

JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION AND FINDING SUCCESS

Junior High School Transition and Finding Success

Krista E. Nieraeth

Concordia University Portland



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Abstract

The transition between elementary and junior high schools can sometimes be difficult for students. Often, this transition leads to academic and behavioral issues due to new and higher expectations set upon them. Programs, such as PBIS, will be used to see if the transition between elementary and junior can be more successful for students in terms of academics and behavior. The target participants of this study will include an entire sixth grade class before they matriculate into junior high school and will follow them as they progress through the first four months of junior high school. Students were given a Likert scale survey five times during the study, and grade and behavioral data were collected and compared among three different school years for all junior high students. Analysis of the survey data found that student levels of nervousness or fear in regards to a change in the school routine and climate from elementary to junior high decrease, while their excitement for junior high academics and school climate increased over time. Academic and behavior data showed that grades increased and behavior referrals decreased when students were exposed to PBIS principles and participated in transition programs. Based on the findings, it can be inferred that students who exhibit high academic performance and have low behavioral referrals are students who transition more easily, are able to find more success in academics, and have fewer behavioral issues, thus allowing them to gain the skills needed to be successful in high school.

Key words: junior high students, transition programs, positive behavior intervention and support, academic success

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Chapter One – Introduction

Early weekday mornings find sleepy-eyed adolescents marching up the stairs of the school bus, ready for the long bus ride to school. As the bus starts up a mountain, rounds the corners of the mountain's passes and begins its descent into the vast valley of farmland, these students begin to wake up, ready for a day of school. As the bus slowly drives through town, students' stomachs start rumbling, hungry because they did not have time to get breakfast before they began their journey.

The school (grades 7 – 12) that these students are attending is located in Oregonton, a town of approximately 470 residents (Portland State University Population Research Center (PSU PRC), 2010). Many of the students are transported from four other towns approximately the same size of Oregonton. This consolidated school has been in existence since the late 1960's and has two feeder elementary schools, one on the same campus and another located 40 miles east of the town. After the sixth grade, those students who attend the elementary school in the other town are transported to Oregonton. Some get on the bus as early as 6:10 am and do not arrive home until after 5:00 pm. More than 75% of the student population at this school relies on some sort of transportation to school every day (_____ School District, 2010).

Numerous families of these students do not live inside the city limits of the towns serviced by the school but still reside in the school's boundaries. Instead, several choose to live closer to the jobs that support their families. Ties to the area run deep for some. Many are generational farmers, ranchers, or loggers and expect their children to follow the same lifestyle. A number of the families in the area have attended Oregonton's school and have had the same teachers as their children.

There is also a high number of migrant families found in the area. Several work on the local farms and ranches during harvest time and leave during the winter to find work further south. Oregonton's junior/senior high school provides ESL classes and assistance to students who come from homes where Spanish is the first language. Numerous families also move to small Oregonton due to its proximity to a nearby city that has an approximate population of 21,480, making it the largest city in the area (PSU PRC, 2010). Industries in this town include a major factory that manufactures doors and windows, a hospital and accompanying services, a mill, and retail stores. The city is also home to both a community college and a four-year college. This draws many to the post-secondary schools to help further their education and job prospects. Recently, Oregonton's school population has slightly increased due to a massive pipeline project that is bringing families into the area. However, there has been a decrease in the number of students over the years, mostly due to the economic downturn and lack of stable jobs found in the local farming, ranching, and logging industries.

Located in the state's fourth largest county, the researcher's school is part of a larger school district which serves families located within the county boundaries, excluding the largest city. The district has six high schools, four of which house grades 7 – 12, two full-time junior high schools (grades seven and eight), and 12 elementary schools (grades K – 6), all which serve over 6,000 students and employs over 350 teachers and educational assistants (Public School Review LLC, 2009; _____ School District, 2010). Most students in the district are Caucasian; however, there are schools that have high populations of Hispanic and Native American students. According to data released for the 2009 – 2010 school year, 71% of the students within the district were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program, qualifying some

elementary, junior and high schools to be identified as Title I schools (_____ *School District – School Guide*, 2010).

Before the 2009 - 2010 school year, the district realigned its boundaries with an adjoining district, gaining one more high school (grades 9 – 12) and losing an elementary school to the adjoining district. The district also closed one elementary school. This realignment has been part of a bigger issue within the county and the community for many years. Many residents want the school districts to merge in hopes of saving money by combining resources. Voting for a complete merger has taken place several times over the years, but has never passed in either district. Many bonds for both school districts have not been passed in recent years due to the unrest over the lack of merger. In March 2009, the adjoining school district constituents voted in a special election as to whether they would like to merge with Oregonon's district. This measure was voted down; therefore, realignment of district boundaries took place with funding from the state.

Currently, the district is struggling with budget dilemmas due to the recent economic crisis. Over the course of the past school year and the current one, the budget has been reduced from \$62.7 million to \$56.3 million (Pfeil, 2010). For the 2009 – 2010 school year, approximately \$2.79 million was cut through the elimination of junior high school athletics, a reduction in high school athletics and student activities, reduction in certified and classified staff positions, cutting classified work hours, and furlough days for both teachers and administrators (Albrecht, 2009; Aschbrenner, 2010).

For the current school year, the district reduced its budget by approximately \$3.61 million. To help with this process, teachers and administrators agreed to take 12 furlough days, with the classified staff taking 10 furlough days. All employees also agreed to a no increase on

the insurance cap paid by the district. Ten teaching positions were eliminated from the district through attrition, and classified work hours were reduced by 45 hours per day. Textbook purchases for both math and science, K – 12, were placed on hold for the year, as well as some technology purchases. More cuts would have been made, but the district received \$1.3 million from a public sector jobs bill passed by the federal government, as well as \$1.8 million from the local county road fund (Pfeil, 2010).

Looking ahead to the 2011- 2012 school year, the superintendent of the district, in a recent newspaper editorial, stated that the district stands to cut approximately 9% out of the budget if the state lowers its K – 12 educational funding from a \$5.783 billion to a \$5.4 billion budget, as has been indicated by the state's current governor. If the current funding levels are used for the 2011 – 2012 school year, the superintendent predicts that approximately \$6 million will have to be cut from the district's current operating budget. If that funding level were to drop to a \$5.4 billion educational budget, the reduction to the district's budget would be approximately \$8 million (Theede, 2011).

The research site is Oregon's junior/senior high school which serves students in grades 7 – 12 who live in the eastern part of the county. The campus as a whole accommodates grades K – 12, with a total population of 453 students for the 2009 – 2010 school year. There are two main school buildings on this campus that are connected by a breezeway and students in grades 7 – 12 use both buildings for classes. One of the buildings was built in the 1930s and the other in the 1970s, with major remodeling happening in the newer building in the early 1990s. A school bond was put on the ballot in 2008 to help remodel the older school building, as well as other buildings within the district, but failed due to school merger concerns. Oregon Junior/Senior High School has 234 enrolled students, with 14 teachers, a vice-principal, a

principal shared with the on-campus elementary school, one paraprofessional, and a shared media specialist. The average teaching experience at the school is 14 years. Approximately 65% of the teachers at the school have a master’s degree or higher, while 89% of the classes are taught by highly qualified teachers. All teachers at Oregon Junior/Senior High School teach both junior high and high school level classes, with an average student-to-teacher ratio of 17:1. This school was rated “outstanding” by the state educational department and met AYP for the 2009 – 2010 school year (____ Department of Education, 2010).

According to the standardized testing data from the 2009 - 2010 school year, student testing scores by grade from Oregon Junior/Senior High School were as followed:

Subject	Grade 7 % Meets and Exceeds	Grade 8 % Meets and Exceeds	High School % Meets and Exceeds
Reading	70	53	64
Math	78	68	32
Writing	54	n/a	60
Science	n/a	50	49

The scores in all areas were an increase over the 2008 – 2009 OAKS scores for the school. However, all areas tested, with the exception of writing, were still below the district and state averages (____ Department of Education, 2010).

Before the 2009 – 2010 school year, there was no system set in place for continuity between the elementary schools and junior/senior high school at Oregon. Students came directly from sixth grade into an environment where students from ages 12 – 18 intermingle together in hallways, cafeteria, and classrooms. Some staff members had expressed concerns that students in the junior high were not fully prepared for the behavior and academic expectations of

junior high school. Many believe this is due to lack of communication between the elementary schools and the junior high school. It became a priority for Oregon's administration and staff to help make the transition between the schools easier and more successful for all those involved. In the 2009 – 2010 school year, the number of students enrolled in the seventh grade was 39 and the number enrolled in the eighth grade was 33. In those grades, approximately 14% of the junior high students are enrolled in the special education program at Oregon (_____ School District, 2010).

The staff members and administrators at Oregon have been implementing the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) program as a part of the district's secondary school climate initiative. In this program, the umbrella rules of "Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible, and Be on Time" have been taught throughout the school year to every student using staff-made lesson plans and positive reinforcement, both tangible and verbal. The goal for the program is to ensure that students are learning necessary skills that teach them through positive means what it means to be a safe, respectful and responsible student. This program has been in place since the 2007 – 2008 school year. The administration has supported the staff during this process and actively engages the staff and students using PBIS principles. Also used in conjunction with PBIS is the School-Wide Information System (SWIS) program, which allows school officials to track behavioral referrals, and the eSchoolPlus program, which allows academic progress to be monitored.

With this increasing tracking ability, staff at Oregon identified that in the 2008 – 2009 school year, seventh and eighth grade students made up 62% of behavior referrals and 23% of F's given, while in the 2009 – 2010 school year, seventh and eighth grade students made up 30% of behavior referrals and 25% of F's given. These percentages are much higher than any

other of the grades. The greatest committed offenses in junior high were tardiness and disruptive behavior. Also, out of the ten students with the most referrals, six of them were junior high students (_____ School District, 2010). Many staff members have expressed concerns regarding this data in the previous school years, but have never had concrete data to justify them. Ideas have been formulated using the PBIS principles as to what incentives should be used to help decrease those numbers. Through this research and with this data, the researcher is looking to help formulate ideas as to why these behavior and academic issues are occurring and to suggest and implement programs to help prevent these issues.

The researcher, having seven years of classroom experience, five at Oregon Junior/Senior High School, teaches a wide variety of science and math classes for grades 7 – 12. The researcher is currently working towards the completion of her Master's of Education degree in Educational Administration. She is interested in looking at ways to improve student performance in school and on state assessments. Through her classes, she is hoping to learn ways to impact school climate so that a positive and productive learning environment is provided for all students.

The researcher has been a member of the school's PBIS team for the past four years and has been a part of writing the school improvement plan, which includes a plan of implementation of PBIS. She has given presentations to the school's staff that includes current student academic and behavioral data. The researcher has also led discussions with the staff as to what steps are needed for implementing PBIS at the school. She has attended PBIS workshops given by Jeff Sprague and Steve Smith from the University of Oregon, as well as many PBIS workshops provided by the PBIS director in Oregon's district. Because of her involvement with the PBIS team, the researcher has attended trainings on using SWIS and eSchoolPlus and has the

ability with other staff members to monitor student behavioral and academic progress throughout the year.

During this action research, the researcher is looking at why some seventh and eighth grade students exhibit low academic performance and have high discipline referral numbers. The researcher will also be looking at the connection between this data and how it might affect those students' academic and behavioral success in the future. She is also seeking ways that the school can assist these students so they can find success in the seventh and eighth grades and ultimately in future grade levels.



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Chapter Two – The Issue

Some believe that success in school happens due to habits that are learned during previous grades and experiences. However, in the lower grades, some students do not learn or are not taught the skills and behaviors needed to be successful in the upper grades. During the elementary years, all students are confined to one teacher for a majority of the day. It is in one classroom where these students do all of their core classes. Perhaps once a day they may go to an art, PE, or music class, but most often they are confined to one space. Students have constant access to paper, pencils, books, and other items needed for their school work because those items are located in the classrooms. Also in these classrooms, students are able to walk around whenever and wherever they want to gather materials for class. However, in the secondary grades, such is not the case.

Because of the high failing rate in the junior high school, it seems as though many students have not acclimated to the new “way” of school, where classes are located in different rooms every 48 to 50 minutes. Students are asked to manage their time wisely and ensure that they make it to classes on time and prepared. The researcher currently teaches two classes in which junior high students are enrolled. At the end of the second marking period, approximately 5% failed her class, while another 10% earned a ‘D’. Many teachers in the school have the same or higher failing rate among junior high students.

Along with the failing grades, the staff at the researcher’s school is finding that these students are using their newly found freedom in negative ways. Junior high students made up approximately 30% of the behavior referrals written for the 2009 – 2010 school year, most for tardiness and disruptive behavior. Out of that percentage, 83% of the referrals were written for seventh grade students and 17% were written for eighth grade students. Many staff members

often are heard complaining about the behavior of these students in the hallways, classroom, cafeteria, and playground. The researcher herself wrote two referrals for the 2009 – 2010 school year, both of which were for seventh grade students. However, in the previous school year, the researcher wrote 14 total behavioral referrals for students in both seventh and eighth grades.

The researcher has taught junior high classes for five years. Over those years, she has seen some of the same traits as her colleagues in junior high students. Usually after the first marking period, most became acclimated to their new environment and flourished both academically and behaviorally. Parent/teacher conferences happened around this time, so discussions with the students and their parents seemed to help the students begin the process in becoming more responsible and respectful. At semester time, however, the researcher had noted that some of her junior high students continued to leave their materials in their lockers before class and in her classroom after class. The next day, these students would walk into the classroom and declare they could not find their book, homework, pencil, etc., to take home the previous night, so their assignments were incomplete. These students tended to become disruptive during class time due to lack of preparation and not being to fully become engaged in the material being taught.

The researcher has been in meetings where this subject has been mentioned and other staff members often report that they were having difficulty with the very same junior high students on the very same issue. These behavior and academic issues have become a major concern for the school's PBIS team and administration. Ideas have been brought to the PBIS team about ways to help alleviate this issue, but none have been implemented due to lack of support or lack of information on the idea posed. Many staff members seem to have become frustrated that nothing has been done, so referral rates for junior high students have increased

because of lack of preparation and the percentage of failing grades is approximately the same as it was before.

Oregonton's seventh grade class has the highest state testing scores in the secondary school. Historically, however, as Oregonton's students get older, their test scores as a whole drop. Why does this occur? Are students not adequately prepared with academic and behavioral skills that allow them to maximize their learning in the upper grades? In this action research, the researcher hopes to use different collection methods, such as SWIS, eSchoolPlus, and survey results from seventh grade students, to study why some junior high students exhibit low academic performance and have high behavioral referrals and what that means for their academic and behavioral success in the future. The researcher is also looking for ways other schools have combated this problem and how Oregonton can implement those methods to assist these students in learning the necessary skills to become successful.

Literature Review

In the course of reviewing literature on student transitions between elementary to junior high and junior high to high schools, it becomes apparent that this time is marked with academic achievement loss and behavior problems. Adolescent development is in full swing at these ages and many children are coping not only with the biological changes in their bodies and also social challenges that await them in their new environment. According to Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, and Kurlakowsky (2001), it is during these transition periods that students are facing a range of new demands in school structure, classroom organization, and academic and teacher standards. Many find that this leads to a lack of predictability in how students may find success, which can lead to stress and anxiety (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). These types of

feelings, compounded already with the child's changing biological processes, can lead to a lack of connection between students, teachers, parents, peers, and school (Anfara & Schmid, 2007).

Students and parents alike have concerns about the transitions. Many questions, such as the amount of homework that will be given or where classrooms are located, seem to be on the forefront of their minds even before the school year starts (Akos & Galassi, 2004). The fear of the unknown often leads students to start the year trying to figure how to survive in junior high, rather than how to learn the necessary skills to become successful. These students find themselves in school environments and classrooms that have higher behavior and academic expectations than they have ever experienced before (Anderson, Munk, Young, Conley, & Caldarella, 2008). Sometimes, students are unable to discover success in either place and are not able to make any connection to the school community and sense of purpose in their learning (Pitton, 2001). This inability to find some sort of connection due to poor academic performance and problem behaviors can often produce a higher chance of the student dropping out of high school (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008).

While the subject of school transition is not new, it has become prominent due to the mandates of No Child Left Behind. Many schools are looking at ways to help students make a positive transition between elementary and junior high in order to allow academic and behavior skills, as well as life skills, to be taught and successfully implemented before high school (Dillon, 2008). Orientation programs are being utilized to help calm the fears of incoming students (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Throughout the year, many schools are instituting programs that help define common expectations for all students, assist in building a sense of community, respond to student concerns, and in general, allow students to become a more integral part of their school (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Borelli, 2007; Dillon, 2008).

The researcher will first explore literature that describes how academic achievement and skills factor into a successful transition. Next, the research will review how behavior performance affects academic achievement. Finally, the researcher will describe some best practices and school-based interventions that could be used in helping create a successful transition.

Academic Achievement and Skills.

A great number of transitions occur during the adolescent years. A child is transitioning biologically, psychologically, and socially (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008). According to Anfara and Schmid (2007), this period is usually marked by levels of stress, anxiety, and anticipation. Often these symptoms are accompanied by a decrease in academic achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and a feeling of connection to the school community. Sometimes, these attributes are exacerbated by the fact that the school environment has mismatched the level of psychological needs of the student at that particular moment (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Dillon, 2008; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006).

During the elementary years, much of the learning is student-centered. Often, students are in charge of what they learn and how they learn it (Pitton, 2001). They find their sense of purpose in the learning process, and thus are able to find academic success. It is through this success that the necessary skills are learned so that the success can continue. However, when these students reach the secondary level, they find environments that are more teacher-centered and which require higher levels of self-motivation and responsibility (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). Many students struggle to find the success that they previously had but are unable to find a sense of purpose in learning. The focus of learning is now in the performance of a task rather than the mastering of basic knowledge (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). This change in

the learning environment often marks the beginning of the downward slide into achievement loss (Johnson & Smith, 2008).

Lack of skills, such as organization and time management, often lead to a lower rate of academic achievement during the junior high years. Gone are the days where students have one main classroom, with one teacher and desks that have built in storage facilities. Now, students are asked to travel to seven different classrooms, stop at their locker which may or may not be on their way, and do all this with minor supervision (Anderson, Munk, Young, Conley, & Caldarella, 2008). Secondary teachers often assume that organizational, behavior, and academic skills are taught and learned in elementary schools, so they neglect to teach them.

This change can overwhelm any student. Some make the transition to the environment quicker than others, but still there are those who have trouble doing so (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). These students are frequently the ones who forget their assignments and materials and are disciplined because they are not prepared. They are the ones that are found isolated in the classroom, staring off into space, and not participating in classroom activities. Much of the student's success is related to how well they are engaged in their learning. Engagement is often tied to academic success and these students must have the necessary skills to find that success (Anderson, Munk, Young, Conley, & Caldarella, 2008; Sanford & Evertson, 2001).

Many of these secondary classrooms have a set amount of time in which to teach the standards set forth by each state. Teachers are more focused on teaching the content, rather than building relationships with their students, unlike in the elementary grades, where teachers are able to give each student individualized time over a period of a day. This lack of relationships can lead to a feeling of disconnectedness from the school, which can lead to a lack of motivation

for learning (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). During this transition time, students may require additional support to help them meet the demands of the more complex learning environment. If they are unable to have such a supportive environment, then most often that will lead to a decrease in academic achievement (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Dillon, 2008; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Pitton, 2001).

Behavior Performance.

Junior high school is a time where students start experiencing more freedom. No longer are they watched over for a majority of their school time. Once in junior high, students now have the freedom to move between classes, use candy and soda machines, and walk to the cafeteria on their own. With this freedom, however, comes increased expectations and responsibility, and increased opportunities for failure. Junior high schools have a higher risk of experiencing incidents of fighting, bullying, verbal abuse, and overall disorder in the classroom (Walker, Lambie, & Ngazimbi, 2008).

Often, students who have the higher incidents of behavior problems are the ones who have lower academic achievement. Disciplining these students includes many out of classroom tactics, such as in-school and out of school suspensions. However, the time out of the classroom is sometimes what the student is trying to achieve. Students may use nonviolent behaviors, such as talking back, unnecessary movements, and sleeping during class, as an aversion to not doing their work. Many times, students with early academic difficulties are at a higher risk of developing social behavior problems (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008).

Traditional school discipline is seemingly not working in dealing with these aversion behaviors. According to Walker, Lambie, and Ngazimbi (2008), school administrators often use traditional discipline tactics, like suspensions, because they lack the effective behavioral

management skills. What they fail to realize, however, is that the time away from school and classroom activities does not allow these students to participate in them, making it difficult for these students to feel connected to the school (Walker, Lambie, & Ngazimbi, 2008). This may lead to an even further loss of the student's academic achievement because they are not able to find the success that will motivate them to be the best they can be (Pitton, 2001). Walker, Lambie, and Ngazimbi (2008) also say that,

For the concerned middle level educator, it is necessary to understand the prevalence and potential impact of school misconduct on a student's academic, career, and social development. Furthermore, by analyzing how schools are responding to students who present with discipline problems, implication may be drawn for educators as to how to effectively support these students. (p.4)

Instead of using the traditional disciplining methods, many believe that students should be immersed in an environment where behavior expectations are taught and reinforced, giving the students the necessary skills to self-regulate their behaviors, which is one of the main principles behind PBIS. Often, if these self-regulated skills are taught and reinforced by the school staff, effective teaching and learning will take place (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). These skills also allow for better transitions between grade levels, which can lead to better academic achievement and behavior (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). Many junior high students are looking for ways to control their lives; teaching them the skills to help self-regulate gives the students the feeling of control over their actions and learning. This can lead to higher levels of academic achievement, lower behavioral problems, and a positive learning environment.

Ultimately, the belief that one has the ability to control behavior and academic success leads to a successful student (Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001).

Best Practices and School-Based Interventions.

During these transition times, many students state that their main concerns in moving to a new school are getting lost, being with older students, knowing school rules, making new friends, and increased difficulties in academic work (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). These concerns can lead to students feeling overwhelmed, trying to survive through the school day rather than trying to learn new material. Many times, students have a preconceived notion of what their new school is like because they have heard stories from older siblings and friends. However, if there are programs in place that can help orientate those students to their new surroundings and support them throughout the school year, research says that transitioning into junior high school will be much more smooth and more successful for the student (Anfara & Schmid, 2007; Dillon, 2008; Mizelle, 1999; Pitton, 2001).

Studies have shown that schools that implement some sort of transition program produce students who are less likely to drop out of high school (Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). Many schools do pre-orientation programs with their incoming students. Visiting classrooms, meeting teachers and support staff, and having interactions with their peers are some ways that schools use to help students during the transition period of their schooling (Smith, 1997). This seems to calm any fears that these students have before they even enter school.

Providing ongoing support is also a key in the transition of students. At the beginning of each year, schools that have a vision as to what they want the behaviors at their school to look like will achieve that vision by having clearly defined expectations, school rules, and intolerable behaviors. That leads to those schools having less behavior issues (Borelli, 2007). Using this a

jumping board, many then integrate programs into their school curriculum that help build a sense of community, giving the kids the connection to the school, which is shown to increase academic achievement and decrease behavior problems (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). Programs that give students the opportunity to be more involved in their learning and school environments tend to allow them to better prepare themselves for high school because they are learning the academic and behavior skills necessary for success (Mizelle, 1999). Schools that also give the students a chance to be actively involved in the decision-making of the school also see a higher quality school climate (Walter, Lambie, & Ngazimbi, 2008).

Progress monitoring is also a way that schools use to identify students who might be struggling during their transition years (Johnson & Smith, 2008). Many schools today employ programs that can give instant information on a student's grades, behavior, and attendance. If students are struggling, often their records are sent to a facility committee, where they may be placed on plans that will allow them to work intimately with peers and staff members alike to learn and practice successful academic, behavioral, and social skills. This practice has shown for some students a decrease in the amount of behavior referrals and an increase in academic achievement (Hawken, MacLeod, & Rawlings, 2007). Often, goal setting becomes a focus with students at this stage. Allowing students to set realistic expectations for their behavior and learning gives them the responsibility for their own successes and failures. They need to believe that their situation can change through hard work and effort on their part (Martino, 1993; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001).

Reaching out to parents has also shown to be an effective method to help with the transitioning of students between elementary and junior high school. Parents, as well, have questions and concerns about their child's new learning environment. Inviting parents to become

actively involved in their child's schooling is one way schools can calm those concerns. Students who have parental involvement in their education more than likely will exhibit an increased academic achievement, lower amounts of behavioral problems, and will be less likely to drop out of high school (Mizelle, 1999; Minke & Anderson, 2005).

Schools that provide ongoing supportive environments that promote and teach proper academic and behavioral expectations and include parental support tend to see more successful students (Anderson, Munk, Young, Conley, & Caldarella, 2008). By giving the students the independence and trusting them to use it positively, schools allow those students to grow as people and cultivate positive, meaningful connections with the school, their peers, and their teachers (Scott, 2007). Developing and maintaining these connections will not only increase the quality of the education students are receiving, but also help keep these students in school where they will learn important skills that will make successful members of society.



Chapter Three – The Goal

This research project will focus on reasons why some seventh and eighth grade students exhibit low academic performance and have high discipline referrals. The researcher will also be looking at the connection between this data and how it might affect those students' academic and behavioral success in the future. She will also look for ways that the school can assist these students so they can find success in these grade levels and in future grade levels.

In looking at the research behind adolescent development, particularly in the ages around sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, many children going through this stage of their lives tend to begin showing a lack of motivation and willingness to try new things both academically and socially. It is during this time where a decrease in academic achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and connection to the school community is seen (Anfara & Schmid, 2007). Because of the transition between an environment where learning was more student-centered to an environment where learning is more teacher-centered, some students are showing an increase in behavioral problems and academic failure (Pitton, 2001; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). This increase may be an indicator of poor academic performance and behavior problems at the high school level, which can lead students dropping out (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008). The researcher is hoping to identify why some students exhibit low academic achievement and high behavioral problems during the junior high school years and their feelings towards school transition and environment.

In the transition from elementary to junior high school, many students exhibit anxiety of the unknown. These students are coming from a place where all learning was in one room and their belongings close at hand to a place where they have to travel to different classrooms and

stop off at a locker to collect their materials in a specific time frame. There is some newfound freedom in this new school, with each student now responsible for getting themselves and their materials to the correct places on time. Based on past history and data collected, the researcher believes that this newfound freedom can be, for some students, a hindrance in learning the proper academic, behavior, and social skills necessary to become successful students in both high school and in the world (Dillon, 2008). The researcher is looking for best practices in school-based interventions, including methods introduced by PBIS, which will allow for necessary academic, behavior, and social skills to be taught.

Instruments for Gathering Data

In this study, the researcher will use student questionnaires and ongoing observation and progress monitoring throughout the study using different assessments and tracking models to measure student satisfaction and achievement. Using the Likert scale, the feelings of students will be assessed by asking their opinions on school climate, learning environment, and their feelings towards their peers and teachers (Appendix). The student questionnaire will be given at the beginning and end of the study, as well as three other times throughout the year, and the results will be compared. It is the researcher's hope that at the end of the study, student's perceptions about the school environment will be more positive, indicating that the programs put into place have addressed student and teacher concerns.

Student academic and behavior progress will be monitored using eSchoolPlus and the SWIS programs. These programs are utilized throughout the district in which the research site is located. SWIS will allow for the tracking of behaviors because all behaviors that are brought to the attention of the research site's administration are entered into this program. This program gives data that will allow for the dissemination of behaviors based on time of day, location,

motivation, and staff member. The other program, eSchoolPlus, will be used for ongoing academic tracking. Teachers and administrators use this for grades and attendance all school days. At the end of each marking period, classroom grades are published for teachers and parents to see student grades for each subject taught. This will allow for constant, ongoing monitoring of classroom grades for any student who is participating in the study. It is the researcher's hope that as the study progresses, the percentage of failing grades and behavioral referrals for students in the study will decrease because this monitoring will allow for individual interventions when the students who are struggling are identified.



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Chapter 4 – Action Plan

In this project, the researcher will be looking at the following:

- The reasons why junior high students exhibit low academic performance,
- The reasons why junior high students have high discipline referral numbers
- The correlation between this data and how it might affect those students' academic and behavioral success in the future.

The researcher is also seeking ways that the school can assist these students so they can find success in junior high and in future grade levels.

Possible Solutions

Much of the basis for this action plan comes from PBIS. This system is currently being used at the research site as a way to improve and reinforce a positive school climate and learning environment. The researcher looked for programs that would fit within the framework of PBIS so that consistency between the program and the solutions would occur. Very little monetary assistance is needed to implement these solutions. The research site has, in the past, received grant money from the University of Oregon for use to implement the PBIS program at the site; however, that money is no longer available and a small amount of money is given to the school by the district to help maintain certain PBIS programs.

Staff Development.

Staff members are a very important part of the transition process from elementary to junior high. They are on the front line, interacting with the students every minute of the school day. Adams (2008) states that “the price of failing to connect with students can be high. If kids don't experience a smooth transition from elementary to middle school, it can be destabilizing for many” (p. 44). Often, junior high staff members are trained only in content area, not in

adolescent development, which leads to a lack of understanding of the cognitive development of these students (Adams, 2008).

Before the school year starts, all staff members should be trained how to help junior high students become acclimated to their new environment. Adams (2008) suggests that there are four keys to student success in junior high: organization, communication skills, academic basics and emotional awareness. Anderson, Munk, Young, Conley, and Caldarella (2008) also state that organization is a key to school success. This particular skill is the one that allows students to learn time and material management and how to take charge of their learning (Anderson, Munk, Young, Conley, & Caldarella, 2008). Helping students learn these skills will give them the ability to be successful in junior high and in the future grades as well.

Since PBIS involves staff development opportunities and these principles fit into the PBIS framework, the researcher, in conjunction with the PBIS team, will create development opportunities and materials, such as lesson plans, posters, etc., that explain these key elements. Support will be provided throughout the year to help teachers integrate these elements, as well as the PBIS principles, into the school environment and classrooms. The PBIS team will also create an incentive program to help reinforce these principles and elements. One will be an academic incentive called SMART (Student Success Means Academic Readiness and Tenacity) bucks that will be used to recognize academic achievements and growth. The other, called the Antler buck, is a social incentive that recognizes citizenship, responsibility, and appropriate social behaviors. All staff will be trained to use these as positive reinforcement of the PBIS principles that will be used in classroom and school common areas.

The researcher understands that not all staff members will be receptive of these new ideas. However, if a majority of staff members will integrate them into their classrooms and school

common areas, the students will then be immersed in an environment that is built upon these principles. The researcher accepts this possible solution.

Check-In/Check-Out Procedure.

The check-in/check-out procedure is currently being used in the CHAMPS program, an off-shoot of the PBIS program that is currently used in the elementary grades at Oregonton. This procedure is based on the notion that positive relationships between teachers and students will increase student achievement, lower behavioral referrals, and in general allow for a much smoother student adjustment during transition periods (Hawken, MacLeod, & Rawlings, 2007; Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004).

The researcher believes that the check-in/check-out procedures as outlined by Hawken, MacLeod, and Rawlings (2007) and Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, and Lehr (2004) are effective. However, due to scheduling conflicts and monetary concerns, it would not be feasible at the research site to have this program at this time. The procedure calls for a staff member who is paid to monitor students throughout the school day. This job requires the staff member to supervise a particular set of students' grades and behavior, and then to solely concentrate on helping those students build connections to the school (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004). While rejecting this possible solution, it is the researcher's hope that at a future time, the principles behind this procedure will be implemented into the whole school through different programs, like homeroom teachers and advisory groups.

The researcher believes that if students can find connections with teachers and believe that teachers are their advocates, this will empower students to take charge of their learning and behavior and learn the necessary skills to become successful students.

Transition Programs.

Many students and parents move into junior high school with unanswered questions and preconceived notions. Often, many come into their new environment wondering where their classrooms are, how much homework they will have, what kind of friends they will make, and what kind of school rules they are about to encounter (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Schools can use different types of transition programs before the school year starts and throughout the school year to help alleviate these questions and concerns.

Using programs like teacher meet-and-greets and open houses before and at the beginning of the school year will allow students to start becoming comfortable with their new environment. Currently, the research site does not have open houses the year prior to the start of junior high school; rather, an open house is scheduled three weeks after the start of school. Allowing students to meet the teachers and to ask any questions they might have *before* school is released in the spring or before it starts in the fall will help those students go into the next school year with some idea of what the academic and behavioral expectations will be required of them.

There will also need to be some programs that support students that are on-going during the school year. Older peer mentors and advisory groups are ways to increase student connection to the school and decrease student anxiety (Walter, Lambie, & Ngazimbi, 2008; Smith, 2001; Pitton, 2001). Support for these students during this transition time by all members of the school community will allow for students to find answers to their questions and concerns and learn the necessary skills for success which will set them up for a more successful high school career.

The researcher sees a tremendous need for these programs to be in place at her school and accepts this possible solution. She will work with colleagues to brainstorm ideas for these programs and develop these programs.

Summary

The researcher reviewed many different articles, all which stated that the better the transition between elementary, junior high, and high school, the better the student would perform both academically and behaviorally. While there were many ideas that were presented, the researcher felt that staff development and transition programs would best fit the PBIS program already in place at the research site. The staff members at the school have been trained in the PBIS principles and these programs would enhance the PBIS philosophy at her school.

The researcher will work with the research site's administration and staff to develop these programs into ones that fit with the direction and vision of the school. The researcher is also mindful that this research will only be possible with the help and support of her administration and colleagues. She will work with them to ensure that all ideas are considered during this research period.

Action Plan

In this action research project, the researcher will be looking at why some junior high students have low academic achievement, high behavioral referrals, and what that means for their future success. She will also be looking at ways the school can assist them so that they can be successful.

Before beginning the project, the researcher will meet with the administration in the spring before entry into junior high to discuss the aspects of the project. This project does entail some organizational and scheduling changes for the school day, so it is important for the administration to review the plan.

Action Plan Timeline.

April:

- Meet with school administration to discuss transition program/shadowing for sixth grade students.
- Meet with junior high school teachers to discuss students who would be good hosts for sixth graders for a day.
- Meet with sixth grade teachers to set up schedule of shadowing and match sixth grade students with junior high school student hosts.

May:

- Meet with student hosts to discuss expectations of the visit.
- Meet with sixth grade students to discuss expectations of their shadowing day in junior high school.
- Shadow day for sixth grade students.
- Survey to sixth grader students before and after shadow day.

August:

- Staff member development workshops on PBIS and keys to successful middle school transition.

September:

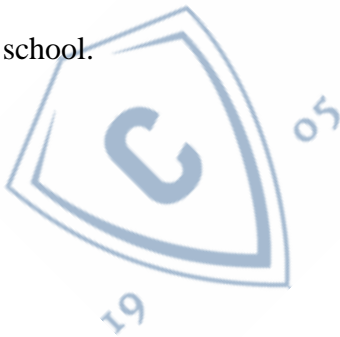
- School expectations taught to students first two weeks of school.
- Antler and SMART buck program explained to students and are implemented into the PBIS program and classrooms.
- Junior high students surveyed on feelings about junior high at the beginning of the school year.

October – December

- Programs reinforce the school’s academic and behavior expectations, including the Antler and SMART buck.
- Student monitoring using eSchoolPlus and SWIS programs.
- Junior high students surveyed on feelings about junior high at the first and second marking periods (approximately 6 and 12 weeks from the beginning of school).

Conclusion

These programs are a good fit at the research site. They fit well into the PBIS program already established and will enhance the program. Learning why some students at the school have low academic achievement and high behavior problems will allow the staff to tailor programs that fit the students’ needs. While adolescence is a trying time, both biologically and psychologically, having programs in place that help the students find their place in school will give them the opportunity to feel comfortable. With this in place, the necessary skills for success in junior high and high school can be taught and these students will be more likely to be involved in their learning during these formative years and be academically and behaviorally successful in high school.



Chapter Five – The Results and Next Steps

During this action research, the researcher looked at why some seventh and eighth grade students exhibit low academic performance and have high discipline referral numbers and the connection between this data and how it might affect those students' academic and behavioral success in the future. Data from previous school years showed that junior high students, as a whole, had the highest overall failing grades in classes, as well as a high number of referrals, written mostly for tardiness and disruptive behavior. For the action plan to be put into place, the researcher met with the administration, in addition to junior high and sixth grade teachers in the early spring 2009 to discuss ideas on a transition program for sixth grade students and the timeline in which that program would occur in late spring 2009.

During this time, the researcher also composed the student survey (Appendix) with the administration at Oregon Junior/Senior High School that would help monitor the students' feelings throughout the process of the action plan. Discussions with the administration also occurred for the usage of grade and behavioral data. The administration was slightly concerned about releasing this data, but agreed to allow the data to be used in the study as long as the researcher took proper care and disposal of the confidential information.

The tools used to gather data for this action research project were Likert scale surveys, eSchoolPlus, and SWIS. The data was collected throughout the entire project and included student, teacher and parent perceptions, as well as grade and behavioral data comparisons among three different school years.

Table 1
Student survey results – mean score

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i
Pre-Shadow	3.55	3.63	3.55	2.90	3.68	3.28	3.73	4.03	2.55
Post-Shadow	2.11	3.68	3.92	2.32	3.76	2.39	3.89	4.26	2.00
Beginning of School Year	2.23	4.08	4.18	1.92	4.13	2.15	4.26	4.44	1.82
End of 1st 6 Weeks	1.74	4.39	4.21	1.79	4.26	1.68	3.92	4.55	1.53
End of 2nd 6 Weeks	1.79	4.29	4.21	1.76	4.21	1.68	3.92	4.53	1.55

Note: The raw data show the mean score of the student survey results that were given throughout the project. The survey (Appendix) was a Likert scale, with the choice of one being strongly disagree with the statement and five being strongly agree with the statement. There were negative mean score changes for questions a, d, f, and i. These questions were designed to ask students about levels of nervousness or fear in regards to a change in the school routine and climate from elementary to junior high. For questions b, c, e, g, and h, there were positive mean score changes. These questions dealt with the students' excitement for junior high academics and climate.

Table 2
Junior High referral data

School Year	2008 - 2009		2009 - 2010		2010 - 2011	
	Total Month	Total Day	Total Month	Total Day	Total Month	Total Day
Sept.	26	1.24	5	0.24	3	0.17
Oct.	46	2.19	16	0.84	21	1.17
Nov.	29	1.93	18	1.06	7	0.47
Dec.	29	1.93	7	0.50	11	0.85
Total	130	1.82	46	0.66	42	0.67

Note: The raw junior high referral data show the total junior referrals written per month in three different school years, as well as the average number of referrals written for junior high students per day in each of those months. Over the three school years, the number of referrals has decreased in total and the average number of referrals written per day has declined from nearly two written per day to less than one referral written per day.

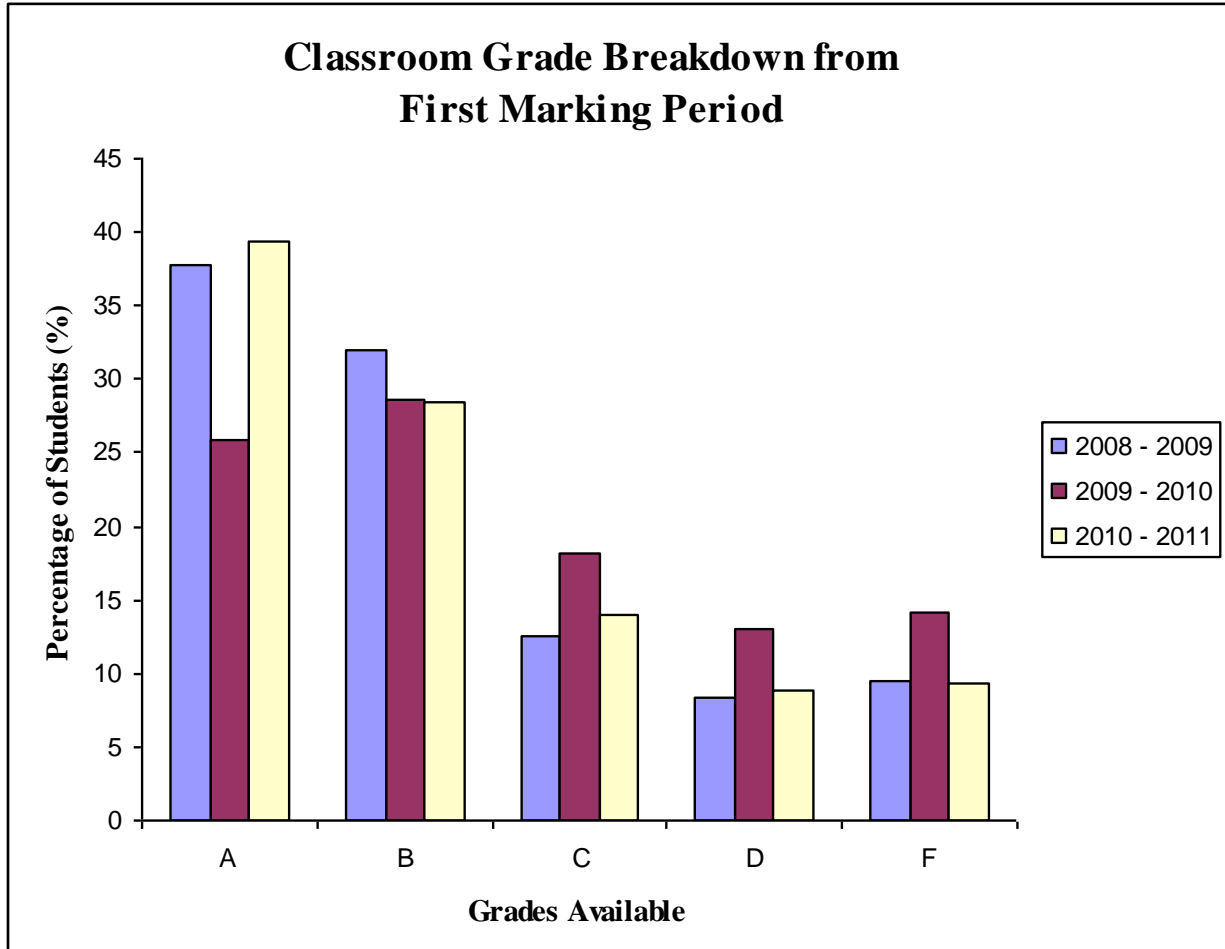
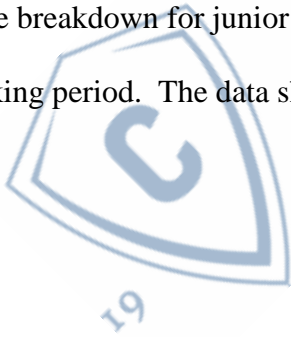


Figure 1. Classroom grade breakdown at the first marking period. Figure 1 shows the classroom grade breakdown for junior high students over a duration of six weeks, ending at the first marking period. The data shown are a comparison of grades from three different school years.



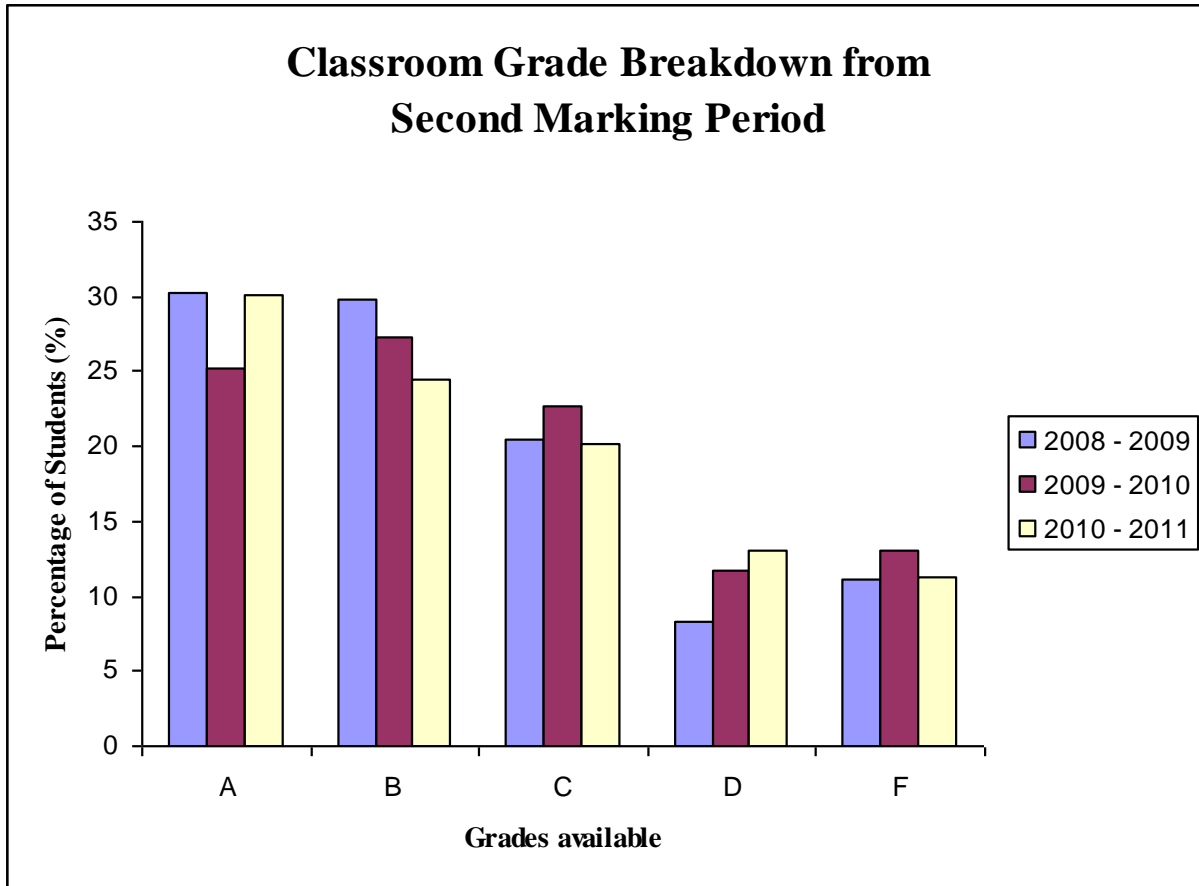
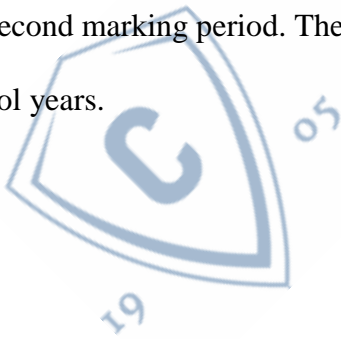


Figure 2. Classroom grade breakdown at the second marking period. Figure 2 shows the classroom grade breakdown for junior high students over a duration of twelve weeks, ending at the second marking period. The data shown are a comparison of grades from three different school years.



In analyzing the data, some themes and patterns begin to emerge. Looking at the survey data displayed in Table 1, the first survey given to the students before they had the opportunity to spend a day with a junior high student showed that they were nervous about the expectations that they would encounter in junior high. However, after their day in the junior high school, most of those nervous feelings lowered. This could be because they became more aware of the routines would be in a school where instead of one teacher all day with the same expectations, they will have five to six teachers, each with different expectations. At the beginning of the next school year, these students had now gained concrete knowledge of what the expectations were. As a result, there were fewer issues with discipline, which may have resulted in higher classroom grades in the first marking period.

The discipline data displayed in Table 2 showed a definite decrease in the number of referrals written for junior high students over the course of three school years. The main principle behind the PBIS program is to teach all students the behavior expectations at the beginning of the school year and as the year progresses, review those expectations. While PBIS has been in place at the research site since 2007 – 2008 school year, the program was really refined in the 2009 – 2010 school year. Teachers and administrators alike became more involved in implementation, which showed in the decrease in the amount of referrals written between the beginning months of the school years of 2008 – 2009 and 2009 – 2010. There was a small decrease in the amount of referrals between the beginning months 2009 – 2010 and 2010 – 2011.

In comparing the grades among the three school years as shown in Figures 1 and 2, the researcher noted that an increase in the number of passing grades occurred for the 2010 – 2011 school year at both marking periods. In reviewing the PBIS principles, the students are aware of the behavior expectations not only in common areas of the school, but also in the classroom. This

most likely led to a more productive learning environment because the teacher spent the limited classroom time teaching content, rather than disciplining.

One trend that the researcher saw in comparing the grades between the two marking periods was that the number of failing grades increased at the second marking period in all three school years (Figure 2). The grades at Oregon Junior/Senior High School are cumulative. As the school year progressed, there was reluctance on the part of the teachers to review the school and classroom expectations. Often, teaching became more about getting through academic content, and many teachers felt that time would be lost if spent reviewing the expectations rather than teaching the content. By not reviewing the expectations at the beginning of the week, teachers used more time disciplining students throughout the week, cutting into the learning time anyway.

Comparing the grade and behavior data to the survey data, it can be inferred that students who exhibit low academic performance and have high behavioral referrals are students who are nervous about the new expectations of junior high school and do not understand how to properly deal with those new expectations. The lack of understanding often will lead to a student feeling out of place and not engaged in learning. This lack of engagement can lead to behavior issues, meaning that the student may miss content being taught in class because their behavior is addressed by the administration during learning time. If a student falls behind in classes due to behavior issues, most likely they will not make up the work that they missed. The implications of that will be that the student falls even further behind in the proceeding grades because they have missed crucial information. While in junior high, if a student fails a class, they do not have to retake it. However, if a student fails a class in high school, that credit must be made up in order for that student to graduate. If students are not adequately prepared for the rigors of the high

school curriculum, a circle can be created. They are less likely to be successful in the classroom, which can again lead to behavioral issues.

Overall, the action plan put into place was effective. The data results were expected, and the positive trend indicated that the students learned how to deal successfully with the new classroom and behavior expectations set forth upon matriculation into junior high school. The results of this project indicated to the researcher that knowing the reasons behind student nervousness about new expectations and having transition and PBIS programs in place to address those feelings is worth the time and effort. As a teacher, the researcher will continue to maintain the PBIS principles within her classroom throughout the year, and to encourage her colleagues to do the same in their classrooms. As an aspiring administrator, the researcher will continue to look at ways to integrate this research project on a school-wide level and work with her current administration to implement and refine this research at Oregonton Junior/Senior High School.

It would be interesting to replicate this study at schools with similar demographics and socio-economic situations in any district across the state. The researcher firmly believes that this is not a problem unique to her school or district; it occurs in all districts. There are currently two schools within Oregonton's district that fit into this category. Both schools house students in grades 7th – 12th and are currently in the process of implementing PBIS with support from the district PBIS coordinator. The study could be easily replicated in those schools because of their similar size, school setup, and programs. In order for the study to be conducted effectively, however, the staff must understand the data, have a clear vision as to what they would like to see happen, and be willing to implement new techniques and ideas using PBIS principles.

This research project could also be done with students moving from junior high to high school. Much of the research used in this study is applicable to that particular age group. Many

new high school students find themselves lost among the new expectations of high school teachers. While the study conducted at Oregonton Junior/Senior High School would not fit well into the high school transition due to the set up of the school, the study could be replicated with students coming from a junior high school into a separate high school. Hypothetically, the same results would be seen and the students would be set up for success, not failure, both academically and behaviorally.

The researcher notes this type of project is one that must be done with all students, not a selected few. The purpose behind the research is to find ways for students to be successful both academically and behaviorally. By excluding one group or another, the study becomes biased, giving the supportive environment to one group over another. Very few students will find success in that scenario.

Future research might look at transition programs that last the entire school years, rather than only a month, and see if academic and behavioral issues decrease or are maintained throughout the year.



Appendix

Student Survey

Directions: Please answer the questions honestly. Your answers are anonymous.

a) I am nervous about moving from elementary school to junior high school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

b) I think that I am ready for junior high school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

c) I am excited about moving from elementary school to junior high school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

d) I'm nervous about having different teachers in junior high.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

e) I think that I will be able to handle the expectations for different teachers.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

f) I am nervous about switching classes in junior high school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

g) I feel like the junior high teachers care about their students.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

h) I understand what “Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be Safe, and Be on Time” look like in all areas of the junior high school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

i) I'm afraid of being bullied in junior high school.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

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