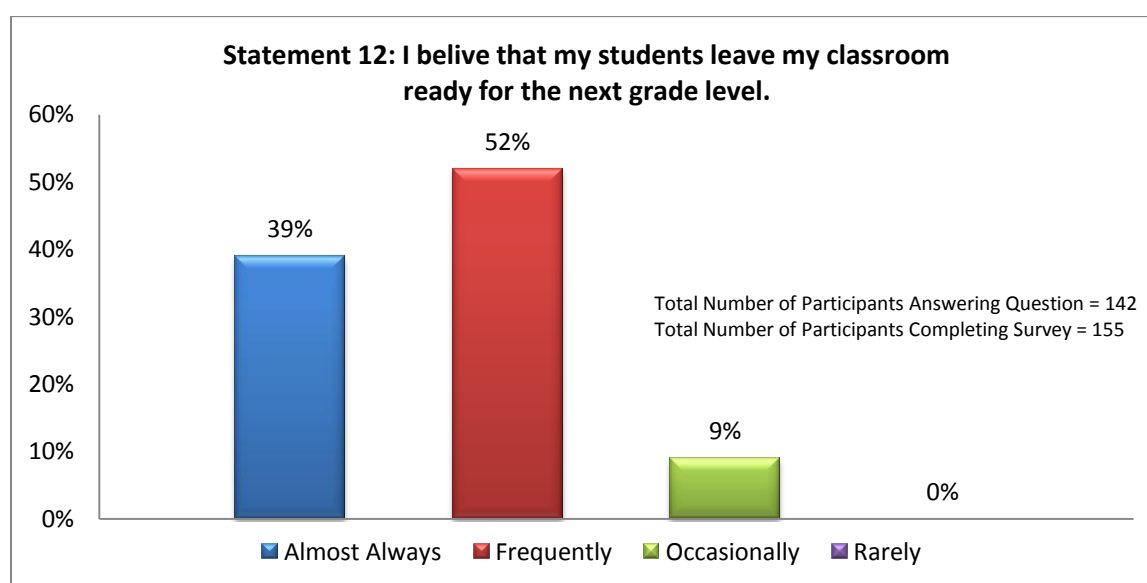


Figure 49. Faculty members’ perception that students leave their classrooms ready for next grade level.

When provided with the opportunity to share open-ended comments, one teacher shared, “My belief is that we have a factory learning environment. Having two grades in the same level does not create an academic setting for personal growth. Some students do not adjust well to hopping so much from school to school.”

**Guidance counselors.** Three guidance counselors were interviewed primarily for their insight on students' sense of belonging in the Bearwood Township School District. However, some of the comments shared during the interviews were actually related to student academic achievement. One such statement was:

As a guidance counselor, one of my main concerns when I see kids come in, are how many are not ready to be there. The social promotions come back to bite us...Even though we try to update all the counselors at the beginning of the year with who's who and how it plays out, the gap in skill level is pretty significant. That's an issue."

Along that same line of reasoning, another counselor shared the concept that social promotions have created a population of students who "don't mature enough...so they're not ready to face reality or they have a skewed vision of reality because they've been passed along and everybody will do things for them..." When they are confronted with independence and responsibility, "they don't really flourish." The counselor continued, "...and also the academics. If a student has done a slide job through high school, they don't have the academic background...That's very frustrating."

Another counselor related the readiness of students to the responsibilities associated with sixth grade and stated that the sixth graders "want to be the big guys, but they're not really ready for it. They're not...That's where the stress comes in for them..." Continuing with this line of thought, the counselor shared that the fifth grade teachers are nurturing, but that the sixth grade teacher use more "junior high style teaching" and that they are very "businesslike," expecting the sixth graders to realize, "'You're in sixth grade now. This is what we do.'" The counselor shared that "more sixth graders...are having a hard time coming back to school or getting into the groove of things."

One of the guidance counselors shared some insight about the discrepancies between the sending and receiving schools as they apply to student placement in specific classes; the lack of an aligned curriculum creates difficulty when students are placed for the next grade level's courses. This counselor offered, "...You've got students who did really well here, and do okay there, or students who did poorly here and still moved on to there, and some of those kids could end up in the exact same class."

**Principals.** Four principals were interviewed for this study; some of the interview questions focused on student academic achievement, which generated discussion about this topic. One principal shared that there are a number of standards studied when making a decision about student placement in a specific course for the upcoming school year. A specific rubric provides insight into which students would be ready for an accelerated class. In addition, several years of test results are used, as well as benchmark testing and teacher input. Then the faculty members together with the administration decide if specific students are ready for accelerated experiences. A similar procedure is followed for students who are underperforming and may need the benefit of basic skills.

When students are entering a school for the first time, it creates the need to call teachers from the previous school over the summer to verify student placement. The principal went on to share, "Had they been in the building, they would have been right there." The need to reach out and contact a teacher who does not teach in their schools would be eliminated and a more direct connection would be forged. "Having somebody right there would make that whole transition much smoother."

**Directors and supervisors.** A focus group comprised of curriculum directors and supervisors shared their insight regarding the current grade-span configuration and subsequent

school-to-school transitions and the impact on student academic achievement for students in the district. One participant shared,

If we had a K through 5 school in which the children were nurtured...they would have a strong nurturing background. But...the transition into sixth grade, then, would be monumental, because they would go from a place where nurturing was paramount—tantamount—and then they would move to a place where academics may be key...[but] there will still be a transition issue at one point...the question is...one versus three transitions...

Continuing with this thought, another participant shared, "...the research actually says the most nurturing environment for students is K through 8." This statement elicited the following comment from another participant regarding the K-8 configuration,

I am not sure it's the model I would adopt, because I fear that they would get to high school and the teachers would say that they are not prepared, academically, although emotionally they're a lot stronger than they were. And maybe that goes to the central question at the heart of all of this.

One of the focus group participants summarized the issues as,

This may be an oversimplification, but we may be discussing the bifurcation between an emotional model in which the student is taken care of, and an academic model where the student achieves...I'm not saying that...you can't have both in a model, but what drives some of us to make sure that there's excellence, also frightens some of us, because it means that it will do harm, emotionally, to the child.

### **Summary of Research Question Three**

The educators of the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the current grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions are having a negative impact on student academic achievement. Although faculty members believe that the students are *leaving* their classrooms ready for the next grade level, their colleagues do not report that students are *arriving* ready for that grade level with the same conviction. Standardized and non-standardized test results support that perception and demonstrate that student scores are lower for students in the first year of attendance in a new school than they are for students in attendance for a second year. Some additional implications impacting student achievement may be increased student anxiety, social promotions, and discontinuity of the curriculum; these factors may be exacerbated by the current grade-span configuration in the district.

### **Chapter Summary**

Although the students who attend schools in the Bearwood Township School District are perceived as feeling safe, happy, and comfortable while in attendance at school, the students themselves report the absence of a sense of belonging and pride in their schools. The students in the district see themselves as “Bearwood” students, but do not believe they are an integral part of any of the six schools which they attend unless they are involved in extracurricular activities or community outreach projects. The students state that they feel comfortable within a few days following each school-to-school transition and enjoy meeting new teachers and making new friends following each transition.

There appears to be ample preparation provided for students and their families prior to transitioning to a new school and there are adequate supports in place for students following each school-to-school transition. However, the parents/guardians would appreciate the chance to meet

their child's new teachers and/or review their children's schedules prior to the new school year. The faculty members believe that students are usually prepared for school-to-school transitions, but purport that they spend a considerable amount of time helping students adjust to the school, since many of the students are nervous when they first arrive in a new school setting. The students perceive their teachers as friendly, but rely predominantly on their peers to help them with the transitions.

Some parents/guardians like the current grade-span configuration since their children are interacting only with students of a similar age. Others would like to have a wider grade-span so that students could remain in a familiar environment for a longer period of time. According to faculty members and parents/guardians, the current narrow grade-span configuration impacts student friendships and limits younger students' exposure to older role models and mentors. Some educators shared that the present grade-span presents a greater disadvantage for students who do not have all of the skills and supports necessary to succeed. Some stakeholders perceive that having a grade-span configuration in which ten-year-olds are placed in a middle school setting is inappropriate as these students are often too young for the rigors and responsibilities associated with a middle school setting. The curriculum directors and supervisors purport that these students are being taught using a middle school model before they are mature enough to handle the academic, social and emotional challenges of a middle school environment.

There is a negative impact on curriculum continuity within the district due to inadequate time appropriated for articulation about the curriculum, the absence of opportunities to share instructional strategies, and insufficient dialogue about the placement of students as they transition between grade levels. However, the directors and supervisors purport that they have begun to open up the lines of communication among the educators of the district and have

created additional opportunities for consistent and productive articulation about instructional practices and the curriculum between grade levels and schools. That perception is also maintained by many of the educators in the Bearwood Township School District.

The educators of the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the current grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions are having a negative impact on student academic achievement. Standardized and non-standardized test results support that perception and demonstrate that the majority of student scores are lower for students following a school-to-school transition. The faculty members believe that the students are *leaving* their classrooms ready for the next grade level, however, their colleagues do not report that students are *arriving* ready for that grade level with the same conviction.

## **Chapter V**

### **Analysis, Interpretation and Synthesis of Findings**

#### **Overview of Study**

The Bearwood Township School District is configured with one primary school for students in preschool through first grade, two additional primary schools for students in second through fourth grades, a middle school for students in fifth and sixth grade, another middle school for students in seventh and eighth grades, and one high school for students in ninth through twelfth grades. The district's grade-span configuration requires students to make five school-to-school transitions during their educational experience in the district. Exploratory research on the topic of grade-span configuration and the subsequent school-to-school transitions indicated a number of concerns expressed by the faculty, staff, and administrators.

Frequent student turnover as students transition from school to school results in most schools losing half of their student population each year; there are indications that this may have an impact on the sense of belonging or sense of community in each school setting. Additionally, the educators in the district also express a concern that the grade-span configuration has an influence on communication, continuity, and collaboration between the schools, especially as it affects the curriculum. This is perceived to have a negative impact on student achievement, as there is a prevailing concern that students are not scoring as well on standardized tests as would be indicative of a district of this size and caliber. This study endeavored to determine the effects of the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions on students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction, and student academic achievement in the Bearwood Township School District.

## **Purpose and Research Questions**

This action research project was implemented to explore the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions experienced by the students, families, and staff members of the Bearwood Township School District. Exploratory research and a comprehensive literature review on these topics guided the focus of this project. The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?
2. How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood Township School District?
3. How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?

## **Organization of the Chapter**

This study endeavored to uncover the many aspects related to the grade-span and school-to-school transitions and how these topics relate to students' sense of belonging, the continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and ultimately, student academic achievement. The specifics of the findings of this study were delineated in the previous chapter. The interpretation of those findings in conjunction with the research available on each of these subjects and the possible implications for the future of the Bearwood Township School District are analyzed in this chapter.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

Following a thorough review of the extensive qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher divided the information into categories to gain clarity and understanding. In the

previous chapter, the findings were merely presented devoid of interpretation. In this section, the findings will be synthesized to create meaning and to examine the significance of each of the nine findings. An integration of the findings with the current literature will provide substantiation of each of the aforementioned findings.

### **Research Question One**

*How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect the sense of belonging for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?* Research question one was posed in order to gain insight into the impact of the present grade-span and subsequent school-to-school transitions on the sense of belonging for students in the district. A sense of belonging refers to students' perception of acceptance and respect within their schools and is related to positive academic, psychological and behavioral outcomes and plays an important role in school success (E. Anderman, 2002; L. Anderman, 2003; Goodenow, 1992). Thus, students' sense of belonging was a significant topic to explore as it relates to the student academic achievement—which is the ultimate goal of the Bearwood Township School District.

**Finding one.** *The parents, guardians and faculty members believe that students in the district feel a sense of belonging and are proud to attend their schools; however, students report feeling a sense of belonging only if they participate in extra-curricular or community service activities.*

It was determined by the parents/guardians and the faculty members that the students are safe, happy, and comfortable while in attendance in the schools of the Bearwood Township School District. The parents and guardians of the school district also perceive that their children feel a sense of belonging; however, students reported only feeling a sense of belonging if they participated in extracurricular activities or performed community service. It is likely that the

parents and guardians are establishing their perceptions on the belief that since their children are safe, happy and comfortable, they should feel a sense of belonging and should be proud to belong to their schools. However, since it is the students who are actually attending the schools, they would have a more accurate concept of a sense of belonging. The student perception that they feel like they belong if they are involved in the extracurricular activities offered by the school is supported by the research of Ma (2003) and Finn (1989); their research has shown that students who spend extra time in school participating in extracurricular and social activities are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. “An important antecedent of higher sense of belonging was participation in high school athletics” (Hagerty, et al., 2002, p. 799). Such participation may assist with social integration, a sense of competence, feeling acceptance and being a valued part of a group (Hagerty, et al., 2002). Very often, extracurricular and social activities are the primary sources of attachment—especially for students whose academic skills are weak.

Since students’ sense of belonging varies depending upon the school size and the grade-span configuration, this finding may be related to the grade-span configuration of the school district (E. Anderman, 2002). According to Craig (2006), “cluster schools,” are schools that house one or two grade levels and were originally configured to be more developmentally appropriate for students. The Bearwood Township School District is configured into “cluster schools,” since most of the district’s schools house students for two grade levels; the majority of the district’s students transition in and out of their schools every two years. When schools are configured in this manner, frequent student turnover occurs as the school loses nearly 50% of its current student population and welcomes approximately 50% of its new student population on a yearly basis (Paglin & Fager, 1997; Renschler, 2002), as is the case in the Bearwood Township School District. In addition to creating schools which struggle to maintain a sense of continuity,

this grade-span configuration has also created large schools as defined by Howley (2001, 2002a). Howley (2001, 2002a) purports that schools with fewer grade levels are actually larger schools when the concept of school size is measured using the number of students per grade level, rather than the total school enrollment.

When schools are large, many students are unable to participate in school activities since there is more competition for each position on the team or in the club, which impacts the sense of belonging (Holland & Andre, 1987); as school size increases, student participation decreases. One of the benefits of small schools is that everyone can participate in the school's clubs, teams and student government; otherwise, there would not be enough members for these groups to function (Cotton, 1996). With the present grade-span configuration of the Bearwood Township School District, students have fewer opportunities to participate in the activities offered throughout the district, since there is more competition for the limited spots. For example, there is usually one president of the student council, one star quarterback and one head cheerleader in a high school. If there are dozens of students competing for a few coveted positions, the opportunity to be selected for those roles is greatly reduced.

Additionally, although most parents, guardians and faculty members reported that students are proud to be part of their *schools*, the students report that they are proud to be part of the *district* as a whole and discuss "Bearwood" when they are asked about their sense of belonging to a specific school. In conjunction with the previous discussion on the sense of belonging, the students do purport that they feel proud that they belong to the band or a sports team, but not necessarily to a specific school. According to Howley (2002a) school-to-school transitions can disrupt the social structure of a school; it is the belief of the researcher that this has created the lack of sense of belonging to any particular school in the district. A sense of

belonging has been proposed by Maslow as “a basic human need and deficits in sense of belonging have been linked to problems in social and psychological functioning” (Hagerty et al., 2002). When students perceive that they do not feel a sense of belonging, it is difficult for them to move to the next two levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, namely, self-esteem and self-actualization (Hagerty et al., 2002). Thus, the loss of a sense of belonging for students who have not been provided with the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities may have more long-lasting implications, which are beyond the scope of this research project.

The schools of the district have played a role in that perception since clothing depicting a specific school’s name or logo is rarely made available for purchase by the families or for the students to wear. The parent/guardian organizations (such as the PTA) are often the decision-makers who order t-shirts and sweatshirts which depict a school name and logo. Since the parents/guardians have a sense that the students will be wearing a specific school’s clothing for such a short period of time, they have often opted for the name and logo of the entire district when ordering clothing for the students. As a result, items of clothing worn by the students often bear the name “Bearwood” or “Class of \_\_\_\_,” accompanied by the logo of a bear, regardless of the school the student actually attends at that time. Frequent student turnover can negatively influence a school’s identity and sense of community (Paglin & Fager, 1997; Renschler, 2000). This lack of a sense of identity and sense of community for any individual school is so pervasive that it has even reached something as unlikely as a t-shirt; an action as simple as the ordering and wearing of clothing has added to the lack of school attachment for some students.

**Finding two.** *The faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District are perceived to be friendly to, interested in and respectful of their students and the majority of students can identify at least one teacher in whom they can confide; however, the parents and*

*guardians do not have the same conviction that their children feel close to the adults in the school.*

The parents/guardians of the students attending schools in the Bearwood Township School District report that the teachers are friendly to, interested in, and respectful of their children; the students also report that the teachers are friendly and helpful. This is affirming and positive feedback for the educators of the district. However, the parents and guardians do not have the same conviction that their children feel *close to* the adults in the school. According to Wasley (2002), students achieve better in environments where they are well-known by their teachers and where their learning is a goal shared by a number of trusted adults. In the Bearwood Township School District, this has been compromised due to the present grade-span configuration. Students develop a greater sense of belonging in smaller schools because they are more likely to get to know their teachers and classmates on a more personal level (E. Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As explained earlier, due to the grade-span configuration, the schools of the district can be considered large, as defined by Howley (2001, 2002a).

Students with significant learning and/or behavioral issues are often the ones who become well-known in a new school setting; the quiet child or average learner may feel anonymous (Blyth, Simmons, & Bush, 1978). *Turning Points* emphasized that it is imperative to create small learning communities in order to allow for consistent relationships with adults and peers and to provide the opportunity for student growth (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). The present grade-span configuration is having a negative impact on the development of relationships between the students and the adults working with them in their schools. It is difficult for staff members to get to know all of the new students who enter a new school when there is frequent student turnover.

A guidance counselor shared that because the students of the Bearwood Township School District transition in and out of schools so frequently, the opportunity to bond with the students is compromised. Offering a different perspective on the same topic, a student shared that most students like to move on to new teachers every few years; he/she equated “making new teachers” to “making new friends.” When bonding is lessened due to the short period of time in one setting, transitioning out of one school and into another may be less traumatic since the students may not have developed deep and lasting relationships with the adults in the school; however, these transitions are creating a lack of a sense of belonging and a decline in academic achievement for the students of the district. Following the stress of a transition, much of the students’ attention is focused on adjusting to the new environment (Linnenbrink, 2010); they may not be able to focus on developing new relationships with the adults in the new school setting. According to Finn (1989), successful students develop a sense of identification with the school; such a sense of identification is difficult when students are transitioning so frequently.

In addition, the students of the Bearwood Township School District transition frequently in large groups which encompass the entire grade level at one time. According to Cotton (1996), some students may be disregarded—albeit unintentionally—when so many students arrive at the same time; this may be what is happening in the Bearwood Township School District. It is difficult for the administration or faculty members to know all of the students well when they are part of a large population and when they remain for such a short period of time. Blyth et al. (1978) found that students can feel anonymous following a school-to-school transition and that transitions may impact confidence level. In addition, due to the configuration of the Bearwood Township School District, the students are transitioning with the same student population each year. Students are very familiar with their classmates and contend that it is their peers who

primarily assist them during times of transition. Thus, it is the relationships with the adults in the school which are being impacted negatively.

**Finding three.** *The students of the Bearwood Township School District are provided assistance before, during and following each school-to-school transition, and, although there is an adjustment period for both students and their families, most reported feeling comfortable in each new school setting.*

The number of school-to-school transitions experienced by students is determined by the grade-span configuration of a district (Brown, 2004). Due to the present grade-span configuration of the Bearwood Township School District, the students make five school-to-school transitions during their educational experience. Following each transition, students must adapt to a new school culture, which can be very stressful (Turner, 2007). All of the schools have procedures in place to assist students as they transition out of a “sending” school and into a “receiving” school. As a result, most of the parents/guardians responded that they felt prepared to have their children transition into a new school and that there were adequate supports following each transition. It is very important that districts develop transition programs based on the needs of their individual communities (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; NCPDI, 2007). However, it is imperative that the transition procedures for new students focus on more than just the procedural aspects of a school move, such as the locations of classrooms, the use of lockers and the rules regarding arrival to class in a timely manner.

According to Eccles et al. (1991), students with confidence in their academic, social and athletic abilities adjust better to transitions. It is important to note that transitioning between schools can be a positive experience for some students and can be a new start for students who are having difficulty in a school setting (Turner, 2007; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). So, although

the experience of a school-to-school transition may be a positive one for students who are confident and/or in need of a “fresh new start,” it may be the shy and/or average student who needs more attention before, during and following a transition. It is essential that the district understand the needs of all of their students, well before the process of preparing them for a school-to-school transition begins.

Transitions can have a profound impact on students academically, socially and psychologically (Akos, 2006). Transitions which occur more than once can be even more damaging to students, according to Linnenbrink (2010). Thus, it is imperative the Bearwood Township School District have procedures in place to assist its students as they make *five* school-to-school transitions. According to Shoffner and Williamson (2000), successful transitions between schools can help students identify themselves as successful students. Weiss and Bearman (2007) purport that school-to-school transitions can serve as turning points for youth and can be stressful and detrimental to a student’s well-being if students react in a negative manner to the transition. Thus, it is important that districts focus on students’ transitions between schools. The primary goal of transition planning must ensure that students experience academic success and a sense of well-being (Augst & Akos, 2009; NCPDI, 2007). In the Bearwood Township School District, students reported feeling comfortable with their peers assisting them during a school-to-school transition. Thus, a suggestion made by Adams (2008) regarding the use of student ambassadors may be an effective component of an effective transition program for the district.

Since the parents/guardians also reported that there was an adjustment period for their child and their family following each school-to-school transition, an important feature of an effective transition program, which might assist in lessening the adjustment period, would be to

have more family involvement in school transition programs (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002). When parents/guardians play a role in their children's school-to-school transitions, they have been found to remain involved in their children's school experiences (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; D. MacIver, 1990; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Transitions that bring together the home, school and community promote the common goal of providing every student with a successful educational experience and help reduce both student and family anxiety toward school (NCPDI, 2007). J.S. Smith et al. (2008) found that when parents/guardians intervened positively on behalf of their children, the students had a smooth transition between schools; thus, it is important to develop a comfortable relationship between the home and school so that students can transition more smoothly between schools. Such parent/guardian intervention must remain an important focus during the period of transition.

Although the parents/guardians reported that they could visit and tour their child's new school(s), many of them would have liked to meet their child's teacher(s) and would appreciate consistently receiving their child's schedule before the start of the school year. According to the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1995), it is imperative that schools "re-engage" parents and guardians following a transition. Parents and guardians who already have children in the school can be an excellent resource for the parents/guardians who have children transitioning into a new school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Transitioning into kindergarten ready to learn is a most significant step for children; it is imperative that they are ready to learn when they start school (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002). It is an important aspect of starting school which cannot be ignored. The relationship between the home and the school must begin well before the students enter the school building.

The faculty members of the Bearwood Township School District contend that students are usually prepared for school-to-school transitions, but that they spend a considerable amount of time helping students adjust to the new school. This perception was discussed in research by Sanders et al. (1994), who determined that assisting students following a school-to-school transition may impede upon instructional time. If teachers are helping students adjust to their new schools within the district every two or three years, a significant amount of instructional time is being wasted. A productive relationship between sending and receiving schools can assist the transition process and provide for a more smooth and productive school-to-school transition for students (Westminster Institute of Education, 2006). The district must ensure that the sending and receiving schools are communicating and that the instructional programs of the schools are aligned with one another. When transition programs provide opportunities for school personnel to better understand the curriculum and requirements of both the sending and receiving schools, student achievement is positively impacted (D. MacIver, 1990; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). If the Bearwood Township School District wants to see improved student academic achievement, the academic component of each school-to-school transition must become an important focus. Further discussion regarding articulation between schools will follow, since this topic is also related to research questions two and three.

Transition programs can range from student visitation of a new school or informational assemblies for incoming students to comprehensive meetings among administrators, teachers and school counselors of the sending and receiving schools (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). According to Dimmit and Carey (2007), school counselors can be instrumental in assisting students as they make school-to-school transitions by utilizing the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model to address the needs of all students and to

support all learners. By providing the opportunity for school counselors to meet with incoming students, some of the concerns and anxieties of school-to-school transitions can be alleviated (Shoffner & Williamson, 200).

A transition “team” approach to the transition process that includes the school district, students’ families and the faculty members from the sending and receiving schools, as proposed by Fenlon (2011), may help to eliminate some of the difficulties associated with a school-to-school transition. Additionally, it must be emphasized that becoming comfortable in a new environment following a transition is an ongoing process, not a single event (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). Ongoing collaboration is imperative if districts are to provide successful transition experiences for their students (Viadero, 1999).

According to Adams (2008), a year-long transition program that spans from January (of the last year in elementary school) to December (of the first year in middle school) should be encouraged to increase the comfort level for both students and their families. Adams (2008) also stresses that a transition program should build excitement for the transition; it must do more than merely provide procedural information about the new school. Hertzog and Morgan (1998) emphasize that the transition into high school should begin in the fall of eighth grade and continue through the spring of the ninth grade in order to be the most successful. With the goal of assisting students as they transition into the high school, the Bearwood Township School District has implemented a procedure which helps students plan for the transition into the high school beginning in the middle of their eighth grade year, when the students and their families meet with the school counselor to develop their schedule for the freshman year of high school.

As mentioned earlier, participation in extracurricular activities can help ease some of the anxiety experienced by students during the transition process since this forges relationships

which help students adjust to the new environment (Akos, 2006; Strobino & Salvaterra, 2000). Thus, it is imperative that each student be provided with the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging by participating in extracurricular activities offered by his/her school. Since social relationships are profoundly important to middle school students, assistance from friends and peers helps students in this age group adjust following multiple school transitions (Akos, 2002). The students of the Bearwood Township School District report that it is their peers who help them adjust following each school-to-school transition, which is supported by the findings of Akos (2002). According to Tomada, Schneider, deDomini, Greenman, and Fonzi (2005), one of the factors distinguishing successful from unsuccessful transitions is that students who made a successful school-to-school transition reported having the assistance of friends who supported their academic goals.

Although Bearwood students reported that it was their peers who helped them transition into a new school, they never mentioned adjusting to the academic aspects of the new school setting; successful transitions seem to focus on the procedural. Once students knew their way around a building and understood their schedules, they reported being comfortable. The development of the sense of belonging and the importance of academics do not appear to be an integral part of the transition processes which have been developed by the administration and, as a result, are not a focus for the students. When students are integrated into the academic and social components of a school, the negative effects of multiple school-to-school transitions may be reduced (Strobino & Salvaterra, 2000). Ultimately, the elimination of some of the school-to-school transitions might be beneficial to the students of the district, which will be further discussed in the next finding.

**Finding four.** *Some participants disliked some effects of the narrow grade-span configuration of the Bearwood Township School District and suggested alternative configurations with wider grade spans.*

Since the schools of the Bearwood Township School District are configured as “cluster schools,” as defined by Craig (2006), students are transitioning in and out of the schools every two years (with the exception of the grades 2-3-4 schools). Cluster schools can be among the largest in the nation if the total enrollment per grade level is used to describe the size of the school (Howley, 2001). In the Bearwood Township School District, every student in each grade level attends the same school (with the exception of grades 2, 3, and 4 when students attend two different schools); that practice has created grade levels with as many as 250-400 students per grade, all transitioning into and out of schools as one large group. Some of the stakeholders of the district recommended a “three-tier” configuration, such as K-5, 6-8 and 9-12, a grade-span configuration which many districts began using in the 1970s and 1980s (Howley, 2001). This configuration would eliminate two school-to-school transitions for the students of the Bearwood Township School District.

Schools with narrow grade-spans such as those in the Bearwood Township School District create the need for students to experience frequent school-to-school transitions; it becomes difficult for schools to keep a sense of identity and provide continuity for students when there is a frequent student turnover (Howley, 2001). According to Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein and Zabel (2009), schools should be developed with wider grade-span configurations to minimize school-to-school transitions. Reducing the number of school-to-school transitions has been strongly suggested in order to provide more stability for students (Wren, 2003). When schools have broader grade-spans, students make fewer school-to-school transitions; this has a

positive impact on student performance (Napier, 2008; Wren, 2003). In addition, students having to make two transitions is known as “double jeopardy,” according to Seidman et al. (1994). Since the students of the Bearwood Township School District experience *five* transitions during their educational experience, that could be known as “quintuple jeopardy.” This could be an integral aspect of the academic difficulties being exhibited by the students of the district. Analysis of student assessment data for the Bearwood Township School District clearly delineated a drop in student academic achievement for students when they transitioned into each new school setting.

According to Wren (2003), the more transitions a student makes, the worse that student will perform. If students remain in one school setting over a number of years, they feel an increased sense of belonging to the school (E. Anderman, 2002). Although some transitions will be inevitable in a district the size of Bearwood, unless the district adopted a K-12 grade-span configuration—which is very unlikely—its students will have experienced four school-to-school transitions before they transition into the high school. According to Akos and Galassi (2004), although students often highlight social and emotional concerns when they move into high school, their academic fears may prove to be more serious and long-lasting. If the students’ academic achievement has already been negatively impacted, the district’s students are entering school achieving poorer academically than may be possible if they had remained in one school setting for a longer period of time.

Creating schools with wider-grade spans allows students to get all of the benefits of a small school within a large school (E. Anderman, 2002). When there are fewer students per grade level, students can receive more attention and guidance from teachers, since there is less competition from peers; this creates the opportunity for students to achieve more academically

(Linnenbrink, 2010). Districts with wider grade-spans would allow students to transition with smaller groups of students where they would remain for a longer period of time.

Additionally, according to Weiss and Bearman (2007), reverse configuration, with students transitioning into a number of schools from one school can sever friendships and social ties when students are separated from their friends. In the Bearwood Township School District students transition out of Primary School I and into Primary School II-A and Primary School II-B; the impact of this grade-span configuration was expressed as a concern by many parents and guardians. An attempt was made to alleviate this situation beginning with the 2011-2012 school year. Thus, students were assigned to a first grade classroom in Primary School I depending upon whether they would be transitioning into Primary School II-A or Primary School II-B for second grade. Class assignments were based on the information available from the Director of Transportation. Thus, beginning with the following school year, the students would transition to second grade with a larger number of students who have been their first grade classmates.

**Finding five.** *There was some concern voiced about the present grade-span configuration of Middle School I due to the perception that fifth graders are too young for the rigors and responsibilities associated with a middle school setting.*

According to Paglin and Fager (1997), middle schools predominantly contain grades 6, 7 and 8. The fact that the ten-year-olds in the Bearwood Township School District attend the first of two middle schools has created some anxiety for parents/guardians, students, and faculty members. Regardless of when it occurs, the transition into middle school can be a disruptive experience for many students, since it requires them to re-establish themselves in a more demanding setting (Elias, 2001). Having ten-year-olds attending Middle School I appears to be exacerbating the anxieties associated with attendance in a middle school setting. According to

Akos (2006), student declines following the transition from elementary to middle school are both academic and psychosocial. In the Bearwood Township School District, the students are transitioning from a *primary* school to a middle school setting, since none of the schools in the district has been designated as *elementary*. (In the Bearwood Township School District, students from Primary School II-A and Primary School II-B transition into Middle School I.) When students do not transition smoothly between the two settings, the experience can be overwhelming (Adams, 2008). The feeling of being “overwhelmed” was reported by a number of parents/guardians, who shared that both they and the student felt unprepared for the transition into a middle school setting.

The focus of middle schools should be on the unique needs of young adolescents, yet these students are not yet adolescents and are being thrust into an environment in which it is difficult for them to learn. According to Wormeli (2011), belonging is one of the primary concerns for middle school students and it must be addressed if the school-to-school transition is to be successful. Following a transition into middle school, it is often noted that students have issues which present themselves as a decline in self-esteem, a lack of class preparation and a lower grade point average (GPA). Further complicating the transition into the middle school is the fact that students in the Bearwood Township School District are transitioning every two or three years. Blyth et al. (1978) found that students who were allowed to remain in one school setting for longer period of time had a greater opportunity to feel comfortable and confident since they did not have to face the stress of a school-to-school transition until they were more developmentally ready for such a transition. The students of the Bearwood Township School District are not provided with the opportunity to remain in any school for more than two or three years at a time until they reach the high school.

According to Wentzel and Calwell (1997), there is a significant link between peer relationships and student academic achievement; they found that peer acceptance and group membership has a strong association with academic achievement for middle school students. In the Bearwood Township School District, the transition into Middle School I at fifth grade signifies a more complicated transition since the students are involved in a “pyramid transition” with students transitioning into the fifth grade from two primary schools. Students experience a greater achievement loss if they are part of a “pyramid transition” of multiple elementary schools into one middle school as compared to the students who are part of a “linear transition” of a single elementary school into a single middle school (Alspaugh, 1998a). This is the only transition that is impacted in this manner in the Bearwood Township School District due to the current grade-span configuration.

Further complicating the issue of a pyramid transition into middle school is discussed by Crockett et al. (1989) who purport that transitions which coincide with other substantial changes, such as puberty or the development of relationships which may be more than platonic may overload the adolescent’s capacity to deal with the transition into a new school setting. In addition, when a large number of students transition into a middle school as one group, the behaviors associated with adolescents can escalate, which creates a distraction for students who need individualized attention to excel in their academic endeavors (M. MacIver & D. MacIver, 2006). According to M. MacIver and D. MacIver (2006), when students attend schools with a wider grade-span configuration, they benefit from greater age diversity as there are fewer students facing adolescent transitions—both physical and educational—at the same time; this creates a more orderly educational environment. All in all, there appear to be many factors

infringing upon the fifth grade students in the Bearwood Township School District; thus, this seems to be an area in need of significant attention.

### **Summary of Findings for Research Question One**

According to Akos (2004), there are three interrelated categories of school transitions: academic, procedural, and social. It is the belief of this researcher that the Bearwood Township School District needs to look more closely at each of these categories. Although the students are perceived to be happy and comfortable in their schools, they do not feel a sense of belonging. This perception may be related to school-to-school transitions, the size of the schools or the lack of time necessary to feel like they are an integral and important part of any one school setting. Ultimately, these factors may be impacting student achievement, for when students feel like they belong, they can perform better academically because they are better known by trusted adults and are secure in their learning environment.

### **Research Question Two**

*How does the grade-span configuration affect the continuity of curriculum and instruction in the Bearwood Township School District?*

**Finding six.** *Although not consistently provided with the opportunity to visit the grade before and/or after the one they presently teach, the faculty members of the district reported being somewhat more familiar with the curriculum before the grade they teach than the curriculum of the next grade level.*

According to Bickel et al. (2001), there is an increased opportunity for seamless articulation when all grade levels are located in the same building. In the Bearwood Township School District, a narrow grade-span configuration makes it especially challenging to provide teachers with opportunities for articulation and visitation between grade levels, since a new grade

level usually equates to traveling to new school building. This might be one explanation of the faculty members reporting that they are more (or less) familiar with one curriculum than the other. If faculty members from different grade levels teach within the same school setting, there are more opportunities to articulate about the curriculum and instruction. When school buildings separate teachers into distinct grade levels, articulation becomes more challenging since it must be organized and scheduled in order for it to occur; this is one of the challenges facing the educators in the Bearwood Township School District.

According to Masters (2005a), when educators are familiar with the knowledge the students are bringing to the new grade level, they can better determine a starting point for new instruction, with little or no waste of instructional time. If the curriculum requirements of the sending and receiving schools are developed appropriately, students will be able to transition between schools without the added anxiety of not being prepared academically for the challenges of their new school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Providing the opportunities for teachers to observe in different grade levels assists them in developing a better understanding of the curriculum, teaching strategies and classroom organization techniques (Department of Education, 2004). This practice can help to lead to better continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the Bearwood Township School District, but will take a definitive effort, as substitute teachers will need to be hired, connections will need to be made, and a schedule will need to be developed. This procedure will not be as simple as stopping by a colleague's classroom for an observation during a preparation period. However, when sending and receiving schools (or grades) share information to improve students' learning and progress, teachers are able to develop more effective teaching practices, which can align the two educational settings (Galton et al., 1999). This change is extremely important if the

Bearwood Township School District wants to improve curriculum continuity and instruction in an effort to increase student academic achievement.

Effective instruction results from effective planning (Bottoms, 2003). When teachers share student work which can illustrate their level of learning, continuity of instruction will be provided for students; standardized test scores should not be the only source of information available about a student when he/she transitions into a new school setting (Westminster Institute of Education, 2006). According to Evangelou et al. (2008), students are eager to know that what they have already learned will assist them as they transition into a new school setting. Providing the district's educators with the opportunity to visit the classrooms in the sending and/or receiving schools will provide the "personal touch" which will allow activities such as this to occur. When a relationship is developed between schools, valuable articulation between grade levels about the curriculum, instruction and students can develop.

Burkam, Michaels, and Lee (2007) found that when schools are configured into cluster schools, with only preschool and kindergarten students in the school, the kindergarten students did not perform as well as those with first graders located within their school; this may be due in part to the lack of alignment between the kindergarten curriculum and the first grade curriculum. Although this specific grade-span configuration is not present in the Bearwood Township School District, the narrow grade-span has created schools which house only two or three grade levels. The narrow grade-span is having a negative effect on the alignment of curriculum because the faculty members are not exposed to the curriculum and instructional practices of the grade level before and/or after the grade in which the teacher is presently teaching in many of the schools. The coordination of curriculum and teaching practices is imperative between schools in order to provide for seamless instruction following a transition (Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2006).

Collaboration and articulation is especially important just prior to and following students' school-to-school transitions (Sink, Edwards, & Weir, 2007).

**Finding seven.** *Faculty members are split in their perceptions about curriculum continuity within the Bearwood Township School District; they recognize that there are factors that inhibit curriculum continuity, such as inadequate time for articulation among faculty members regarding curriculum, instructional strategies, and individual student needs.*

Paglin and Fager (1997) contend that each school system must develop articulation and transition programs which are designed to lessen the decline in academic achievement following a school-to-school transition. Effective articulation is imperative if we are to ensure a quality educational experience for all students; articulation is more challenging when it must occur between educators from different school settings (Wilson, 1998). When there is continuity of instruction between grades, learning is facilitated (Masters, 2005b). This is especially challenging in the Bearwood Township School District due to the narrow grade-span configuration.

According to Eccles and Roeser (2009), there are two important aspects of academic work: the content of the curriculum and the design of instruction. Thus, although the directors and supervisors of the Bearwood Township School District have been working to provide curriculum continuity, what may be missing is the design of instruction; this may lead to the loss of valuable instruction time, since there is a lack of articulation regarding instruction and students must be taught new study skills and get used to new teaching methods. Sharing information about curriculum content improves the continuity of students' learning and sharing an understanding of how students learn creates a better alignment of teaching practices between schools (Catholic Education Office of Melbourne Student Wellbeing Unit, 2010). Wilson (1998)

purports that curriculum articulation provides the opportunity for students to smoothly transition between grade levels and schools, but requires continuous and open communication with teachers from all grade levels.

Curriculum continuity is created when the standards are analyzed, the curriculum is shared and assessments are aligned (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005). Due to the adoption and implementation of the new Core Curriculum Content Standards, the Bearwood Township School District has begun the process of realigning the curriculum. This procedure will help to avoid excessive reteaching and a lack of continuity of instruction due to a lack of communication between grade levels (Sanders et al., 1994). According to English (2000), this lack of communication can be intensified if the grade levels are located in separate school buildings, as is the case in the Bearwood Township School District. When the sending and receiving schools create the opportunity for teachers to jointly plan their lessons, a variety of activities are created for students and the familiarity keeps students motivated following school-to-school transitions (Galton et al., 2003). The adoption of the new CCCS will be instrumental in encouraging curriculum continuity.

The continuity of curriculum is especially important when students are in the primary grades. The continuation of developmentally appropriate programs in the primary grades will promote successful transitions (Reynolds et al., 2006). According to Bogard and Takanishi (2005), the programs should be linked in the primary grades; transition programs will not be enough to provide students with a seamless transition. Thus, the communication between the district's Primary School I and the two primary schools who educate the students in second, third and fourth grades must be seamless. It is imperative that the educators in the three schools of the

Bearwood Township School District clearly understand the curriculum and share developmentally appropriate teaching practices within their classrooms.

One of the issues which further complicates curriculum continuity occurs when a receiving school accepts students from a number of sending schools, as there may be discontinuities in the students' learning experiences; this is one example of when providing consistent and coordinated teaching practices can assist with curriculum continuity (Galton et al., 2003; Wihry et al., 1992). As discussed earlier, this is one of the situations occurring with students in the Bearwood Township School District, who transition into Middle School I from two separate primary schools; this is the only case of a "pyramid transition" in the district. This is when the alignment of educational experiences is imperative if students are to be successful following a school-to-school transition (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005). Providing teachers with the opportunity to work more on curriculum continuity and to focus on specific teaching strategies will help students sustain progress after a transition (Galton et al., 2003).

Articulation about students' needs is imperative if students of the Bearwood Township School District are to have a seamless educational experience as they transition between schools. Unfortunately, schools often operate in isolation and with each new school year, students begin with a "clean slate"—especially following a school-to-school transition (Masters, 2005b). As students transition between grade levels (and especially, between schools), districts discard a year's worth of relationships developed between students and their teachers and abandon valuable knowledge; each year, the child starts all over again (Marshak, 2003). This practice may negatively infringe on instructional time and can lead to a great deal of frustration for the student, the parents/guardians and the teacher. According to Marshak (2003), articulation between educators can help eliminate this lack of communication and place students at the correct ability

level with the correct teacher to start the school year in a timely and efficient manner. If students' current instructional programs are aligned with the expectations they will face in the future, they will be met with success; if such alignment is not part of the process, students will be set up to struggle and fail (Napier, 2008). When educators emphasize the need to collaborate, communicate and cooperate between schools, students can benefit from less stressful transitions (Schoffner & Williamson, 2000).

According to Reyes et al. (2005), one of the most positive aspects of the NCLB legislation has been the development of curriculum articulation in school districts—especially as it relates to students' academic achievement. Providing teachers with in-service days for articulation between grade levels and schools is imperative so that learning is contiguous as students transition between grade levels (Reeves, 2005). In addition, curriculum meetings must encourage teachers to share all of the aspects of the curriculum that students must master (Felton & Akos, 2011). The curriculum directors and supervisors have been focused on improving both horizontal and vertical articulation throughout the Bearwood Township School District; it is imperative that this initiative be encouraged to continue and develop in order to reap the benefits of improved student academic achievement.

### **Summary of Findings for Research Question Two**

Although there is a perception that there is curriculum continuity throughout the district, the faculty members do not believe that they are an integral part of that continuity. Due to the absence of time to visit the grades before and after the one they teach, faculty members are lacking valuable knowledge which could be obtained through effective articulation among their fellow educators. As a result, there may be wasted instructional time, revisiting curriculum which has been previously taught and uncovering the best ways to teach each of their new students.

Faculty members must be integrated into the essential work being initiated by the directors and supervisors in order for instructional practices can be seamless and more effective across the Bearwood Township School District. This important focus has already started with the adoption of the Core Curriculum Content Standards.

### **Research Question Three**

*How do the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions affect academic achievement for the students of the Bearwood Township School District?*

**Finding eight.** *There is a measurable negative impact on student academic achievement following each school-to-school transition for students in the Bearwood Township School District.*

The stressors involved in each school-to-school transition are so critical that they may neutralize or even diminish the achievement gains in the previous school setting (Wren, 2003). According to Howley (2001), as school size increases, student achievement decreases. Since the schools of the Bearwood Township School District have been configured with narrow-grade spans and large numbers of students at each grade level, all of the schools could be considered as “large.” Conversely, other researchers argue that it is not the grade-span configuration in and of itself that diminishes student academic performance, but the subsequent school-to-school transitions experienced by the students due to the district’s configuration of the schools (Hooper, 2002; Howley, 2002a; Renschler, 2000; Weiss & Bearman, 2007).

According to Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman (2008), students achieve lower test scores on standardized tests following each school-to-school transition and it may take two to three years to get the test scores up to the level that they were before the transition. This has been shown to be accurate for the achievement scores analyzed for the students of the Bearwood

Township School District; following each transition, achievement dropped for most grade levels. Mullins and Irvin (2000) found that the most dramatic drop in GPA occurs for students when they transition between grades six and seven; this corresponds to one of the transitions experienced by the students of the district and has been shown to correspond to some of the NJ ASK 6 and NJ ASK 7 scores reported in Chapter Four. One of the unique aspects of the grade-span configuration in this district creates the need for students to transition (on average) every two years; thus, students have little time to recover from their lowered achievement scores before they are required to transition to another school setting. Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) purport that when students experience two school-to-school transitions, they score lower than the students who must only transition once. The students of the Bearwood Township School District are making *five* school-to-school transitions. According to Napier (2008), the decline in academic achievement may be the result of the stress associated with the transition into a new school. A loss in self-esteem following each transition may create the underlying cause of the academic decline shown by students and the increased risk of dropping out of school (Alspaugh, 1998a; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Seidman et al., 1994).

Faculty members and the directors and supervisors of the Bearwood Township School District perceive that the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions are having a negative effect on the students' academic achievement. These perceptions of these educators have been corroborated by the findings of researchers who purport that transitioning between schools is disruptive to students' academic progress (Eccles et al., 1993; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Sanders et al., 1994). The findings have also been corroborated by the analysis of student assessments for the students of the Bearwood Township School District, which demonstrate a drop following each school-to-school transition. Alspaugh (1998a) also

found that academic achievement loss during the transition from middle to high school was a predictor of high-achieving students dropping out of college before graduation. Thus, the educators in the district must be cognizant of these factors and be present to their students before and after their transitions. The process of transitioning from school to school may have implications far beyond the boundaries of the Bearwood Township School District.

**Finding nine.** *Although the majority of faculty members responded that students leave their classrooms ready for the next grade level, they did not have the same conviction when responding that students arrive to their classrooms ready for that grade level.*

One of the underlying causes of this perception may be the frequent transitioning of students between the schools of the Bearwood Township School District. According to Alspaugh (1998a), students experience a loss of self-esteem during transitions, which may be resulting in their academic decline following their entrance into a new school setting. As discussed previously, the development of small school settings—either by reconfiguring the schools or creating a small group setting within a larger school by creative teaming of students with teachers—may help to alleviate the feelings of anonymity created by a large school. Wasley (2002) purports that creating small schools may be one way of enabling all students to perform better on standardized assessments and may enhance students’ learning opportunities. Thus, even in a district with a narrow-grade span configuration such as the Bearwood Township School District, creating a small group setting within a larger school may help to alleviate the feelings of anonymity.

Although no particular sequence of grade-spans can guarantee student success, school-to-school transitions have proven to negatively impact student academic progress (Mertens & Anfara, n.d.). So, although the teachers of Bearwood believe that they have prepared their

students to transition to the next grade level, the negative impact of transitioning between schools five times is having a negative effect on the students of the district and the students do not appear to be ready. Additionally, since the schools are large, the faculty members are busy transitioning new students into a grade level, leaving little time or energy for the students who have recently transitioned out of the grade they are teaching, even if the students are still attending the same school. Reducing school size is one of the suggestions made by Finn (1989) to reduce student alienation and increase a sense of belonging.

One study by Tucker and Andrada (1997) may help the educators of the district better understand another negative aspect of the narrow grade-span configuration. Tucker and Andrada (1997) studied the results of students' assessments on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) for sixth graders; the study compared assessment results for sixth grade students in Type I (K-5) schools and Type II (K-6) schools. When the students in the K-6 schools took the 6<sup>th</sup> grade test, they scored better than the students who had just transitioned out of the K-5 schools. According to Tucker and Andrada (1997), the lower scores may have been caused by the 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers perceiving that they would not be held accountable for the preparation of students for a sixth grade test *or* the lower test scores may have resulted as a lack of articulation between schools about how to prepare the students for the assessment.

As a result of the narrow grade-span configuration of the Bearwood Township School District, students transition into and out of schools frequently. Thus, the district's educators may not feel accountable or responsible for the achievement of students in the next grade level, much the same as the findings of Tucker and Andrada (1997). Additionally, the lack of consultation and collaboration between the educators of the various grade levels of the Bearwood Township

School District may further exacerbate these perceptions if the grade level before or after the one each educator is teaching is located in another school building.

### **Summary of Findings for Research Question Three**

Academic achievement is being negatively impacted by the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions in the district. Students are transitioning in and out of schools so frequently that it is difficult to overcome the negative effects of one transition before the students are faced with another transition. It is apparent to this researcher that student achievement declines during the first year in each school, which amounts to 42% of their educational careers (if they entered the school district as first graders) or nearly 39% of their educational careers (if they attended kindergarten in the district) is spent adjusting to a new school environment. The impact of a school-to-school transition can have a profoundly negative impact on student academic achievement when such a large percentage of a student's educational experience is comprised first years in new school settings.

### **Recommendations for Action**

This purpose of this action research study was to determine the effect of the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions on the students, staff members, and community of the Bearwood Township School District. The researcher has formulated the following recommendations to improve the sense of belonging for students, to increase the continuity of curriculum and instruction between the district's schools, and to enhance student academic achievement throughout the district.

#### **Recommendation One**

*The present grade-span configuration of the school district should be analyzed to determine if there is a wider grade-span configuration which would better accommodate the*

*current student population, lessen school-to-school transitions for students, and increase students' academic achievement.*

A decision about the reconfiguration of a school district is not one which any school district can take lightly. It is a decision which would require the input of many professionals, for although educational decisions must be made based upon their impact on student learning, there are many other factors which must be kept in mind as these decisions are made. Reconfiguration would have an impact on the present facilities, as they would need to be modified to accommodate the student population assigned to each school. Thus, it would be imperative to have input from the Superintendent of Schools, the Director of Buildings and Grounds and the Director of Transportation. Besides the relocation of furniture for various schools, the buildings' bathrooms, libraries, cafeterias and gymnasiums would need to be evaluated since they are presently equipped to operate for students at specific age levels. The cost effectiveness and efficiency must remain a focus. In addition, the expertise of the Director of Transportation would be needed as any changes in the configuration would impact the present bus routes and times.

If the schools of the Bearwood Township School District were reconfigured, students would be able to develop a better sense of belonging in each school setting since they would remain in one school for a longer period of time. There will be fewer school-to-school transitions, and thus, less loss of academic achievement at times of transition. Students will be transitioning in smaller groups, allowing the schools to better accommodate their needs and to get to know them when they arrive (and before they leave). Students will be provided with the opportunity to participate in more activities since they won't be transitioning in and out of schools so quickly; students will have less competition for the coveted positions or sports teams or in school clubs and will have more time to enjoy being the "top dog" in their school setting.

The district's schools would be better able to develop a clearer sense of identity when their students remain in one school setting for a longer period of time. The stakeholders in the district will stop using the term "buildings" and will start referring to them as "schools." By sharing the curricular experts, such as reading specialists and the most effective curricular educators, all students will ultimately transition into the high school from each of the sending schools with similar experiences. This increased school connectedness will improve student academic achievement. There will be increased opportunities for peer mentoring and correct role models when students are permitted to interact with students on various grade levels.

At a time when family stability is not strong, developing a family feeling within a school setting may provide comfort and stability and develop a number of trusted adults who know their students. In addition, families can stay more involved if they have more than one child in the school and parents/guardians will get to know and trust the educators with whom their children are working. The school environment needs to be a safe place for students and their families so that everyone will see the importance of their children's educational experiences.

## **Recommendation Two**

*Fifth grade students, who are predominantly ten years of age when they enter that grade level, would be better served in an elementary school setting rather than in a middle-school setting.*

Students should be allowed to remain in a more nurturing environment until they are more mature and ready for the rigors and responsibilities of a middle school setting. Accommodations to the curricular design of the fifth grade have already been initiated. The relocation of the grade level itself remains to be decided.

### **Recommendation Three**

*The present transition programs throughout the school district must be more of a process than an event and must emphasize the involvement of the student, his/her family and the school to be most effective programs possible.*

Academics should be a main focus of each transition. Involving families will allow for a bond to form between the home and school, and parents/guardians will remain involved. There are a number of programs delineated in chapter four that would serve as excellent models for the implementation of effective school-to-school transitions. Transition programs and orientation sessions must move beyond the procedural—such as touring the school—and develop into an opportunity to share the school’s philosophy while promoting a sense of belonging and welcoming. The process of transitioning students into a new school setting must begin well before the actual transition and continue well into the school year.

### **Recommendation Four**

*It is important to help students develop a sense of belonging to better assist them before, during and following a school-to-school transition.*

A sense of belonging can provide support and protection to students at the time of transition (Eccles et al., 1993). Elias (2001), emphasized that at times of transition, it is important for educators to provide students with inspiration, optimism, clear values and—most importantly—respect. In the Bearwood Township School District, students experience five school-to-school transitions; if students have a strong sense of belonging, they may experience a smoother transition.

The Bearwood Township School District must be cognizant of the impact the frequent school-to-school transitions are having on their students’ sense of belonging and make a

concerted effort to focus on this aspect when working with students. When school-to-school transitions are inevitable, organizational options which would allow students to remain with the same teachers might help to increase a sense of community for students (Osterman, 2000). Some options might be to group students into teams with the same teachers over several grade levels, the development of small schools within larger schools, and the creation of departmental teams, which would have a group of teachers working with a specific group of students (Osterman, 2000).

In addition, the Bearwood Township School District should be encouraged to carefully examine their school-to-school transition procedures to ensure that the students' families are part of the process, so that students and their families will experience a more seamless transition each time they move into a new school setting, beginning with the transition into Primary School I in preschool and/or kindergarten. Developing and implementing effective transition programs helps to create a sense of belonging for students when they enter a new school setting (Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). Some specific transition programs which can be used as guidelines have been mentioned in the previous chapter.

Since the students reported a stronger sense of belonging to the district as a whole, rather than a sense of belonging to any particular school, each individual school must focus on helping students develop a sense of belonging for students. By creating opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, community service projects and sports teams, the students will develop a better sense of belonging in a specific school. If the opportunity for reconfiguration is provided, allowing students to remain in one school setting for a longer period of time will also allow students to develop a better sense of belonging in a specific school setting.

## **Recommendation Five**

*More time must be provided for articulation between grade levels and schools in order to develop more continuity between the curriculum and instructional practices.*

Additional articulation time should become an important part of the process of professional development for the Bearwood Township School District. In addition, visitation across schools will create more opportunities for the sharing of instructional practices. This will help to eliminate the likelihood of re-teaching material already taught and will create more ownership for student learning. The continuity of the curriculum, which ultimately leads to a better quality of instructional practices for teachers, will be accomplished.

Articulation about the students who will be transitioning between schools will enable students to transition between schools more easily since the educators from the sending and receiving schools will have collaborated about their strengths and needs. It is imperative that teachers communicate about students in order to eliminate the waste of valuable instructional time. This practice will also enable students will be better placed with teachers more compatible with their needs; less instructional time will be lost due to the relearning of so much important information that was acquired about the students in their previous school setting. Ultimately, valuable academic time will not be wasted and the quality of the educational experience for each student in the district will be improved. Although this will take some effort on the part of the administrators of the Bearwood Township School District, its implementation will result in a more seamless transition for students and less loss of time for instruction.

## **Recommendation Six**

*It is imperative that the school district begin to collect standardized assessment data, especially following a school-to-school transition, in order to alleviate academic achievement loss.*

The first required standardized assessment (the NJ ASK 3) does not require the assessment of students until they have nearly completed third grade. As a result, until last year, the Bearwood Township School District was missing important information about student progress—or lack thereof. The recent purchase and practice of administering the Developmental Reading Assessment© (DRA) by Pearson to students beginning in kindergarten provides a somewhat standardized method of assessing student growth in the area of reading. Through the use of standardized testing materials, student progress can be more closely monitored. It is important to note that not all assessments must be standardized. The End-of-the-Year Math Assessments, which were recently developed and administered by classroom teachers from kindergarten through grade 4, is an example of a non-standardized test. The information from this math assessment has provided the district with the opportunity to analyze individual student progress, the progress of a specific class, and/or the progress of an entire grade level.

Beginning in the spring of 2012, the incoming kindergarten class will be screened using the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning by Pearson (DIAL™- 4). Although the incoming kindergarten students are always screened to assist with the class placement and the balancing of classes, beginning in 2012, the DIAL™-4 a standardized assessment tool will assist with the distribution of students and provide more accurate information. An in-depth knowledge of the strengths and needs of all students can better facilitate each child's educational experience while in attendance in the district's schools.

In addition, it is imperative that the Bearwood Township School District emphasize the importance of the academic rather than just the social aspects of a school-to-school transition; a greater focus on academics may provide students with the opportunity to experience a more seamless academic transition between schools. Finally, through the careful analysis of student academic achievement, especially following a school-to-school transition, the educators of the district will be better equipped to make an informed decision about the best grade-span configuration for the school district, if the Board of Education proposes a reconfiguration for the district's schools.

### **Recommendation Seven**

*The work started by the curriculum directors and supervisors must continue so that student academic achievement will continue to improve.*

It is recommended that the curriculum directors and supervisors continue to oversee curriculum development and curriculum mapping with the faculty members in the district; implementation of the Core Curriculum Content Standards may assist with this process. The district has employed educational professionals of the highest caliber to teach in its schools. Utilization of these educators to teach their colleagues will affirm the professionalism and skills of educators throughout the Bearwood Township School District. Educators throughout the district already provide in-service opportunities for their fellow educators. Providing valuable instructional time during the school day will ensure that these educators can reach all of their colleagues.

### **Recommendation Eight**

*The role of parents/guardians must be better defined and efficiently implemented to better assist students before, during and following a transition.*

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley emphasized that school districts need to do a much better job of helping parents understand that they play an important role in getting their young children ready to enter school (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2000). Riley also emphasized that teachers need to connect with parents even before their children enter school in order to create a smooth transition into formal schooling (USDOE, 2000). As a school district, we should be utilizing our resources to reach out early and often to the parents/guardians with newborns. Through the use of our speech therapists, our guidance counselors, our school nurses, our teachers, the occupational therapist and the physical therapist, we can help parents/guardians help their children become ready for school entrance.

In addition, as students experience school-to-school transitions, parents/guardians can play an important role in preparing their children for the transitions socially, psychologically and academically. The parents/guardians can act as liaisons between the school and home, making each school-to-school transition less stressful, which will result in less academic achievement loss. By including parents/guardians in the transition process, the students and their families will be better able to experience successful school-to-school transitions.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Additional research needs to be conducted in the Bearwood Township School District if the district is to continue its focus on improving student academic achievement. Two recommendations for further research are as follows:

**Fostering resiliency in students through times of change.** During this study, it was noted during some interviews that students with the correct supports are “resilient” and appear unfazed by school-to-school transitions. Research by Anfara and Schmid (2007) studied students’ resiliency and identified a strong sense of belonging as key to the existence of effective coping

and confidence traits, ultimately impacting changes such as transitions. This study identified a strong sense of belonging as an important aspect for improving student academic achievement; it is important to also understand the reciprocal relationship between students' resiliency and a strong sense of belonging. Since change is inevitable in this fast moving society, it is imperative that we assist students to develop resiliency to so that they can continue to be successful during transitions. Developing a clearer understanding of how to foster resiliency in students will ultimately lead to more confident students and better academic achievement, even after a school-to-school transition.

**Continuing a focus on improving student academic achievement.** One facet of this study specifically investigated the impact of the present grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions on student academic achievement. Although an analysis of assessment scores revealed the trend toward a drop in students' academic achievement scores following each school-to-school transition, this relationship cannot be definitively determined until any other factors which may be impacting student academic achievement are determined and examined. It was beyond the scope of this study to analyze student academic achievement except for its relationship with the grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions. However, since it is the ultimate goal of any school district to provide each of its students with a quality educational experience, it is imperative that investigations continue into any other factors which might be having a negative impact on students performing to their optimal level. Through the use of the aforementioned standardized and nonstandardized test results, the administrative team can better analyze student academic achievement and investigate the grade levels and specific student populations that are demonstrating difficulty learning to their optimal level. Once the factors which are negatively impacting student academic

achievement have been identified, the educators of the Bearwood Township School District can take the necessary steps to address these factors.

### **Final Thoughts**

Districts are being held accountable for student achievement in a more stringent manner since the inception of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This law has greatly altered the educational process for administrators, educators and students and it often appears that the only benchmark of the success (or lack thereof) for a district has been reduced to scores on a standardized test. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is nothing “standardized” about the unique individuals who enter our schools on a daily basis. They arrive from varied backgrounds, replete with experiences from an assortment of families with diverse values and educational experiences. Students may arrive hungry or satisfied, tired or well-rested, bored or eager to learn. Yet, there they are—ready and able to learn or struggling to learn. How do we best differentiate instruction in an effort to reach and teach each student so that each of them will have the most viable opportunity to learn, to grow, and to journey beyond the school?

This researcher endeavored to answer this question by studying one aspect of the Bearwood Township School District, namely, the grade-span configuration, and investigating its impact on its students as they experience five school-to-school transitions in their multi-year quest for knowledge in this K-12 school district. When the researcher thought about who might best understand the implications of the grade-span configuration, it was the stakeholders who came to mind. The stakeholders who are involved in the educational process—the students themselves, their parents and guardians, the faculty members, the administrators and the curriculum directors and supervisors—were all invited to share their opinions and their expertise about this topic. Through the implementation of surveys, interviews and focus groups, these

stakeholders were invited to share what they have seen and experienced, what they like and what they would change, and ultimately, how to better prepare the students of the district to receive the highest quality educational experience possible.

As the Bearwood Township School District continues to focus on initiatives designed to generate better student achievement, one of the most basic changes may center on the present grade-span configuration of the district. The present grade-span configuration was created 18 years ago and must be revisited; it was created with a different student population in mind and appears to have outgrown its effectiveness. Additionally, sometimes, it is important to work smarter, not harder. The staff of the district is dedicated and concerned for the welfare of the students whom they serve. It is imperative to give them the appropriate resources to create a more educationally-sound district. Under the continued tutelage of the directors and supervisors, the faculty members must be given the time to articulate and have a voice in what they teach. They must be encouraged to continue their fine work, replete with the knowledge that they must endeavor to reach every student in the district so that he/she will achieve his/her very best and go off into the world beyond the Bearwood Township School District endowed with a love of learning and ready to live life to its fullest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By opening up the lines of communication and encouraging articulation about student academic achievement and the continuity of the curriculum and instruction, this researcher is confident that brilliant and educationally-sound changes will transpire.

APPENDIX A  
FACULTY SURVEY

Dear Colleagues,

The purpose of this survey is to gather data for an action research study which will focus on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. This online survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. Please be assured that your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the survey at any time.

This survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information which will be collected is the grade level(s) at which you are presently teaching. No Internet Protocol (IP) address will be collected and it will be impossible to identify respondents. Additionally, it will be impossible to identify and/or penalize anyone who does not participate.

Please feel free to contact me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu) if you have any questions and/or concerns about this survey. Thank you very much for your participation. I value your input and appreciate the time it will take to provide me with your valuable insight.

By continuing with this survey, you are agreeing to participate.

Thank you,

Pauline F. Anderson

## Faculty Survey

1. I am familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) before the one(s) I teach.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

2. Students are prepared for school-to-school transitions.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

3. There is ample time provided for articulation about the curriculum and instruction.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

4. Student academic achievement is positively impacted by school-to-school transitions.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

5. I spend a lot of time helping students adjust into our school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

6. I am provided with the opportunity to visit the grade(s) into which my students will transition.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

7. Students feel nervous when they first enter this school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
---------------	------------	--------------	--------

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

8. Teaching strategies are discussed between schools.

Almost Always                      Frequently                      Occasionally                      Rarely

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

9. I am familiar with the curriculum in the grade(s) after the one(s) I teach.

Almost Always                      Frequently                      Occasionally                      Rarely

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

10. Students proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo.

Almost Always                      Frequently                      Occasionally                      Rarely

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

11. I believe that my students arrive to my classroom ready for the grade level.

Almost Always                      Frequently                      Occasionally                      Rarely

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

12. I believe that my students leave my classroom ready for the next grade level.

Almost Always                      Frequently                      Occasionally                      Rarely

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

13. Students' academic achievement is negatively impacted by the grade-span configuration.

Almost Always                      Frequently                      Occasionally                      Rarely

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

14. I am provided with the opportunity to visit the previous grade/course to the one I teach.

Almost Always                      Frequently                      Occasionally                      Rarely

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

15. I believe there is curriculum continuity in the schools throughout the district.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

16. I spend a lot of time reteaching concepts which should have been learned in the previous grade level.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

17. Students enjoy attending this school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

18. I am involved in students' placement in the next grade level.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

19. There are adequate supports for students when they enter our school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

20. I provide input to the educators who will teach my students in the upcoming year.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

21. Students feel like they belong in this school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

22. I presently teach (*Please choose only one.*)

\_\_\_\_\_ preschool or kindergarten

\_\_\_\_\_ 1<sup>st</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 2<sup>nd</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 4<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 5<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 6<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 7<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 8<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 9<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 10<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 11<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 12<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ I teach multiple grade levels.

23. Please share any thoughts about any aspect of the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions in the district:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

APPENDIX B

EMAIL INVITATION TO FACULTY MEMBERS TO PARTICIPATE  
IN FACULTY SURVEY

Dear Colleagues,

I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D.

The Superintendent of Schools has given me permission to conduct research within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As faculty members, your expertise, experience and opinions are vital to my research. I am asking for your participation by completing an online survey, which should take no longer than 10 minutes of your valuable time.

Please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary; the survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information which will be collected is the grade level(s) at which you are

presently teaching. However, since the number of faculty members in the Bearwood Township School District is so large, that information could not be used to identify individual participants.

I have prepared the survey using SurveyMonkey which can be accessed online at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/689JQZ9>

The survey link will close on November 8, 2011.

I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research.

I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

APPENDIX C

FIRST EMAIL REMINDER TO FACULTY MEMBERS TO  
PARTICIPATE IN FACULTY SURVEY

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to thank those who have already taken the time to complete my Faculty Survey. I would also ask those who have not completed Faculty Survey to consider taking approximately 10 minutes of your valuable time to do so. Since this survey is anonymous, I have no way of identifying who has or has not already completed the online survey with SurveyMonkey.

Please be reminded that my research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

I would also like to reiterate that as faculty members, your expertise, experience and opinions are vital to my research. Please be reminded that your participation is completely voluntary.

The survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information which will be collected is the grade level(s) at which you are presently teaching. However, since the number of faculty members in the Bearwood Township School District is so large, that information could not be used to identify individual participants.

I have prepared the survey using SurveyMonkey which can be accessed online at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/689JQZ9>

The survey link will close on November 8, 2011.

I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research if you have not already done so.

I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey.

As I mentioned in my previous email, if you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

APPENDIX D

SECOND EMAIL REMINDER TO FACULTY MEMBERS TO  
PARTICIPATE IN FACULTY SURVEY

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to thank those who have already participated in my research by completing the Faculty Survey. I would also like to once again ask those who have not completed the survey to consider taking approximately 10 minutes of your valuable time to do so. Please be reminded that since this survey is anonymous, I have no way of identifying who has or has not already completed the online survey with SurveyMonkey.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

Your input as faculty members is vital to my research. Please be reminded that your participation is completely voluntary.

The survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information which will be collected is the grade level(s) at which you are presently teaching. However, since the number of faculty members in the Bearwood Township School District is so large, that information could not be used to identify individual participants.

I have prepared the survey using SurveyMonkey which can be accessed online at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/689JQZ9>.

The survey link will close on November 8, 2011.

I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research if you have not already done so.

I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey.

As I mentioned in my previous emails, if you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

## APPENDIX E

### PARENT/GUARDIAN SURVEY (FOR SURVEYMONKEY)

Dear Parents and Guardians

The purpose of this survey is to gather data for an action research study which will focus on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. This online survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. Please be assured that your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the survey at any time.

Please complete each survey question as it pertains to your oldest (or only) child who attends school in the Bearwood Township School District. This survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information which will be collected is the grade level(s) for your oldest child who is still attending school in the Bearwood Township School District. No Internet Protocol (IP) address will be collected and it will be impossible to identify respondents. Additionally, it will be impossible to identify and/or penalize anyone who does not participate.

Please feel free to contact me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu) if you have any questions and/or concerns about this survey. Thank you very much for your participation. I value your input and appreciate the time it will take to provide me with your valuable insight.

By continuing with this survey, you are agreeing to participate.

Thank you,

Pauline F. Anderson

1. My child feels safe in school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. My child feels happy attending school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. My child feels comfortable in school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. My child feels like he/she belongs to his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. My child feels proud to be part of his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. My child feels close to the principal of his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. My child feels close to the teachers at his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. My child feels close to the support staff at his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. My child would proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. The principal is friendly to my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11. The teachers are friendly to my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. The support staff is friendly to my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. The teachers respect my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. The teachers are interested in my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. My child has at least one teacher in the school in whom to confide.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

16. I felt prepared to have my child change schools when he/she moved into the next grade level.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

17. There was an adjustment period for my child when he/she child moved into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

18. There was an adjustment period for my family when my child moved into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

19. The sending school provided information about the new school prior to my child's move.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

20. The sending school prepared my child to move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

21. There were adequate supports provided for my child when he/she moved into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

22. My child was given the opportunity to visit and tour his/her new school prior to the move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

23. My child was given the opportunity to meet the teachers in his/her new school prior to the move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

24. My child was given the opportunity to review his/her class schedule prior to the move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

25. I felt welcome in my child's new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

26. I felt comfortable volunteering in my child's school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

27. I have completed this survey based on my oldest child still attending the district's schools.

He/She is presently in :

\_\_\_\_ preschool

\_\_\_\_ kindergarten

\_\_\_\_ 1<sup>st</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 2<sup>nd</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 4<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 5<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 6<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 7<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 8<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 9<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 10<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 11<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_ 12<sup>th</sup> grade

28. Please use the space below to comment about any aspect of the move(s) into new school(s) for any of your children:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

APPENDIX F  
PARENT/GUARDIAN SURVEY (PAPER COPY)

October 24, 2011

Dear Parents and Guardians:

As explained in the letter which accompanied this Parent/Guardian Survey, the purpose of this survey is to gather data for an action research study which will focus on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. Completing this survey should take no longer than 10 minutes. Please be assured that your participation is completely voluntary; you are not required to complete this survey.

Please complete each survey question as it pertains to your oldest (or only) child who attends school in the Bearwood Township School District. Your responses will be treated in a most confidential manner. I am the only individual who will collect, read and collate the information. Returning the survey in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope will further help to ensure confidentiality.

Please feel free to contact me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu) or at the Primary School I Primary School telephone number if you have any questions and/or concerns about this survey. I will return your call before or after the regular school hours. I value your input and appreciate the time it will take to provide me with your valuable insight.

By completing and returning this survey, you are agreeing to participate.

Thank you,

Pauline F. Anderson

1. My child feels safe in school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

2. My child feels happy attending school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

3. My child feels comfortable in school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

4. My child feels like he/she belongs to his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

5. My child feels proud to be part of his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

6. My child feels close to the principal of his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

7. My child feels close to the teachers at his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

8. My child feels close to the support staff at his/her school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

9. My child would proudly wear clothing which depicts the school name and logo.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

10. The principal is friendly to my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

11. The teachers are friendly to my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

12. The support staff is friendly to my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

13. The teachers respect my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

14. The teachers are interested in my child.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

15. My child has at least one teacher in the school in whom to confide.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

16. I felt prepared to have my child change schools when he/she moved into the next grade level.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

17. There was an adjustment period for my child when he/she child moved into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

18. There was an adjustment period for my family when my child moved into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

19. The sending school provided information about the new school prior to my child's move.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

20. The sending school prepared my child to move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

21. There were adequate supports provided for my child when he/she moved into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

22. My child was given the opportunity to visit and tour his/her new school prior to the move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

23. My child was given the opportunity to meet the teachers in his/her new school prior to the move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

24. My child was given the opportunity to review his/her class schedule prior to the move into a new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

25. I felt welcome in my child's new school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

26. I felt comfortable volunteering in my child's school.

Almost Always	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
( )	( )	( )	( )

27. I have completed this survey based on my oldest child still attending the district's schools.

He/She is presently in :

\_\_\_\_ preschool

\_\_\_\_ kindergarten

\_\_\_\_ 1<sup>st</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 2<sup>nd</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 4<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 5<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 6<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 7<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 8<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 9<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 10<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 11<sup>th</sup> grade

\_\_\_\_\_ 12<sup>th</sup> grade

28. Please use the space below to comment about any aspect of the move(s) into new school(s) for any of your children:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

APPENDIX G

EMAIL INVITATION TO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS TO PARTICIPATE IN  
PARENT/GUARDIAN SURVEY

Dear Parents and Guardians:

I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D.

The, Superintendent of Schools, has given me permission to conduct research within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As parents and guardians, your personal experience with your children is vital to my research. You know your children best and your opinions are very important to me. I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research.

I am asking for your participation by completing an online survey, which should take no longer than 10 minutes of your valuable time. Your participation is completely voluntary.

The survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information that will be collected is the grade level for your oldest (or only) child still attending one of the schools in the district.

I have prepared the survey using SurveyMonkey which can be accessed online at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SB9DGT8>.

The survey link will close on November 8, 2011.

I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that

I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

Principal

APPENDIX H

FIRST EMAIL REMINDER TO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS TO PARTICIPATE IN  
PARENT/GUARDIAN SURVEY

Dear Parents and Guardians:

I am writing to thank those who have already taken the time to complete my Parent/Guardian Survey and to once again ask those who have not completed the survey to consider taking approximately 10 minutes so that your opinions and ideas can be incorporated into my research. Since this survey is anonymous, I have no way of identifying who has or has not already completed the online survey with SurveyMonkey.

I would like to remind you that my research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As parents and guardians, your personal experience with your children is vital to my research. You know your children best and your opinions are very important to me. I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research.

Please be reminded that your participation is completely voluntary.

The survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information that will be collected is the grade level for your oldest (or only) child still in attendance at one of the district's schools.

I have prepared the survey using SurveyMonkey which can be accessed online at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SB9DGT8>

The survey link will close on November 8, 2011. I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey.

As I mentioned in my previous email, if you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

Principal

APPENDIX I

SECOND EMAIL REMINDER TO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS TO PARTICIPATE IN  
PARENT/GUARDIAN SURVEY

Dear Parents and Guardians:

I am writing once again to thank those who have already taken the time to complete my Parent/Guardian Survey. I would also like to make a final request to those who have not yet completed the survey to consider taking approximately 10 minutes of your time to do so; it is important to have your opinions and ideas incorporated into my research. Once again, I would like to remind you that since this survey is anonymous, I have no way of identifying who has or has not already completed the online survey with SurveyMonkey.

Once again, I will restate that my research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As parents and guardians, your personal experience with your children is vital to my research. You are the experts on your children and your opinions are very important to me. Please be reminded that your participation is completely voluntary.

The survey is anonymous and the only identifiable information that will be collected is the grade level for your oldest (or only) child still in attendance at one of the district's schools. There is also no way to identify anyone who has decided to not participate in the survey.

I have prepared the survey using SurveyMonkey which can be accessed online at:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SB9DGT8>

The survey link will close on November 8, 2011.

I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey.

As I mentioned in my previous email, if you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

Principal

## APPENDIX J

### INVITATION LETTER TO ACCOMPANY PAPER SURVEY TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS

October 25, 2011

Dear Parents and Guardians:

I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D. One of the requirements of the program is to conduct an action research study in your school district. The, Superintendent of Schools, has given me permission to conduct research within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. As parents and guardians, your personal experience with your children is vital to my research. You know your children best and your opinions are very important to me. I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research.

Since your email address was unavailable at the time of this mailing, I am asking for your participation by completing a paper survey, which should take no longer than 10 minutes of your valuable time. In order to keep the information in your paper survey confidential, please refrain from using any names as you complete the final question and do not sign your name. Using the

enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope will further assist me to keep the information you share confidential. Please be reminded that your participation is completely voluntary; I will be unable to determine which parents and guardians participated.

If you would prefer to complete the survey online, please *discard* the paper copy of the survey enclosed with this letter and complete the survey using the SurveyMonkey survey which can be accessed online at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SB9DGT8>. The survey link will close on November 8, 2011. It is very important to complete only *one survey per family* in order to keep the data valid. Your assistance with this matter is very important.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, you may call me at the telephone number listed above or email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu). I will return your call or respond to your email before or after regular school hours. I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey.

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

Principal

## APPENDIX K

### REMINDER NOTICE POSTED ON THE BEARWOOD TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT WEBSITE

#### **IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT**

Mrs. Pauline F. Anderson, principal of Primary School I, is presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of her Ed.D. Part of the requirements of the program is to conduct an action research study.

Mrs. Anderson's research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

The, Superintendent of Schools, has given her permission to conduct this research study within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project.

Mrs. Anderson has sent each family a Parent/Guardian Survey, either via email or the U.S. Postal Service. Please take ten minutes to complete and return the survey so that your vital input will be incorporated into her study.

If you have any questions or wish to speak to Mrs. Anderson regarding her action research, please contact her at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

If you would prefer to speak to her by telephone, please call Primary School I Primary School at 973-764-2801 and Mrs. Anderson will return your call before or after the regular school hours.

Thank you for your anticipated cooperation!

## APPENDIX L

### REMINDER LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS TO COMPLETE PAPER SURVEY

November 1, 2011

Dear Parents and Guardians:

A week ago, I sent you a Parent/Guardian Survey. I am writing to thank those who have already taken the time to complete the survey and have returned it to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope. Since this survey is not signed by any participants, I am unable to identify those who have or have not already completed the survey.

If you have not already done so, I would ask you to take about 10 minutes to complete the survey and return it to me so that your opinions and ideas can be incorporated into my research. I would like to remind you that my research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As parents and guardians, your personal experience with your children is vital to my research. You know your children best and your opinions are very important to me. I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research.

Please be reminded that your participation is completely voluntary. I will do my utmost to keep your information confidential and want you to be at ease as you complete the survey; the only identifiable information that will be collected is the grade level for your oldest (or only) child still in attendance at one of the district's schools. Please do not sign the survey or use any name(s) as you complete the last question. As I mentioned in my previous mailing, if you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu). If you feel more comfortable contacting me by telephone, please use the number listed above.

I would like to thank you in advance for your participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the time it will take to complete my survey. Please be reminded that I will need all surveys postmarked by November 8, 2011, so that they can be incorporated into the data.

Sincerely

Pauline F. Anderson

Principal

## APPENDIX M

### EMAIL INVITATION TO GUIDANCE COUNSELORS TO PARTICIPATE IN A ONE-TO-ONE INTERVIEW

Dear Colleagues,

I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D. One of the requirements of this program is the completion of an action research dissertation. The Superintendent of Schools has given me permission to conduct research within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As guidance counselors, your expertise, experience and opinions are vital to my research. I am seeking your participation in a one-to-one interview focused mainly on students' sense of belonging as it relates to the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

Please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary; there will be no penalty for choosing not to participate. Your identity will be kept confidential and no identifiable

information will be asked or reported. The interview is designed to take approximately forty minutes, but may take a bit longer.

I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research. Please contact me via a “reply” to this email no later than Friday, October 28, 2011, to let me know if you are willing to participate in a one-to-one interview.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Please take a moment to reply to this email. Thank you in advance for your anticipated cooperation.

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

## APPENDIX N

### EMAIL TEMPLATE TO GUIDANCE COUNSELORS WITH INDIVIDUALIZED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for responding to my email inviting you to participate in a one-to-one interview.

I have scheduled the following date, time and location for your interview:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

The interview should take approximately 40 minutes.

Please confirm your interview date, time and location via email so that I can be sure this interview can be fit into your busy schedule.

I appreciate your cooperation and would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

## APPENDIX O

### CONSENT FORM FOR GUIDANCE COUNSELOR INTERVIEWS

TITLE OF RESEARCH: *Grade-span Configuration and Subsequent School-to-School Transitions*

RESEARCHER: *Pauline F. Anderson is a Doctoral Student at the College of St. Elizabeth. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership.*

This study has been approved by the College of Saint Elizabeth's Institutional Review Board.

*Pauline F. Anderson* has:

- A. Provided me with a detailed explanation of the procedures to be followed in the project, including an identification of any experimental procedures.

I am participating in an interview as part of a research project for Pauline Anderson's doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth. I understand that the study focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

I will be asked to answer questions that relate to students' sense of belonging as it relates to grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

The information that is discussed is confidential. Mrs. Anderson will not use my name or anything that could be used to identify me in her report and I will not discuss our meeting with anyone.

The one-to-one interview will last approximately 40 minutes and I will not be compensated in any way for my participation.

B. Answered any questions that I have regarding the study.

I understand that:

A. My participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time. My refusal to participate will not result in any penalty.

B. By signing this agreement, I understand that the researcher does not expect that my participation in the study will harm me in any way. There is no plan to reimburse me for any costs I might incur as a result of participating in this study.

C. There is an expectation of confidentiality regarding the interview. Therefore, I agree not to discuss the interview with anyone.

D. I also give my consent to be audio taped.

I hereby give my consent to be the subject of your research.

---

Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX P

### PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS FOR GUIDANCE COUNSELOR INTERVIEWS

Hello. Thank you for volunteering to participate in this one-to-one interview. I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral program at the College of St. Elizabeth. My study focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. I am interesting in hearing your thoughts and experiences about students' sense of belonging, as it relates to grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

If there are no objections, I would like to record this session for accuracy. I will secure the recording and no one else will have access to it. Once this interview is completed, the interview will be transcribed by a transcription company. All of the recordings and transcriptions will be securely maintained in locked cabinets in my home and no one in the school district will hear the recording or read the transcribed documents except for me.

Do you have any questions?

Please read and sign this consent form.

Let's begin. I will ask the questions one at a time.

1. Please describe some of the advantages for students as they transition into your school.
2. Please describe some of the challenges students face as they transition into your school.
3. Are there any initiatives and/or programs in place to assist students as they transition into your school?
4. Please describe some of the advantages for students as they transition out of your school.

5. Please describe some of the challenges students face as they transition out of your school.
6. 6. Are there any initiatives and/or programs in place to assist the students as they transition out of your school? What is the most challenging time of the school year for your students? Please explain.
7. Please describe the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of your school as they relate to the sense of belonging for the students who attend your school.
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about students' sense of belonging in this district?

Thank you for participating in this one-to-one interview. I certainly appreciate your cooperation.

APPENDIX Q

EMAIL INVITATION TO PRINCIPALS TO PARTICIPATE IN A ONE-TO-ONE  
INTERVIEW

Dear Colleagues,

I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D. One of the requirements of this program is the completion of an action research dissertation. The Superintendent of Schools has given me permission to conduct research within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As principals, your expertise, experience and opinions are vital to my research. I am seeking your participation in a one-to-one interview focused mainly on continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement as they relate to the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

It is my goal to interview each of the principals in the Bearwood Township School District.

Please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary; there will be no penalty if you choose not to participate. Your identity will be kept confidential and no identifiable information will be asked or reported. The interview is designed to take approximately forty minutes, but may take a bit longer.

I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research. Please contact me via a “reply” to this email to let me know if you are willing to participate in a one-to-one interview.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

I would greatly appreciate it if you would take a moment to reply to this email. Thank you in advance for your anticipated cooperation.

Thank you,

Pauline

## APPENDIX R

### EMAIL TEMPLATE TO PRINCIPALS WITH INDIVIDUALIZED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for responding to my email inviting you to participate in a one-to-one interview.

I have scheduled the following date, time and location for your interview:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

The interview should take approximately 40 minutes.

Please confirm your interview date, time and location via email so that I can be sure this interview can be fit into your busy schedule.

I appreciate your cooperation and would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

Thank you,

Pauline

## APPENDIX S

### CONSENT FORM FOR PRINCIPAL INTERVIEWS

*Complete both pages of this form and submit it with the Submission Form. Indicate if you will use College letterhead \_\_\_\_\_ or the letterhead of the host site. ☒*

TITLE OF RESEARCH: *Grade-span Configuration and Subsequent School-to-School Transitions*

RESEARCHER: *Pauline F. Anderson is a Doctoral Student at the College of St. Elizabeth. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership.*

This study has been approved by the College of Saint Elizabeth's Institutional Review Board.

*Pauline F. Anderson has:*

- A. Provided me with a detailed explanation of the procedures to be followed in the project, including an identification of any experimental procedures.

I am participating in an interview as part of a research project for Pauline Anderson's doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth. I understand that the study focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school

transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

I will be asked to answer questions that relate to continuity of curriculum and instruction and students' academic achievement as they relate to grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

The information that is discussed is confidential. Mrs. Anderson will not use my name or anything that could be used to identify me in her report and I will not discuss our meeting with anyone.

The one-to-one interview will last approximately 40 minutes and I will not be compensated in any way for my participation.

B. Answered any questions that I have regarding the study.

I understand that:

A. My participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time. My refusal to participate will not result in any penalty.

- B. By signing this agreement, I understand that the researchers do not expect that my participation in the study will harm me in any way. There is no plan to reimburse me for any costs I might incur as a result of participating in this study.
- C. There is an expectation of confidentiality regarding the interview. Therefore, I agree not to discuss the interview with anyone.
- D. I also give my consent to be audio taped.

I hereby give my consent to be the subject of your research.

---

Signature

---

Date

APPENDIX T

PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPAL INTERVIEWS

Hello. Thank you for volunteering to participate in this one-to-one interview. I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral program at the College of St. Elizabeth. My study focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. I am interesting in hearing your thoughts and experiences about the continuity of curriculum and instruction and students' academic achievement, as they relate to grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

If there are no objections, I would like to record this session for accuracy. I will secure the recording and no one else will have access to it. Once this interview is completed, the interview will be transcribed by a transcription company. All of the recordings and transcriptions will be securely maintained in locked cabinets in my home and no one in the school district will hear the recording or read the transcribed documents except for me.

Do you have any questions?

Please read and sign this consent form.

Let's begin. I will ask the questions one at a time.

1. Describe communication about curriculum and instruction between grade levels and schools in this district.
2. Is there a connection between curriculum and instruction and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.

3. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to curriculum and instruction?
4. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.
5. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and school-to-school transitions? Please explain
6. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to student academic achievement?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the curriculum, instruction and/or the academic achievement of students in this district as these topics relate to the grade-span configuration and/or school-to-school transitions?

Thank you for participating in this one-to-one interview. I certainly appreciate your cooperation.

APPENDIX U

LETTER TO ACCOMPANY PARENT/GUARDIAN PERMISSION FORM FOR STUDENT  
INTERVIEWS

October 25, 2011

Dear Parents and Guardians:

I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D. One of the requirements of the program is to conduct a research study in your school district. The Superintendent of Schools has given me permission to conduct research within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project. The principal of Bearwood Township High School has also been informed about my study.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. Your child has been identified as one of the students who is currently attending ninth grade in Bearwood Township High School and has been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten. His/Her name was randomly selected using a Table of Random Numbers and his/her Student Identification Number. Your child's opinions are vital to my research, but since your child is under 18 years of age, I will need your permission to speak to your son/daughter.

If you are willing to allow your child to be interviewed, I would like to ask you to speak to your child to see if he/she is willing to participate in a one-to-one interview within the next few weeks. If your child would like to participate in the study, please sign and date the Parent Permission Form which is attached to this letter and return it to me in the enclosed stamped and self-addressed envelope within a week of its receipt.

I will then schedule an interview with your child during his/her lunch period so that the interview will not interfere with his/her academics. I will notify your son/daughter about the date, time and the exact location of the interview via email. The interview will be held in the high school. Prior to the start of the interview, your child will also be asked to sign a Minor Assent Form for the interview. The interview should take no longer than thirty minutes to complete.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, you may call me at the telephone number listed above or email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu). I will return your call or respond to your email before or after regular school hours. I would like to thank you in advance for your anticipated participation and want you to know that I sincerely appreciate your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

Principal

## APPENDIX V

### PARENT/GUARDIAN PERMISSION FORM FOR STUDENT INTERVIEWS

*Complete this form and submit it with your submission form. Indicate whether you will use CSE letterhead \_\_\_\_\_ or letterhead from the host site. X*

TITLE OF RESEARCH: *Grade-span Configuration and Subsequent School-to-School Transitions*

RESEARCHER: *Pauline F. Anderson is a Doctoral Student at the College of St. Elizabeth. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership.*

The following permission is required by the College of St. Elizabeth.

This study has been approved by the College of Saint Elizabeth's Institutional Review Board.

- *Pauline F. Anderson* has identified my son/daughter as a potential participant in a one-to-one interview as part of a research project for her doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth and my son/daughter has expressed a willingness to participate.
- As explained in the attached letter, my child's name was randomly selected from a list of ninth grade students who have been in attendance in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten. It was determined that the students' point of view is important to this study.

- I understand that the study focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.
- My child will be asked to answer questions that relate to students' sense of belonging as it relates to grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.
- The interview will be scheduled during my child's lunch period and he/she will be encouraged to eat lunch while the interview takes place. The interview will not exceed 30 minutes in length; my child will not miss class time to participate in the interview.
- The interview will be conducted at Bearwood Township High School during the school day.
- It will be audio taped and will be later transcribed by a transcription company.
- The information that will be discussed will be kept confidential. Mrs. Anderson will not use my child's name or anything that could be used to identify him/her in her report.
- My child will not be compensated in any way for his/her participation.

I understand that:

- My child's participation in this study may be discontinued at any time he or she wishes to withdraw. Similarly, I may withdraw my child from the study at any time. If either of us decides to withdraw, my child will not incur any penalty.
- By signing this agreement I understand that Mrs. Anderson does not expect that my child's participation in the study will harm him or her in any way. There is no plan to reimburse for any costs I might incur as a result of my child participating in this study.
- I hereby give my consent for my child/ward to be the subject of your research. You have given me an explanation of the procedures to be followed in the project and you will be willing to answer any inquiries I may have.
- I also give my consent for the interview to be audio taped

---

Parent's /Guardian's Signature and Date

---

Phone Number

---

Address

---

Child's Name

---

Child's Birth date

## APPENDIX W

### EMAIL TEMPLATE TO STUDENTS WITH INDIVIDUALIZED

#### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I have received a Parent/Guardian Permission Form from your parent/guardian which indicates that you have agreed to participate in a one-to-one interview about how students feel about transitioning from school-to-school when they have completed all of the grades in a particular school. Since you have attended school in the Bearwood Township School District since you were in kindergarten, you have made five school-to-school transitions. Your experiences before, during and after each transition is an important part of my research study.

I have scheduled the following date, time and location for your interview:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Please bring your lunch to the interview so that you will have time to eat before your next class. You are welcome to eat while we talk. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes.

If you would kindly reply to this email immediately, I can be sure that your interview date, time and location work with your schedule.

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my study!

Sincerely,

Pauline F. Anderson

P.S. If you print out a copy of this email, you can use it as a reminder about your scheduled interview.

## APPENDIX X

### STUDENT ASSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW

*Complete this form and submit it with your submission form. Indicate whether you will use CSE letterhead \_\_\_\_ or letterhead from the host site. X*

- I have been attending school in the Bearwood Township School District since kindergarten so my name was put on a list and I was randomly chosen to participate in this interview.*
- I am willing to speak to Mrs. Anderson about the research project she is completing to earn her doctorate from the College of St. Elizabeth.*
- I know this will be more like a conversation than a school test.*
- I know my name will not be used.*
- I know that what I say will be kept confidential and that my name will not be connected with the information I share during the interview.*
- I know this is not a test.*
- I know that I can stop whenever I want and no one will be upset with me.*
- I know that this session will be recorded.*

---

Your Name

---

Today's Date

---

Your Birth Date

## APPENDIX Y

### PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT INTERVIEWS

Hi participant's name. My name is Mrs. Anderson. I want to thank you for returning your Parent/Guardian Permission Form and for taking the time to speak to me. Since you have attended school in Bearwood since you went to kindergarten at Primary School I, you have a lot of important information to share!

This interview is part of the research I am doing for the doctoral program at the College of St. Elizabeth.

I want you to know that your name will not be used in this study, but I will be using your ideas as part of my research findings. It is important that you feel comfortable during this interview and I want you to know that you may stop this interview at any time without a penalty.

All of your comments will be kept confidential and your name or anything that can identify you will not be used in any way.

You will not be graded in any way.

I would like to record this session so that I will be certain to include all of the information you will be sharing with me. I will be sure that no one else will be able to listen to the recording except for me.

When I have finished this interview, it will be transcribed—or typed out—by a company. Everything will be kept in locked cabinets in my house and no one in the school district will ever hear or read the information from this interview except for me.

Do you have any questions?

Please read and sign this consent form.

Let's get started!

When a student has finished all of the grades in a school and moves on to the next school, it is called a school-to-school transition. For example, when you finished Middle School I and went to Middle School II you were *transitioning* from one school to another. That is what I am going to be asking you questions about...making *school-to-school transitions*.

Since you have lived in Bearwood and have gone to school in this district since kindergarten, you have made five school-to-school transitions. I am going to ask you about your experiences as a student. Are you ready to begin?

1. As you think back to the schools you have attended, did you feel more or less comfortable in some schools than in others?
  - a. What made you feel more or less comfortable?
2. As you think back to the schools you have attended, did you ever feel like you were an important part of your school?
  - a. Why did or didn't you feel that way?
  - b. Did you think that other students knew you? Did a lot of them know you by name?
  - c. Did you think that the adults in the school knew you? Did a lot of them know you by name?
3. Have you ever felt proud to be part of a school?
  - a. If so, why? If not, why not?
  - b. Have you ever worn a t-shirt or sweatshirt with a school's name on it? What was the school's name?
4. What was the best thing about changing schools—or transitioning?
5. What was the worst thing about changing schools—or transitioning?

6. How long did it take you to adjust after transitioning from one school to another?
  - a. What helped make transitioning to a new school easier?
  - b. Who helped make transitioning to a new school easier?
7. Were you ever excited about starting a new school? When? Why?
8. Were you ever scared about starting a new school? When? Why?
9. Do you have anything else about transitioning that you would like to share with me?

Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you.

Your ideas have been very important to my study and I appreciate your help.

APPENDIX Z

EMAIL INVITATION TO DIRECTORS AND SUPERVISORS

TO PARTICIPATE IN A FOCUS GROUP

Dear Colleagues,

I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D. One of the requirements of this program is the completion of an action research dissertation. The Superintendent of Schools has given me permission to conduct research within the Bearwood Township School District. The Bearwood Township Board of Education has been also been informed about this action research project.

My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

As curriculum directors and supervisors, your expertise, experience and opinions are vital to my research. I am seeking your participation in a one-to-one interview focused mainly on continuity of curriculum and instruction and students' academic achievement as they relate to the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

I am inviting you to participate in a focus group which will consist of the directors and supervisors who are involved in the areas of curriculum and instruction for the Bearwood Township School District

Please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary; there will be no penalty for choosing not to participate. Your identity will be kept confidential and no identifiable information will be asked or reported. The focus group is designed to take approximately one hour, but it may take a bit longer so that everyone's opinions will be heard.

I would ask you to seriously consider allowing me to incorporate your valuable input into my research. Please contact me via a "reply" to this email to let me know if you are willing to participate in this focus group.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss my research topic in further detail, please email me at [panderson@cse.edu](mailto:panderson@cse.edu).

Thank you in advance for your anticipated cooperation and want you thank you for taking a moment to reply to this email.

Yours truly,

Pauline F. Anderson

## APPENDIX Aa

### EMAIL TEMPLATE TO DIRECTORS AND SUPERVISORS FOR FOCUS GROUP

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for responding to my email inviting you to participate in a focus group.

I have scheduled the following date, time and location for the focus group session:

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

The focus group session should take approximately one hour.

Please confirm your attendance via email so that I can be sure this focus group session can be fit into your busy schedule.

I appreciate your cooperation and would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

Thank you,

Pauline

## APPENDIX Bb

### CONSENT FORM FOR DIRECTORS AND SUPERVISORS FOCUS GROUP

*Complete both pages of this form and submit it with the Submission Form. Indicate if you will use College letterhead \_\_\_\_\_ or the letterhead of the host site. ☒ X*

TITLE OF RESEARCH: *Grade-span Configuration and Subsequent School-to-School Transitions*

RESEARCHER: *Pauline F. Anderson is a Doctoral Student at the College of St. Elizabeth. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership.*

This study has been approved by the College of Saint Elizabeth's Institutional Review Board.

*Pauline F. Anderson has:*

- A. Provided me with a detailed explanation of the procedures to be followed in the project, including an identification of any experimental procedures.

I am participating in an interview as part of a research project for Pauline Anderson's doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth. I understand that the study focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement.

I will be asked to answer questions that relate to the continuity of curriculum and instruction and students' academic achievement as they relate to grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

The information that is discussed is confidential. Mrs. Anderson will not use my name or anything that could be used to identify me in her report and I will not discuss our meeting with others.

The focus group will last approximately one hour and I will not be compensated in any way for my participation.

B. Answered any questions that I have regarding the study.

I understand that:

A. My participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time. My refusal to participate will not result in any penalty.

B. By signing this agreement, I understand that the researchers do not expect that my participation in the study will harm me in any way. There is no plan to reimburse me for any costs I might incur as a result of participating in this study.

C. There is an expectation of confidentiality regarding the focus group. Therefore, I agree not to discuss this focus group with others.

D. I also give my consent to be audio taped.

I hereby give my consent to be the subject of your research.

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Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX Cc

### PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS FOR DIRECTORS AND SUPERVISORS FOCUS GROUP

Hello. Welcome to our focus group. Thank you for volunteering to participate in this session. I am presently enrolled in the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the College of St. Elizabeth in pursuit of my Ed.D. One of the requirements of this program is the completion of an action research dissertation. My research focuses on grade-span configuration and subsequent school-to-school transitions as they relate to students' sense of belonging, continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout the district, and students' academic achievement. As directors and supervisors, your expertise, experience and opinions are vital to my research. I am interested in hearing your thoughts on curriculum and instruction and students' academic achievement as they relate to the grade-span configuration and school-to-school transitions.

Please note that I will not be contributing to the conversation nor will I be sharing my personal views on any of the topics which will be discussed. I am here to moderate the session by asking the questions and listening to your responses. Please be assured that this session will be confidential and that no names or other personally identifiable information will be included in when I report my findings. In addition, the findings will be reported in generalizable terms, with no identifiable information attached to specific data. You may withdraw from this focus group at any time.

If there are no objections, I would like to record this session for accuracy. I will secure the recording and no one else will have access to it. Once this interview is completed, the interview will be transcribed by a transcription company. All of the recordings and transcriptions will be securely maintained in locked cabinets in my home and no one in the school district will hear the recording or read the transcribed documents except for me.

Do you have any questions?

Please read and sign this consent form.

Let's begin. I will read one question at time.

1. Describe communication about curriculum and instruction between grade levels and schools in this district.
2. Is there a connection between curriculum and instruction and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.
3. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to curriculum and instruction?
4. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and the grade-span configuration? Please explain.
5. Is there a connection between student academic achievement and school-to-school transitions? Please explain
6. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of the grade-span configuration of this district as it relates to student academic achievement?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the curriculum, instruction and/or the academic achievement of students in this district as these topics relate to the grade-span configuration and/or school-to-school transitions?

Thank you for your time. I truly appreciate your cooperation and your participation in my study.

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