High School Decision-Making at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River

A Thesis Submitted by
Aimee A. Bronhard
to
The College of Professional Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of The Doctorate of Education (EdD) in Educational Leadership
with a Specialization in Curriculum Leadership in the College of Professional Studies from
Northeastern University
Boston, MA

Dr. Chris Unger, Advisor
October, 2012
Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how students at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River take into consideration their initial college and career aspirations when making their decision for high school. Self-efficacy theory, critical theory, and a literature review related to high school decision-making inform the analysis of data regarding the three research questions framing this study: (1) What influenced Henry Lord Middle School eighth grade students’ decisions when selecting a high school of attendance?; (2) How are parents or guardians of 8th graders at Henry Lord Middle School informed of the high school options and influence their children’s high school decision-making process?; (3) How did guidance counselors influence the high school decision-making process for transitioning eighth graders from the Henry Lord Middle School?

To answer these questions, a case study approach was used to assess students’ perceptions of how they reached their decision for high school, to assess the influence of family members on that decision, and to identify the information used by parents in support of that decision at Henry Lord Middle School. One hundred and sixteen middle school students participated in focus groups along with seven family members and a guidance counselor for the school to determine student, family, and guidance counselor perspectives on Henry Lord Middle School students’ decision-making for high school. Themes identified through an analysis of focus group results were then used to identify cross-stakeholder perspectives. These perspectives ground recommendations for improving the middle school guidance program and the transitional services at Henry Lord Middle School.

Keywords: high school decision-making, career planning, parental influence, self-efficacy, critical theory.
Acknowledgements

This research study is the result of hard work, determination, and persistence in the face of the unknown. As I reflect on this journey I refer to a quote by Albert Schweitzer, “at times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” My family has kindled the fire within me, time and again throughout this doctoral thesis process, while instilling in me the confidence to believe that anything is achievable if it is the focus of my efforts. I thank my mother Rita, father Jack, brother John, sisters Bethany and Jacqueline, sister-in-law Kim, and brother-in-law Mike, for their unending support, laughs along the way, and believing in me throughout this whole journey. I am grateful for their understanding during times that required my commitments and energy to be in less favorable places. I feel blessed for being supported by my partner in life, Robert. Truly, your understanding, vote of confidence, shoulder to cry on, and undying bragging of my efforts to all whose path you crossed inspired me to believe in myself and ensure that I never quit; even at times when it seemed unconquerable.

Many thanks to all of my friends and colleagues, together you have challenged me, supported my efforts in a variety of ways to ensure that I completed my goal. This thesis could not have been completed without the support of my second family at the Brick Alley Pub in Newport, RI, colleagues at B.M.C. Durfee High School, Ralph Olsen, Paul Marshall, Joyce Paulo, Kim Napolitano, Lindsey Fleurent, and my classmate and mentor Sue Ann Marks. You all played such an important role in this project and I am truly grateful for your undying friendship.
In addition, words cannot explain the role that my advisor Dr. Chris Unger played in this project. His vision, energy, ability to be critical and supportive in the same sentence, timeliness, and overall guidance could not be replicated by another. I was truly blessed to be assigned to his leadership and guidance and I look forward to our future collaborations as leaders in urban education and research. Dr. Gail Matthews-Denatale, for her time, energy, and feedback as my second reader, I am grateful. Many thanks to Dr. Heather Woodcock-Ayers, serving as my third reader, scholar and life mentor, your support and confidence throughout this journey in my personal and educational endeavors have inspired me in so many ways untold. I hope to follow your lead as a change agent in the field of education. Finally, thank you to Nicholas Bretz, your friendship over the last few years has guided me to the finish line of this long journey and I am confident that this marks the beginning of the next journey we will take together.

Finally, I would like to thank the doctoral committee members and the Northeastern University Ed.D faculty for their dedication to providing a quality and rigorous educational experience. Each individual who has crossed my path, either professionally or personally has assisted me in becoming the educational leader who I am today. THANK YOU ALL!!!!!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.................................................................................................................. 7

LIST OF FIGURES.................................................................................................................. 7

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................ 8
  Problem of Practice............................................................................................................... 8
  Significance of the Problem................................................................................................. 9
  Research Questions........................................................................................................... 11
  Practical and Intellectual Goals......................................................................................... 12
  Document Organization.................................................................................................... 13
  Theoretical Framework..................................................................................................... 13

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW......................................................................................... 20
  The Developing Adolescent during the Middle School Years......................................... 21
  Academic and Career Development Pursuits during the Middle School Years................. 25
  The Influence of Parents on Middle School Students Academic and Career Planning. .... 31
  A Student’s College Going Aspirations............................................................................ 38

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN......................................................................................... 44
  Research Questions.......................................................................................................... 44
  Methodology..................................................................................................................... 45
  Site and Participants......................................................................................................... 47
  Data Collection................................................................................................................ 51
  Data Analysis................................................................................................................... 55
  Validity and Credibility..................................................................................................... 60
  Protection of Human Subjects........................................................................................ 62
  Summary.......................................................................................................................... 64

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS....................................................................................... 65
  Study Context.................................................................................................................... 65
  High School Choice Data from Study Participants......................................................... 66
  Coding for Themes........................................................................................................... 70
  Research Question 1........................................................................................................ 71
  Research Question 2........................................................................................................ 83
  Research Question 3........................................................................................................ 91
  Summary of Findings...................................................................................................... 96

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS.................................................... 100
  Revisiting the Problem of Practice................................................................................ 100
  Review of the Methodology............................................................................................. 101
  Discussion of Major Findings........................................................................................ 102
  Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework.......................... 109
  Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review.................................... 113
  Validity and Limitations................................................................................................. 118
  Significance of the Study............................................................................................... 120
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Next Steps</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: SY 2011 8th Grade Application and Admission Data………………………… 66
Table 2: SY 2011 8th Grade Application and Admission Data by Lunch Status………… 67
Table 3: SY 2012 8th Grade Application and Admission Data………………………….. 69
Table 4: SY 2012 8th Grade Application and Admission Data by Lunch Status………… 69
Table 5: Major Themes Identified by Students through the Study ............................... 102
Table 6: Major Themes Identified by Parents and Guardians through the Study............. 106
Table 7: Major Themes Identified by Guidance Counselor Through the Study…………….. 108

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Data Collection Phases.................................................................................. 51
Figure 2: Data Collection Relationships........................................................................ 55
Chapter I: Introduction

Problem of Practice

The Fall River Public Schools (FRPS) is an independent urban school district within Bristol County, MA comprising nine elementary schools, four middle schools serving students in grades 6-8, and one comprehensive high school. Students within the Bristol County region also have the option to attend both regional vocational technical and agricultural high schools. Hence, a middle school student in the FRPS has the option to attend any one of the three public high schools, each offering a wide variety of academic programs and linkages to post-secondary education. At the end of 8th grade, transitioning middle school students are required to participate in a high school decision-making process. At present, the middle schools do not currently sponsor consistent programming which would enable students to identify and arrive at decisions based on personal strengths, interests, and academic capabilities that align with career and academic offerings of the secondary schools. Additionally, minimal career exploration and decision-making strategies are formally included in the curriculum to support middle school students and families when determining their high school of choice.

The lack of clear decision-making has resulted in an ever-increasing number of students discovering little alignment between their middle and high school experiences. Not feeling prepared, students are placed, (as early as middle school) at-risk for non-completion of secondary education. This study adds to the body of research which suggests that informing students of the academic, career, and vocational related opportunities available within the secondary and post-secondary settings is critical to student’s high school decision making process and finding relevance in earning a high school diploma.
Two of the three secondary schools in Fall River sponsor a competitive application process for admission. Program selection is based on a student’s academic grades, attendance, and conduct records for the seventh and eighth grade school years. Middle school students and families who remain unaware of these admission requirements may unknowingly limit (through inadequate attendance, poor academic performance, etc.) the likelihood of acceptance to the student’s high school of choice. Not surprisingly, Fall River Public Schools at-risk student populations and students with less involved parents are disproportionately affected by practices that benefit families with some prior knowledge of admission requirements. This research study investigates the process through which middle school students at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River decide where to attend high school. It seeks to unveil specific factors taken into consideration when electing a high school of choice, and how, if at all, parental influence and self-efficacy for possible career aspirations are considerations.

**Significance of the Problem**

The significance of this research study aligns with the need for students to make meaningful connections early-on along the academic journey of middle school, high school, to post-secondary training. Nationally, our country is experiencing a downshift in economic and business prosperity, thus increasing the need for heightened educational requirements for current and future generations. The employment opportunities that once existed for individuals with less than a high school diploma are no longer available. The competitiveness of the job market and the work skills required for the 21st century economy do not allow students to drop out of school or just pass through their high school experience (Levy & Murnane, 1992).

Additionally, students are becoming disengaged along the pathway from middle school to high school which places them at even greater risk of becoming unprepared to take advantage of
post-secondary offerings. This trend is receiving heightened attention by national and local policy makers, community stakeholders, and educators who are increasingly recognizing the importance of assuming a P-20 perspective on enabling all students to achieve college and career readiness. As Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) emphasize, “students who drop out of high school are often unable to support themselves; they are twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty from one year to the next” (p. 2). Today, high school dropouts, at a national and local level, face diminishing opportunities and a lifetime of struggle to maintain financial independence.

The traditional middle school experience is a three-year window of opportunity, a chance for parents and teachers to guide developing adolescents along the path of becoming young adults who are focused on academics and future careers, able to utilize effective decision-making strategies, and successfully transition into high school. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) argue that “Academic skill building is a cumulative process with the elementary and middle-school grades being fundamental to later high-school and college success” (p. 244). In order for middle school students to make informed decisions, they must be better informed. They stand to benefit from early exposure and awareness of academic and career alignment. Many students and parents with limited formal educational experience, who took advantage of economic opportunities and jobs that will no longer exist for their children, do not see a connection between the academic arena and the world of work. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) also explain “while it may seem obvious to some adults that the entire education curriculum is designed to prepare students for their eventual careers, it is not obvious to all or even most students, which is one of the reasons so many of them become alienated from formal education” (p. 235).
This researcher’s practical experience as the Department Head of Guidance at Durfee High School, responsible for all student transfers and registrations, suggests that all too often students find themselves enrolled in a high school or subscribing to an academic or career program not directly aligned with future goals, career interests, or self-efficacy beliefs. Data provided by the Graduate Follow-up Data of Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School of Fall River and released by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2010), suggests that of the 259 student responses (out of 308 graduates of the Greater Fall River area), only 37% were employed in related high school fields of study, compared to 69% who were simply employed. In regard to education, 26% were furthering their education in a related academic field, whereas 59% were enrolled in post-secondary programs unrelated to what they studied at the vocational technical school. This data highlights the importance of middle school students’ selection of an appropriate high school and of the role of middle school staff (particularly guidance counselors) providing information early enough in middle school so that more students are awarded the opportunity to apply to all three public high schools within the Fall River Public School System.

**Research Questions**

The three research questions of this study are: (1) What influenced Henry Lord Middle School eighth grade student’s decisions when selecting a high school of attendance? (2) How are parents or guardians of 8th graders at Henry Lord Middle School informed of the high school options and influence their children’s high school decision-making process? (3) How did guidance counselors influence the high school decision-making process for transitioning eighth graders from the Henry Lord Middle School?

The factors that impact a student’s decision of high school attendance will likely vary across populations. Through the case study, I seek to identify these various factors within the
specific context of Fall River-Area schools. This research seeks to describe the transitional influences and considerations weighed by students as well as the existing transition practices and procedures sponsored by the middle school staff.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

The practical goal of my research is to document the varying influences that students and parents/guardians at HLMS encounter when selecting a high school. An additional consideration is to specifically gauge, from the perspective of students and parents, the level of influence that guidance counselors have on the transition process. Insights gleaned from these perspectives gleaned from focus group data will be applied to the redesign of transition programs at HLMS in a manner that is responsive to the actual needs and concerns of future students and their families. A practical goal for this research will be for HLMS staff to hear and consider ways to respond to perceptions offered by students and parents as constructive suggestions (rather than as personal attacks) when considering ways to improve current transitional practices.

Intellectually, I am interested in clarifying decision making factors and understanding the influences of people who shape a student’s high school choices and middle to high school transitional experience. In qualitative case study research, Maxwell emphasizes the importance of researcher anchored in “…intellectual goals…understanding something, gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately addressed” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 21). This qualitative research study seeks to identify and look critically at the perceptions of student and parents regarding the high school decision-making process; looking critically at the quality of information held by different students and parents. In Fall River, it is troubling to see the number of students who find themselves enrolled in a high school that is not meeting their initial career or educational goals.
Document Organization

The remainder of this report includes a presentation of the theoretical framework informing the research design and analysis, a literature review as it provides context to the study, the research design, the presentation and analysis of findings, and then a discussion of the findings, including their significance to the field.

Theoretical Framework

This research study is informed by two theories pertinent to the problem of practice within the FRPS and Henry Lord Middle School: Albert Bandura’s social-cognitive model of self-efficacy and critical theory’s interpretation of cultural capital.

Self-efficacy theory. Albert Bandura is a behavioral and social psychologist whose research has focused on understanding how environmental, behavioral, and psychological beliefs impact individual behavior and achievement motivation (Bandura, 1995). Bandura (2006) posits that personal efficacy is a core belief foundational to human motivation and well-being. He states, “unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 3). Examining self-efficacy theory in academic contexts, Bandura’s work emphasizes that, “a major goal of formal education is to equip students with the intellectual tools, self-beliefs, and self-regulatory capabilities to educate themselves throughout their lifetime” (2006, p. 10). Adolescence is characterized by increased self-awareness and personal independence. The middle school years are a particularly critical time where adolescents begin drawing connections between what they deem as relevant and irrelevant to future academic and career or vocational aspirations. In addition, as adolescents begin to develop a sense of independence in middle school they also identify with either success or failure in the educational arena (Bandura, 2006).
On the basis of his research, Bandura (1995) concludes, efficacy beliefs are responsible for regulating human functioning through four processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection; three of these four inform the framework of this study. Bandura’s cognitive process of human agency states, “Personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves and the firmer is their commitment to them” (1995, p. 6). Bandura’s theory also states that motivational processes are considered to be cognitively essential, in that, “people motivate themselves and guide their actions and commitment to their goals based on personal beliefs of self-efficacy and what they believe they can accomplish” (1995, p. 6). Lastly, the selection processes address the environmental factors which affect each individual’s daily existence. Bandura frames it this way: “Beliefs of personal efficacy can shape the courses people’s lives take, by influencing the types of activities and environments they choose to get into” (Bandura, 1995, p. 10).

Research points to how children’s beliefs in their efficacy to regulate their own learning activities and to master difficult subject matters affect their academic motivation, interest, and scholastic achievement (Bandura, 1993; Schunk, 1989; Zimmerman, 1995). As middle school students begin to identify personal strengths and weaknesses, they also set personal goals based on what they believe they can achieve. Students who do not set goals or who do not believe that they have the ability to achieve are likely to struggle in their academic and career pursuits. “Moreover, students who doubt their intellectual efficacy are likely to gravitate to peers who do not subscribe to academic values and pursuits. Engagement in problem behaviors often results in disengagement from academic activities” (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 1209). That said, middle school students who struggle to find success, or who view school (particularly the middle and
high school experiences) as irrelevant, put themselves at high risk for dropping out and as a consequence, for a lifetime of poverty and struggle.

It is therefore critically important that middle school students understand the level of preparation needed to achieve particular career and vocational goals. If middle school students and their families are unaware of (or not informed of) the various programmatic options available within the different public high schools in Fall River, students may inadvertently choose programs that do not adequately prepare them to meet their initial career or vocational aspirations. Additionally, if students are not able to draw clear and relevant connections between the requirements of secondary education and future college/career success, they can become disengaged from the educational process all together. It has been stated, “self-efficacy beliefs influence aspirations and strength of goal commitments, level of motivation and perseverance in the face of difficulties and setbacks, resilience to adversity, quality of analytic thinking and causal attributions for successes and failures, and vulnerability to stress and depression” (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli, 1996, p. 1206). Bandura’s theory and its processes justify the critical need for parents, teachers, and guidance counselors to support middle school students in developing self-efficacy beliefs that are aligned with preliminary academic and career goals.

Research by Betz and Hackett (1981) expanded on self-efficacy by studying its application to vocational and career decision-making. Their work suggests that an individual’s expectation of personal efficacy has bearing on motivation toward career aspirations and achievements. Hackett and Betz, (as cited by Bandura, 2006) write,

the higher the students’ perceived efficacy to fulfill educational requirements and occupational roles, the wider the career options they seriously consider pursuing, the
greater the interest they have in them, the better they prepare themselves educationally for different occupational careers, and the greater their staying power in challenging career pursuits. (p.13)

Research with young adults confirms that beliefs regarding ability and self-efficacy play a key role in occupational development and pursuits (Bandura, 1995; Betz & Hackett, 1986). Students who are knowledgeable of the secondary and post-secondary education or training that is aligned to their academic or career goals are more likely to persevere in the face of difficulty (Bandura, et al., 2001). Research has shown repeatedly that people, particularly adolescents, eliminate from consideration [fail to consider] occupations that they believe to be beyond their capabilities, no matter how attractive the occupation may be (Bandura, 1995; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1986).

Bandura (1995) states that although the task of choosing one’s lifework occurs in later adolescence, it is the preparatory choices of early adolescence that play a key role in shaping the paths that young people follow into adulthood and the courses their lives then take.

**Critical theory of cultural capitalism.** An important consideration within this study is the social and cultural influences on middle school students and their families. Students are affected by struggles of inequality and hardship, elements of poverty, and varying levels of academic and post-secondary knowledge needed for career and vocational success. A critical theory approach to cultural capital theory will be used to investigate these social and cultural considerations and practices, aiming to better understand how a student’s cultural and familial ‘capital’ influences future opportunities.

Critical theory is a known paradigm for investigating empirical research among many disciplines (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critical theory originated in the Frankfurt School of Germany by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). The intent was
to criticize Marxist theory which contended that, “schools were capitalist agencies of social, economic, cultural, and bureaucratic reproduction” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 89). The researchers (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002) argue that “schools can become institutions where forms of knowledge, values, and social relations are taught for the purpose of educating young people for critical empowerment rather than subjugation” (p. 89). Critical theory provides a lens for the researcher to criticize or question the phenomenon under study. Kincheloe & McLaren use the critical theory lens as way to recognize competing power interests between groups and individuals within a society—identifying who gains and who loses in specific situations. Privileged groups, the criticalists argue, often have an interest in supporting the status quo to protect their advantages (2002,). The research of Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010) states that, “critical research must be concerned with making a better society; indirectly through improved understanding of social mechanisms or directly, through empowerment of participants” (p. 194). This research study utilizes the critical lens of social and cultural capital as a means of possibly explaining inequities faced by students and families who are involved in the high school decision-making process at Henry Lord Middle School.

Through the lens of cultural capital theory, Bourdieu used the concept of ‘cultural capital’ to define those culturally-based resources that act as a form of ‘capital’ for different groups (1979a/1984). He goes on to further acknowledge that cultural capital is generally acknowledged in two ways: through one’s social origin [family] and through education [school] (Bourdieu, 1979a/1984). In his work, Bourdieu (1979a/1984) was able to reveal the subtle way that privilege, power, and domination are perpetuated and transferred. Cultural capital allows for the exposure of cumulative advantage that one may acquire through both social origin and education. According to Winkle-Wagner (2010), “the cumulative acquisition of cultural capital
is implicit: one who acquires high-status cultural capital through family origin and through education will be more privileged in society generally” (p. 6). Another point explains, “Cultural capital that is acquired through social origin helps to explain the intergenerational transference of lifestyle or class privilege throughout generations” (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 6). A critical interpretation of these concepts is that formal education, though traditionally seen as a powerful tool intended to impact one’s cultural capital, is insufficient by itself to support class and generational shift. Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) make the claim that schools, albeit unconsciously, frequently favor students who possess the relevant cultural capital gained from their families over students who are less advantaged.

The experiences of students in the FRPS have been such that middle school students who come from privileged, educated, or informed backgrounds are more likely to find themselves with a wider range of high school options and the ‘social capital’ of informed “networks” comprised of other individuals and information that will assist in making informed high school decisions. That said, this “network” of parents and family members, who classify themselves as being involved and informed, do not traditionally question the existing high school selection and transition practices of Henry Lord Middle School. This may be due to these children not being denied access or opportunity, or simply because their parents or family members possess the ‘cultural capital’ to unearth whatever information or services they require in order to maintain their position.

These trends within the FRPS, if analyzed critically, call into question the role that schools play in perpetuating discrimination and social injustices Students from families of low socioeconomic status, uneducated backgrounds, or minority status within the FRPS are not traditionally represented within the involved parent network. It seems reasonable to posit that
this underrepresented group of parents or family members are likely unaware of the public high school options in Fall River, the differing college or vocational preparation that each high school offers, or the multiple ways in which their children or family members are possibly missing out on opportunities for admission; ultimately, they do not possess the social or cultural ‘capital’ needed to successfully navigate the high school selection process.

According to Winkle-Wagner (2010), “it has become no secret that the simple examination of income levels does not adequately explain class-based disparities in the large social context” (p. 65). However, there is a wealth of research on the topic and evidence to suggest that students from low socio-economic backgrounds lack the social and cultural capital to secure high-quality jobs within the educated labor market, i.e., research is referring to those students who come from unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled manual backgrounds (Savage & Egerton, 1997; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Research from Brown, Fukunaga, Umemoto, & Wicker, (1996), in their annual review, suggests that, “the effects of social class are quite complex throughout the career choice and vocational adjustment processes. Social class affects occupational attainment, access to work opportunities, individual worldviews, and values placed on work as well as how an individual is viewed by others” (p. 168). In a similar vein of research, Owens (1992) explains that adolescents from higher social classes are more likely to attend college and training, whereas adolescents raised in lower social class environments generally transition directly to work or the military after high school. Researcher Greenbank states that, “the working-class disadvantage appears to be rooted in their inferior educational achievements” (2009, p. 157).

There are two considerations to this debate that inform this research study. Blustien et al. (2002) reference several scholars who endorse the view that, “social class plays a broad and
structural role in people’s lives, determining access to the resources that are needed for adaptive transitions from school to work and the barriers to access” (p. 311). An additional interpretation of the debate is with Willis (1977) who argues that social class creates specific cultural elements that are then internalized into the values and identities of adolescents. He goes on to explain that individuals from lower social classes seek to recreate their cultural characteristics by rejecting middle-class norms of education or occupational goal setting (Willis, 1977).

In summary, Winkle-Wagner (2010) emphasizes the relevance of cultural capital in educational research when she states, “the use of cultural capital in educational research has helped to highlight the way that students’ backgrounds, not just in socioeconomic terms but relative to their families’ tastes, preferences, norms, and way of spending recreational time, affect their educational chances” (p. 66). This is particularly relevant to this research study as the researcher aims to investigate the influence of family ‘capital’ and school ‘capital’ on middle school students as they make their decision for high school attendance. It is worth remembering that it is the high school experience which prepares students for college admission and career opportunities; a lot is riding on this 4-year period.

Chapter II: Literature Review

There is a wide body of literature and many angles from which research has critically looked at the middle school years; four bodies of literature have been investigated in order to guide and inform this research study. The first investigates the developing adolescent during the middle school experience. The second body of literature identifies the impact of career planning, particularly during the middle school years. The third segment of the literature analyzes the influence that parents have exerted on the career and high school decision-making process. The fourth and final body of literature explores past research for the degree of influence
parents have traditionally exerted on their child’s career and high school decision-making process. These four bodies of literature, taken together, provide a clear and detailed foundation for this study.

The Developing Adolescent during the Middle School Years

The developing adolescent and the middle school years are topics widely researched in today’s academic arena. Field, Hoffman, and Posch, (1997) state that, “adolescent development is conceptualized into early, middle, and late adolescence ranging in ages approximately 11-14 years old, 14-17 years of age, and finally 17-19 years old respectively” (p. 286). These developmental periods of adolescence are marked by tremendous growth and self-discovery (Erickson, 1968). The transitional points of entry into middle and high school posit adolescents between the early and middle stages of development respectively. Researchers refer to these transitional years as trajectory-changing events, which represent a convergence of biological, personal, familial, social, and cultural development; these occur simultaneously and with a great deal of variability, creating a stimulus of growth and risk for the developing adolescent (Rutter, 1987; Field et al., 1997; Potter, Schlisky, Stevenson, & Drawdy, 2001; & Akos, 2002). Epstein & Mac Iver (1990) reference the larger class sizes, changes in grading and testing procedures, challenging course material, and increased amounts of independent work as the risk factors faced by transitioning middle school students. Maurice Elias (2001) states, “educators often underestimate the importance of these demands, but in reality, children’s energy for learning depends on the nature of coping throughout these experiences” (p. 20).

It is during the transition to middle school that students’ sensitivity to the quality and relevance of school may decrease significantly (Diemert, 1992). Developing adolescents, particularly minority youth in urban areas, experience considerable declines in academic
motivation and achievement during the middle school years (Eccles, et al., 1993; Schneider & Coleman, 1993; Seidman, et al., 1994). The success of urban youth in coping with this transition has been identified as critical in determining whether they eventually drop-out or graduate from high school (Reyes, Gillcock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000). Research shows that the levels of school and academic disengagement continue to rise when students reach high school (Marks, 2000; McDermott, Mordell & Stolzfus, 2001). However, it is crucial to realize that school disengagement (which often results in declining academic motivation and subsequent dropping-out) does not usually begin in high school; students who elect to drop out of school once they turn sixteen may have psychologically disengaged themselves from the educational process as far back third grade (McWhirter, McWhriter, McWhriter, & McWhriter, 1998), and significant disengagement (often compounded by risky and defiant behaviors) has very often surfaced by the seventh grade (Murdock, 1999).

Longitudinal research of the Philadelphia Public Schools by Balfanz and Herzog (2006) reveals that more than half of urban middle school sixth graders with the following three criteria eventually dropped out of school: attendance to school was less than 80% of the time (the equivalent of missing five weeks of school) repetitive behavioral infractions; and failing either English or mathematics. The indicators of dropping out are present by early adolescence (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Balfanz and Herzog, 2006). Therefore it is critical to intervene prior to high school with strategic programming efforts that enhance motivational beliefs and sustain school engagement. The middle school years are a critical point to capture students adrift and support those who seem to be more focused and motivated. “Career education must begin in middle school or earlier to allow
students time to develop the aptitudes, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop an awareness of their chosen career” (Jones, 2010, p. 24).

Research by Eccles, Lord, Roeser, Barber, & Jozefowicz, (1996) supports the notion that behaviors and motivation are influenced by how well an individual’s personal characteristics meld with the social environment (such as school or work). These researchers also suggest that middle school students are not likely to succeed in environments that do not fit their psychological, social, or academic needs. This idea is supported by the person-environment fit model. According to this model, the disparity between the school environment and an adolescent’s developmental needs is responsible for the negative shifts in attitude toward both the self and school achievement (Eccles, et al., 1996; Wigfield, et al., 1998); ultimately impacting a student’s opportunity for college and/or career success.

Additionally for consideration, the research from Cothran & Ennis (2000) has investigated the construct of school engagement as a way to understand academic underachievement and the relatively high student drop-out rates in many public high schools. School engagement involves positive attitudes toward school, teachers, classmates, and academic learning, whereas disengagement encompasses student perceptions of school as boring, unwelcoming, alienating, and largely irrelevant (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Lapan (2004) suggests that career development programming in the middle grades has been identified as one means for positively enhancing student attitudes toward school and for increasing student engagement, while making the academic journey more personally relevant for the student. The researcher promotes that early career planning and awareness can provide students with an external source of motivation that helps in understanding connections between doing well in
school and having choices and opportunities later in life, ultimately enhancing school engagement (Lapan, 2004).

Niles & Trusty (2004) emphasize that the middle school years are the critical time for adolescents to begin drawing connections between their school work, the real world, and their future goals. A student’s degree of academic achievement in middle school will, to a great extent, determine future educational opportunities, career and lifestyle options, and lifetime earnings (Arbona, 2000; Murnane & Levy, 1996). It is therefore critical that middle school students be mentored and encouraged to develop self-awareness, be granted access to information regarding educational and career opportunities, and challenged to develop the skills they will need to make important decisions for their future (Lapan, 2004; Solberg, Howard, Blustein, & Close, 2002; Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005).

To further support these claims, a recent research report from American College Testing (ACT) underscores the critical nature of career development and college readiness in the middle grades. The researchers found that of all the variables studied, the best predictor of students’ college and career readiness was eighth grade achievement (2008). The predominant recommendation stemming from this research was that, by improving college and career readiness skills and by connecting their skills to career opportunities, eighth grade students will experience a dramatic and positive impact on their high school and post-high school experiences.

School achievement, resulting in college and career readiness for all of our nation’s youth, is at the center of local, national, and federal debate. As the United States seeks to compete globally in the 21st century for sustainable jobs, all youth must possess “work readiness” skills in order to earn a livable income (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1999; Orfield, 1997). Noguera (2003) promotes the notion that it is both economically wise and morally compelling
for contemporary middle schools to equip students with the fundamental academic skills and character traits needed to successfully compete in a global economy, and to ensure that every child has access to the American dream.

**Academic and Career Development Pursuits during the Middle School Years**

“In an era of downsizing, plant closings, and technological obsolescence, lifelong learning is no longer the preserve of the ambitious; it is a necessity for all initial education and training and it is essential to a contemporary career, as are continuing education and training” (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 2). The choices that middle school students make are critically important for their educational and career development. The middle school years become an important period when students can learn to prepare themselves for high school and adult life thereafter. “Developing students who perform well academically and have the intellectual wherewithal to improve their life conditions” is therefore the next critical step for middle school reforms (Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, & Austin, 1997, p. 535). With the heightened attention of middle school years being central to academic preparation and the development of one’s initial career aspirations, the role of career development and career planning in middle school warrants considerable attention by researchers.

The array of developmental perspectives on career planning confirm, that vocational and career development is a lifelong process affected by an individual’s personal and contextual factors (Gottfredson, 1981; Super, 1957; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulanbert, 1986). However, recent practice and research has focused almost exclusively on the high school student as opposed to the developing middle school adolescent (Fouad, 1997; Solberg et al., 2002). Gottfredson (1981) posits that most research has focused on the high school students because they are further along the trajectory; they are closer to making (and more realistic in their
assessment of decisions about post-secondary education and careers. However, there is a wealth of research that supports the notion that career aspirations emerge from the interplay of interests, personality traits, developmental maturity, individual experiences, natural abilities, peer groups, sex, and parental influences (Grotevant, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1977; Holland, 1973; Johnson, 1987). These elements of personal development are explored by adolescents long before high school and structured support is critical for middle school students to draw connections to their future goals when making choices for high school and beyond.

Career development begins in early childhood and continues throughout an individual’s life (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). According to Super (1990) and Super et al. (1996), the early part of an individual’s life is characterized by the growth stage (ages 4-13) and then followed by the exploration stage (ages 14-24) of their career development. It is during these developmental stages that young people begin to gain awareness for their interests and abilities. They are then able to use this knowledge and self-awareness to make some initial decisions regarding their future occupational and educational goals (Super, 1990). The lifelong recognition and development of career interests is critically important, but particularly so during the middle school years. Research suggests that the identification of interests is of paramount importance in enabling adolescents to determine what they like and what they do not like (Betz, 1992; Hansen, 1984; Tracey, 2002). Tracey (2002) suggests that a student’s interests are often aligned with beliefs of competency and impact a student’s individualized career planning.

Additionally, from the perspective of Krumboltz’s (1979, 1994) social learning theory of career decision-making, learning experience is the most essential concept for understanding how individuals develop occupational preferences and related skills and beliefs. In his study, Krumboltz (1996) proposes that the role of career planning for middle school students should be
to expand their learning and clarify beliefs about their career development. A testable proposition applying a social learning theory approach to career development is advanced by Krumboltz (1994) who contends, “people will tend to prefer an occupation if…they have succeeded at tasks they believe are like tasks performed by members of that occupation” (p. 19). It is critical, therefore, for middle school students to explore their personal strengths and abilities to assist them in their career planning and programmatic decision-making, specifically at the point of high school decision-making.

That said, in a study by Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, (2006) the researchers emphasize, “that higher levels of career plan fullness and expectations are associated with school engagement; although the findings suggest that student reports of school engagement do not explain levels of career development” (p. 276). This study highlights the importance of intentional career development in middle school, and that school engagement and self-awareness for interests and abilities do not necessarily lead to or predict that a student will develop positive or realistic career aspirations. In a study by Johnson (2000) on Long Island, NY, sixth and ninth grade students’ awareness of the connections between school and future career goals were examined. The outcomes of his study highlighted that students had a limited, and in some instances inaccurate, understanding of this relationship. In his discussion, Johnson reports that more than 80% of students’ responses indicate limited or non-existent knowledge of how what they were learning in their favorite subjects connected to their future career goals (Johnson, 2000). More specifically, this study revealed that middle school students had no awareness of the type of work that is involved in their career aspirations, indicating a definite call for career counseling at the middle level (Johnson, 2000). Trusty et al., (2005) emphasize the negative impact this lack of understanding can have on a student’s transition from middle to high school.
Trusty & Niles (2003) also support the notion that this disconnect in middle school has the potential to continue through a student’s post-high school education, and may even influence career success.

Additional research by Julien (1999) outlines the barriers faced by middle school students when making their career decisions. They range from lacking self-confidence, not being aware of high school credentials needed to achieve career goals, to being uninformed of the financial realities following high school (Julien, 1999). These processes are often intimidating for students and parents to navigate independently; the schools role in facilitating such information has recently evolved and come to be expected. Several longitudinal studies (Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty & Niles, 2003; Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005) consistently show that almost half of the young adults who enter into an associate or bachelor’s degree program directly after high school do not attain their degrees within an 8 to 10 year period. A pertinent follow-up question is: Why and how does this relate to middle school career planning? Research (Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty & Niles, 2003; Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005) confirms that young adults are generally not availing themselves of the relevant high school courses needed for the post-secondary completion and success. In fact, a student’s path to academically challenging high school courses manifests itself in the middle and elementary grades; this, then, is the critical window of time in which adolescents must find relevance in their school work and their developing selves.

In his study, Stinchcombe (1965) hypothesizes, “many students believed school was not relevant to their future careers and that students’ school efforts were determined, not only by their internal motivation, but also by their perceptions of schools’ future relevance” (p. 98). In a nonrandom qualitative study by Rosenbaum (1998), he replicates the study by Stinchcombe (1965) thirty years later. Rosenbaum (1998) replicated the nonrandom qualitative study
originally performed by Stinchcombe’s (1965), and arrived at similar conclusions: many students felt that school was simply irrelevant to their future careers. However, while Stinchcombe (1965) found only work-bound students to express this perception, Rosenbaum (1998) found these sentiments to be expressed by college bound students. Rosenbaum states, “many students who planned to attend college reported that high school achievement was not relevant to their future careers” (Rosenbaum, 1998, p. 60). The outcomes of these studies support the growing need for middle school career planning strategies that focus on drawing relevant connections for students.

In the longitudinal studies of Trusty (2002) and Trusty & Niles (2003, 2004b), researchers identify high school course load as the variable with the highest correlation to college success, a factor which is, in most instances, initially determined by the students high school and programmatic selection at the conclusion of middle school. Trusty, Niles, & Carney, (2005) conclude, “if students, as early as middle and high school, do not plan and behave in ways consistent with their postsecondary educational goals, or if they have no goals or plans, then negative consequences will fall to students” (p. 139). Fouad (1995) and Fouad & Smith (1996) argue that career assessment and intervention in middle schools (i.e., before critical high school course selections are made) is essential to expanding the vocational options of youth. Tracey (2002) notes that middle school years are a critical period to study the development of career-related interests and competency beliefs, given the key cognitive shifts during these ages. The Commission on Pre-College Guidance and Counseling (1986) also notes that, “students are all too often unaware of the consequences of their academic choices in selecting an appropriate high school program that will support career aspirations” (p. 23).

A middle school poll prepared for the National Association of Secondary School Principals and Phi Delta Kappa (Markow, Liebman, and Dunbar, 2007) reports that nine out of
ten middle school students (92 percent) planned to attend college. The poll later reports, however, that seven out of ten middle school students (68%) did not have the necessary or relevant information about how to choose the appropriate high school programs or courses that would prepare them for their initial career interests. Additional research that supports these claims is that by Harris and Dewdney (1994), which outlines the barriers to accessing information that is pertinent to making informed decisions. Specifically, the research points to four barriers faced by adolescents going through the career decision-making process: not knowing the relevant and required information; not knowing where or how to access necessary information; lack of awareness of existing sources of information; and finally, the information required may simply not exist (Harris & Dewdney, 1994).

The recent trend of high-stakes test-taking accountability and standards-based instruction has led school districts to cast aside curriculum that supports career exploration for the developing adolescent, specifically in the elementary and middle grades. However, Lapan, Gysbers, and Petroski (2001) point, “in the counseling literature, academic gains have been found when curriculum activities forge relevant, interesting connections to possible educational and career futures for students” (p. 321). Additionally, research by Evans and Burck (1992), who studied the K-12 continuum, supports the notion that infusing career education into the scope and sequence of all curriculum areas will lead to even greater academic gains for students prior to high school. Furthermore, if students are provided the necessary information early enough in middle school to assist in making meaningful course and program selection during the middle to high school transition and beyond students will find themselves in a high school setting that meets their interests and needs. This deliberately-chosen environment will better
prepare students for their career of choice, resulting in a more meaningful high school experience and increased rates of high school completion.

**The Influence of Parents on Middle School Students Academic and Career Planning**

The role of parents in shaping young people’s academic development and career aspirations—specifically during the middle or junior high academic years-- has received limited attention by researchers. Prior research focuses primarily on the influence of family on college students’ aspirations and persistence through the academic and career trajectory A closely related body of academic literature investigates the influence that parents maintain over their children’s success in school and when guiding their children in career planning (Fouad, 1995; Rutter, 1980; Shoffner & Klemer, 1973; Schulenberg, Vondracek, Crouter, 1984). A substantial body of research also examines parental efficacy beliefs in guiding their children, as well as how a parent’s socio-economic status (SES) may influence parental involvement in their child’s career and vocational planning (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Eccles and Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Young and Friesen, 1992).

In their review of the literature summarizing how parents affect adolescents’ vocational choice, Shoffner and Klemer (1973) state, “research suggests five major areas of parental influence on career planning: parents serving as role models, affecters of children’s self-concept, motivators of children’s interest and achievement, providers of the developmental environment, and career information givers” (p. 419). A reoccurring theme within the literature is that parents are the primary influence, positive or negative, on an adolescent’s development and vocational or career selection (Fouad, 1995; Rutter, 1980; & Shoffner & Klemer, 1973). Mike Rutter’s (1980) research conducted thirty years ago confirms his hypothesis that young people will share their parents’ values on life’s major issues and also generally turn to them for guidance
and support during periods of transition and decision-making. More recently, Fouad (1995) confirms that students continue to report their parents and family members as being the most influential factor when choosing a career pathway. Not surprisingly, research suggests that an adolescent’s parents have a stronger impact on vocational development and career aspirations than do a student’s school or peer networks (Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984). Youth of both sexes look to their parents for advice, and then attempt to meet these expectations in order to satisfy parental aspirations for educational planning and academic and occupational achievement (Fouad, 1995).

Additionally, Shoffner and Klemer (1973) explore the role of parents in helping shape a student’s self-concept; which is said to impact adolescents’ occupational and vocational choices. The researchers state, “parents may help adolescents develop a conception of ‘self’ as either able or incompetent through the rewards and punishments which they give, often thoughtlessly, for their efforts” (p. 420). Individuals’ self-conceptions are directly related to cultural and familial influences, with parents being the primary influence (Anderson, Mawby, & Miller 1965). Best put, “parental appraisals provide a ‘looking glass’ by which students form their self-appraisals and worthiness for particular vocational possibilities” (Shoffner & Klemer, 1973, p. 421). It is to parents whom adolescents look for confirmation and approval of their chosen vocation and initial career aspirations. Hoffman and Hoffman (1966) believe, “it is the basic parental attitudes toward the child rather than specific parental techniques which shape the needs and motives later given expression in adolescent and adult life when making vocational choices” (p. 403).

In order for parents to be able to effectively foster their child’s efficacy for vocational and career aspirations, the parents themselves must be aware of the largely influential role that they play, and must ultimately be confident in their own ability to guide their children
effectively. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) apply Bandura’s self-efficacy model in interpreting their results and concluding that, “parents with a higher sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed will tend to see themselves as capable in this domain; thus, they are likely to believe that their involvement will make a positive difference for their children” (p. 19). As context for their study, the researchers note that, “work to date in the specific area of parent’s efficacy beliefs related to helping children succeed in school is limited but suggestive of the construct’s potential usefulness in understanding more about parent’s involvement decisions and behaviors” (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 19).

To expand this body of literature, researchers (Hoover-Dempsey, K., Bassler, O., & Brissie, J., 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) are also interested in parents’ sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school as a condition for their own involvement in school activities. Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler defined parent efficacy as, “parents’ beliefs about their general ability to influence their child’s developmental and educational outcomes, their specific effectiveness in influencing the child’s school learning, and about their own influence relative to that of peers and the child’s teacher” (1997, p. 19). In a similar vein, researchers Eccles and Harold (1993) describe parents’ efficacy beliefs as being composed of three elements: “parents’ confidence that they can help their children with school work, parents’ views of their competence as their children progress to higher grades, and parents’ beliefs that they can influence the school through school governance” (p. 572). The authors point out that parents who do not possess these efficacy beliefs often become less engaged as their children progress along the K-12 pipeline; this correlates with the observation that parents of secondary school students are less involved than parents of elementary-aged students. Eccles and Harrold (1993) also suggest through their research findings that decreasing levels of parental involvement or
non-involvement altogether, may be due to a parent’s sense of decreased efficacy as the child’s school work becomes more advanced.

Eccles & Harold (1994) reported their findings from a longitudinal sample of over 1,000 predominantly White, lower-middle-class children and their parents. Their research reported that the most notable variable potentially related to parental efficacy was determined to be “intellectual confidence” (p.15). The research specifically focused on a mother’s confidence levels in her own intellectual ability, “liking intellectual challenges and sticking with hard problems rather than giving up” (p. 15) subscribing to achievement motivation and “family’s valuing of mastery” (p. 15), and valuing the importance of learning, sticking with problems and using time productively. They concluded by supporting the claim that the mastery and achievement beliefs were the most strongly linked to parent involvement and decision-making (Eccles & Harold, 1994).

The influence of parental efficacy is also analyzed by Clark (1983), who reports ethnographic findings that suggest higher-achieving high school students’ parents, compared to lower-achieving student’s parents, “saw themselves as wiser, if not smarter, than their children” (p.122). This research finds parents of the higher-achieving students are more actively involved in the vocational and educational decision-making process with their children. These parents are also more actively involved in the school and at school-sponsored guidance and teaching conferences or events with their children (Clark, 1983). He later reports survey data from a group (N=460) of ethnically-diverse parents of third-grade students; the efficacy beliefs of these parents are measured on a two-point scale based on whether or not they “had knowledge of how to help” (Clark, 1993, p.95). His findings suggest that the parents of high-achieving students show significantly higher efficacy scores than did the low achievers’ parents, and the parents of
the high-achieving students have a greater awareness of what is required to help their children (Clark, 1993). These research studies support the construct that parents’ efficacy and belief in their ability to support their children is a key influence in students’ academic success and career development.

Young and Friesen (1992) conduct one of the first studies to examine the role that parents believe they play in their children’s career development. They find that parents view assisting their child in career development as an important function of parenting. However, parents often felt helpless and uninformed about their children’s career decision-making and unsure of how to effectively be part of the career decision-making process (Young & Friesen, 1992; Downing & D’Andrea, 1994). Middleton and Loughead (1993) go on to cautiously note that, although well intentioned, parental encouragement based on a limited range of vocational and career information is likely to result in limited career aspirations and choices for their children. In a study by Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson, and Witko (2005), the perceptions of parents regarding their own involvement in their children’s career planning (both for high school students and middle school students) are measured. Results strongly indicate that specific programming in middle school is essential for students and families to share common definitions and understandings during the career decision-making process; which should necessarily affect one’s high school decision-making strategy. Palmer and Cochran (1988) further emphasize that, since parents view themselves as central figures to their children’s career development, “a child’s career plan is not just his or her plan. It would be more accurate to call it a family plan given parents’ contribution of resources, finances, advice, personal support, and networking contacts, among other things” (p. 75).
The influence of an adolescent’s family background, particularly socio-economic status (SES), is widely recognized in the literature and worthy of review. It is accurate to make the claim that an adolescent’s social class is specifically determined by his or her family of origin. Adolescents are not provided with options or choices for which socio-economic class they are born into. This is critical to consider when interpreting the research; specifically when researchers like Splete & Freeman-George make the point that, “socioeconomic status strongly influences career choice. Social class, or SES of the family, helps to shape the adolescent’s values, educational expectations, and career aspirations, all of which are important to career development” (1985, p. 57). Gottfredson (1981) highlights that one’s social class significantly influences the development of occupational aspirations.

The claims by Gottfredson (1981) are evidenced by the outcomes of Shapiro and Crowley’s (1982) research, which shows how adolescents from highly-educated families with higher income levels are more likely than their lower income peers to express aspirations for post-secondary goals that commensurate with higher-status occupations. An adolescent’s vocational aspirations and goals will often shape and determine their educational success, failure, desires, and opportunities taken. Blau and Duncan (1967), through their path analysis research study, find adolescents who come from higher SES backgrounds have greater means of access to financial resources which have been set aside for college attendance than do adolescents from lower SES backgrounds. This finding, while not surprising, is key because it is indisputable that a college degree denotes higher occupational status, both in terms of one’s initial job and then one’s subsequent jobs thereafter (Blau & Duncan, 1967).

Research by Blustein, Chaves, Diemer, Gallagher, Marshall, Sirin, & Bhati, (2002) suggests that, although many low-income and ethnic minority youth rely on family members for
assistance and support in career planning, their parents express feelings of inadequacy and concern about having limited knowledge of-- and scarce resources to support-- their children’s vocational choices (Blustein et al., 2002; Mau, 1995). This research suggests that low-SES families may not be able to provide their children with the specific college and career guidance so frequently seen in higher-SES families (Blustein et al., 2002). Schneider and Stevenson (1999) draw similar conclusions and connections noting that, “today’s parents share their adolescents’ high ambitions; although many parents have high educational expectations for their children, they often fail to draw meaningful connections between educational credentials and future work opportunities” (p. 7). These researchers further acknowledge that other opportunity factors exist and vary across one’s social class including, but are not limited to, mentors, role models, varying levels of occupational knowledge, and informational networks; all of which having obvious implications for the individual’s vocational development (Blau & Duncan, 1967).

In closing, there is great depth within the literature and a wide body of research to support claims about the importance of the middle school years, the need for career planning during these years, and the influence that parents have in shaping the vocational and career aspirations of their adolescent children. It is also the case that there are gaps within the literature that warrant further scholarly attention. Hartung et al. (2005) emphasize that research is focused on what children know about the world of work and careers, rather than on how they learn this information. Also, Palmer and Cochran believe, “one of the most important areas for theory and future research is in the role of parents in the career development of their children” (1988, p. 75); in agreement are Young and Freisen, who state, “the specific nature of parent involvement in children’s career development has not been adequately examined” (1992, p. 205).
This research study aims to fill that research gap, pursuing a qualitative approach, to inquire into how middle school students make future educational and career choices.

**Students’ College Going Aspirations**

The topic of student college choice and the college-going aspirations of young adults have received increased attention from educational researchers, federal, state, and policymakers in the United States and the global arena over the last three decades. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) state, “although the relationship between education and economic competitiveness and quality of life is multivariate, the commonly held belief is that increased levels of education at the state level improve the quality of life for citizens and attract more business and industry to communities at-large” (p. 231). There is an immediate urgency for middle schools and high schools to work collaboratively with post-secondary institutions of all types to ensure that students remain engaged in the college choice process.

Although college and career expectations are widely held by high school students, expectations evolve at different stages in students’ primary and secondary schooling (Goyette, 2008). It is clearly stated by Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010), that “students who have always believed they will attend college are fundamentally different from those who make a conscious decision at some point in middle or high school to attend college” (p. 17). The researchers emphasize, through their findings, that focusing on career and academic expectations of students at the end of high school will essentially miss the critical distinction by combining early and late adopters of a college-bound mindset into a single group (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010).

Hossler and Stage (1992) state, “the term student college choice has been used to describe a range of post-secondary educational decisions including (a) the decision of students to continue their education at the post-secondary level and (b) the decision to enroll in a specific
post-secondary institution” (p. 426). There are several different models of student college choice that have been developed with the intent to explain the college-going processes for students. Research by Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) identifies four types of college choice models that are also explored by researchers in the field: econometric, consumer, sociological, and combined. Each of these models suggests a specific set of factors to determine outcomes of student college choice; the econometric model will be explored further, as elements of this model directly support the current research study.

The econometric model assumes that, “individual students will enroll in a post-secondary educational institution if the perceived benefits of attendance are greater than those of non-college alternatives” (Hossler & Stage, 1992, p. 426). Factors that heavily influence a student’s college-going choice in this model include expected future earnings, expected direct and indirect costs, student familial background characteristics, and high school characteristics (Ekstrom, 1985; Fuller, Mansky & Wise, 1982; Mansky & Wise, 1983). These factors are interpreted differently by students and families. The research findings by Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) explore this idea specifically, stating:

Even though the expectation of college attendance is almost universal, economically advantaged students are more likely to take this belief for granted than their less privileged classmates. In particular, students who are white, native-born, and from better-educated families are more likely to fall into a reproductionist mode of college choice by not really deciding whether to go to college. They simply assume from a young age that it will be so. Minority youth and those from less well-educated families, on the other hand, trace their college expectations back to a more recent time. Such students are more likely to develop their college-going expectations as a result of their interactions with
others during middle or secondary school, which became pivotal fields of influence. (p. 17).

Research by Hossler and Stage (1992) defines the predisposition stage of the econometric model of student college choice as, “…the early phase of the model when students make the decision as to whether or not continue their formal education after high school” (Hossler and Stage, 1992, p. 428). Several factors (including family background and high school experience) influence this phase, and correlate with students forming predispositions toward post-secondary education.

A predisposition toward post-secondary education is positively associated with students’ socioeconomic status (Ekstrom, 1985; Elsworth et al., 1982, & Gilmour et al., 1978). Research by Elswroth et al. (1982) finds that SES explained 9% of the variance in post-secondary participation rates among Australian youth. In a multivariate analysis of the correlates of post-secondary participation (also in Australia), Ekstrom (1985) found, SES, along with sex, age, and home location, explaining most of the variance in the college-going participation rates. Finally, in a qualitative study of the post-secondary plans of seniors attending an American high school, Gilmour et al. (1978) report that as the family income and educational level of parents increased, the age when students first began to seriously consider their post-secondary plans decreased. Additionally, using a conditional logic analysis, Manski and Wise (1983) investigate the college choice decisions of 23,000 high school students who participated in the NLS study. They found SES helped to predict the likelihood of post-secondary enrollment (or predisposition), but the effect was not strong. These findings collectively suggest that, while SES may not directly influence predisposition, SES likely plays a significant role in student high school achievement; and, in turn, a student’s predisposition to post-secondary opportunities.
Academic ability is another factor that influences college-going aspirations within the predisposition phase. Trent and Medsker (1968) state, “there is some question as to whether socioeconomic status or students’ academic ability has the greater influence on the decision to attend college” (p. 3). There is accumulated support within the research showing that a student’s ability is positively aligned with a predisposition toward post-secondary education (Trent & Medsker, 1968; Manski & Wise, 1983; and Yang, 1981). Hearn (1991) promotes the idea that prior academic achievement is largely independent of social and economic origins but is a strong predictor of educational attainment.

Additional research by Manski & Wise (1983) reveal the influence of high school GPA and SAT scores as predictors of which students go on to college. Yang (1981) indicates that high school grades can explain 15% of the variance in post-secondary aspirations. Grades also explain 12% of the variance in actual attendance rates of high school students. Furthermore, Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) state that, “as one would anticipate, children who have always believed that they would attend college also tend to perform better in school and to take more advanced math classes and are more likely to take the PSAT” (p. 24). Lastly, using NLS data, Peters (1977) reports that high-ability high school students are eight times more likely to go to college than low-ability students. These findings collectively demonstrate that student ability and student achievement have a direct and significant impact upon the post-secondary plans. Hossler and Stage (1992) from their findings add, “as ability and academic achievement rise, students are more likely to aspire to attend a post-secondary institution and they are more likely to follow through on their plans” (p. 430).

A body of research also looks at the predisposition phase of students’ college choice through the lens of parent education attainment levels. For example, Gilmour et al. (1978)
reports that students with college-educated parents started thinking earlier about continuing their education after high school. In a study of 1,714 rural high school seniors throughout their final year in high school and through their first year in college, Yang (1981) applying both qualitative and multivariate analytic techniques, identifies father’s education as a stronger influence than mother’s on student aspirations. However, in this study, mother’s education exerts more influence on actual college attendance rates. Finally, Manski and Wise (1982) compare college application probabilities of students whose parents had less than a high school education to those of students whose parents earned a college degree or more. In most income brackets, Manski and Wise (1982) found students with college educated parents twice as likely to apply to college than their income matched peers.

Findings by Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) emphasize that the level of parental education fosters an enormous influence on not just the probability of college aspirations for one’s child but also on the timing of college aspirations. The researchers state, “compared to children of parents who completed high school but never attended college, students whose parents completed a bachelor’s degree or more are around 20 percentage points more likely to subscribe to a college going belief” (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010, p. 23). The data is further critiqued in that, “children of parents who failed to complete high school, by contrast, are about 7 percentage points less likely than children of high school graduates to hold a lifelong expectation of postsecondary attendance” (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb, 2010, p. 24). Hossler and Stage (1992) confirm these ideas stating, “this evidence suggests that the level of parental education has a strong positive influence upon predisposition toward post-secondary education, more than either SES or student ability” (p. 431).
Another factor prevalent within the predisposition phase is the influence of parental expectations and encouragement. In several studies, parental expectations and encouragement are found to be positively associated with aspirations for post-secondary education (Ekstrom, 1985; Gilmour et al., 1978; Murphy, 1981). The descriptive study of Murphy (1981) reveals that 43% of all students and 50% of all parents say the idea of attending a post-secondary institution was first initiated by parents. Sewell and Shah (1978) used data from the NLS study and found that the educational expectations of parents explained 37% of the variance in post-secondary aspirations. Researchers conclude that, “parental expectations explained more of the variance in aspiration than any other variable” (p. 563). A study by Carpenter and Fleishman (1987) found that as parental expectations increased, so did student achievement. The researchers claim that these findings indicate a reciprocal relationship among parental expectations, student achievement, and student predisposition. In their study, Hossler and Stage (1992) also summarize their findings to conclude, “as students perform better in school, parents increase their educational expectations, which in turn provide further motivation for students to improve their performance” (p. 432).

Viewed collectively, factors that appear to consistently influence students toward college included SES, ability and academic achievement, parental education, and parental encouragement. Researchers note that there are contradictory findings in the literature regarding the effects of school quality on a student’s college choice decision. For example, Alexander et al. (1978) finds that the social status of the high school is correlated with attendance at a post-secondary institution while research by Kolstad (1979) points out that when SES and other background characteristics were held constant; high school quality is only weakly correlated with enrollment in college. What we can claim, however, is that the influence of a student’s familial
educational and economic background, can strongly influence that student’s post-secondary aspirations and chosen pathway.

**Chapter III: Research Design**

The demands of the 21st century, including economic trends, and technological advances, require that adolescents find relevance in their decision-making while striving to make connections with potential career and educational aspirations as early as high school. My problem of practice *anticipates that existing transitional practices sponsored by Henry Lord Middle School may not be most effective in preparing students and families for the high school decision-making requirement. This researcher’s informal observation and communications over time would seem to evidence that, for most middle school students and their families, an information gap exists when interpreting the public high school options and potential secondary school outcomes.* To address this problem, I propose to explore the influential factors considered by students and parents at Henry Lord Middle School when making the decision of high school attendance, while also aiming to investigate the level of awareness students and parents have for specific high school programming.

**Research Questions**

The three research questions guiding this study are:

1. What influenced Henry Lord Middle School eighth grade students’ decisions when selecting a high school of attendance?

2. How are parents or guardians of 8th graders at Henry Lord Middle School informed of the high school options and influence their children’s high school decision-making process; and,
(3) How did guidance counselors influence the high school decision-making process for transitioning eighth graders from the Henry Lord Middle School?

**Methodology**

**Rationale for a qualitative approach.** According to Maxwell (2005), qualitative and quantitative strategies provide varying logic and strength when addressing different types of research questions. Miles and Huberman (1984) support this approach, stating that, “field research is far better than solely quantified approaches at developing explanations of what we call local causality—the actual events and processes that lead to specific outcomes” (p.132). Creswell (2009) suggests several important characteristics of qualitative research to be employed in this study, such as, the importance of conducting research in the natural setting while focusing on the holistic meaning (multiple perspectives) that participants hold for the problem or issue under investigation. This research study incorporates the qualitative elements outlined above, intending to capture the perspectives of multiple interest groups and detailing the decision-making influences and considerations of the primary analysis group: transitioning 8th grade students at Henry Lord Middle School.

The results that emerge from this qualitative research study will aid in offering considerations for restructuring existing transitional practices and communication strategies between middle and high school students, family members, and faculty; striving to ensure that all students and families are provided the academic, career, or technical school information necessary to partake in knowledgeable and relevant high school transitions.

**Rationale for a case study design.** I have selected a case study methodology to investigate the problem of practice. Of the multiple qualitative methods available, a case study approach is the most appropriate to answer the question of “how” or “why” (Maxwell, 2005;
Yin, 2003). Case study researcher Robert Stake (1978) points out, “this method has been tried and found to be a direct and satisfying way of adding to experience and improving understanding” (p.7). Yin (1984) states that there are many definitions of a case study yet, “the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (p.22); this definition aligns with the research questions framing this study by highlighting the decision-making process.

This research study employs a single-case study design (Yin, 1984), aiming to understand the process and rationale of a specific group of students (Henry Lord Middle School 8th graders) as they engage in a specific activity (decision of high school attendance). The case study methodology permitted the researcher to explore the variety of individual perspectives, influences, and considerations that lead to a student’s decision of where to enroll in high school at Henry Lord Middle School. The primary subjects of the study were 8th grade students from Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River who were in the process of transitioning from a middle school to a high school environment. The use of a case study methodology also allowed the researcher to compare and discuss the wide array of influences prevalent among students at this site.

The intent of the case study is descriptive in nature (Yin, 1984). The description includes a detailed account of the participants’ own perceptions and experiences as they relate to the problem of practice. The perceptions of family members and guidance counselors will provide additional data for comparison and analysis. The case will serve as a mechanism to interpret the contextual transition experiences for students at HLMS. A practical goal of this research study is
to develop a suggested set of informational, relevant, and consistent practices that eventually come to be expected by future generations of students and families at HLMS.

**Site and Participants**

This research study will utilize a purposeful selection sampling strategy for both the location and participants intended to inform this research study. Maxwell suggests, “selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide you with the information that you need in order to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative selection decisions” (2005, p. 88). This research study will include three stakeholder groups including students, parents or guardians, and a HLMS guidance counselor.

**Site.** The Fall River Public School system is an urban school district with a free/reduced lunch population totaling 76.6%, comprised of nine elementary schools, four middle schools, and one comprehensive high school. The assignment of students at the elementary and middle levels is determined by the family’s residency or a student’s programmatic needs and school offerings. The transition between middle and high school presents the first instance where students and families are given a choice and provided options in public education. In Fall River, students have the option of enrolling in one of three public high schools, each offering a wide variety of programming and post-secondary preparation. Significantly, two of the three schools subscribe to a competitive application and selection process, thereby increasing the stakes for all students to be knowledgeable and informed of the programmatic differences and application requirements and criteria.

The Guidance Department of each high school is responsible for coordinating efforts with the middle school guidance staff to complete 8th grade student registrations and transitions. The middle school principals allow area high school representatives from the three area high schools
the opportunity to communicate their school and programmatic offerings with 8th grade students and families. Over the last four years, there have been few, if any, new initiatives by the HLMS staffs to expand information or services. This contextual transition information is intended to demonstrate the lack of quality information and transitional programming currently being disseminated to HLMS students and families. All middle school students are required to formally make their decision for high school attendance by May 2011. Data collection for this research study began once students finalized their decisions for high school in September 2011.

The Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River (HLMS) was the specific site that this case study investigated. HLMS is one of four middle schools in Fall River, servicing just under 500 students in grades 6-8. The school has a free/reduced lunch population of 84.2%. Student body ethnicity is 67.8% White, 17.9% Hispanic, 6.6% African American, 6.2% Asian, and 1.5% Mulit-Race, non-Hispanic respectively (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2011). The school was designated as a Level IV school by the DESE in 2011; administration and staff are working diligently to correct the aforementioned deficiencies.

The rationale for choosing Henry Lord Middle School is twofold:
1. The principal of this site is committed to strengthening established protocols for students transitioning from middle school to high school; the latter affords students the opportunity for decision-making when selecting their high school of choice.
2. The school currently lacks a documented and formalized plan to inform and support transitioning 8th graders in the high school decision-making process.

**Participants.** This study included three types of respondents during data collection to fulfill the study’s purpose: students; parents, guardians, or family members; and HLMS guidance counselors.
**Group 1: Transitioning 8\textsuperscript{th} grade students at Henry Lord Middle School.** The student participants who informed this research study were 8\textsuperscript{th} graders at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River transitioning to high school in September 2011. The students were asked to explain how they made their final decision of where to attend high school. All 8\textsuperscript{th} grade HLMS students, listed on the school enrollment logs, were invited and encouraged to participate. The 8\textsuperscript{th} grade English Language Arts (ELA) classes, a requirement for all students, served as the vehicle to conduct the study. Using a focus group strategy, 8\textsuperscript{th} grade ELA class rosters were randomly divided to group the students and ELA class time was used to facilitate the focus group discussions. Participants were asked to explain how they made their decision of where to attend high school in September 2011. The entire transitioning 8\textsuperscript{th} grade class at HLMS attended an informational assembly in the school auditorium, where the researcher introduced the students to the purpose, goals, and research questions framing the study. Additionally, the researcher conveyed the important role that each student played in the study.

The total number of students reflected 144 potential participants. Students were selected based upon their recent experience with high school decision-making, thereby providing a suitable sample population on which to apply the research questions framing this study. The ages of the invited participants ranged from 13 to 15 years of age, with variation attributable to individual grade progression and retention histories.

**Group 2: Middle School student family members.** Parents, guardians, or family members of the 8\textsuperscript{th} grade student participants were recruited to be included in Phase II of this research study. The family members were asked for their perspective in several areas, including: discovering the influence they exercise over their child’s decision for high school, interpreting their awareness for the differing high school programs; and explaining the rationale for their
child’s final decision of where to attend high school. Additionally, family members were encouraged to discern their initial satisfaction with their child’s high school selection at the time of the interview. Family members of each student participant were recruited by invitation through the mail encouraging their participation in a 1 on 1 interview session with the researcher (or research assistant if translation is a barrier). The invitation outlined the purpose, goals, and research questions framing the study and the importance of each family member contributing to the study. A targeted range of 15-20 parent, guardian, or family member interviews/focus groups were expected to be held; the goal being to build diverse perspectives into the data.

If participation in the parent/family member interviews does not yield adequate responses, in regard to number of participants, the researcher will seek partnership with the public high schools to sponsor scheduled focus groups at the different high schools. The researchers contact information was provided to extend an invitation for arranging the date, time, and location of the interviews.

**Group 3: Middle school guidance counselors.** There were two guidance counselors at HLMS who were responsible for student transitions and organizing corresponding programming. They were recruited for inclusion in Phase III of this research study, participation in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. The goals of their involvement were to better understand the transitional programming that existed at HLMS and to have them share their experiences of working with students and families in the transition process. Data from the student focus groups and parent, guardian, or family member interviews will be shared for comment and further discussion and reflection; student and family member confidentiality will be maintained in this phase of the study.
Data Collection

In order to create a detailed description of the influences faced by students and families, multiple sources of data were considered (Yin, 2003) including focus groups with transitioning 8th grade students, in-depth one-on-one interviews and/or focus groups with parents, guardians, or family members of the student participants, and one-on-one interviews with guidance counselors from HLMS. Figure 1, below, succinctly outlines the three phases of data collection that informed this research study. In Figure 1 the intended participants, method and setting for data collection, and the type of consent elicited by the researcher are framed to simplify each phase for future readers.

Figure 1: Data Collection Phases

Phase 1: Student focus groups. There are many researchers who interpret and subscribe to different definitions and reasons for using a focus group strategy in qualitative research. The rationale for using the focus group strategy in this study was to better understand the factors considered by students and the influences they encountered when making their decision of where to enroll for high school. A focus group is, “an interaction within a group, based on topics that
are supplied by the researcher who typically takes the role of a moderator” (Morgan, 1997). Mertens (2005) suggests, “the reliance on interaction between participants is designed to elicit more of the participants’ points of view than would be evidenced in more researcher dominated interviewing” (p. 246). Using a focus group strategy, guided by written protocols (see Appendix A), facilitated discussions with transitioning 8th grade students took place during English class time at HLMS. The focus groups lasted for one class period of 90 minutes. Participants were asked to explain how they arrived at their recent decision of where to attend high school. Additional themes that arose in the focus group questions included: the influence of career aspirations, personal efficacy beliefs, influence of personal interests and abilities, and family member influences when making their decision.

Researchers support smaller groups because they are considered most effective to encourage participation and sharing of the participant’s thoughts, experiences, and beliefs etc. (Yin, 1984; Krueger, 1995; Morgan, 1997). Each focus group consisted of no more than 12 students and was audio taped for future transcription, coding and data analysis. In the event that the majority of students within each English class did not return their consent forms, electing to opt out of the study, the classes were randomly divided into two focus groups, a research assistant was utilized to conduct the second focus group simultaneously. All student participants were reminded, as part of the focus group protocols, of their voluntary participation in the focus groups and their ability to abstain from answering any question they do not want to answer.

The lead researcher collaborated with the research assistant, prior to the focus group sessions to review specific focus group protocols that had been established. The researcher outlined the purpose, goals, and research questions framing the study. The assistant researcher was also trained in the described procedures for maintaining confidentiality. Students who
opted-out of the focus groups, based on a parent/guardian’s decision to opt-out or a student electing to opt-out when signing the assent form, remained with the English teacher during the time of the focus groups; activities were provided to the students and were not be punitive in nature.

Phase 2: Middle School student family members (interviews and focus groups). An inquiry that attempts to understand the meaning people make of their actions and experiences, it is suggested, can be sufficiently attained through the interview practice (Seidman, 1998). This research study employed two phases of interviews: parents, guardians, or family members; and HLMS guidance counselors. Seidman states, “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (1998, p. 3). With this idea as the premise guiding this study, individual interviews were anticipated with 15-20 parent, guardian, or family member volunteers to obtain more in-depth insight to their involvement and understanding of the middle to high school transition, interpretation of the different programs offered at each high school, and the role they played in the high school decision-making process for their child.

Parents, guardians, and family members were first informed and made aware of their opportunity to participate in this study when they received the consent form outlining their child’s participation in the study. Additionally, through invitations mailed to the homes of student participants in November-December 2011, parents, guardians, or family members were recruited for the interview phase of the study. Due to the fact that the parent/family member interview request did not yield adequate response, final recruitment attempts included invitations to a parent/family member focus group, sponsored by each public high school. School records
provided the information necessary for all parent, guardian, or family member recruitment efforts.

All participants for the interview/focus group phase of the study were encouraged to meet face to face (with either the researcher or research assistant). However, if a participant were to request a telephone interview, the researcher would have made accommodations for the individual. Interviews were scheduled at a time convenient to the participants and lasted for 35-50 minutes to answer 15-20 questions. The researcher determined the interview protocols (see Appendix B), which followed an open-ended format in order to fully allow parents, guardians, or family members to unveil their experiences, knowledge, and concerns. Additionally, as part of the interview/focus group protocols, the researcher reviewed with each participant, prior to the start of the formal interview, a detailed explanation describing the goals, purpose, and research questions framing the study. The participants were reminded of their ability to opt out of the study at any time and that they are not required to answer any of the questions asked by the researcher.

**Phase 3: Middle School Guidance Counselors (Interviews).** One-on-one individual interviews were also conducted with guidance counselors at HLMS. The interviews were done face-to-face, and lasted between 45-60 minutes. The interviews explored the transitional programming that existed at HLMS and shared the themes that emerge in phases one and two (student focus groups and parent interviews) in order to facilitate comment and further discussion. Interview protocols were used to guide the sessions with the guidance counselors (see Appendix C) while ensuring that student, parent, guardian, or family member, confidentiality was maintained in the study.
These forms of data collection, student focus groups, parent, guardian, or family member interviews or focus groups, and guidance counselor interviews were selected to strategically inform the central inquiry framing this study (high school decision-making) as represented in Figure 2 (next page). Data collected at the outset through student focus groups was foundational to the study and essential to informing and finalizing the protocols for the parent, guardian, or family member and guidance counselor interviews. There are specific areas of interest framing the initial protocols for each phase of data collection; however, the information and developing understandings gained during each phase of data collection was used to inform the next and the research questions continued to guide the inquiry within each group.

Figure 2: Data Collection Relationships

**Data Analysis**

Researcher Janice Morse, (as cited by Saldana, 2009) defines the data analysis process to novice researchers most clearly, stating,

data analysis is a process that requires astute questioning, a relentless search for
answers, active observation, and accurate recall. It is a process of piecing together data, of making the invisible obvious, of recognizing the significant from the insignificant, of linking seemingly unrelated facts logically, of fitting categories one with another and of attributing consequences to antecedents. (p. 148)

The researcher subscribed to the data analysis ideals of Janice Morse described above, as this research study produced significant amounts of qualitative data that require immediate and ongoing analysis and careful management. “Data analysis is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos throughout the study… it is conducted concurrently with gathering data, making interpretations, and writing reports” (Creswell, p. 184). The following section outlines the procedures that the researcher implemented to achieve meaningful analysis of the two forms of data collected in this study: focus group and interview data.

Data reduction, coding, and interpretation were completed with all three sets of data: transcripts of student focus groups, interviews with parents, guardians, or family members, and guidance counselors. A categorizing strategy, coding, and thematic analysis of the data were completed with each group of participants (Maxwell, 2005). The categories were substantive and theoretical to ensure that all ideas and perceptions were analyzed and included in the analysis process.

**Stage I: Pre-coding.** All focus group and interview audio recordings were listened to and reviewed for pre-coding analysis; analytical memo writing began immediately and simultaneously. Saldana (2009) explains pre-coding as the opportunity to identify significant quotes or passages within the data that appear important and therefore worthy of further attention. As a novice researcher using raw data, this was an essential first step in the analysis
process. In regard to analytical memo writing, Saldana (2009) supports the idea that ongoing analytical memo writing forces the researcher to critically analyze personal assumptions, interpretations, and the extent to which those beliefs shape what is seen in the data in the early stages of analysis. Maxwell (2005) suggests using memos throughout the analysis as a way for the researcher “to not only capture one’s analytic thinking about data, but also facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytic insights” (p. 96). Both pre-coding and analytical memo writing created a general and personal understanding and interpretation of the data.

**Stage II: First cycle coding.** The researcher transcribed the audio data to textual transcriptions for the first cycle of coding and data analysis. Coding is defined as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study…for our purposes it is not the words themselves but their meaning that matters” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56). The data was analyzed to interpret common ideas, meanings, and relationships within the data. The first cycle of data analysis used inductive “emic” categories (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Maxwell, 2005) to determine emerging themes that reflected the participant’s own interpretations.

Saldana (2009) supports the use of multiple methods during the first cycle of coding to fully interpret the richness and completeness of the data. The researcher used Attribute Coding, Descriptive Coding, In Vivo Coding, Values Coding, and Evaluation Coding to identify common and divergent themes within and across stakeholder groups (Saldana, 2009). Attribute Coding was used to log descriptive and demographic characteristics of the participants for later reference during analysis. Descriptive coding was used to summarize the data by topics and lead to a categorized inventory of the data; considered to be essential groundwork for second cycle coding and analysis (Saldana, 2009). In Vivo Coding is also known as “literal coding” or “verbatim
coding” where the exact words and phrases of the participants are captured in the analysis; claims are made that this type of coding is particularly useful in educational research with youth (Saldana, 2009). “Values Coding places codes on the data that reflects participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (Saldana, 2009, p. 89). This type of coding was used to analyze and draw comparisons to the cultural values, personal experiences, and general knowledge of the participants included in this study. Lastly, Evaluation Coding allows qualitative data to draw conclusions and essentially make judgments about the effectiveness of programs or policies. These coding strategies were intended to address the research questions framing this study. At the conclusion of the first cycle coding, the researcher compared the categories and attempted to consolidate the codes in meaningful ways that move beyond the literal interpretations of the data; anticipating a more theoretical and conceptual analysis in the second cycle of coding.

**Stage III: Second cycle coding.** In the second cycle of data analysis the researcher analyzed the transcripts of focus groups and interviews using theoretical codes and interpretations resulting from prior theory; also known as “etic” categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Maxwell, 2005). During this stage the researcher further reduced the data, by successively recoding the data and developing more refined themes and impressions. Saldana (2009) supports the notion that, “the primary goal during second cycle coding, is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the array of first cycle codes” (p. 149). The researcher employed Pattern Coding in the second cycle of coding. Saldana (2009) suggests to recall and review the first cycle of codes “to assess their commonality and assign them a Pattern Code…a stimulus to develop a statement that describes a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of inter-relationships, or a theoretical construct from the data” (p.
Researchers identify that the function of pattern coding aims to reduce large amounts of raw data and helps the researcher gain a more integrated understanding of the rules, causes, and explanations within the data collected (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009). Miles & Huberman (1994) suggest examining those pattern codes in light of a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories.

Boyatzis (1998) believes, “a good thematic code is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon” (p. 31). In the analysis of data and creating the code manual for this study, the researcher adopted Boyatzis’ structure of a useful and meaningful code by assigning each of the studies thematic codes a label, definition, description, and example which assisted in capturing the authenticity and richness of the data in connection to the research questions (Boyatzis, 1998). Additionally, this study required effective storage and management to prepare for that analysis of raw data sets throughout this research study. The qualitative analysis software MAXQDA was able to support the categorizing, coding, thematic analysis, and analytical memo writing that structured the analysis of this research study. For these reasons I utilized MAXQDA software to capture the richness of the data and to accurately portray the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of the participants in this research study.

**Stage IV: Interpretation and outcomes.** The final stage of data analysis for this study was an interpretation of the data, discovering the outcomes and “lessons learned” through the researcher’s personal interpretations of the data, and also by comparing the outcomes of the current study to that of past research and theory (Creswell, 2009). Applying self-efficacy theory and critical education theory, the outcomes of the current study explained to whether the transitioning students have connected their self-efficacy for achieving success and the programmatic offerings of each high school when making their decision for attendance. Also,
whether or not students and families are equitably informed when making their decision for high school, was also interpreted.

**Validity and Credibility**

The researcher intentionally instituted practices throughout this research study that ensured a rigorous process of data collection and analysis. In qualitative research Creswell & Miller (2000) point that, “validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 125). Other terms that are used synonymously in qualitative research are authenticity, trustworthiness, and credibility. Yin (1984) suggests three strategies to increase validity: multiple sources of evidence, chain of evidence, and peer review of researcher’s results; all of which were implemented within the framework of this study.

There were three sources of evidence within this study, all of which are intended to link disparate perspectives to the main research question. The researcher triangulated the data to compare and contrast the perspectives and interpretations of students, parents, and guidance staffs, aiming to “build coherent justification for the themes that arise within the data collection” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). This process was intended to add validity to the research study and also to address any researcher bias within the analysis. Additionally, to ensure the trustworthiness of the participant responses, an ongoing analysis of the study’s findings was employed. The researcher used a “peer debriefing strategy to enhance the accuracy of the account” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). The researcher employed this strategy to incorporate questions and a review of the case study report through the lens of someone other than the researcher herself; this contributed additional validity to the research study.
Finally, Gibbs (2007) promotes the notion that qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s methods and approach are consistent across different researchers and studies. This research study employed a “rich, thick, description to convey the findings. The description is intended to transport the readers to the settings and give the discussion an element of shared experiences” (Cresewll, 2009, p. 191) and add to the reliability of the research study.

Maxwell (2005) is critical of qualitative studies that rely on proposed methods to identify validity threats and suggests researchers identify potential threats prior to the study to strategically address them. There are a many potential factors which may seriously flaw a research study; however, Maxwell (2005) suggests confronting two broad types of validity threats: researcher bias and reactivity.

**Researcher bias.** All researchers must be aware of and guard against the tendency to interpret data through personal and professional perspectives, allowing for an analysis and coding of the data to not be unduly influenced by the researcher’s lens based on their personal experience rather than the natural emergence of themes and codes from participant data.

Working in the Fall River Public Schools as the Department Head of Guidance, the researcher’s experience allowed for direct participation in the transition programming with HLMS. As a participant in the existing transition programming with HLMS students and families I cannot say that bias was completely eliminated from the study. Certainly, this researcher’s experience as a guidance counselor may serve (however unintentionally) as a source of interpreter bias. However, this researcher attempted to draw directly from the data the critical issues that impacted a student’s decision making as stated, while attempting to be continually cognizant of any interpretation that did not allow for a valid and trustworthy analysis of the data..
**Reactivity.** Maxwell (2005) defines reactivity as, “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” (p.108). Otherwise put, how does the researcher know that her involvement in this research study and her professional role at DHS doesn’t influence, positively or negatively, participant responses? To exclude this eventuality, the current research study did not begin until after students finalized their decision for high school attendance in the spring of 2011. This research study was not intended to coerce students in any way and their decision for high school was celebrated and congratulated.

The researcher of this study facilitated the focus groups and interviews of the different participant groups. The professional role of the researcher, serving as Department Head of Guidance at Durfee High School, did not seem to present any specific risks to the participants. The researcher will not serve as a counselor for any of the HLMS students who subsequently transition to Durfee, and their identities will be kept confidential; every attempt was and will be made not to compromise the relationships based on the student’s involvement in the study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The current study did not anticipate any known risk to the participants. The study aims to interpret and understand the various influences that students and parents took into consideration when making the decision for high school attendance; there are no experimental procedures or treatment groups that could result consequentially for one group or another. Therefore, participation in the study did not put the students or parents at risk. In fact, participants may actually benefit by becoming more self-aware and by better understanding the reasoning involved in arriving at their eventual decisions. Participation in this research study was voluntary and inclusive of all transitioning 8th graders; the final sample selection was purposeful and nondiscriminatory. Not all transitioning 8th grade students participated in this research
study, unless they opt-out, and then only after they have finalized their decision for high school attendance. This study is not intended to influence their decision-making authority. It should be noted that the participating guidance counselors are considered colleagues and efforts have been taken to ensure that this researcher not be perceived as an authority figure (which would conceivably influence participant response and therefore skew study results).

However, it is worth mentioning some theoretically potential risks. The student focus groups could result in students questioning themselves and their decision for high school due to lack of information or misinformation at the time of their decision. Additionally, guidance counselors may be intimidated by potential outcomes of this research, fearing embarrassment for providing inconsistent and untimely admission and transition information to students and families.

In order to safeguard the sample, the researcher will support students if their decision for high school changes as a result of their participation. If a change in placement is requested and possible, as a result of their participation in the focus groups, the researcher will assist the students during the summer months. Additionally, the researcher will secure an agreement with the Principal that any data revealed by this research project will be used in a constructive manner, aimed at strengthening transition programming at HLMS and not for evaluative purposes. The interviews and focus group sessions will be audio-taped with participants’ knowledge and consent, and recordings and documentation will be destroyed after data transcription takes place. Participants will not be named in the study and their identities will be concealed.
Summary

The middle school experience is a short but important time in all students’ educational journey. Contemporary legislation, like Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind, emphasizes the nation’s commitment to increasing college and career readiness for all students by high school graduation. In order for a student’s high school experience to be relevant and rigorous, middle school students need to be considering their initial college and career aspirations as they make their decision for high school.

The educational theories posed in this research suggest that a key factor impacting a student’s decision for high school is their ability to interpret academic and career opportunities while fostering beliefs of self-efficacy for particular short and long-term aspirations. Additionally, parents and guardians who are not sufficiently aware of public high school options and requirements put their children at potential risk for non-admission to colleges and career programs. The prior research surrounding this topic emphasizes the need for ongoing college and career activities as early as middle school.

This study is being completed to better understand how students at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River are making their decision of where to enroll for high school. The study aims to uncover the influences that are most prominent in a student’s transitional decision-making authority. Research points, parents and family members are the most influential to a student’s career and educational aspirations. Including this population in the current research will be essential to address both the primary and secondary research questions that frame this study. The information obtained within this study will be used to inform and develop the future transitional practices of the FRPS.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to report and discuss the key findings from the research conducted over a one year period with a total of 116 transitioning 8th grade students, seven parents, and one guidance counselor at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River, Massachusetts regarding students’ and families choice of high school. This report is broken into five sections: The first section provides a brief review of the study context; the second provides a descriptive analysis of the participant groups: students, parents, and middle school administration; the three additional sections address each of the three research questions by its aligned participant group: students, parents, and school administration.

Study Context

The perceived importance of choosing a high school varies widely among students, parents, and school administrators. Perceptions of the various stakeholders were obtained through focus groups with students, interviews with parents and guardians, and an interview with the school guidance counselor. All focus groups and interviews were subsequently coded for themes, as described in the previous chapter for coding. The themes in response to each research question are presented below, along with illustrative participant quotes, reference to the responses by participants across all focus group and interview questions as presented in tables in Appendix D, and the researcher’s commentary. Through this analysis, the voice and perspectives of students, parents, and school guidance counselors participating in the study are presented. In total, 144 8th grade students participated in the focus groups of this study. Unfortunately, however, despite several attempts to gain participation by at least 15-20 parents and guardians, only a total of eight parents were interviewed, providing a limited set of responses to inform this study.
High School Choice Data from Study Participants

In June 2011 there were 144 8th grade students at Henry Lord Middle School identified as the potential sample for this research study. The potential sample of 144 resulted in the participation of 116 students (80%). The total sample was analyzed as combinations of school records were provided to enhance this research study. School records indicated gender, application status to Diman/Bristol Aggie, admission decision by Diman/Bristol Aggie, final high school decision by each student, and the free/reduced lunch status of each student (a low income determinant for schools). This study’s sample was categorized as presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

*SY2011 8th Grade Application and Admission Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Applied to Diman/BA/Other</th>
<th>Accepted to Diman/BA/Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=71)</td>
<td>42% (30)</td>
<td>47% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=73)</td>
<td>53% (39)</td>
<td>54% (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (n=144)</td>
<td>48% (69)</td>
<td>51% (35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

SY 2011 8th Grade Application and Admission Data by Lunch Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Applied to Diman/BA/ Other</th>
<th>Accepted to Diman/BA/Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FRL</td>
<td>Not-FRL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=71)</td>
<td>43% (26/61)</td>
<td>40% (4/10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=73)</td>
<td>55% (33/60)</td>
<td>46% (6/13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (n=144)</td>
<td>49% (59/121)</td>
<td>43% (10/23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 1 indicates that in SY2011, roughly half of the class chose to apply to Diman/Bristol Aggie (n=48%) whereas the other half (n=52%) chose not to apply to the application-driven high schools. The admission trends for students who applied were then analyzed and similarly, 35/69 (51%) of the students who applied were accepted to Diman/Bristol Aggie and 34/69 (49%) were not admitted. The lunch status categories were used to further analyze the sample and alarming trends arose from the data (see Table 2). A total of 10 students who did not qualify for free/reduced lunch applied to Diman/Bristol Aggie; of the 10 students who applied, 7 were accepted, producing a 70% acceptance rate for students in this category. Conversely, there were a total of 59 students who qualified for free/reduced lunch and applied to Diman/Bristol Aggie; of the 59 students who applied, 28 were accepted. This data points out that, when looking at lunch status as a control within this sample, there is a greater acceptance rate for students who do not qualify for free/reduced lunch (70%) as compared to their peers who do qualify (47%).

Further analysis of this data, by gender and lunch status, points to an even greater disparity among females in the free/reduced lunch category. There were a total of 6 non-free
reduced/lunch females who applied to Diman/Bristol Aggie and 5 were admitted. This is an 83% acceptance rate for non-free/reduced lunch female students. Conversely, 33 female students who qualify for free/reduced lunch applied to Diman/Bristol Aggie and 16 were admitted. This is a 48% acceptance rate for female students qualifying for free/reduced lunch. The male students’ admission rates looking at gender and lunch status were more evenly distributed: 50% for non-free reduced lunch males and 46% for free/reduced lunch male students. In regard to gender and admission rates, there appeared to be a slightly higher rate of acceptance for females; 21 of the 39 (54%) females who applied to Diman and Bristol Aggie were accepted, as compared to 14 of the 30 (47%) males who also applied and were accepted.

Additional analysis of admission data indicates that roughly half (34 of 69, or 49%) of the students who applied to Diman/Bristol Aggie were not admitted 34/69 (49%). Still, when looking at data regarding non-admission, gender, and lunch status, there again arises a discrepancy regarding female students; the data indicates that 17/33 (52%) of female applicants receiving free/reduced lunch who were denied admission to Diman/Bristol Aggie as compared to 1/6 (17%) of the students not receiving free/reduced lunch being denied admission.

In order to ascertain whether high school application and admission trends exist from year to year at Henry Lord Middle School, this researcher also analyzed the school records and high school application/admission data from the transitioning 8th graders in SY2012, using the previously established categories and yielding the following results:
Table 3

SY 2012 8th Grade Application and Admission Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Applied to Diman/BA/ Other</th>
<th>Accepted to Diman/BA/Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=72)</td>
<td>35% (25)</td>
<td>72% (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=81)</td>
<td>53% (43)</td>
<td>58% (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (n=153)</td>
<td>44% (68)</td>
<td>63% (43)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

SY 2012 8th Grade Application and Admission Data by Lunch Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Applied to Diman/BA/ Other</th>
<th>Accepted to Diman/BA/Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FRL</td>
<td>Not-FRL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males (n=72)</td>
<td>28% (17/61)</td>
<td>73% (8/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females (n=81)</td>
<td>55% (38/61)</td>
<td>25% (5/20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (n=153)</td>
<td>45% (55/122)</td>
<td>42% (13/31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 points that overall there was a 4% decrease in students applying to Diman/Bristol Aggie compared with SY2011. However, when looking at the categories of gender, lunch status, application, and admission for the population at large, trends emerge. For instance, there was a 21% decrease in applications to Diman/Bristol Aggie by female students who do not qualify for free/reduced lunch from SY2011 to SY2012, as shown between Tables 1 and 3. Additionally, there was a 7% increase in applications by students who do qualify for free/reduced lunch within the same school years. Admission trends for female students within
these categories point to a 3% decrease for students who do not qualify for free/reduced lunch; yet, there is a 7% admission increase for students who do qualify for free/reduced lunch from SY2011 to SY2012 (see Tables 2 and 4).

There are significant differences for male students when considering the same categories. The application trends are opposite that of the females; from SY2011 to SY2012, there was a 33% increase in applications made by male students who did not qualifying for free/reduced lunch, and a 15% decrease by males who did qualify (see tables 2 and 3). The admission trends for male students were unique in that both categories of male students-- those who did not qualify for free/reduced lunch prices and those who did-- experienced significant increases in admission; ranging from 38% and 19% respectively from SY2011 and SY2012. The data in Tables 1 and 3 point out that overall, there was a 4% decrease in applications in SY2012; however, there was a 12% increase in admission and a 12% decrease in students not accepted for admission from SY2011 and SY2012. In summary, analyzing two school years of application and admission data does not provide enough information for the researcher to identify themes. However, there are clear differences between males and females in each category that warrant further analysis and a deeper look into why such differences exist between genders.

Coding for Themes

Themes were coded in relation to each of the three research questions and the corresponding participant groups (students, parents/guardians, and the guidance counselor). Themes were developed from an analysis of transcribed data from student focus groups, parent/guardian interviews, and an interview with the Henry Lord Middle School guidance counselor.
Saldana (2009) explains pre-coding as the opportunity to identify significant quotes or passages within the data that strike you as being important and worthy of later attention. Initially, the data was pre-coded as the researcher listened to all focus groups while reading the corresponding transcription to ensure complete accuracy of each transcription prior to coding. Additionally, it was during the pre-coding stage that the researcher began analytical memo writing to identify any emerging themes within the data. Saldana (2009) supports the idea that ongoing analytical memo writing forces the researcher to critically analyze personal assumptions, interpretations, and the extent to which those beliefs shape what is seen in the data in the early stages of analysis.

During the first stage, data was coded using In Vivo Coding (also known as “literal coding” or “verbatim coding”) where the exact words and phrases of the participants are captured in the analysis (Saldana, 2009). The second cycle of coding employed on the data was that of Pattern Coding, which aims to reduce large amounts of raw data and helps the researcher gain a more integrated understanding of the rules, causes, and explanations within the data collected (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009).

**Findings and Analysis**

**Research Question #1: What influenced Henry Lord Middle School eighth grade students’ decisions when selecting a high school of attendance?**

The first research question was: What influenced Henry Lord Middle School eighth grade student’s decisions when selecting a high school of attendance? Through several cycles of coding the transcripts of the fifteen student focus groups, six primary themes emerged. These are:
1. For the greater majority of students, the primary influence in the selection of their high school was the opinions of their parents, guardians, family members, or fellow students, conveyed primarily through personal stories and anecdotes.

2. School resources, e.g., guidance counselors and other available material, had little influence on middle school students’ choice of high school.

3. Students were not aware of how their decision of high school would or could impact their future educational or vocational opportunities.

4. Most students did not have the necessary information to make an appropriate decision, and only half of the students included a discussion regarding their goals and future career aspirations.

5. Students held high personal expectations for themselves despite being unaware of career and vocational requirements.

6. By the time students learned about their high school options and the importance of their decision, it was too late in the process to have any influence.

Each of these themes was evident across all of the student focus groups and are presented and discussed below, referencing the evidence for each theme where useful, using select quotes from students along with the relative number and percentage of students responding to each question, again where useful.¹

For the greater majority of students, the primary influence in the selection of their high school was the opinions of their parents, guardians, family members, or fellow students, conveyed primarily through personal stories and anecdotes. Throughout the 15

¹ As part of the coding process, students’ responses to each focus group question from across all focus groups were also categorized in support of identifying themes and noting common answers from across focus groups. In support of the analysis, the number of students and percentage of student responses across all focus group questions was tabulated and is presented in Appendix D. Throughout the presentation of themes, where useful, these findings are reported in the presentation of each theme.
focus groups it was parents or guardians and family members whom students referenced most frequently as being the key influence affecting their decision for high school. Students again and again stated that their parents and family members, specifically family members who had a prior or personal experience with one versus another high school, were most influential when making their decision. In response to the question, “Who did you talk most with when you were making your decision for high school?,” across all 15 focus groups with a total of 114 students participating, 51 (or 45%) and 32 (an additional 29%) of students stated it was their parents or another family member, respectively, resulting in a full 74% of all focus group students stating they were most influenced by family (see Table J, Appendix D). One student stated, for example, “My parents had a lot to say about this decision, for real.” Another stated, “I spoke to my sister; she went to Durfee,” while another student said, “I talk to my cousin the most, she is a freshman and she just started.” Students also commented, “My uncle went to Diman, he says it’s a good school and that I should go there because there are choices for a trade and that helped him,” or “I talked with my grandfather and my uncle, they both went to different schools so they could to tell me about each one.” In sum, for most students, family was the greatest influence in their decision of where to go to high school.

When family or fellow student information was used by students, that information was primarily in the form of stories and anecdotes. Students also stated that when discussing their high school options with parents/guardians, family members, or friends, they primarily relied on and took into consideration the family member’s previous experience and personal stories regarding the schools or their friends’ perceptions of each school (see Table D, Appendix D). During focus groups students were asked, “Did your parent/guardian speak to the guidance counselor about your decision for high school?” A total of 48 students responded and 36 (or
75%) replied no to this question (see Table CC, Appendix D). One students stated, “No, my mother talks to her friends about school the most,” and another said, “My mom talks to her friends and stuff like that,” and still another, “No, my parents don’t speak English so it’s pointless.”

For at least half of students, the high school decision was not made in conversation with anyone regarding their future or personal goals. Across 15 focus groups, 64 out of 114 students (56%) responded to the question, “Do you speak to anyone about high school supporting you with reaching your goals, and if so, who?” There were 32 students (or 50%) who claimed they had consulted parents/guardians and/or family members in the course of making their decision, while another 32 (or 50%) said that they talked with no one (see Table P, Appendix D). One student stated, “My parents are always asking me about my future and my goals.” Another said, “It’s just not stuff that you really talk about all the time; that stuff never really comes up.” The data indicates that a student’s parents, guardians, and family members of students are the most influential people who assist them with their decision for high school, but future plans and personal goals are seemingly not taken into consideration.

School resources, e.g., school assemblies, guidance counselors and other available material, had little influence on middle school students’ choice of high school. Throughout focus group discussions, the theme of school resources emerged as being both influential and non-influential to the high school decision-making process. Across 15 focus groups, the school resources most often cited by students were: student assemblies, high school open houses, and school staff (particularly guidance counselors) when going through the decision-making process.

An overwhelming number of students referenced student assemblies held during 8th grade as influential in their high school decision-making process. Students were asked, “How was
information presented to you about the public high school options?” There were 109 students who responded and 46 (or 42%) referenced school assemblies and the information presented there as extremely influential in the high school selection process (see Table B, Appendix D). A student commented:

We just learned it from when the people came in this year; of course you knew a little bit but basically from people who went there and our friends and stuff. But when we had that assembly that’s where people really began to understand what each was.

Students also commented, “If you were in school, everyone had to sit in on Diman and Durfee but Bristol Aggie was for only the kids who were interested.” Another stated, “People from Durfee and Diman came in and people who signed up for Bristol Aggie went down to the assembly when they came.” Focus group participants confirmed that all 8th grade students were required to attend the Diman and Durfee high school assemblies. However, student attendance for the Bristol Aggie assembly was not mandatory; only those students who were interested in attending Bristol Aggie attended the presentation. Therefore, students who may have been good candidates for Bristol Aggie could have essentially denied themselves the opportunity by not choosing to attend the assembly.

Although students believed the assemblies were influential, many interpreted mixed messages that appeared to impact their high school decision-making process. Students were asked, “What was told to you, what kind of information was told to you about the public high school options?” Again and again, students stated that if they wanted to go to college they had to go to Durfee, whereas if they wanted a job then they had to go to Diman. Across all 15 focus groups, 56 (or 51%) of students held this belief and referenced it as being an influential consideration when making the decision of where to attend high school (see Table D, Appendix
D). Students did not appear to view college as a stepping stone to obtaining a better job. There was urgency among the students to need a job immediately after high school and Diman was the place where they believed they could achieve this. A student stated:

Well, I know that Durfee is more focused on going to college, Diman is more focused on getting a job right out of high school and Bristol Aggie is an agricultural school so it’s focused on farming and veterinary work.

Additionally, another 54 students (or 49%) referenced similar and specific information that they knew about each high school as being extremely influential. Student commentary ranged from, “At Diman you can be on co-op and make like legit money while you are still in high school,” to, “At Durfee there are more AP classes that get you ahead in college,” to, “Bristol Aggie is for agricultural right? Don’t you learn about farming and being a vet there,” and, “I am going to Bristol Aggie to be a veterinarian.” Students also had their own presumptions about each high school, stating, “You have to try harder to get into Diman, it’s just a fact,” while another student said, “They don’t accept bad kids at Diman because the application process keeps them out.”

Also within the theme of school resources, students commented on the lack of influence that the high school open houses actually had on their decision-making. Not all students were made aware of the open houses, scheduling conflicts existed within families, and students were more apt to listen to the information that family members provided regarding the high schools than go to the open houses (see Table C, Appendix D). During focus groups, students were asked, “Were you made aware of the different high school offerings?” There were 77 students who responded, “I didn’t even know there were open houses at the high schools,” and another said, “I knew about them I just couldn’t get a ride there,” still another said, “I didn’t even go,
though I knew about the open houses. I know everything about the schools because I have family
members who are in both schools.”

Lastly, school staffs, specifically guidance counselors, were often referenced within the
focus groups as being non-influential to students when making their decision for high school.
On many occasions throughout the focus groups, students commented on their limited interaction
with guidance counselors and the lack of structured opportunities to speak with them about the
high school options and the differences between them.

Students were asked, “Do the guidance counselors provide you information about high
school and options for life after?” An overwhelming response by 112 students (or 57%) felt that
school counselors did not provide this type of information (see Table AA, Appendix D).
Students commented, “All they did is give us the application and tell us to fill it out and bring it
back. They said they were going to meet with us but they didn’t.” Another stated, “The guidance
counselors didn’t have to give you that information because the high schools came here
themselves to get us the info,” and another said, “You really only got called to Guidance if you
are in trouble, to sign like those witness papers and stuff.” Guidance counselors at HLMS do not
schedule specific meeting opportunities with individual students in order to focus on the high
school transition process, and the majority of students did not see Guidance as a place to explore
high school offerings or initial career interests.

Additionally, students were asked, “Do the middle school counselors talk with you about
what high school would be a good match for you?” Of the 43 students who responded to this
question, 34 (or 79%) of the students replied in the negative, commenting, “No, we might have
talked to them here and there but not about high schools or even college being for us.” Another
said, “Nope, they just set up the assemblies for us” (see Table BB, Appendix D). Furthermore,
when asked, “Who did you talk with most when you were making your decision for high school?” 25 students (or 18%) mentioned school staff (n=25) [inclusive of guidance counselor, teacher, and therapist] as being influential in their decision-making (see Table J, Appendix D). Students stated, “I met with my guidance counselor and my mom during my IEP meeting.” Another said, “I have talked to my guidance counselor in the cafeteria about high school,” and still another stated, “My science teacher is more easier to talk to.” The data indicates that guidance counselors are not a significant influence on a student’s high school decision-making, particularly when compared to the influence of parents and family.

**Students were not aware of how their decision of high school would or could impact their future educational or vocational opportunities.** The 21st century economy requires students to be more engaged in their education than ever before. The majority of students at Henry Lord Middle School did not choose a high school that would prepare them for their initial career interests. Numerous students alluded to being influenced by the concern for a safe school more than they referenced career interests.

Regarding future ambitions, students were asked, “Do you have academic or career goals? If so, what are your career goals and how did they influence your high school decision-making?” Out of 53 responses 36 students (or 68%) answered affirmatively that their career goals did influence their decision-making (see Table M, Appendix D). A student stated, “I know I want to go to college but I just don’t know for what,” while another said, “I want to graduate from high school and not stay back,” and still another said, “I want to keep myself on the honor roll in high school.” Students were not apt to reference long-term goals and it was interesting—and a bit disturbing—to see the number of students whose main focus was simply to graduate from high school, with no future vision or career-related ambition.
Students were also asked, “How did you make the decision, what did you take into consideration when making your decision for high school?” There were 77 students who responded and 32 (or 42%) alluded to safety concerns being most influential when making their decision for high school (see Table K, Appendix D). One student commented, “My family doesn’t want me going to Durfee either, he said that the school has too many trouble makers,” another said, “They look at conduct at Diman and Bristol Aggie so if you have issues you can’t go and Durfee has to take you; so you would be going to school with all of those kids.” These illustrative statements are evidence that safety was a key concern of both students and parents. It became clear within the focus groups that students were being encouraged by their parents/guardians and family members to attend the high school perceived as most safe, regardless of whether the school would provide the best opportunity for education and future career interests. The college or career aspirations of students did not appear to be a priority when selecting their high school of choice. Students stated that their parents or family members encouraged them to select the perceived safer school more so than an academically appropriate placement. As previously mentioned, due to the application process, students perceived Diman as being the safer environment and this took priority when making their decision for high school.

Most students did not have the necessary information to make an appropriate decision and only half of the students included a discussion regarding their goals and future career aspirations. Students were not fully informed of the high school offerings. Most students did not appear to be entering high school with a relevant plan to achieve their goals or initial career aspirations. Additionally, of the students who did, many still appeared to be unclear of the specific high school outcomes.
The students were asked, “Does the high school you are attending offer the courses or programs that you need to achieve your goals?” There were 25 students (or 47%) who responded that they did not know if their high school would be able to prepare them while another 19 students (or 36%) believed that their high school would not prepare them to achieve their goals (see Table N, Appendix D). One student’s response: “All we had were assemblies where they told us how to apply to the high schools, that’s it.” Another said, “That’s what’s confusing, to know what to take to prepare you for college and what colleges you should go to.”

Some students did not appear to have specific knowledge of the high school offerings, nor did they know what to expect as outcomes from the different high schools and certification programs. Additional responses included, “I was thinking of going to Bristol Aggie to be a Vet,” and “I want to go to Diman to be a dentist.”

Across the board, students who planned to attend Diman or Bristol Aggie believed that they would be accepted into their first career program of choice at their respective high school. When asked what they would do if not accepted into their first choice program, 17 out of 25 students (or 68%) said that they didn’t care, and would remain at the high school anyway (see Table Q, Appendix D). Their comments ranged from, “I’ll just grow to like it and since I may not like it now I will let time work on me,” to “I’ll just go from dental to culinary, which is my third choice if I have to.” Many students, therefore, would prefer to spend their entire high school experience preparing for a second or third choice career rather than move to another high school within the school district. This demonstrates the degree to which the lack of knowledge clouds students’ decision-making process in selecting a high school and program of study.

**Students held high personal expectations for themselves despite finding the middle school experience to be irrelevant.** During focus groups the student participants exhibited a
strong sense of personal efficacy. Students were asked, “Do you believe you are smart?” A total of 45 students responded and 31 (or 69%) responded affirmatively (see Table U, Appendix D). Student responses included, “I know I’m smart,” and “Everyone is smart in their own way,” and, “More in some subjects than others.” When discussing areas of strength, students referenced academic subjects, in which they excelled, rarely mentioning non-academic skills or abilities.

Also, when students were asked, “Do you believe you can achieve anything you set your mind to do?” a total of 43 students replied and 34 (or 79%) said “Yes” (see Table X, Appendix D). A student commented:

   I think if you put your mind to it and you keep telling yourself over and over again that you can do it then it will boost yourself to keep practicing and the more you practice the better you will get and that goes with school too.

Additionally, there were 91 students who responded to the question, “Do you see yourself as a four year college student immediately after high school?” A total of 52 students (or 57%) replied affirmatively and an additional 24 (or 26%) said that they did not know (see Table S, Appendix D). This implies that there were 76 students (or 83%) who considered themselves, by the 8th grade, as being potentially college-bound. One student stated, “I know I want to go straight to college,” while another said, “I know I want to go to college but I don’t know what classes that I need.” Students who were not sure focused more on financial concerns as their guiding reason for not wanting to go straight to college. A student commented, “I’ve never really thought about how I am going to pay for college or not,” with another student saying, “I feel that I will be working a job and going to college at the same time.”

Lastly, students expected high school to be more relevant than their middle school experience. Students were asked, “Do you believe that your grades represent who you are and
what you are capable of?” A total of 57 students responded and 41 (or 72%) said no (see Table V, Appendix D). Comments included, “You just don’t try in middle school. If they made school funner and stuff like that I would do so much better and I just don’t see the use of it,” and “I feel like it doesn’t matter until you get to bigger things like high school and college.” Many students did not find relevance in the middle school experience, and their academic achievement suffered as a result. Furthermore, when asked, “Do you see a connection between high school and your future goals/success?” a total of 56 students replied and 29 (or 52%) responded affirmatively (see Table A). One student commented, “Yes, because from a one to a ten I find high school to be the ten because you need a diploma in the world to get a job,” and another said, “Yes, I need to take classes to prepare me for college.”

By the time students learned about their high school options and the importance of their decision, it was too late in the process to have any influence. During focus groups, students were asked, “When did you come to learn about the public high school options in Fall River and what it takes to get into each high school?” There were 108 students who responded to this question and overwhelmingly, 69 students (or 64%) confirmed that Henry Lord did not provide any official introductions to the high school options before 8th grade (see Table A, Appendix D). Comments ranged students included, “They only started talking to us about our options during this school year,” and, “Not in 7th grade or anything, we really only heard this year sometime,” and another said, “It was when the assemblies happened during 8th grade that I first got real stuff.”

As a result, students who were interested in applying to Diman and Bristol Aggie, once they understood the application criteria, realized they were receiving information too late in the process. When specifically asked, “Were you aware early enough in middle school of the high
school differences,” 44 students (or 66%) replied that they were not aware early enough to have any effect on their decision (see Table C, Appendix D). Students who wanted to apply to the application driven high schools, Diman and Bristol Aggie, were not aware of the application criteria early enough and felt they were at a disadvantage, and would have done things differently had they known. A student said, “I decided I wasn’t going to apply once I understood what the application was asking. I would have just started doing my homework and bringing up my grades if I would have known,” and another said, “I think that if I would have known about the application process to Diman and Bristol Aggie earlier that would have made a difference for me. I would have kept my grades up.” These illustrative statements point that the timing of learning this information in middle school was ineffective for a number of students.

**Research Question #2: How are parents or guardians of 8th graders at Henry Lord Middle School informed of the high school options and influential in their children’s high school decision-making process?**

The second research question was: How are parents or guardians of 8th graders at Henry Lord Middle School informed of the high school options and influential in their children’s high school decision-making process? The limited response rate by parents and guardians provided the researcher with a small amount of data that could not be used as evidence to make overall claims about the parent population. Additionally, the researcher cannot assume that the opinions and experiences by the parents and guardians who participated reflect that of the entire parent population. The parents and guardians who chose to participate in this research study did so by their own intentions. Their views and opinions are nevertheless important, personal, and relevant to their child’s high school decision making process. The researcher attempted to enlist 15-20 parents/guardians to participate in the interview process, 144 recruitment letters were addressed
and mailed to the parents/guardians of the student participants. Due to a limited response (n=3) a second mailing was initiated and 3 additional parents/guardians agreed to participate in an interview. With only 6 participants after two attempts, the principals of Diman and Durfee, the two high schools where the largest majority of student participants had applied and attended, sent an invitation in support of this research study to attract additional parents/guardians to participate in a focus group hosted by the high schools; no parents/guardians responded. Due to the fact that the three recruitment attempts yielded only 6 parent/guardian responses, the 8th grade parents at Henry Lord Middle School in June 2012 were mailed an invitation to participate in a focus group; this attempt added 1 participant. The overall parent/guardian recruitment for both individual interviews and focus groups yielded a total of 7 parents/guardians representing 6 different families and student participants. Each parent/guardian received the same set of research protocols and questions. In an attempt to answer research question #2 the researcher identified five essential questions and 4 to 6 supporting questions that parents/guardians would be asked in the interviews.

Although parent/guardian participation in the study was relatively small (n=7), a great deal was gained from their perspectives, observations, and stories, with several common experiences and influences, among these parents and guardians, regarding the high school transition process for their middle school children. From an iterative review and coding of the transcripts, three themes emerged:

1. Most parents learned about the high school options through personal experiences with older children.

2. Parents who personally had a positive experience with education were more likely to encourage education for their children.
3. Parents and guardians were not informed by the middle school staff, specifically guidance counselors, regarding the high school options for their transitioning middle school children.

Each of these themes will be discussed in light of the parents’ commentary and responses to the questions asked during the focus groups.

**Most parents learned about their child’s high school options through their personal experiences with older children.** Six of the seven parents explained that it was their previous experiences with older children that informed their knowledge and understanding of the high school options. Specifically, parents were aware of the offerings at the high schools where their older children attended. Also, it was clear that parents had varying levels of awareness of the offerings at each of the high schools and referenced their older children’s experience as either paving the way for younger children or forcing them to look elsewhere. The one parent who did not rely on the experience of an older child attended the high school open houses to get specific information that would assist in the decision-making process.

Parents who relied on the experience of their older children were very specific in how much this experience influenced their 8th graders’ choice of school. Two parents expressed that they did not consider any school other than Durfee, where their older children attended. As stated by one parent:

No, no, we weren’t interested in anything else. She wanted to go to Durfee, She had two older sisters who went to Durfee and that was all she wanted to do was to go to Durfee.

So we never really looked at anything else.

Another parent commented, “My son was not that much into Diman because my older son and daughter went to Durfee, so he wanted to keep going to Durfee.” When this parent was asked
whether or not she encouraged her son to look at other options she replied, “I let my kids make the choice, whatever is the right choice for them. I don’t want to influence their choice too much, that will be the right choice that they make.”

Additionally, there were parents who felt informed of multiple options due to having several older children who experienced different high schools. One parent specifically stated:

I come from the city myself so I attended the Fall River Public School system. I also have two older boys who went through as well. One went through Henry Lord as well as the high school here, he went to Durfee. My middle son started off at Henry Lord and he ended up at Bristol Aggie in Dighton.

Interestingly, this parent also commented that her 8th grader was debating between the two high schools that his older brothers attended, not including as an option high schools that they didn’t attend. She stated:

My son was actually debating back and forth between Durfee and Bristol Aggie. I myself pushed for him to come to Durfee rather than Bristol Aggie given his grades, he’s got the potential, and what he’s looking into for his future, it was a better fit.

Although very few parents were interviewed, this small sample suggests that parents relied heavily on the previous experiences of their older children heavily when considering the options for their 8th graders. It was only the one parent who did not have any older children that relied on the open houses to obtain information regarding high school choices.

Parents who personally had a positive experience with education were more likely to encourage education for their children. During interviews, parents and guardians were asked about how they supported education while developing college and career aspirations with their children. Interestingly, of the seven parents/guardians interviewed, four had graduated from high
school and three were high school dropouts who later earned their GED. A review of the transcripts revealed that commonalities existed between the two groups of parents and their children’s experiences appeared to align with their own experiences in education.

Parents and guardians who graduated from high school stated that they expected their 8th grade child to also graduate from high school. In addition, these parents also shared that they expected their children to pursue higher education and careers. Moreover, these four parents remarked that their children did not struggle in school, although academic strengths and weaknesses varied. In short, these parents rated their 8th graders’ overall school experience as being positive. One parent who was a high school graduate and referenced his wife to be a college graduate stated, “Education is probably the most important thing in my household and my daughter knows that there is a certain level of expectation for good grades. She loves school too though; she is a straight A student and wants to be a social worker.” Another parent who is also a high school graduate herself with older children in college stated:

Oh my son knows that without a college education none of us can find a good job. I didn’t go to college. I finished high school and that was it; it’s tough out there. The one they know for a fact, they cannot get what they want without a college education and a good job, I have expensive kids you know. He wants to be an architect and he does good in school so he already knows that he has to go to college anyway.

Finally, even the guardian, serving as the foster parent of an 8th grade student participant with older and younger children of her own, pointed out that she was enrolled in law school and felt that she was modeling her commitment to education and will encourage education for her children through her own pursuits. She stated, “You know, I am tired, I have four kids and law school but I do what I have to do because I do want to show them how to be successful
financially but I also want to be happy with what I do.” She also referenced the fact that her foster son does not have aspirations for college but wants to get out of high school to get a job to make money. He sees his independence as the way to free himself from the world of social services. She commented, “For him, he just can’t stand foster care and he really wants to be independent. So, being able to make money for him means that I can just be free from everybody.” These comments suggest that children of the parents/guardians who were interviewed for this study are engaged in education and can formulate at least initial career goals at the point of transitioning into high school. They also appeared to have considered their initial career aspirations when electing their high school of choice.

In contrast, the three parents who were high school dropouts themselves commented a great deal on the struggles that they have with their children in regard to school attendance and academic achievement. They reported their children as being frustrated with school, leading to a gradual disconnect from the educational process and possible career opportunities. In the words of one parent, “Nope, she doesn’t talk about anything. No careers. All she wants to do is work in the pet shop or the animal rescue league and stuff like that, that’s all she talks about.” This parent also went on to say, “She wants the life that I have. I only work two days a week and I take care of an elderly lady who she loves so she wants to be with me all the time.” The other parents commented, “No, he doesn’t even talk about college at all. He doesn’t even talk about a trade school. He says it’s too much schooling and just wants to get out of school to work on cars.” Both sets of parents struggle to encourage their children to value education, but these children seem to lack an awareness of how school is in any way relevant to their future career aspirations.
Additionally, both parents referenced their struggles in battling school disengagement with their children. This has resulted in academic failure, school truancy issues, and subsequent confrontation with school administration. It was alarming that all three parents–high school dropouts themselves–confirmed that it would be easier to allow their children to drop out of school at 16 years old, rather than engage in ongoing entanglements with school officials. Both parents went so far as to negotiate dropout tactics with their 8th graders in order to avoid daily arguments related to school-based interactions. As one parent said:

It’s hard because of what was lacked in my life and I usually don’t like to admit this but at one point, I told him that he could drop out when he was 16, so now he has this in his head. I figured, at least at 16 he will qualify for the BCC programs like I did so I can take him right over there for his GED like I did too.

The other parent also commented, “She suffers from school anxiety and no one would listen to me. So, I told her that she could drop out and I meant it. I can’t take this fight with the schools anymore.” Although both parents had different experiences that led them to support their children’s dropping out of high school, it was evident by their remarks that they felt alone in their fight to educate their children and the communication with school administration was ineffective, only adding frustration to the equation.

Parents and guardians were not informed by the middle school staff, specifically guidance counselors, regarding the high school options for their transitioning middle school children. The interviews revealed that, generally speaking, most parents/guardians felt that school staff – particularly guidance counselors – did not adequately disseminate relevant information regarding high school selection to the students and their families. Five of the seven parents believed middle school guidance counselors did not provide students with relevant
information in order to make an informed high school decision. The two parents who did receive information did so through their child’s special education transition meeting at the end of 8th grade.

During the interviews parents were asked about the involvement by guidance counselors and the school in the high school decision-making process. Parents had differing expectations of the school staff in the transition process but all felt that more could have been done by the schools. Specifically, the father who was experiencing the high school transition for the first time commented:

I was hoping that the guidance counselors would have done more but obviously there are a lot of kids and not enough staff, the ratio is terrible, so I don’t think it’s their fault. Plus, a lot of the parents from here already have the mentality that their kid is going to Diman. If they only knew what was available, most only went to one open house, filled out the application, and if he got in, then their kid went there. To me that’s terrible; they don’t even look at the options.

Parents also referenced school flyers and promotional materials that were sent home by the guidance counselors but also did not feel that the information was timely or adequate to inform parents of the different options. The foster parent commented, “My son came home with flyers and brochures but there wasn’t a lot of communication at all between me and the guidance counselors regarding this.” Another parent commented,

I don’t think they informed the kids that much. When they are going from one school to the other one they should be able to give them more information about the school and what it offers that the others don’t and I don’t feel that they did that for any of my children.
It was clear that the school did not offer anything specific to parents other than flyers, brochures, and open houses, if one wanted to attend, in support of the high school transition. There were two parents whose children received special education services. They both commented on their child’s transition meeting, which is required as part of the IEP process, to be informative but that not enough information was provided at that time. The comments were, “I want to say it was the ELA teacher who educated me on the special class my son was going to go into.” The same parent went on to say, “That still wasn’t enough information so I called the middle school guidance counselor but school ended and I never got any additional information from them so I had to call Durfee to speak to someone there.” In contrast, the other parent believed to be well enough informed stating, “I learned that from Henry Lord. They were alright with that, with the information that they gave, you know it was fine. I think they sent the information home with my daughter and I had meetings because she is on an IEP.” Interestingly, it was these same two parents who encouraged their children to drop out of high school. The schools clearly did not provide adequate information for student and families.

**Research Question #3: How did guidance counselors influence the high school decision-making process for transitioning eighth graders from the Henry Lord Middle School?**

The third research question was: How did Guidance counselors influence the high school decision-making process for transitioning eighth graders from the Henry Lord Middle School? Henry Lord Middle School has two guidance counselors who service all students in grades six through eight. An individual interview was conducted with one of the guidance counselors; the other was unavailable. The guidance counselor who sat for the interview has been working at HLMS for the past ten years. From an in-depth review and coding of the transcript of the guidance counselor interviewed, three themes emerged:
1. The Henry Lord school administration does not provide consistent and predictable transition programming for students or parents/guardians from year to year.

2. The regular changes in leadership at Henry Lord Middle School have not fostered consistent expectations of guidance counselors.

3. Recently, in 2012, Henry Lord Middle School has begun to place more of a focus on college and career exploration for its 7th and 8th grade students.

**The Henry Lord school administration does not provide consistent and predictable transition programming for students or parents/guardians from year to year.** During the interview, the counselor confirmed that outreach to both students and parents, in regard to choice of high schools, changes yearly. Students and parents are offered different opportunities to learn about the high school options from year to year and cannot expect or rely on similar experiences from one year to the next. When asked about how the public high school options are presented to students and families, the counselor responded, “In previous years, I don’t remember it happening this year as it did in the past, but the high school representatives would attend our PTO meetings and talk about it there.” She also mentioned:

   In past years, the other counselor would set up an assembly for only kids who were interested in attending Bristol Aggie. I am not sure if that was even done this year because I didn’t have a chance to attend any of the assemblies by the high schools.

The counselor was also asked how parents/guardians were communicated with about the high school transition. She stated, “Again, not having them come in this year, it was more on an individual basis. Kids come for applications and course selection sheets, we send letters home inviting parents to contact us, and we use the website.” She then went on to explain, “However, I can’t say that we have anything specific, like an assembly or anything for parents of 7th and 8th
graders like we do in late August for the transitioning 6th grade parents.” The counselor did not reference any programming that could be expected, year to year, by parents or students to inform the high school transition process.

**The regular changes in leadership at Henry Lord Middle School have fostered an inconsistent expectation of guidance counselors.** There have been eight principals at Henry Lord Middle School in the last ten years. It was noted during the counselor’s interview that this ongoing turnover of leadership has resulted in additional job demands being placed upon HLMS’s two guidance counselors. Specifically, being assigned responsibility for areas such as the bullying investigator, the student registration process, and the scheduling responsibilities particularly, have effectively decreased the number of hours available for the guidance counselors to engage in individualized high school and career counseling.

The counselor was asked about the guidance counselor’s role at Henry Lord and what the main job responsibilities include. Immediately her comments referenced school leadership, “Each administration sees things differently. I have had eight principals in the last ten years and every principal has their own perception on how guidance counselors should be used, which causes things to change pretty regularly.” The counselor was asked about how her time is spent and whether or not the building principal has set an expectation for the counselors to meet with the student one-on-one to discuss the high school transition and initial career plans. She went on to state:

I can’t say that there has ever been an expectation verbalized regarding that. I do meet with them individually, many on the fly, but I do meet with all students. I catch many of them in the cafeteria during lunch, but I keep a list so I know who I have met with; I know I eventually meet with all of them.
Bullying is a subject which has received heightened attention as of late from both national and regional law makers. It has become a major consideration for the HLMS guidance counselors who are expected to be the bullying investigator for the school. With the ever-increasing utilization of social media platforms, guidance counselors often are now required to investigate problems and issues that originate outside of school; this distinction requires daily attention and has significantly increased the counselors’ job responsibilities. The counselor being interviewed stated, “The bullying designee is a huge job. Each investigation requires hours, if not days, to complete from start to finish. I find that a lot of my time is spent adhering to this responsibility.” She went on to say, “Most of the incidents occur at home on the computers and then the kids come back to school and have to face one another; it has taken on a life of its own at times.”

Additionally, guidance counselors at HLMS are responsible both for student registration and student transfers. The student population in the Fall River Public Schools is highly transient, with students continually moving into and out of the district, thus placing even greater demands on the counselors’ time. The interviewee stated, “This process is very time consuming. The tracking down of grades and hunting down materials that students are missing, the time spent on this alone takes away from so many things we could be doing.” The counselor went on to say, “Registrations take up a lot of time but nowhere near as much time as the rescheduling of students.” During SY2012, due both to due to both, a flaw in the master schedule and from peer to peer issues that arose between students, the counselors experienced increased constraints from having to change student’s schedules. The counselor stated:

The non-academics changed every semester, so even though schedules were set, the master schedule was flawed and although kids were supposed to get something different,
they often repeated classes, it just wasn’t good. And then, the request by Administration to change a kid’s schedule due to peer-to-peer issues became out of hand. I noticed that the more we allowed it the less the kid’s worked things out and I found myself changing kid’s schedules two weeks before school ended.

Together, the requests made by administration (that guidance counselor responsibilities include bullying investigator, registrations, and excessive student scheduling) took away from time that could otherwise be spent servicing students on the high school transition process.

Recently, in 2012, Henry Lord Middle School has begun to place more of a focus on college and career exploration for its 7th and 8th grade students. The Fall River Public Schools is a district receiving Race to the Top grant funds by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. As part of their agreement, Project 4C requires the district to develop specific activities and programs that foster college and career readiness for all students in grades K-12. Being a participant, Henry Lord Middle School has added several activities that align with this focus during SY2012. Specifically, the school has participated in its first Middle School Career Day, developed an Advisory Program, and conducted career interest inventories with their students.

In the spring of 2012, the 7th grade students at Henry Lord participated in the Middle School Career Day. Prior to attending Career Day, all students completed an interest inventory and investigated their top career pathways that resulted from the survey. The 7th grade students completed the interest inventories in their social sciences classes and the partnership by the teachers in this discipline was noted as being positive. The counselor stated, “The kids loved it, they were able to see how things that they like to do that are not school related hook up with
different careers that are out there. The teachers also were engaged with the students so it worked out well.” In regard to the actual Career Day, the counselor went on to say:

The Career Day was great; the kids were talking about it for the next week. They really were able to make those connections. The fact that it was organized by the career pathways really connected it for the students. This was the first time that middle school students were able to experience a career day to this magnitude.

The Advisory Program was also introduced to Henry Lord during SY2012. The curriculum of the Advisory Program was designed by a team of teachers and administrators during the summer of 2011. The counselor stated, “There was a good team of people developing the curriculum and the whole staff, except one, embraced the concept and put forth a good effort.” The Advisory Program served many purposes; however, the counselor stated, “To me, at this point, the whole career piece is paramount. We have added the advisory piece this year to help out with that and to get kids self-monitoring in regard to their achievement and where they see themselves going.” The 8th grade students were exposed to an 18-week career curriculum and they took their interest inventory during advisory. The 7th grade students only had an eight week exposure to the career search process but also experienced a Career Day.

In short, during SY2012 the Henry Lord Administration, Guidance, and school staffs have increased the attention paid to the career search process. Further program development is being considered as the district-at-large increases its demand for high school transition programming and career exploration at the earlier grades.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study are derived from the combination of student, parent/guardian, and guidance counselor voices. The collection of data from the three participant
groups provided a look into the various influences that impact a student’s final decision for high school. Analyzing input from different points of view allowed for a deeper understanding of what was most influential and non-influential for all participants who have a stake in this experience.

In sum, comments made during student-based focus groups indicated that:

- **The primary influence in a student’s selection of a high school was their parents, guardians, family members, or fellow students.** Students were explicit that it was personal anecdotes and prior experiences, as related by their parents and/or peers, that most influenced their high school decision-making process. Also, students did not discuss with their primary influence or take into consideration future plans or personal goals when making their decision for high school;

- **School resources emerged as being both influential and non-influential to the high school decision-making process.** The school resources referenced most often by students as being influential in the decision-making process were: student assemblies, high school open houses, and school staff, particularly guidance counselors. The most influential school resource cited was the 8th grade assembly, which provides representatives from each area high school the chance to meet with 8th grade students and to present the scholastic opportunities available at their respective school. The data also showed that, during assemblies, students often interpreted mixed and sometimes erroneous messages that misguided their high school decision-making. Students noted that due to lack of awareness and familial scheduling conflicts, the high school sponsored open houses were non-influential to the overall high school decision-making process. Students also commented on the lack of
interaction with guidance counselors and as a result, they too were non-influential in their decision-making process;

- Students were not aware of how their decision for high school would or could impact their future educational or vocational opportunities. The majority of students did not choose a high school that would prepare them for their initial career interests; school safety presented itself to be more of a concern;

- Students did not have the necessary information to make an informed decision and only half of the students included a discussion regarding their goals and future career aspirations. Students were not aware of the high school offerings and many did not have a relevant plan to be successful. Of the students who did, many were still unclear of the specific programmatic outcomes;

- Students held high expectations for themselves and exhibited a strong sense of personal efficacy. An overwhelming number of students considered themselves, by 8th grade, to be college-bound, and also expected high school to be more relevant than their middle school experience;

- Many students felt that the timing of the presentation of their various high school options occurred too late in the process for it to have any real influence on their choice for high school. Students who were interested in the application driven high schools believed they were not aware early enough and felt they would have done things differently had they been aware.

The data collected from the parent/guardians through individual interviews added to these findings. Parents and guardians commented that:
- Their previous experiences, positive or negative, with older children were the most influential factors considered when assisting their 8th grader in the high school decision-making process. Parents and guardians, however, had limited awareness as they were only familiar with the schools in which their older children attended and were thus not aware of all options;

- Parents and guardians who themselves had a positive experience with education, compared to those who did not have a positive experience with education, were more likely to have higher expectations for their children resulting in successful school experiences;

- Parents and guardians believed that school staff, particularly guidance counselors, was not sufficiently informative for students and their families regarding the high school decision-making process.

The data collected from the guidance counselor interview further enhanced the overall findings:

- Henry Lord Middle School does not provide consistent and predictable transition programming from year to year for students and their families;

- Regular changes in school leadership at Henry Lord Middle School have fostered inconsistent expectations of the guidance counselors. Each principal has had differing expectations of the guidance counselors, causing an ongoing shift in responsibilities;

- Beginning in 2012, as a result of federal and state-funded initiatives, staff at HLMS have implemented a wide range of strategies to raise student awareness of college and career opportunities.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Currently (2012), middle school students in the Fall River Public Schools (FRPS) have the option of attending one of the three public high schools: (1) the vocational technical school (Diman); (2) the agricultural high school (Bristol Aggie); or (3) the comprehensive high school (B.M.C. Durfee High School). Each of these schools offers a wide variety of academic programs and linkages to post-secondary education and training. At the end of middle school, students are required to participate in the high school decision-making process. At present, the four middle schools in the FRPS do not currently sponsor consistent programming for their students to identify personal strengths, interests, or academic capabilities that align with career and academic offerings of the secondary schools. Additionally, minimal career exploration and decision-making strategies are provided to support middle school students and families when determining their high school of choice.

In Fall River, multiple secondary schools (e.g., Diman and Bristol Aggie) sponsor a competitive application process for admission, taking into account a student’s academic grades, attendance, and conduct records for the seventh and eighth grade school years. Students and families who are not aware of this evaluative process early enough in middle school can potentially decrease the likelihood of acceptance to the high school of their choice. Traditionally in the Fall River Public Schools, the at-risk student population and students with less-involved parents are more affected by this admission trend and deficit of knowledge.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the process by which middle school students at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River are making their decision of where to attend high school. This study was designed to answer the following research questions:
1. What influenced Henry Lord Middle School eighth grade students’ decisions when selecting a high school of attendance?

2. How are parents or guardians of 8th graders at Henry Lord Middle School, informed of the high school options, and how do they influence their children’s high school decision-making process?

3. How did guidance counselors influence the high school decision-making process for transitioning eighth graders from the Henry Lord Middle School?

**Review of the Methodology**

This case study consisted of students, parents/guardians, and the guidance counselor, all of whom participated in the high school decision-making process at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River. Data was collected and then analyzed during SY2011 and SY2012 through focus groups with students and face-to-face interviews with parents/guardians and the Henry Lord guidance counselor. The focus groups were held with 8th grade students in June 2011, once their final decision for high school had been made. The individual parent/guardian interviews were held between the months of December 2011 and May 2012. Due to a limited response by the targeted parent/guardian population in SY2011, the recruitment of 8th grade parents/guardians during SY2012 was necessary. The face-to-face interview with the Henry Lord guidance counselor took place in July 2012. The data by all participants was then coded for significant themes.

This chapter will be broken down into the following sections: discussion of the major findings; discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework; discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review; conclusion; significance of the study; and next steps.
Discussion of Major Findings

Through the 15 focus groups with students and individual interviews with seven parents and one middle school guidance counselor, various themes emerged. The students identified major themes as to how they were influenced when making their decision for high school. They revealed the influential and non-influential people and school programs they experienced throughout the high school decision-making process. Themes also emerged from the parent/guardian and guidance counselor interviews that enhanced and built upon the claims of the students. Tables 5, 6, and 7 highlight these themes and a summary of the overall findings.

Table 5

Major Themes Identified by Students through the Study

| Major Themes                                                                                     |
|                                                                                                  |
| For the greater majority of students, the primary influence in the selection of their high school was the opinions of their parents, guardians, family members, or fellow students, conveyed primarily through personal stories and anecdotes. |
| School resources, e.g., guidance counselors and other available material, had little influence on middle school students’ choice of high school. |
| Students were not aware of how their decision of high school would or could impact their future educational or vocational opportunities. |
| Most students did not have the necessary information to make an appropriate decision and only half of the students included a discussion regarding their goals and future career aspirations. |
| Students held high personal expectations for themselves despite finding the middle school experience to be irrelevant. |
| By the time students learned about their high school options and the importance of their decision, it was too late in the process to have any influence. |

For the greater majority of students, the primary influence in the selection of their high school was the opinions of their parents, guardians, family members, or fellow students, conveyed primarily through personal stories and anecdotes. School resources, e.g., guidance counselors and other available material, had little influence on middle school students’ choice of high school. Students were not aware of how their decision of high school would or could impact their future educational or vocational opportunities. Most students did not have the necessary information to make an appropriate decision and only half of the students included a discussion regarding their goals and future career aspirations. Students held high personal expectations for themselves despite finding the middle school experience to be irrelevant. By the time students learned about their high school options and the importance of their decision, it was too late in the process to have any influence.
students, conveyed primarily through personal stories and anecdotes. Throughout 15 focus groups with a total of 114 student participants, 83 students (or 74%) stated that it was parents or guardians and family members most frequently referenced as being the key influence when making their decision for high school. Specifically, students primarily relied on and took into consideration the family member’s previous experience and personal stories regarding the high schools or their friends’ perceptions of each school. Additionally, for 64 of the students (over half, or 56%), this decision was made without conversing with anyone about future goals or initial career aspirations.

**School resources, e.g., guidance counselors and other available material, had little influence on middle school students’ choice of high school.** During focus group discussions the students commented about influential and non-influential school resources, e.g., school assemblies, individually learned knowledge, high school open houses, and guidance counselors when making their decision for high school. There were 46 students (or 42%) who referenced student assemblies held during 8th grade to be influential to the high school decision-making process. A student commented, “We just learned it from when the people came in this year…but when we had that assembly, that’s where people really began to understand what each was about.” However, although students believed the assemblies were influential, many interpreted mixed messages that appeared to impact their high school decision-making process.

Additionally, there were 54 students (or 49%) who referenced specific information that they learned “on their own” about each high school and explained that the information was very influential. Examples of this commentary are, “At Diman you can be on co-op and make legit money while you are still in school.” Another stated, “At Durfee there are more AP classes that get you ahead in college.”
There were two school resources that students referenced as being non-influential: high school open houses and guidance counselors. A total of 77 students (or 68%) did not believe that the high school open houses were influential in the decision-making process. Students were not equally informed; some had transportation issues and/or familial scheduling conflicts that impacted their ability to attend. Furthermore, due to limited interaction and unstructured conversations with guidance counselors, many students referenced them as being non-influential in the decision-making process. An overwhelming 64 students out of the 112 who responded (or 57%) felt that school counselors did not provide relevant information about the high school options or regarding which school would be the better match for the student.

**Students were not aware of how their decision of high school would or could impact their future educational or vocational opportunities.** The majority of students at Henry Lord Middle School did not choose a high school that would prepare them for their initial career interests. Students were not apt to reference long-term goals; they focused instead on short-term goals (e.g., graduating from high school and aspiring to go to college) and did not relate these short-term goals to long-term career or vocational interests. There were 32 students (or 42%) who alluded to school safety concerns as being most influential in their final decision-making strategy. These students also commented on the pressure they were feeling from parents or guardians to attend the “safer” high school; career and academic outcomes were not the priority for these families.

**Most students did not have the necessary information to make an appropriate decision and only half of the students included a discussion regarding their goals and future career aspirations.** Students were not informed of the high school offerings. Most students did not appear to be entering high school with a relevant plan to achieve their goals or
initial career aspirations. Additionally, of the students who did, many still appeared to be unclear of the specific high school outcomes. There were 25 students (or 47%) who did not know if their high school offered the necessary academic or vocational preparation needed to achieve their goals. Also, students did not know what to expect as outcomes from the different high schools and certification programs. A student stated, “That’s what’s confusing, to know what to take to prepare you for college and your goals,” and another commented, “I was thinking of going to Bristol Aggie to be a Vet.” Students were not fully aware of where their high school journey could lead them.

**Students held high personal expectations for themselves despite finding the middle school experience to be irrelevant.** During focus groups the student participants exhibited a strong sense of personal efficacy. A total of 31 students (or 69%) believed they were smart and another 34 (or 79%) believed they could achieve anything that they put their mind to. When asked about their strengths, most students referenced areas of academic ability and achievement, rarely mentioning non-academic skills or abilities. Interestingly, there were 76 students (or 83%) who considered themselves, by the 8th grade, as potentially being college bound. Students who were not sure focused more on financial concerns as their guiding reason for not wanting to go straight to college. Lastly, students also expected high school to be more relevant than their middle school experience. Students did not find relevance in the middle school experience and, as a result, their academic achievement suffered.

**By the time students learned about their high school options and the importance of their decision, it was too late in the process to have any influence.** Overwhelmingly, 69 students (or 64%) confirmed that Henry Lord did not provide any official introductions to the high school options before 8th grade. Students who wanted to apply to the application-driven high schools
(Diman and Bristol Aggie) were not made aware of the application criteria early enough. As a result, they felt they were at a disadvantage, and would have done things differently had they known.

Table 6
*Major Themes Identified by Parents and Guardians through the Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most parents learned about the high school options through personal experiences with older children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents who personally had a positive experience with education were more likely to encourage education for their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and guardians were not informed by the middle school staff, specifically guidance counselors, regarding the high school options for their transitioning middle school aged children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Most parents learned about the high school options through personal experiences with older children.** Overwhelmingly, six parents (or 87%) explained that it was their previous experiences with older children that informed their knowledge and understanding of the high school options. Specifically, parents were aware of the offerings at the high schools where their older children attended. Also, it was clear that parents had varying levels of awareness of the offerings at each of the high schools and referenced their older children’s experience as either paving the way for younger children or forcing them to look elsewhere.

**Parents who personally had a positive experience with education were more likely to encourage education for their children.** Interestingly, of the seven parents/guardians interviewed, four had graduated from high school and three were high school dropouts who later earned their GED. A review of the transcripts revealed that children’s educational experiences tended to align with those of their parents. Parents and guardians who graduated from high
school expected their 8th grade child to also graduate from high school. In addition, these parents also shared that they expected their children to pursue higher education and careers. In contrast, the three parents who were high school dropouts commented at length about the struggles they have with their children vis-a-vis school attendance and academic achievement; these children are frustrated with school, and run the risk of becoming disconnected from the educational process and facing limited career opportunities. The three parents confirmed that they had discussions about allowing their children to drop out of high school once their children turned 16 years old.

Parents and guardians were not informed by the middle school staff, specifically guidance counselors, regarding the high school options for their transitioning middle school aged children. The interviews with parents and guardians emphasized that school staff, specifically guidance counselors, are not considered to be informants for the students and their families. Five of the seven parents believed middle school guidance counselors did not provide students with relevant information in order to make an informed high school decision. The two parents who did receive information did so through their child’s special education transition meeting at the end of 8th grade. Parents had differing expectations of the school staff in the transition process but all felt that more could have been done by the schools. Parents/guardians referenced school flyers and promotional materials that were sent home by the guidance counselors but did not feel that the information was timely or adequate to inform parents/guardians of the different options.
Table 7

Major Themes Identified by Guidance Counselor through the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Henry Lord school administration does not provide consistent and predictable transition programming for students or parents/guardians from year to year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The regular changes in leadership at Henry Lord Middle School have not fostered consistent expectations of guidance counselors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recently, in 2012, Henry Lord Middle School has begun to place more of a focus on college and career exploration for its 7th and 8th grade students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Henry Lord school administration does not provide consistent and predictable transition programming for students or parents/guardians from year to year.** During the interview, the counselor confirmed that outreach to both students and parents, in regard to choice of high school, changes yearly. Students and parents are offered opportunities to learn about the various high school options from year to year, but cannot expect or rely on similar experiences from one year to the next. She commented, “I can’t say that we have anything specific, like an assembly or anything for parents of 7th and 8th graders like we do in late August for the transitioning 6th grade parents.” There were no predictable experiences or programs for parents/guardians that Henry Lord sponsors other than the student assemblies, typically held during the school day.

**The regular changes in leadership at Henry Lord Middle School have not fostered consistent expectations of guidance counselors.** There have been eight principals at Henry Lord Middle School in the last ten years. The guidance counselor explained that the regular changes in school leadership often lead to changes in what is expected of the guidance counselors. These additional responsibilities (e.g. bullying investigator, the student registration
process and the excessive scheduling needs) occupy a considerable amount of time, and take away from the individualized high school/career counseling that should take precedence.

Recently, in 2012, Henry Lord Middle School has begun to place more of a focus on college and career exploration for its 7th and 8th grade students. Being a participant in the Race to the Top federal grant program, Henry Lord Middle School is required to incorporate locally developed college and career activities and programs into their curricula. Beginning in SY2012, Henry Lord Middle School has added several activities that align with this focus. Specifically, the school has sponsored its first Middle School Career Day, conducted career interest inventories with students, and developed an Advisory Program. The 7th grade students completed career interest inventories, to be used as guidance aids, prior to attending Career Day to be used as a guiding tool during Career Day. Additionally, all 7th and 8th grade students participated in career exploration units during the Advisory Program. The 7th grade students had an eight week curriculum and the 8th grade students had an 18-week-experience that focused on college and career.

Discussion of the Findings in relation to the Theoretical Framework

This study was informed through the perspective of self-efficacy theory and the critical theory of cultural capitalism. Both of these theories served as a lens to investigate the process by which students at Henry Lord Middle School in Fall River made their decision for high school.

Self-efficacy. The idea of self-efficacy used in this study as outlined in Chapter 2 follows the work of many practitioners but most closely resembles the definition put forth by Albert Bandura. Bandura’s (2006) self-efficacy theory insists that people’s actions are guided by a personal belief that desired results can be achieved through their efforts. According to his theory, efficacy beliefs are responsible for regulating human functioning through three processes:
cognitive, motivational, and selection. Additionally, the expanded self-efficacy theory by Betz and Hackett (1981) which included vocational and career decision-making was also relevant to this study’s findings.

According to Bandura (1995) points, the cognitive process suggests, “Personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities” (p. 6). Bandura supports the idea that students who believe they can achieve and find success at desired tasks are likely to set higher goals for themselves and persevere in the face of difficulty, compared to their peers. The motivational process emphasizes, “people motivate themselves and guide their actions and commitment to their goals based on personal beliefs of self-efficacy” (p. 6). Students who have higher levels of self-esteem or self-efficacy are more likely to set goals and commit to academics and careers that they believe they can accomplish. Bandura’s selection process suggests, “Beliefs of efficacy can shape the courses people’s lives take, by influencing the activities and environments they choose to get into (p. 10). Additionally, Betz and Hackett (1981) expanded this definition to include vocational and career decision-making by suggesting that an individual’s expectation of personal efficacy has the ability to motivate and influence their career aspirations and achievements. The researchers promote that beliefs of self-efficacy play a key role in occupational development and pursuits (Betz & Hackett, 1986). Research shows that students who doubt their intellectual abilities often become disengaged and struggle to find a place in the academic arena. There are two processes of self-efficacy theory that are of particular note to this study: motivational and selection. Pertaining to the current research study, responses from student participants tended to support the motivational process, while responses from parents/guardians tended to support the selection process.
Motivation. A key finding of this study was that the students – despite holding their middle school experience to be largely irrelevant – held themselves in high esteem, and had high personal expectations. Students often commented that they knew they were smart and that they could achieve anything that they put their mind to. Students believed that the reasons their middle school grades did not reflect their true potential was because they didn’t find middle school to be relevant. Samples of students were not motivated by the middle school experience to work hard and achieve success and their academic performance was aligned. This aligns with Bandura’s theory as several of these students were unable to achieve the goals they had set for themselves, namely to gain admission to one of the application-driven high schools. Conversely, there were students who were motivated to go to college or attend Diman or Bristol Aggie; these students were able to set and achieve smaller goals throughout middle school, and they saw their middle school experience as relevant to their future success.

Selection. A key finding gained from the parent/guardian interviews in this study were that parents whose personal experiences with education had been positive were more likely to encourage their own children’s educational pursuits. The data supports that parents who themselves valued education, and also supported their children’s efforts with education, communicated this efficacy message regularly to their children. As a result, parents commented on the success their children had achieved in middle school, and they referenced specific career aspirations held by their children—aspirations that would require further success in high school. These parents were also aware of the continued support that would be required to assist their children in meeting their goals as they made the transition to high school. In contrast, the three parents who personally struggled with education confirmed that their children both lacked specific goals (academic or career) and often struggled throughout the middle school experience.
These parents seemed largely incapable of nurturing their children’s education or in helping their children to identify personally meaningful goals. These students held negative views regarding education, and (by the eighth grade) had serious discussions with their parents about dropping out of school. Therefore, these students’ efficacy beliefs were taken into consideration when making their decision for high school.

**Critical theory of cultural capitalism.** Critical theory has been used across many disciplines and was intended to criticize the Marxist theory pointing, “schools were capitalist agencies of social, economic, cultural, and bureaucratic reproduction” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 89). Critical theory provides a lens for the researcher to criticize or question the phenomenon under study. Researchers often use critical theory lens as a way to distinguish between competing interests among groups, noting that, “Privileged groups often have an interest in supporting the status quo to protect their own advantages” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p. 90). Bourdieu (1979a/1984) looked critically at cultural capital theory and used the concept of ‘cultural capital’ to define those culturally based resources that act as a form of ‘capital’ for different interest groups. According to Winkle-Wagner (2010), “the cumulative acquisition of cultural capital is implicit: one who acquires high-status cultural capital through family origin and through education will be more privileged in society generally” (p.6). The findings of with the current research study support the theorized interpretations of critical theory of cultural capitalism.

A key finding of this study (confirmed by both student and parent responses) is that the relative cultural capital possessed by a child’s family has a proportional degree of influence on that child’s high school decision-making process. A major finding of this study is that students believed the primary influence in their selection of a high school was the personal stories and
anecdotes of their parents, guardians, and/or family members. The students pointed out that the personal experiences of these individuals, positive or negative, were a key influence in their decision-making process. It was the personal experiences of parents, guardians, and family members - their ‘cultural capital’ - that strongly influenced the information and support that they provided to their children. These findings help to clarify why middle school students who come from privileged, educated, and informed backgrounds are more likely to find themselves with a wider range of high school options. Importantly, the family members of these students are seen to possess the resources necessary to support their children in the high school decision-making process, as compared to students whose family members lacked this ‘cultural capital’.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

The findings from this study offered varying conclusions in connection with the literature review presented in Chapter Two. The literature review focused on four main themes to inform this study: the developing adolescent during the middle school years; academic and career development pursuits during the middle school years; influence of parents on middle school students’ academic and career planning; and college-going aspirations.

**The developing adolescent during the middle school years.** The findings from this study were consistent with the current literature on the developing adolescent during the middle school years. Previous researchers have observed that developing adolescents, particularly minority youth in urban areas, experience considerable declines in academic motivation and achievement during the middle school years (Eccles, et al., 1993; Schneider & Coleman, 1993; Seidman, et al., 1994). Additional research by Eccles, Lord, Roeser, Barber, & Jozefowicz, (1996) supports the notion that a students’ motivation and behavior is influenced by how well, or to what extent, the student’s personality and character relate to the current social environment (in
this case, the middle school setting). The findings from this study indicated that HLMS students by and large did not deem the middle school experience relevant to their future aspirations. This in turn led to grades that were in all likelihood not representative of the students’ true capabilities, resulting in some students being denied admission to their high school of choice. This finding also supported the research by Cothran & Ennis (2000) who investigated the construct of school engagement for its potential in explaining academic underachievement.

The research by Lapan (2004) suggests that career development programming in the middle grades has been identified as one means for positively enhancing student attitudes toward school, and for increasing student engagement. In corroboration of this research, HLMS has recently begun to emphasize exploration of college and career opportunities for its 7th and 8th grade students. Thus far, feedback regarding the advisory program’s career exploration lessons and middle school career day has been positive, and has sparked engaging conversations among the students.

Academic and career development pursuits during the middle school years. The research regarding academic and career development pursuits during the middle school years offers varying conclusions. Prior research has purported that it is during the developmental stages of adolescence that young people begin to establish an awareness of their interests and abilities, and then use this self-knowledge to guide initial decisions regarding future occupational and educational goals (Super, 1990). The findings of this study do not, however, support this contention; most students in the current research study were unaware of how their choice of high school would or could impact their future educational or vocational opportunities. Of note was the revelation that many HLMS students, when making their high school decision, were more
influenced by the perceived safety of a school than by its ability to meet a student’s career aspirations.

Research by Johnson (2000) examined sixth and ninth grade students’ awareness of the connections between school and future career goals. The outcomes of his study highlighted the fact that the students had a limited and inaccurate understanding of this relationship. Overwhelmingly, the findings indicated that many students were unaware of how high school would prepare them for their desired careers, or even which high school courses best aligned with their career interests. Students repeatedly commented that they did not know specifically what the high schools offered, nor were they aware of the programmatic outcomes.

Research by Julien (1999) explored the various barriers faced by middle school students when making college and career decisions, and found the “biggest” barriers to be 1) students’ lack of awareness of the high school credentials needed to achieve career goals, and 2) unawareness of the financial realities of paying for college. Additionally, students who had high expectations for themselves but were not sure if they saw themselves as college-bound referenced financial concerns of paying for college as a key influence impacting their college aspirations.

Influence of parents on middle school students’ academic and career planning. A reoccurring theme within the literature is that parents are the primary influence in an adolescent’s development and vocational/career selection (Fouad, 1995; Rutter, 1980; & Shoffner & Klemer, 1973). Dating back more than thirty years, Mike Rutter’s (1980) research suggested that young people will share their parents’ values on life’s major issues while also mostly turning to them for guidance and support during points of transition and decision-making. In agreement with Rutter’s conclusions, the current research study showed overwhelmingly (in 83 of 114
participants, or 74%) that HLMS students tended to favor their parents and family members when making decisions regarding high school selection, and were most influenced by personal stories and anecdotes.

Fouad (1995) echoes the above, stating that students cite their parents and family members as being the most influential factor when choosing a career pathway. The findings of the current research study, however, do not fully concur with Fouad (1995). This researcher found that students reported consulting their parents and family members about possible career pathways and vocational interests, but there were no major findings that confirmed parental influence on students choosing a specific career pathway at the time of deciding upon which high school to attend.

There is a parallel body of research which suggests that, in order to optimally foster their children’s educations and careers, parents must first have confidence in their own ability to guide their children effectively; in other words, a student’s success may well be ultimately determined by a parent’s overall sense of efficacy in this area. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) draw on the efficacy theory of Bandura’s self-efficacy model, also referenced within the theoretical framework of this study, making claim that, “parents with a higher sense of efficacy for helping the child succeed will tend to see themselves as capable in this domain; thus, they are likely to believe that their involvement will make a positive difference for their children” (p. 19). The findings of this study confirm those of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) by demonstrating that parents whose past educational experiences had been positive were more likely to encourage education for their children; and that these children, in turn, were more likely to hold positive views of education as compared to students whose parents held predominantly negative view of the educational process. Parents who struggled with education and who were high school
dropouts themselves regularly commented on the constant struggles they faced with their children in regard to school attendance and academic achievement.

Young and Friesen (1992) also found that parents often felt helpless and uninformed about their children’s career decisions, and were unsure of how to effectively be part of the decision-making process. The findings of this research study support the results by Young and Friesen (1992). The two key findings by parents and guardians confirm that they were not informed by middle school staff, specifically guidance counselors, regarding the high school options for their transitioning middle school aged students. The lack of school-sponsored guidance and information disempowered parents and guardians, causing them to rely primarily on previous experiences with older children when guiding their 8th graders in the high school decision-making process.

A student’s college going aspirations. Research by Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) identify four types of college-choice models potentially utilized by students: econometric, consumer, sociological, and combined. The econometric model assumes that, “individual students will enroll in a postsecondary educational institution if the perceived benefits of attendance are greater than those of non-college alternatives” (Hossler & Stage, 1992, p. 426). Factors that are related to a student’s college-going choice in this model include: expected future earnings, expected direct and indirect costs, student familial background characteristics, and high school characteristics (Ekstrom, 1985; Fuller, Mansky & Wise, 1982; Mansky & Wise, 1983). The findings of this study support these findings. A key finding among students pointed to an overwhelming majority (76, or 83%) who saw themselves as being college-bound and considered themselves, by the 8th grade, as being potentially college-bound. Students who were unsure cited financial concerns as their guiding reason for not wanting to go straight to college.
This directly aligns with the econometric model; this research confirmed itself to college aspirations only, and whether or not students eventually go on to follow through on these aspirations was not part of the current study.

The research by Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) emphasize that the level of parental education fosters an enormous influence on not just the probability of college aspirations for one’s child but also on the timing of college aspirations. The researchers state, “Compared to children of parents who completed high school but never attended college, students whose parents completed a bachelor’s degree or more are around 20 percentage points more likely to subscribe to a college going belief” (Grodsky & Riegle-Crumb, 2010, p. 23). The findings by the parent participants overwhelmingly confirm the results of Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) pointing that parents who personally had a positive experience with education were more likely to encourage education for their children. The parents who were high school graduates all spoke of the success their children were having with school and many specifically referenced the college aspirations held by their children in middle school. Conversely, the three parents who dropped out of high school discussed the ongoing struggles that they have with their children in regard to school attendance and academic achievement. They also were direct in stating that their children did not have specific career aspirations and absolutely were not considering a college education.

**Validity and Limitations**

Potential issues with the validity for this study, including issues with credibility, authenticity, reliability, and reactivity were addressed in Chapter III. To insure credibility, the researcher communicated formally, in writing, with all potential participants prior to focus groups and individual interviews. The researcher provided students with assent forms while
parents, guardians, and the middle school guidance counselor signed consent forms prior to all data collection. Given that the researcher is an administrator at one of the three high schools listed in this study, it is conceivable that participant response could have been affected; however, triangulation of the data and using multiple data sources that compare and contrast participant perceptions and peer review of the results were the steps taken to address the internal validity and credibility of this study. It can’t fully be addressed in the confines of a one-researcher thesis. In regard to reliability, this study’s methods and approaches are consistent across other researchers and studies, and will be made public to be used for other researchers’ review.

The researcher’s professional role as Department Head of Guidance at Durfee High School awards prior experience and professionally held perceptions regarding the high school transition for students. Therefore, it is unrealistic to claim that the researcher’s bias and reactivity within this study and its findings were completely eliminated. To minimize bias during data analysis, the researcher took several steps during data collection and the coding process to guard against researcher bias. Multiple reviews of the data, drawing categories and meanings directly from the participant’s words, and keeping analytical memos throughout the coding cycles helped to clarify and interpret the emerging themes across all participant groups. In regard to reactivity, or to ensure that the researcher’s role did not influence participation or findings, multiple strategies were used. The researcher conducted focus groups with students once their final decision for high school was made. To ensure that parents and guardians were not influenced by the researcher’s role, invitations for participation were sent after their children were already enrolled in high school; additionally, the researcher was introduced as a student researcher, not the Department Head of Guidance. In regard to the interview with the middle
school guidance counselor, the researcher does not hold any authority over this individual and therefore any risk related to participation in this study was deemed to be non-existent.

This study’s greatest limitation to this study was relatively small number of parent/guardian participants. All parents/guardians of HLMS SY2011 student participants (n=144) were recruited to take part in one-on-one interviews with the researcher, and were compensated with a $20.00 Stop & Shop gift card for their time and participation. Despite multiple recruitment attempts, response rate was low (n=6), requiring this researcher to include parents/guardians from HLMS 2012 eighth grade students; this yielded one additional participant. There is, of course, some degree of uncertainty in extrapolating the data derived from such a small sample to the general population, and additional participants would have given a clearer picture as to the nature of reality.

Significance of the Study

The importance of all students earning a high school diploma in the 21st Century has received increased attention from school leaders and policy makers in recent years. The high school experience requires heightened expectations of our students and must prepare them for one of three worlds: higher education, work, or military. Therefore, the selection of one’s high school is one of the most important decisions that a developing adolescent will make. Students and parents/guardians must be aware of the high school options and outcomes in order to ensure that the experience is relevant.

This study is important to the field of education because it reports the most influential and non-influential factors that students considered when making their decision for high school in an urban school district. Given the fact that urban school districts across the state and country struggle with similar risk factors for their students and parents the findings of this study could be
transferrable to other urban districts with similar populations and high school options. The study incorporates the perceptions of parents and guardians, who, prior research shows and the findings of this study confirm, are most influential to a child’s high school selection and initial career or vocational aspirations. The voice of this participant group is often left out of the development of educational policy and practice during the middle and high school years and should be considered in the future.

Through this study, Fall River Public Schools and the educational community as a whole can understand the most influential factors impacting a student’s decision for high school. All stakeholders can gain insight by understanding what our students are taking into consideration when making one of their biggest decisions, their selection for high school. In addition, they can reflect upon the areas of transition programming that should be modified or enhanced based on the perceptions of the each participant group. An exploration, similar to this study, has major implications in the field of education. In urban districts, if problems of school engagement and academic or vocational relevance continue to be apparent concerns for school communities, all stakeholders should consider proactive measures to modify middle school and guidance counselor transitional and vocational exploration and programming.

Next Steps

The Fall River Public Schools is comprised of four middle schools, each with its own version of transitional programming for its 8th grade students. In 2012 the district has supported the development of a vertical guidance team to develop common strategies and practices that will address the inconsistencies that surround the high school transition and selection process for students. Duplication of this study at the additional three middle schools in Fall River and comparison of the key findings would be important future research to ensure that each middle
school is addressing the transitional needs of its student population. Using the culmination of these findings to create meaningful and consistent transition programming that addresses the needs of all middle school students and their parents or guardians in the Fall River Public Schools would be most beneficial.

Additionally, the student and parent/guardian participants of this study offered suggestions for creating transitional programming based on their own experiences of the high school decision-making process. Student and parent participants overwhelmingly agreed that Henry Lord Middle School must develop consistent and predictable transition programs that begin as early as 7th grade for all students. Both groups of participants commented on the need to better understand the programmatic differences between the high school options and the outcomes of each program prior to making their decision. The students also requested that guidance counselors spend more time with the students individually in order to answer questions and address concerns that typically would not arise in large assemblies. Parents and guardians requested that high school information sessions be offered on different days and times in order to accommodate their diverse schedules. Henry Lord Middle School should consider developing and implementing a transition program that addresses and utilizes the findings of this study. Possible action research on transition programming that identifies best practices and addresses the key findings and suggestions by the participants of this study are worthy of future research.

Conclusion

The three research questions that guided this study were: what influenced 8th grade students when making their decision for high school; how parents and guardians were informed of the high school options while influencing their child’s decision; and how did guidance counselors influence both students and parents in their high school decision. The findings of
this study identified the most influential and non-influential factors for each participant group. Because this study was qualitative, the perceptions of transitioning 8th grade students, parents and guardians, and a middle school guidance counselor were documented and heard.

The results of this study overwhelmingly suggest that when making their decision for high school and exploring careers and college options, students are most influenced by their parents, guardians, and family members. The parents and guardians reported their biggest influence to be previous experiences with older children. Finally, findings pointed to Henry Lord Middle School not providing consistent and predictable information regarding the various high school options, and programmatic differences among the options, for either students or their parents or guardians.
References


Appendix A

A Case Study: High School Decision Making at HLMS in Fall River

Focus Group Protocols

Welcome Participants and Introduce Myself and the Study

o The students assent form will be distributed when they arrive to English class. Noted atop their consent form, students will be in either A or B group if the number of participants requires two focus groups.
o If necessary, the students will be separated into A and B focus groups immediately and the sessions will disperse to their assigned room.
o The researcher will ask students to move the chairs to a circle formation for the focus groups.
o The session will begin by offering a welcome statement to all student participants and re-introducing myself as the researcher and when necessary, introducing the research assistant.
o The researcher’s role in the school community will be explained and the research assistant will also outline her role in the district.

Purpose of the Discussion

Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “The Fall River Public Schools and Henry Lord Middle School are committed to providing all students transition to a high school that can support student’s personal goals and career interests. Specifically, Henry Lord Middle School is committed to improving the transition programming for its future 8th grade students.

In order to do this, we must first understand how you came to the decision of where to attend high school, what or who influenced your decision, and actually, whether or not YOU even had a choice for high school in September.

Distribute Student Assent Form and Explain
Ask Permission to Record

Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “I’m going to ask you a few questions about how you reached your decision of where to attend high school. We will use this information so that we can
improve the ways we provide students and families with information about the options for high school in Fall River. This focus group is scheduled to last for 90 minutes.”

“We want to be sure that everyone feels free to speak his or her mind. Please listen to the ideas of others with an open mind and respect their privacy. What we say in this room should stay in this room – will you agree to do that?

“With your permission, we’d like to tape our conversation and write down common themes and ideas on chart paper. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular person, unless you first give us explicit permission. Is that OK? Also, at this time, each of you will be asked to state that your parents, guardians, or family members are aware and agree of your participation in the focus group.”

“Any questions before we get started?

**Ask Participants to Introduce Themselves**

*Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS:* “Now, all of you are familiar with each other after being a student at HLMS and in English class all year together, but I am not very familiar with each of you. So, can you all please introduce yourselves to me, I ask that you tell me a little something about yourself. Let’s go around the circle to introduce ourselves by telling me what your first name is, how many years you have been a student at HLMS, and which high school you will be attending in the fall.”

*Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS:* “Thanks for sharing that was great. Now the discussion will go like this, I’m going to ask you a few questions about how you feel your career plans, interests, abilities, and beliefs about yourself, influenced your decision of where to attend high school. We will use this information so that we can improve the way we provide future HLMS students and families with information about the high school options. We have 90 minutes together so let’s make the most of it.”

“There are three things that I am really interested in knowing whether or not influenced your decision. I will start with questions that address the three areas of interest and I hope you can add some additional insights to my understanding. I am also interested in whatever else you want to share that influenced your decision that maybe I didn’t think of.”

**Begin the Discussion**

*Focus Group Guidelines/Timing :* “I will wait at least 10-15 seconds after asking a question to give everyone time to think and respond. Prompts will be used for the following reasons: if no one speaks up, if I need to ask a question for clarification, if I need to push a student to go deeper in explaining their thinking, or to get the discussion back on track. Please raise your hand if you would like to speak and wait to be called on to speak so that we respect one another’s time and comments. Let’s begin!”
1. How did you come to learn about the public high school options in Fall River and what it takes to get into each high school?

*Prompting Questions (use as needed)*
- Did you receive information in middle school about the high school options?
- When (what grade were you in)?
- How was information presented?
- What was told to you? What kind of information was told to you? (sports, academics, connection to college etc.)
- Were you aware, early enough in middle school, of the differences?
- Did you consider where you wanted to go to high school and what it took to get into that high school during your middle school years?
- Did your parents/guardians know what the application requirements were?

2. What’s your overall feeling on your decision for high school next year?

*Prompting Questions (use as needed)*
- Are YOU happy about your decision? Was this YOUR decision or did others influence your decision?
- Did you have a choice?
- Who did you talk most with when you were making your decision?
- How did you make the decision (what did you take into consideration)?
- Are you being forced to go to this high school?
- Why don’t you have other options?
- What comes to mind as something HLMS can do to better prepare future 8th graders for the high school decision making process?

3. Did you consider your career or academic goals when you made your decision for high school?

*Prompting Questions (use as needed)*
- What are your career goals? How did they influence your decision? Do you have academic or career goals?
- Does this school offer the courses you need to achieve your goals?
- Who do you speak with about your goals and aspirations for after high school?
- Did you speak to anyone about high school supporting you with reaching your goals? Who?
- What specific career program or academic programs are you interested in enrolling at your high school?
- Do you see yourself as a 4 year college student immediately after high school?
- Do you see a connection between high school (education) and your future goals/success?

4. What type of student do you see yourself as?

*Prompting Questions (use as needed)*
- Do you believe you are smart?
- Do you believe that your grades represent who you are and what you are capable of?
- Do you see a connection between school and your future?
What are your strengths?
What are your weaknesses?
Do you believe you can achieve anything you set your mind to?
Do you see high school as a fresh start both socially and academically?

5. How has HLMS supported you in making your decision of where to attend high school?

Prompting Questions (use as needed)
- Do the guidance counselors provide you information about high school and options for life after? HOW?
- Do the middle school counselors talk with you about what high school would be a good match for you?
- Did you take their recommendation into consideration?
- Did your parent/guardian speak to the guidance counselor about your decision for high school?
- Did the middle school or high school offer any programs where you could learn this information? If so, when? Where?
- Did you attend with your parents/guardians or family members?
- If you were asked to advise the school on what to do to improve the support given to students, what would you suggest?

6. Open Mic
- Did something come up during the discussion that you would like to go back to further discuss? (refer to the chart)
- Did we miss talking about anything that you felt really impacted your decision?
- In regard to preparing and helping you to make your high school decision, what would you like to see HLMS do a better job of?
- Do you have any specific suggestions?
- Summarize the chart of common responses to confirm that the themes reflect their overall list of key influences.

Close the Discussion
Thank you for participating.
I will wish them luck in high school next year and a safe summer vacation.
Appendix B

Parent/Family Member Interview Protocols

Welcome and Introductions
- The researcher will meet the study participant at a previously determined time and location convenient to the participant.
- The session will begin by offering a welcome statement to the participant and introducing myself as the researcher.
- The researcher’s role in the school community will be explained and the relationship to the study will also be described.

Purpose of the Discussion
Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “The Fall River Public Schools and Henry Lord Middle School are committed to provide all students transition to a high school that can support student’s personal goals and career interests. Specifically, Henry Lord Middle School is committed to improving the transition programming for its future 8th grade students. In order to do this, we must first understand how your child or family member came to the decision, last year, of where to attend high school, what or who influenced their decision-making, and actually, whether or not your child or family member even had a choice at all, for high school this past September 2011.

Distribute Consent Form and Explain
Ask Permission to Record
Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “I’m going to ask you a few questions about how your child or family member reached the decision of where to attend high school. We will use this information so that we can improve the ways we provide students and families with information about the options for high school in Fall River. The interview is scheduled to last 45-60 minutes.”

“With your permission, I’d like to tape our conversation. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular person, unless you first give us explicit permission. “Any questions before we get started?

Ask Participants to Introduce Themselves
Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “Can you please introduce yourself to me. Let’s start by stating your first and last name, the name of your child or family member, the high school he/she is attending in September 2011, and why you decided to participate in this research study?

Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “Thanks for sharing that was great. Now the discussion will go like this, I’m going to ask you a few questions about your experience, as a parent/family member, navigating the transition to high school, the process you went through with your child/family member when making the decision of where to enroll for high school, the influence you have on your child’s/family members decision of where to attend high school, and your perception of your child’s overall satisfaction with the choice for high school. Additionally, I would like to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the transition programming
sponsored by the FRPS and Henry Lord Middle School. We will use this information so that we can improve the way we provide future HLMS students and families with information about the high school options.”

**Begin the Discussion**

*Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS “Let’s begin!”*

7. During your child’s middle school years, how did you learn about the public high school options in Fall River and what it takes to get into each high school?

*Prompting Questions (use as needed)*

- How did you receive information about the options for high school during your child/family member’s middle school years?
- When (what grade was your child/family member in)?
- How was information presented? What was told to you? By whom?
- What specific kind of information was told to you? (sports, academics, connection to college etc.)
- Were you made aware, early enough in your child’s/family member’s middle school years, of the programmatic differences of the high schools?
- What factors did you take into consideration when guiding your child/family member?
- Did you discuss these factors with your child/family member?
- Did you know of the application requirements and what the application requirements were for specific high school options?

8. What’s your overall feeling on your child’s decision for high school? What is your level of satisfaction?

*Prompting Questions (use as needed)*

- Are YOU happy about your child’s/family member’s decision? Was this YOUR decision or was this your child/family member’s decision?
- Did your child/family member have a choice for high school? If not, why doesn’t your child/family member have other options?
- Are you requiring/forcing your child/family member to go to this high school? If so, why?
- How satisfied are you with the high school and your decision thus far? How satisfied or happy do you believe your child is with the decision?
- What has your level of involvement been thus far? (Teacher communication? Open House? Vice Principal interaction? Guidance Counselor interaction?)
- Have you seen your child’s progress report(s)? report card?
- What comes to mind as something HLMS can do to better prepare future 8th graders and their parents/family member’s for the high school decision-making process?

9. What type of influence do you feel you had on your child/family member’s decision for high school?

*Prompting Questions (use as needed)*

- What types of conversations did you have with your child/family member in regard to the decision of high school attendance?
- Did college or career plans manifest in the conversations? If so, can you reference specific examples?
o What are your child’s/family members career goals? How did they influence his/her decision for high school?
o Does this school offer the courses your child/family member needs to achieve his/her academic/career goals?
o Does your child see him/herself as a 4 year college student following high school?
o How confident are you in your ability to guide and assist your child or family member in the college/career preparation process?
o Do you believe that your involvement in the high school and career decision-making process will make a difference? Please explain?

10. What type of student do you see your child/family member as?

Prompting Questions (use as needed)
o Do you believe your child/family member is smart? If yes, do you tell him/her that often?
o Do you believe your child has a positive view of him/herself? If so and/or if not, please explain your response.
o Do you believe that your child’s/family member’s academic progress/grades represent who he/she is and what he/she is capable of?
o Do you intervene in response to poor school grades? Conduct infractions? Attendance concerns?
o Do you see a connection between school and your child/family member’s future success?
o Do you encourage him/her to believe in his/her self? If so, can you give an example of how you encourage him/her?
o Is education a priority in your household? Please provide examples that support your response.
o What was your personal experience with education?
o Did you graduate from high school? College? Military?

11. How has HLMS supported your child/family member in making the decision of where to attend high school?

Prompting Questions (use as needed)
o Did the middle school guidance counselors provide you information about high school and options for life after? HOW?
o Did the middle school counselors talk with your child/family member about what high school would be a good match?
o Did you take their recommendation into consideration? If not, why?
o Did you speak to the guidance counselor about the decision for high school?
o If you were asked to advise the school on what to do to improve the support given to students and parents/family members, what would you suggest?

12. Open Mic
o Did something come up during the discussion that you would like to go back to further discuss?
o Did we miss talking about anything that you felt really impacted the decision?
o In regard to preparing and helping your child/family member make the decision for high school, what would you like to see HLMS do a better job of?
o Do you have any specific suggestions?
Close the Discussion
Thank you for participating.
Appendix C

A Case Study: High School Decision Making at HLMS in Fall River
Guidance Counselor Interview Protocols

Welcome participant and introduce myself and the study

Purpose of the Discussion

Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “The Fall River Public Schools and Henry Lord Middle School are committed to provide all students transition to a high school that can support student’s personal goals and career interests. Specifically, Henry Lord Middle School is committed to improving the transition programming for its future 8th grade students. In order to do this, we must understand, from your perspective, how did Guidance Counselors influence the high school decision making process for transitioning eighth graders from the Henry Lord Middle School?”

Distribute Unsigned Consent Form and Explain
Ask Permission to Record

Researcher/Research Assistant SAYS: “I’m going to ask you a few questions that align with the questions I asked the students and parents regarding the role of Guidance Counselors in the high school decision making process for students and families. We will use this information so that we can improve the ways we provide students and families with information about the options for high school in Fall River.”

“With your permission, we’d like to tape our conversation. Everything you say will be treated confidentially. Any questions before we get started?”

“To get started can you please introduce yourself and tell me how many years you have been a Guidance Counselor.”

Begin the Discussion

1. Do you believe that Henry Lord Administration places an emphasis on the student’s high school transition process?
2. How are the public high school options presented to students and parents in Fall River? In what grade are students and parents/guardians presented with the programmatic and application process and what it takes to get into each high school?
3. In what ways do you communicate specifically with the parents/guardians of students?
4. Students commented that teachers were influential in their high school decision making strategy. Is there any formal training provided to teachers regarding the public high schools and their offerings?
5. What has your role as a Guidance Counselor at Henry Lord evolved into? What are the priorities and main job responsibilities?
6. Do you introduce college and career opportunities to students in middle school? If so, how?
7. Do you have specific programming for the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students regarding high school offerings/selection, college, or careers?
8. As a Guidance Counselor, are you expected to set aside time in your schedule to meet with students one-on-one regarding the high school transition process?
9. If you were charged with the responsibility of meeting with each 7th and 8th grade student in a formal meeting, what would have to change in regard to your current job expectations?
10. Is there anything that you would like to see done differently at Henry Lord regarding the 8th grade high school transition process?
11. Any additional thoughts?
Appendix D

*Table A*

| WHEN DID YOU COME TO LEARN ABOUT THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL OPTIONS IN FALL RIVER AND WHAT IT TAKES TO GET INTO EACH HIGH SCHOOL? (N=108) |
|---|---|---|
| **8th grade** | 64% (69) | • This year, the beginning of the year my mother told me.  
• In the middle of the year they told us about the different schools.  
• They only started talking about the high schools the past few months |
| **7th grade** | 23% (25) | • We were told, in 7th grade, that you had to try harder if you wanted to get into Diman or Bristol Aggie.  
• I found out in 7th...I found out in 8th...a lot of people were saying stuff so it was hard to like find out what you had to do to get in so it was very unaware. |
| **Other Grades** | 13% (14) | • My sister, she applied to BA and at the time I was in the 5th grade and I figured it all out. I heard her and my mom talking about what was on the application and what was not.  
• I knew about Durfee and Diman since I was in the 6th grade. My brother and sister went there and they told me all about it.  
• I was in 3rd grade because my sister, she was attending Diman and when would talk about it all the time. |

*Table B*

| HOW WAS THE INFORMATION PRESENTED TO YOU ABOUT THE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL OPTIONS? (N=109) |
|---|---|---|
| **Assembly** | 42% (46) | • If you were in school everyone had to sit in on Diman and Durfee and Bristol Aggie was just for those who were interested.  
• We just learned it from when the people came in this year; of course you knew a little bit but basically from people who went there and our friends and stuff. But when we had that assembly that’s where people really begin to understand what it was.  
• We had assemblies about what they do at each school. |
| **Family** (Other family members, not mother or) | 27% (29) | • I got this information from people who I know go to Diman and Durfee.  
• Pretty much if your parents went there then you will know about that high school from them, or that they want |
<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>something better for you… or if they went to a high school and</td>
<td>they didn’t like it then they don’t encourage it because of their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• My sister goes to Durfee so she tells me all about it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>13% (14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A lot of people were saying stuff so it was hard to like find</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>out what you had to do to get in so it was very unaware.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I was really told by my parents and my brother who all went</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to Diman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6% (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• My band teacher talked to me about Durfee.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The application stuff comes up in class most often. Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>say it when we are not behaving. They tell us that what you do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>now impacts you later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The teachers, they told us a lot. They told us to do good and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>have good grades and attendance and conduct because your future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>was going to depend on that for what high school you would end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>up getting into.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>6% (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• When you know people who go there, that is when you start</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>talking about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• They get their information from people they know.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I got this information from people who I know go to Diman and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Durfee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School,</td>
<td>6% (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor,</td>
<td>• In the middle of 8th grade my mother came in for a meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flyers/Papers/</td>
<td>with my Guidance Counselor to talk about high school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handouts</td>
<td>• It was the Guidance counselors, they told us about what it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>took to get into Diman and Bristol Aggie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We were told what’s good about the school to get us to want</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to go. They used power points and talked about sports and stuff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*NOTE: There were no students who specifically mentioned their</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>father when answering this focus group question. Father could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>have been implied within the category of family, but specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mention of father was not made by respondents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table C

| WERE YOU MADE AWARE OF THE DIFFERENT HIGH SCHOOL OPEN HOUSES? (N=77) |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yes                      | 65% (50)                                                            |
|                          | • I didn’t even go though I knew about the open houses. I know      |
|                          | everything about both schools because I have family members who    |
|                          | are in both schools.                                               |
|                          | • I went to the open house at Diman they had a great presentation  |
there of the course offerings they have at Diman. They also gave you a tour of the different shops and there were students there that showed what you do in each program, so it was kind of cool to see that.
- I learned a lot at the open houses at the schools.

No | 35% (27) | I didn’t even know that there was an open house at Durfee. I went to the Diman one and then I hated it and I wasn’t going to Diman, then I changed my mind.
- I didn’t even know that there were open houses at the high schools.

Table D

| WHAT WAS TOLD TO YOU? WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION WAS TOLD TO YOU? (SPORTS, ACADEMICS, CONNECTION TO COLLEGE, ETC) (N=110) |
|---|---|---|
| Durfee vs. Diman (49 students responded regarding Durfee for college & Diman for job) | 51% (56) | • Well I know that Durfee is more focused on going to college, Diman is more focused on getting a job right out of high school, and Bristol Aggie is an agricultural schools so its focused on farming and veterinary work.
• I talked to my brother and my father because they both went to Diman and they said, if you want job experience go to Diman and if you want to go to college, go to Durfee.
• Diman is one week school and one week shop and then Durfee is just school |
| Durfee | 24% (26) | • I’ve heard things that Durfee is a tough white school and the freshman class comes in with over 700 kids and that there is a lot of stuff to get involved in, that what I am told by everyone.
• They have more classes and at Durfee there are more AP classes than anywhere else
• At Durfee there are more classes, more electives, more stuff to do like World Language and cartooning. |
| Diman | 17% (19) | • They don’t accept bad kids at Diman, the application process keeps those kids out.
• I know you leave Diman with a trade to get a job.
• Diman is a vocational school, a technical school where you learn a trade. |
| Bristol Aggie | 8% (9) | • Bristol Aggie is more like a farmer school, plants, and animals and what not.
• I know that Bristol Aggie is on a farm or whatever, it’s for Agriculture. |
I was thinking of going to Bristol Aggie to be a Veterinarian.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shops, sports, electives, options for after high school</th>
<th>8% (10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>what shops they had, a lot of information about their shops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It feels like they are trying to push Durfee High School on us for some reason.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They said that because for every grade you earn credits and you need so many credits to move on to the next year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table E

| WERE YOU AWARE, EARLY ENOUGH IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, OF THE HIGH SCHOOL DIFFERENCES? (N=67) |
|---|---|
| No | 66% (44) |
| I think that like, we should be able to get introduced to it in like 7th grade because Diman, they told me that they looked at it in 7th grade too, not only your 8th grade…. So I think that in the beginning of your 7th and your 8th grade too they should do it twice so that you always have that in the back of your mind that you want to go to Diman so you got to make sure you have all good grades. |
| I think that if I would have known about the application process to Diman and Bristol Aggie earlier that would have made a difference for me. I would have kept my grades up. |
| I decided I wasn’t going to apply once I understood what the application was asking. I would have just started doing my homework and bringing up my grades if I would have known. |
| Yes | 34% (23) |
| We just learned it from when the people came in this year… of course you know a little bit but basically from people who went there and our friends and stuff. But when we had assemblies that’s where people really began to understand what it was. |
Table F

| DID YOUR PARENTS/GUARDIANS KNOW WHAT THE APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS WERE? (N=84) |
|---|---|
| **Student Knowledge** | **49% (41)** |
| – We were kind of told once but no one ever sat us down and showed us what the application looked like. |
| – I know that for sure, they look at your discipline, how many suspensions/detentions you’ve had, your grades, your attendance, those kinds of things. |
| – You had to pick choices, like your shop, and then you had to fill out information about yourself and then there was a side where your Guidance Counselor has to fill out about your grades and how many times you’ve been absent. |
| **No** | **31% (26)** |
| – A lot of people were saying stuff so it was hard to like find out what you had to do to get in so it was very unaware. |
| – We had our part to fill out with name and street but then the Guidance counselors had their parts to fill out too. |
| – I know that MCAS is definitely on there. |
| **Yes** | **20% (17)** |
| – Oh yes, my mom thought it was all three years counting to get into high school. |
| – They want to really know about your grades and how many times you were absent. |
| – My parents knew that it was discipline and attendance really. None of the bad kids go to Diman/Bristol Aggie. |

Table G

| IS THERE A SPECIFIC REASON WHY YOU CHOSE THE HIGH SCHOOL YOU DID? (N=27) |
|---|---|
| **Yes** | **93% (25)** |
| – I want to absolutely go to Durfee because I want to play the violin and I want to get into music and orchestra. |
| – Because half of my cousins go there and my mom wants me to go there to be with them. |
| – My mom told me that Diman has a better Culinary perception than Durfee so I am going there for that. |
| **No** | **7% (2)** |
| – No, not really for anything specific. |
| – I had to choose this school because I didn’t get into any others that I applied to. |
Table H

| WHAT'S YOUR OVERALL FEELING ON YOUR DECISION FOR HIGH SCHOOL NEXT YEAR? ARE YOU HAPPY ABOUT YOUR DECISION? WAS THIS YOUR DECISION OR DID OTHERS INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION? (N=71) |
|---|---|---|
| **Yes** | 62% (44) | - I am going to Durfee because half of my cousins go there and they want me to go there.  
- Yes my brother goes there and had a good experience so it will be good.  
- Yes, but if no one had pressured me, I would probably be going to Durfee. |
| **No** | 38% (27) | - I didn't want to go to Diman, I just applied because my mother wanted me to… She thinks it’s a better school… like less trouble.  
- I’m going to Diman but I really wish I was going to Durfee because I think that their sports are better and can get me a scholarship for a better college than Diman can for Sports.  
- Yeah, I wish I had more options. You get disappointed if you can’t go where you want to go in the end. |

Table I

| DID YOU HAVE A CHOICE? (N=60) |
|---|---|---|
| **Yes** | 55% (33) | - This is my choice to go for high school  
- I wanted to go to Diman to be a Vet.  
- I chose to go to Durfee because I wanted college prep and you can’t get that at Diman. |
| **No** | 45% (27) | - I’ve never really heard of Bristol Aggie at all so I really didn’t have good enough grades to go to Diman so I was pretty much stuck with going to Durfee. Not to mention Durfee does had a course for technology and that what I am interested in so it’ll work.  
- It was an easy choice because I didn’t have another choice mainly because of my grades.  
- I wanted to go to Diman but I didn’t get in |
### Table J

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO DID YOU TALK MOST WITH WHEN YOU WERE MAKING YOUR DECISION FOR HIGH SCHOOL? (N=114)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Parents (Parents, Mom, Dad, Stepmom) | 45% (51) | • My parents had a lot to say about this decision, for real.  
• My parents told me that all high schools had a lot of programs and opportunities because I don’t know what I want to do yet.  
• I talked to my mom. She told me to apply to Diman, this thing is I that I don’t know what I want to do for my career yet.  
• My father was talking to me about college and how Durfee is more involved with college but I said I wanted to go to Diman. |
| Family (Family, Sister, Brother, Uncle, Godfather, Cousin, Aunt) | 29% (32) | • Oh, I talked most to my brother and sister they go to Durfee.  
• My grandfather tells me a lot of stuff because he want to both schools when he was a kid  
• I talk to my family members about this stuff the most. |
| School (Counselor, Therapist, Teacher) | 18% (21) | • I met with my Guidance Counselor and my mom about high school during my IEP meeting  
• I talked to my stepmom because she is in the LPN program at Diman and that is more present and she told me all about all of their changes and how it’s a good school so she persuaded me.  
• I’ve been talking with my teachers, figured they would know the most about high school. |
| Friends | 5% (6) | • Your friends who go to the schools really give you the full information of their overall experience since freshmen, sophomore, and junior ear and so obviously you would listen to them.  
• I talk to my friend who lives next door. |
| Nobody | 3% (4) | • I don’t talk to people about this sort of stuff. I just weigh my options and make my own decisions.  
• I don’t talk to anybody about this stuff.  
• I don’t talk to anyone, I mainly argue with my mom about it. |
### Table K

| HOW DID YOU MAKE THE DECISION (WHAT DID YOU TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION) WHEN MAKING THE DECISION FOR HIGH SCHOOL? (N=77) |
|---|---|
| Safety | 42% (32) |
| - For me, I’m not trying to look at that but my mom keeps going back and forth with safeness of Diman vs. Durfee. |
| - A lot of people think that Durfee has a lot of bad kids. |
| - My brother doesn’t want me going to Durfee either. He said that the school has too many troublemakers. |
| Going to college/future | 24% (19) |
| - Being able to go to college was the upmost important factor of my decision cuz I know that at time it’s not easy to get into college. |
| - Um, like the different opportunities that you have at both schools. Like depending on what you want to take, then which high school has a better opportunity of you exiting school and having more opportunities for after high school and what job you want to take. |
| - Like everything around me. I see people struggling everyday so if I take the right career path, I won’t struggle like them. |
| Sports | 18% (14) |
| - I want to play basketball for Durfee, that’s why I want to go there. |
| Friends | 16% (12) |
| - I want to go to Durfee because all of my friends are going there, and I’m fine with that. |

### Table L

| ARE YOU BEING FORCED TO GO TO THIS HIGH SCHOOL? (N=46) |
|---|---|
| Yes | 63% (29) |
| - I didn’t have a choice because of my family. They didn’t want me to go to Durfee they wanted me to go to Diman and that was it. |
| - The problem with talking to your parents is that if they didn’t like the school they went to then they tell you that it wasn’t good enough and they want better for you, it’s just an excuse sometimes forces us there. |
| - My mother is forcing me to go to Diman. It really makes me mad because my mother dropped out of school and then she tells me what high school I have to go to and she is no forcing me to go to Diman. |
| Yes | 68% (36) | - I want to graduate from high school and not stay back.  
- I know I want to go to college I just don’t know for what.  
- I want to keep myself on the honor roll in high school. |
|-----|---------|-------------------------------------------------
| Don’t have any/ Don’t know | 32% (17) | - I really don’t know yet.  
- I don’t have any really, I’ll just do whatever it takes. |

**Table N**

| Don’t know | 47% (25) | - That’s what’s confusing to know what to take to prepare you for college and what colleges you should go to.  
- My mom tells me to just bring up my grades and she’ll probably transfer me to Diman, |
|------------|---------|-------------------------------------------------
| No | 36% (19) | - No, I know that there are a lot of colleges but I don’t know what colleges will help me with what I want to do.  
- I don’t find middle school to be important.  
- No, all we have has is assemblies where they told us how to apply. |
| Yes/ A little bit | 17% (9) | - Yes, because I need a lot of math, all types of math I’m sure.  
- Yes, I want to go into Cosmetology and I know they are the only school that even has that program. |
### Table O

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Do You Speak With About Your Goals and Aspirations For After High School? (N=98)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Parents | 56% (54) | - I talk to my mom but it’s tough because she never went to college so she doesn’t really know what it’s about.  
- My mom, she went to college but she went to a 2 year not a 4-year college. She working in the baby’s room and said that if I wanted to go that I had to go to college for 4 years and take more classes so that is how I became interested.  
- My mom is disabled so I have been taking care of her for a long time and that’s how I got interested. |
| Family (Cousin/Sister, Brother, Uncle, Boys/Girls Club) | 22% (21) | - My sister already has like 5 brochures for college and so I am always looking at them with her.  
- The Boy’s and Girls’ club staff are the people who I talk to most. |
| No one/ No one really | 15% (15) | - It seems like it’s in steps. That in elementary school you learn about middle school and in middle school you learn about high school and in high school you learn about college. |
| Teacher | 7% (8) | - At my IEP meeting we talked about my goals.  
- My art teacher talks with me about the different jobs. She gave me a chart to show me the different jobs. It was called Careers in Art.  
- We only talk to the teachers who ask us about it and not all of them ask. |

### Table P

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did You Speak To Anyone About High School Supporting You With Reaching Your Goals? And If So, Who? (N=64)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| No One | 50% (32) | - That’s what’s confusing; to know what to take to prepare you for college and what colleges you should go to for what you want.  
- It’s not just stuff that you really talk about all the time. That stuff never really comes up. |
| Parents/ Mom/ Family | 50% (32) | - I need to go to Durfee so that I can take a lot of math courses to help me become a math teacher and I know that Diman doesn’t have that.  
- My parents are always asking me about my future and my goals. |
### Table Q

**WHAT WILL YOU DO IF YOU DON’T GET INTO YOUR 1ST CHOICE PROGRAM AT DIMAN? (N=25)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I’ll be fine                             | 68% (17)   | - When I went to the orientation they showed us different things on what the thing are you can do there so I liked a few.  
- Nothing, you do another one; you can switch, my cousins did that and he didn’t get the shop that he wanted but he switched.  
- I’ll just grow to like it since I many not like it not I will let time work on me. |
| Not sure/ Don’t know/ I’d stay           | 32% (8)    | - Not sure, I’ll have to think of that.  
- I do feel that I can be passionate about my second choice program. Both programs, from what people have told me, both programs seem like really good ones because they offer you a lot during high school. |

### Table R

**WHAT SPECIFIC CAREER PROGRAM OR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS ARE YOU INTERESTED IN ENROLLING AT YOUR HIGH SCHOOL? (N=110)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Health Careers           | 41% (46)   | - I’m going to Diman to get my CNA license in Health Assisting.  
- I want to go to Diman for dental assisting.  
- I want do so something with science because mainly me and science just click.  |
| Construction/ Carpentry  | 8% (9)     | - I am going to Diman or carpentry. I will do carpentry so I can pay for my college tuition at the same time. |
| Finance                  | 7% (8)     | - I want to learn like finance and stuff. |
| Vet                      | 6% (7)     | - I’ve just always had a love for horses and really think that I want to work with them. |
| Culinary                 | 6% (7)     | - I used to want to be a Culinary Arts chef, when I was younger I loved to bake. |
| Athletic/ Dirt biker     | 5% (5)     | - I will be a professional baseball player.  
- I want to be a professional dirt biker. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Auto</td>
<td>5% (5)</td>
<td>My main career goal is to be a diesel mechanic on really big trucks and stuff cuz that’s what my dad does.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forensics</td>
<td>5% (5)</td>
<td>I want to do like CSI and forensics but I don’t know what I need to do for that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafting/Graphic Design</td>
<td>4% (4)</td>
<td>I want to design video games so I will take Durfee’s Graphics design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>4% (4)</td>
<td>I want to be an Air Force pilot, my cousin is one and he flies jets and tells me it’s the funnest experience in his life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I want to join the military and play my trumpet for the National Guard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer/Electronics</td>
<td>4% (4)</td>
<td>I am thinking about taking up electronics so that I have something to fall back on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater/Band</td>
<td>4% (4)</td>
<td>Oh ya, I play the trumpet. My family said that I guess you can join the military and go around the world playing the trumpet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>1% (2)</td>
<td>I want to be an English teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table S

| DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS A 4-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIGH SCHOOL? (N=91) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yes                             | 57% (52)                        | I know that I want to go straight to college out of high school, like not get a job, just go straight to college and my main goal is to go straight to college. |
|                                 |                                 | I know I want to go to college but I don’t know that classes that I need.                                                                  |
|                                 |                                 | I feel that my parents will help me pay for college but I feel that I want to earn money myself so I can pay for my own college.           |
| Don’t know                      | 26% (24)                        | I’ve never really thought about how I am going to pay for college or not.                                                                    |
|                                 |                                 | I’m going to try the 2-year school and then if I want to keep going I’ll go to a 4-year school.                                              |
|                                 |                                 | I feel that I will be working a job and going to college at the same time.                                                                |
I’m not sure it’s worth it. Once you get an education there are a lot of bills to go with it and you don’t want to be paying for it until you’re 35.

I hate doing homework/ I hate doing anything that has to do with school period. I am totally the opposite of anything who like loves school. So what’s the point of high school if you don’t want to go to college.

Table T

| DO YOU SEE A CONNECTION BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL (EDUCATION) AND YOUR FUTURE GOALS/SUCCESS? (N=56) |
|---|---|
| Yes | 52% (29) |
| Yes, because from a 1 to a 10 I find high school to be the 10 because you need a diploma in the world to get a job. |
| Yes, I need to take classes to prepare me for college. |
| It’s extremely important because it basically continues you on your path and like my sister said before, no matter what anyone says all four years are equally important. |
| No | 38% (21) |
| I don’t know, you just sit in a classroom all day and you don’t do anything fun… you just sit there and look at the board and the teacher talking. |
| No it’s just something that I have to do. |
| I have the attention span for like 10 minutes it’s really hard for me to stay with it all day. |
| Sort of | 10% (6) |
| Kind of, I have been thinking about it, but I am still confused with what to take. |
| I plan to get a nice paying job out of high school. |

Table U

| DO YOU BELIEVE YOU ARE SMART? (N=45) |
|---|---|
| Yes | 69% (31) |
| I know I am smart. |
| I’m smart, but I wish now that I would have taken school a little more seriously. |
| More in some subjects than others. |
| Everyone is smart somehow in their own way. |
| No/Depends | 31% (14) |
| Because I am lady and I don’t put it all in |
| I really never thought of myself as being smart. |
Table V

**DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR GRADES REPRESENT WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU ARE CAPABLE OF? (N=57)**

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **No** | 72% (41) | - Because you don’t try in middle school. If they made school funner and stuff like that I would do so much better. It’s boring and I don’t see the use of it.  
- Laziness, yeah laziness, we just try to pass in school because you just don’t want to be here.  
- I feel like it doesn’t matter until you get to bigger things like high school and college. |
| **Yes** | 25% (14) | - I always get good grades and I am rarely absent.  
- If you really want to do well you can. |
| **Depends** | 3% (2) | - The important classes are English and Math, they are the two subjects you can actually use in your life.  
- It depends on the class and the teacher. |

Table W

**DO YOU SEE A CONNECTION BETWEEN SCHOOL AND YOUR FUTURE? (N=40)**

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Yes** | 67% (27) | - Yes, they are preparing us for the real world but sometimes kids don’t see that.  
- Yes, because if you don’t pass high school you are not going to get a job.  
- Yeah, because if you don’t do your best in middle school then you don’t get accepted to the school that you want and then if you want to get into honors classes at Durfee then you have to do good in middle school. |
| **No** | 33% (13) | - Right now, I don’t see how Henry Lord has helped me; I'm seeing now how Durfee will help me but I am not sure how Henry Lord has so far.  
- Yeah, me too, I wish they would just get rid of middle school because I really don’t see the whole point of it. |
Table X

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DO YOU BELIEVE YOU CAN ACHIEVE ANYTHING YOU SET YOUR MIND TO DO? (N=43)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>79% (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Yes, you just have to put your mind to it and not let other people influence you from what they have experienced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If you put your mind to it. We all know what we have to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I think if you put your mind to it and you keep telling yourself over and over again that you can do it then it will boost yourself to keep practicing and the more you practice the better you will get and that goes with school too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I don’t really set goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I don’t really think far in advance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I don’t want to let myself down so I really don’t set goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends</td>
<td>9% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I knew of a school that I wanted to go to when I started at this school but just from being around people and doing things, I didn’t bring my grades up enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I can, but it depends. It has to be certain things because if I set my mind to writing a book it’s never going to happen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table Y

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DO YOU SEE HIGH SCHOOL AS A FRESH START BOTH Socially AND ACADEMICALLY? (N=62)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>71% (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Because, it’s a new school, new teachers, and new report card.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I really want my diploma. My dad never got his diploma because my mom got pregnant for me in high school so he had to get a job; I want to do it for them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Me too, my dad and my uncle never made it to the end and I want to prove to them that I can do it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Especially because I got a lot of bad reputations in 6th grade because of the suspensions I kept getting. Those teachers hopefully won’t know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Everyone knows you, especially if you’ve been to different schools, everyone knows everyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• They definitely look out for you at the high school; they will pull your conduct so they will know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It’s going to be just like we came here in 6th grade, it’s going to be tough if you’re not paying attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I have to change me more than the school can.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It seems like it is going to be so much more work. I want to make those goals, but then everyone says that you say that to start but it’s much harder to actually do it once you get there because of the drama. It depends because I do gymnastics, I am going to do cheerleading, I do dance, and then I have to babysit my nephew so it’s hard to do all of the homework and stuff.

Table Z

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOW HAS HLMS SUPPORTED YOU IN MAKING YOUR DECISION OF WHERE TO ATTEND HIGH SCHOOL? (N=69)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Assemblies | 46% (32) | • No, we all had assemblies and that was it.  
• The assemblies at the beginning of the year and the teachers from those schools came |
| HL Didn’t | 35% (24) | • They didn’t, not at all.  
• They haven’t, they didn’t talk about anything other than MCAS, MCAS, MCAS; there’s more to life than MCAS. |
| Always Durfee | 19% (13) | • It’s always Durfee, Durfee, Durfee. They push that school on you.  
• That’s the only school that the Guidance counselors and the teachers ever talk about. |

Table AA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DO THE GUIDANCE COUNSELORS PROVIDE YOU INFORMATION ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL AND OPTIONS FOR LIFE AFTER? HOW? (N=112)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| No | 57% (64) | • All they did is give us the application and tell us to fill it out and bring it back. They said they were going to meet with us but they didn’t.  
• Nope they are too busy, we usually just see them in the cafeteria.  
• The Guidance Counselor didn’t really have to give you that information because the high schools came here themselves to get the info. |
| Discipline | 29% (32) | • You only really go to Guidance if you are in trouble, to sign like those witness papers and stuff; that’s the only reason we go down there.  
• They don’t come talk to us about that stuff. We usually have to make the effort but if kids go there it’s pretty much because you have a problem. |
I got called in to be reprimanded mainly.

I’ve met with my Guidance Counselor and talked about college during lunch one day.
My Guidance Counselor had talks with me and helped me get into the high school I wanted.
I’ve talked to her about what I should put my mind into.

Table BB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>14% (16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I talked with my guidance counselor about Durfee being a good match because of their science program.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table CC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>75% (36)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No, my mother talks to her friends about my school the most.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, my dad doesn’t speak English so it’s pointless.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, my parents went online to see what the high schools looked like.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My mom talks to her friends and stuff like that.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My mom did when I transferred here.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In 7th grade my parents came in and talked to know what was available for high school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents called the school to set up the meeting to talk about high school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents called Henry Lord to talk about Diman.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table DD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did the Middle School or High School Offer Any Programs Where You Could Learn This Information? If So, When? Where? Were There Any Career Days or Guest Speakers (N=65)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|   | - Only people came in to talk about high schools, not colleges or careers.  
|   | - We didn’t do any stuff like that.  
|   | - They don’t do that but they should. The truth is that teachers can’t tell us about every career so let other people tell us that stuff. |
| Yes | 18% (12) |
|   | - We started the Peaceful Coalition here a few years ago.  
|   | - We went to BCC for that computer thing. It was basically for them to give us a tour and then the computer game they had us play with.  
|   | - I did that stuff at my middle school in New Bedford. |

### Table EE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If You Were Asked to Advise the School on What to Do to Improve the Support Given to Students, What Would You Suggest? (N=98)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earlier Awareness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|   | - They should tell kids and their parents all about the application process and what is really needed if you want to go there.  
|   | - I’d say for everyone at the start of 7th grade to start having one on one talks with Guidance so that kids can ask their own questions.  
|   | - Henry Lord should compare the high schools for the kids and give info on all schools so that kids can make the right choices right away. |
| Relevance | 30% (29) |
|   | - Give us classes that will prepare us for the world and for high school.  
|   | - They should connect school to more than just MCAS, that’s all that they focus on.  
<p>|   | - Give even more information about the high schools. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personalize</th>
<th>21% (21)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• If they sat us down in small groups to explain the high schools to us that would be helpful. You really can’t ask questions in that big assembly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• They should really get to know us. I had to ask the Guidance Counselor for a letter of recommendation for an application and I didn’t know how she would be able to write it cause she doesn’t really know me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• They should put up more posters in school and make brochures explaining all of the options for high school and college.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>