Graduation rates are one of the most troubling concerns. Despite millions of federal dollars invested in research on students at risk of dropping out of high school, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates in November, 2001, that each year for the past decade over half a million students have left school before graduation (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005). Unfortunately, this increase in the dropout rate has occurred at a time when there seems such a large emphasis on getting a college degree, much less a high school diploma, and being able to compete in a global world (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

Increased graduation requirements and rocky transitions from middle school to high school seem to comprise a majority of the reasons for students struggling, failing, and dropping out. Since high school graduation requirements and the transition to high school both involve the ninth grade, a lot of research has focused on the importance of the ninth-grade year. Solutions to help ease the transition to high school, including the development of freshman academies and an emphasis on students both before and after ninth grade, are underway to boost freshman success, and in the long run reduce high school dropout rates.

The Ninth-Grade Problem

Researchers target ninth grade as the make or break year for completing high school. It is during the ninth-grade year that many students for the first time have to earn passing grades in core courses (Fulk, 2003). Satisfactory completion of core courses is often required for graduation from high school, and these core courses are typically some of the toughest and most rigorous academic classes a student has to take in high school (Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008). Furthermore, the rising use of standardized examinations to measure school performance, and exit examinations required to earn a diploma, add to the difficulty and importance of doing well in high school (Schemo, 2004).

As a result of the increased demands of high school, the statistics generated from freshman year are concerning. Ninth-graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade
level (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). The ninth grade also has the highest enrollment rate in high schools. This is mainly due to the fact that approximately 22% of students repeat ninth-grade classes (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). This number, however, can be even larger in some places, especially large comprehensive urban high schools. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have found that up to 40% of ninth-grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat the ninth grade, but only 10% to 15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). According to NCES, the average freshmen graduation rate for 2001-2002 is 72.6%, but is as low as 57.9% in states such as South Carolina (Seastrom, et al., 2005). This means that there can be more than double the amount of students in ninth grade as compared to twelfth grade (Useem, Neild, & Morrison, 2001). That is why the ninth-grade year has become such a focal point of educational reform.

The Transition to Ninth Grade

Challenging graduation requirements are only one of the many issues that ninth-grade students have to overcome. There has been a lot of research done to pinpoint exactly why students have so much trouble during the ninth-grade year, and most research points to one overarching problem, the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade. According to Akos and Galassi (2004), 40% of students generally suffer serious problems after the transition to high school.

While the transition of a student from middle school to high school can represent an important milestone in that student's educational career, it can also be a time masked with feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Coming from a smaller-sized middle school to a larger-sized high school can be overwhelming for students (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Transferring to a new school creates a transition period that is frequently marked by declining academic performance, increased absences, and increased behavior disturbances. These factors put freshmen more "at risk" than any other school-aged group (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). In fact, students who fail to make a smooth transition to high school dropout as early as the end of ninth grade (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Part of what makes the transition so difficult, is not merely just the adolescent age of the students, but the substantial differences, both academically and socially, between middle school and high school. Ninth-
graders are introduced to new stresses and different expectations for which they are often not prepared (Smith, et al., 2008).

One major academic transition issue is how students earn credit in middle school as opposed to high school. As mentioned previously, high school is the first time that students earn credit for graduation over the course of four years. Unfortunately, some ninth-graders do not realize the importance of the ninth-grade year. When asked, students who fail one or more classes during ninth grade state that they wish they better understood the importance of the freshman year on graduation. If this had been the case, they claim that they would have worked harder to achieve higher grades (Zsiray, 1996).

Academic concerns such as more rigorous classes and more frequent homework assignments are only some of the problems that freshmen face after entering high school. Along with academics, social concerns also evolve during the transition period. These include getting lost and being bullied by older students (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Solutions to Ease the Transition to the Ninth Grade
The solution is simple. Eighth-graders are young, they have heard rumors about high school, and have developed preconceived notions of what it will be like. They are about to be little fish in a big pond, and are looking for guidance and answers. While the problems of transition seem complex, solutions to ease the transition can be simple and affordable. It can be as easy as providing each ninth-grader with bell schedules and a map to help them better understand where they need to go and when, or handing out sample packets of ninth-grade tests and homework assignments to help answer questions about the level of difficulty of the classes in high school (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

Other solutions include, but are not limited to, (1) a meet the teacher night for soon-to-be freshmen, (2) a ninth-grade orientation for both students and parents before school begins, and (3) the use of student mentors (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Cushman, 2006). Surveyed high school students using hindsight suggest providing information to debunk myths. Other suggestions include sending high school students to the middle schools to discuss exactly what high school will be like (Cushman, 2006). These transition attempts should not end when the eighth-grade students arrive, but should be continued throughout most of the ninth-grade year (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).
The Freshman Academy

Thus far, many of the freshman academies that do exist have reported great success. According to McIntosh and White (2006) some positives of freshman academies include improvements in attendance, school behavior, teacher morale, and parental contact. Students also realize increased academic success, as can be seen from the reduction of freshman class failures and an increase in scores on standardized tests (White, 2008). Specific data from one high school that compares freshmen prior to a separate freshman center, with freshmen who participated in a separate freshman wing, find a reduction in the number of failed freshmen classes, less expulsions, and increased attendance rates (McIntosh & White, 2006).

Studies that contain vast amounts of information regarding freshman academies have been conducted. There are many specific examples of freshman-only schools that tell stories of success. One noticeable difference among all of these academies is their goals. While all of these academies include student success in their mission in some way, each school (depending on size, area, location, or demographics) has seemed to focus the philosophy of their freshman academy to meet the individual needs of their particular freshman class (Clark & Hunley, 2007).

Ninth-Grade Academies Keep Kids in School.
By: Chmelynski, Carol, Education Digest, 0013127X, Jan2004, Vol. 69, Issue 5

BECAUSE ninth grade is such a tough year for many students, some districts have created special academies or other programs to provide special attention to students in the first year of high school. Behind these steps are studies showing that ninth-graders have the most discipline incidents and retentions and are most likely to drop out.

In the state of Georgia, Houston County High School created a special program for ninth-graders to help them succeed in making the transition from middle school to high school, says Principal Mike Hall. At the time, more than 60% of discipline referrals at the 2,200-student school were for ninth-graders. Since the program was created six years ago, Hall says, discipline incidents are down 55% and grade retentions decreased 46%. For the first five years, the academy was housed in a separate wing of the high school. This year, it's in a separate building. The school offers an elective class called High School 101, which covers time management,
decision-making skills, study skills, test-taking strategies, learning styles, social tolerance, computer research skills, and career alignment.

In general today, we have most ninth-graders move to a larger school where they are expected to adapt to a variety of instructional styles and conform to a different set of rules and expectations, including a tougher grading standard. They often get overwhelmed by all the changes in a large, anonymous--sometimes alienating--high school.

At the same time all this is happening, parents tend to become less involved in their children's education. Some school leaders hope to shelter students from some of these changes by offering a more nurturing ninth-grade academy where they can gain self-confidence and important social and academic skills.

"Educators have used ninth-grade academies for about a decade to focus on the unique problems facing freshmen," says Wesley Pugh, formerly a senior program director for the Talent Development High School reform model in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Kids Drop Out After Ninth Grade

The Philadelphia school system began using freshmen academies in several schools about three years ago as part of the Talent Development initiative. Since then, suspensions have decreased by 41%, and arrests have been cut in half at those schools, says a Talent Development report.

This is the first year that all of Philadelphia's 54 high schools have ninth-grade academies, says district spokesperson Amy Guerin. "These students receive a double dose of English and math instruction and get extra help on how to study on the high school level and how to digest material." The objective is to prepare these kids to succeed in high school, she says. "When you look at when kids tend to drop out of school, it's the end of ninth grade."

Chattanooga Central High School, in Harrison, Tennessee, began a ninth-grade academy last year to create "a nurturing program that would enable ninth-graders to acclimate to high school with less pressure from older students," says ninth-grade counselor Nancy Prince. The program also was aimed at providing opportunities for teachers to interact more with students to identify their needs and help them learn.

"Suspensions dropped significantly from 29.4% to 17.8% during the first year of the academy," Prince says. And because of a focus on reading, "a
significant number of students have been brought up to grade level in reading."

Also in its second year, this time in the state of New York, is the ninth-grade academy at Albany High School, where freshmen have the entire third floor to themselves. "In a comprehensive high school this large--2,600 students--kids can get lost in the shuffle. Keeping the freshmen together helps kids from becoming lost and helps teachers better know their students," says Academy Principal Anthony Clement.