

THE SENIOR YEAR ENIGMA: A STUDY OF THE ENTRENCHED AND
SUSTAINING SOURCE OF SENIORITIS

by

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: THE SENIOR YEAR ENIGMA: A STUDY OF THE ENTRENCHED AND SUSTAINING SOURCE OF SENIORITIS

As educational leaders respond to the challenges of providing a 21st century education to high school age children, the senior year in high school specifically and high school reform in general has gained national, state, and local attention. Many find the senior year in high school suffering from a malady colloquially called senioritis. This study, designed as an action research dissertation, examines the deeply entrenched source of senioritis through the context of a high performing regional high school district. The study was grounded in a mixed methods approach using data from a broad survey of students and faculty triangulated with rich qualitative data from an extensive array of relevant research participants and archived data. Guiding the study were the theoretical critical attributes identified in current literature relevant to the research problem. Critical attributes providing the framework were the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences between teacher and student, intrinsic valuing of learning, personal ownership of schoolwork, connection of schoolwork with future plans, level of expectations and the possible change in those expectations, expectation for academic rigor, and expectation for post secondary preparation. Mental models, structures, and patterns that support and sustain senioritis were also part of the research framework. Data was collected from students and teachers in all grade levels, building and district level administrators, guidance counselors, and non-teaching faculty in the district's two high schools. Surveys, interviews, focus groups,

questionnaires, and archived documents were the instruments used for data collection providing data for the analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and recommendations. The research finds that the curriculum and instructional program, teacher expectations, and student expectations influence and contribute to senioritis by not infusing and cultivating the critical attributes identified above as essential in mitigating senioritis. The research also finds that mental models, structures, and patterns exist that support and sustain the concept of senioritis. Furthermore, the research reveals that the senior year experience as well as the high school experience differs among students by ability grouping and grade level. The study's conclusions lead to a set of actionable recommendations.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the professors of the Graduate School of Education's first doctoral cohort at the College of Saint Elizabeth and the inspiring educators and servant leaders that were my classmates and friends in cohort one.

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Chapter One

The Senior Year Enigma:

A Study of the Entrenched and Sustaining Source of Senioritis

Secondary school public education and the universal K-12 public school experience in the United States conclude in the senior year of high school. The senior year in high school specifically and the high school model in general are receiving increased scrutiny as education presses forward into the 21st century. Many view the senior year as falling short in accomplishing sustained student engagement, continuous academic achievement, constant intellectual growth, and the indispensable preparation for students as they transition to the next chapter in their young lives, whether that is post-secondary schooling or the workplace. Secondary schools across the nation are implementing a broad range of alternatives, options, and myriad culminating activities to make the senior year more meaningful and engaging. Senior exhibitions, capstone projects, internships, portfolios, alternative paths to graduation, dual enrollment, senior seminars, and service projects are several examples (Chmelyski, 2004). This study of the complexities of the high school senior year places the problem in the context of a high-achieving suburban high school and examines deeply the sustaining source of the dilemma before recommending action. Implementing popular programs and alternatives, without deep examination, would result in a band-aid approach and a patchwork of remedies treating the symptom not the cause. The entrenched and sustaining source of senioritis is a culminating year that is being challenged as falling victim to low expectations, cultural stereotypes and norms that support a rite of passage that limits learning and academic growth, and a core curriculum structure that sustains the problem (Kirst, 2001; National Commission, 2001a, 2001b; Sizer, 2002). Peter Senge (2000), in collaboration with Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and

Kleiner in *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Handbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education*, implores educators to use systems thinking and warns, “reacting to each event quickly, and solving problems as quickly as they come up, helps develop a kind of ‘attention-deficit’ culture in the school system” (p. 77). Senge asserts, “The discipline of systems thinking provides a different way of looking at problems and goals-not as isolated events but as components of larger structures” (p.78). This study explores the mental models, the systemic structures, the patterns, and trends that sustain the entrenched source of senioritis.

High School Reform and the Senior Year

The senior year in high school and secondary education in general are receiving much attention by educational change agents from diverse fields. Researchers, teachers, school building and district level leaders, state education departments, and the federal government are all calling for a closer examination of secondary education and the senior year in particular. Parents, communities, business, and industry along with those in higher education are also asking for an examination of the final year in high school. In June of 2000, the Department of Education collaborated with the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation to form the National Commission on the High School Senior Year. The National Commission was given the task of examining the last year in high school and recommend paths to improvement (National Commission, 2001a, 2001b). New Jersey has followed the National Commission’s lead with the formation of the New Jersey High School Redesign Committee (New Jersey Department of Education [NJDOE], 2008b).

This problem with the senior year has often been colloquially named “senioritis”, a malady that seems to affect most seniors regardless of academic, economic, or social

background. Nancy Sizer (2002) in her book *Crossing the Stage: Redesigning Senior Year* devotes a chapter to senioritis. Sizer speaks to the complexities of the senior year throughout her book and attempts to define senioritis as “an emotional state: a complex combination of vulnerability, nostalgia, restlessness, weariness, disappointment – and laziness and entitlement” (p.136). The National Commission (2001b) agrees, “that the most common term used to characterize the senior year is ‘senioritis’” (p.28). The National Commission characterizes the affliction as one that stifles academic growth while serious academic course work is put on hold. “There is little sense of the final year as a time to strengthen skills, enhance preparation for post-secondary programs, broaden experiences to include service or demanding work-based learning, or culminate earlier classroom experience” (p. 28). Kirst (2001) refers to the final year in high school as the senior slump, a time when seniors “view the senior year as a time they have ‘earned’ for nonacademic pursuits” (p.10).

Secondary schools have not kept pace with effective schools research and school improvement research at the same rate as elementary schools. Earl, Torrance, and Sutherland (2006) in Harris and Chrispeels (2006) *Improving Schools and Educational Systems: International Perspectives* discuss the complexities of secondary school change and the difficulties in accomplishing secondary school change globally as well as in the United States. As a result, secondary school education, particularly in the senior year of high school, has changed very little over the past few decades. Wise (2008) refers to high schools being at the tipping point claiming, “the education reforms of the past two decades in the United States have essentially ignored secondary schools, focusing instead on the elementary grades” (p.8). This is affirmed by Nelson (2007) concluding “evidence that the traditional high school is long overdue for reform has been mounting for decades” (p.1). In fact, the term senioritis can be found in

some dictionaries with a posting in the 1950's. Secondary school reform, particularly in the senior year, is a significant problem faced by 21st century school leaders. Others share this concern, as "Leaders across all fields worry that even students who do complete high school are not adequately prepared for higher education or work success" (Nelson, 2007, p.1). The term senioritis tends to lead one to accept, condone, or at least tolerate the malady as part of the high school process. The senior year enigma may be a more apt description of the current state of affairs during the senior year of high school. Sizer (2002) and Kirst (2001) address this mystery and puzzle of the senior year as a predominantly American cultural experience and phenomenon. Sizer describes the senior year experience as a year of transitions, rites of passage, conflicting expectations, daunting choices, and, for most, stressful anticipation of the future.

The New Jersey High School Redesign Committee, in 2008, published a rationale for high school redesign through NJ STEPS: Redesigning Education in New Jersey for the 21st Century entitled *The Case for High School Reform* (NJDOE, 2008b). Currently, New Jersey graduation requirements allow boards of education to select between two options or adopt both to offer more flexibility in content selection and avenues to meet the requirements particularly in the senior year (NJDOE, 2008a). Most changes and adjustments to high school graduation requirements have centered on total credit hours, required courses, and number of hours needed in those courses. Boards of education have adjusted with these state level mandates as they have been developed. However, the most significant change to graduation requirements has been the development of what is commonly known as *option two*. The development of option two has also led to the use of the term *option one*, which can be simply explained as the traditional route to the 110-credit high school graduation requirement. N.J.A.C. 6A: 8-5.1(a)1ii, generally known as option two, allows local boards of education to meet the 110 credit requirement, or their own

credit requirements, through an alternative program of studies that meet the Core Curriculum Content Standards for promotion and graduation (NJDOE, 2008a). Option two provides an alternative to the traditional high school course of study allowing for a program of theme-based options, interdisciplinary studies, magnet programs, exchange programs, distance learning, internships, community service, co-curricular and extra curricular activities, college courses, and other potential programs (NJDOE, 2008a). This forward thinking alternative to the traditional route to graduation is of particular significance to students in their senior year as it allows for flexibility, creativity, and exploration of post-secondary plans. Boards of education at one time were required to offer either option one or option two. Now, boards of education are allowed to offer both programs to fulfill their graduation requirements, or a combination of the two, affording even more flexibility in program choices toward a high school diploma (NJDOE, 2008a). In addition, culminating projects, capstone activities, and senior seminars are increasingly being implemented to make the senior year more meaningful and engage students throughout the year (Chmelynski, 2004; D'Andrea, 2005; Dreis & Rehage, 2006; National Commission, 2001b).

However, these initiatives are not extensively adopted. Credit requirements, Carnegie units, academic rigor, financial limitations, location, travel, professional development, and other barriers prevent extensive use of these options particularly in suburban districts. The New Jersey High School Redesign Committee has outlined a proposal calling for a change in the current graduation requirements suggesting five recommendations for high school redesign focusing on high school, college, and workplace alignment (NJDOE, 2008b). These recommendations are detailed in chapter two and are essential for all high school students; however, they hold particular significance for high school seniors.

Profile of the High School District

The demographic profile of the communities in the Lincoln Regional High School District involves the compilation of data from five towns. The district serves students in five northwestern New Jersey suburban communities, covering an area just under 100 square miles, and has a population of approximately 37,000 in the 2000 census. Established in 1958, the district operates two high schools, Truman High School and Woodrow High School, in a 9-12 system, accepting students from the five communities. Population data from the 2000 census reveals communities that are strongly related. The racial composite indicates a 95.9% white community with small African-American and Asian populations and a slightly greater number of Hispanic/Latino inhabitants. Education levels are high for all five communities, ranging from a low of 48.3% of the residents in one community having bachelors and advanced degrees, to a high of 71.3% of residents in another community having bachelors and advanced degrees. English is proficiently spoken in 98% of the households. Employment data reveals communities where 80% of those employed are in the private/salaried worker sector with very low unemployment figures, high incomes, and high home values.

The academic profile reveals a district with a wide range of curriculum offerings in a variety of disciplines. Students of all abilities can pursue a rich number of options in the arts, technology, and in the traditional academic areas. Seventeen Advanced Placement courses are offered as well as the International Baccalaureate diploma program, a rigorous internationally recognized college preparatory program (NJDOE, 2008c). Consistently high SAT scores, consistently high AP scores, and a growing number of IB diploma candidates characterize the district (NJDOE, 2008c). Over 90% of graduating seniors attend a four-year or two-year college or university with most attending a four-year post-secondary school (NJDOE, 2008c). With a

graduation rate over 98%, the Lincoln Regional High School District is among the top performing schools in the county as well as the state.

Problem Statement

Current research into the senior year in the Lincoln Regional High School District supports the perception that the senior year, as presently constructed, lacks engagement, lacks meaningfulness relative to future academic and career plans, and suffers from a period of lowered expectations for seniors among students and teachers as the year progresses. Along with the affective domain, quantitative data indicates student absenteeism, tardiness, and class cutting all increase in the senior year. The data supports a strong correlation with a student's year in high school and an increase in absenteeism. The qualitative and quantitative data collected, established that the senior year in the Lincoln Regional High School District, particularly in the second semester, is congruent with similar findings in schools across the nation.

Senioritis, as manifest in the Lincoln Regional High School District, is defined as senior year students demonstrating a lack of engagement with school, the perception that the senior year lacks meaningfulness relative to future academic and career plans, and the senior year suffering from a period of lowered expectations for seniors among students, teachers, and parents as the year progresses. There is also an increase in absenteeism, tardiness, and class cutting among twelfth grade students. The senior year experience, as currently constructed in the Lincoln Regional High School District, similar to other high schools across the country, sustains the concept of senioritis.

Research Questions

Five consistent themes emerged from the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative exploratory research data as primary causes of senioritis in the district. They are:

- The curriculum or graduation options and alternatives available.
- The college admissions and acceptance process.
- The external assessment process.
- The expectations of students and teachers.
- The long-established cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and norms of the senior year in high school and of high school seniors.

These five themes helped develop the following four research questions:

1. To what degree do the curriculum and instructional program influence senioritis?
2. How do the expectations students have for themselves as seniors and for their senior year contribute to senioritis?
3. How do the expectations teachers have for the seniors they teach and for the senior year contribute to senioritis?
4. To what extent do the mental models of cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and norms surrounding the senior year in high school sustain senioritis?

The first three themes relate to the comprehensive curriculum and instructional program including course offerings, graduation requirements, alternatives, and options to standard graduation requirements, internal and external assessments, and post-secondary planning. The last two themes are trends that are separate from the comprehensive curriculum. They address the influence expectations have on motivation and engagement of high school seniors, as well as the impact of mental models on the senior year.

External literature supports these findings as causations to the problem of the high school senior year, senioritis and the senior year enigma. Nancy Sizer (2002) in her book *Crossing the Stage: Redesigning Senior Year* provides an insightful look into the life of high school seniors.

The heart of the book is based on interviews from a diverse group of seniors from schools across the country and from her own observations. Sizer points to many problems of the senior year as currently structured and offers ample suggestions for change and redesign. The problems and causes of those problems discussed by Sizer are consistent with the exploratory research findings. The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001a, 2001b) reported in their summary of findings and final report results consistent with those found at Lincoln Regional High School. The National Commission identified low expectations, poor alignment with college and workplace, lack of motivation, inadequate counseling, ill-timed assessments, and insufficient professional development for teachers as causes of problems in the senior year. The National Commission's report focused on four questions surrounding the topic of the senior year in high school and its effectiveness in post-secondary preparation, work place preparation, and what changes could be made in the existing structure to increase engagement and achievement for all students in the final year of high school. The conclusions of Kirst (2001) support the exploratory research findings principally with what Kirst finds as an overwhelming emphasis on college admissions as the end goal of high school at the expense of preparation for post-secondary education.

Current Context: Exploratory Research Confirming and Clarifying the Problem

Confirming the problem. Qualitative data gathered from focus group discussions along with quantitative data collected point to a problem with the senior year as currently structured in the Lincoln Regional High School. The qualitative data established that the senior year in the district, particularly in the second semester, lacks engagement, meaningfulness, and import relative to current academic pursuits as well as future academic and career plans for twelfth grade students. The quantitative data reveal that student attendance, tardiness rates, and class

cuts show a substantial change (see Figures 1-4). Absenteeism, tardiness, and class cuts all increase in the senior year compared with other years. Final end of year grades show an increase in the senior year (see Figures 5-12). The data suggest that seniors are in school less, arrive late, and cut more classes, yet their grades as measured by the number of A's, B's, C's, D's, and F's may improve. Recurring themes and trends in the qualitative data pointing to the substantial issues of lack of engagement, import, and meaningfulness surrounding the senior year, along with less time in class, are very significant data in relation to this research topic.

Determining the long-term feasibility and viability of the research in the pre-research stage included both quantitative and qualitative data sources. Quantitative data was collected in the following areas: attendance, tardiness, grades, and discipline referrals relating to class cuts (see Figures 1-12). Qualitative data was gathered using focus group methodology. Questions were developed that were open-ended in nature, allowed for follow up questioning, and encouraged discussion among the participants. Focus groups of students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators were used in this exploratory stage of the research. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) point to the usefulness of focus groups at any time during the research process but particularly in the exploratory stage. Inter-rater reliability for the qualitative data was established by using three different raters to also categorize, code, and rate the focus group responses to construct the trends and themes, while the quantitative data was gathered from school databases. Validity of the measures was established through numerous discussions with fellow cohort researchers, advisor, mentor, and colleagues as well as through external literature review.

Clarifying causation. As previously stated, five consistent themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative exploratory research data as primary causes of the

senior year enigma and senioritis in the district leading to the set of research questions. Focus groups of students, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators were formed to investigate the current perceptions of the causes for the problem of the senior year in high school in relation to senioritis and the senior year enigma. The qualitative data gathered from the focus group discussion clarified areas of causation of the problem with the senior year in high school in the Lincoln Regional High School District.

Segmented groups were chosen to allow participants to freely offer their perspective and cultivate a rich exchange among the group on the questions being asked. Morgan (1997) discusses the problems inherent in “mixing categories of participant across authority or status lines, either due to ethical issues or because of the high probability the discussion will be uncomfortable at best and conflict-ridden at worst” (p.37). Three guiding questions were used with the flexibility to ask relevant follow up questions. Focus group data was categorized, coded, and rated by three people, as well as the researcher, to construct trends and themes relative to causation. This process established inter-rater reliability for the qualitative data. Reliability was further established with multiple segmented focus groups resulting in triangulation of the data. Qualitative data collection may look to inter-rater reliability as an instrument to measure reliability. External literature review, along with dialogue among professional educators and colleagues establishing peer consensus, provided validity for the exploratory research findings.

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

Exploratory research clearly established the perception that the senior year in the Lincoln Regional High School District, as presently constructed, lacks engagement, lacks meaningfulness relative to future academic and career plans, and suffers from a period of lowered expectations as

the year progresses. The quantitative data indicates student absenteeism, tardiness, and class cutting increase in the senior year. The data supports a strong correlation with a student's year in high school and an increase in absenteeism. Exploratory research established solid themes of causation related to the problem of the senior year in the Lincoln Regional High School District leading to a set of meaningful and relevant research questions to guide further study. Current research into the senior year in the Lincoln Regional High School District points to similar concerns expressed by groups across the nation. Review of the external literature supports the problem and the possible causations of the problem of senioritis and the senior year enigma in the high school senior year. The senior year experience, as currently constructed in the Lincoln Regional High School District, similar to other high schools across the country, sustains the concept of senioritis.

Teaching and learning, the basis for school improvement, will benefit substantially from further study into this problem of the senior year. Keeping seniors meaningfully engaged throughout their senior year through improved instructional strategies and curriculum, maintaining high expectations and a change in the cultural norms will lead to increased levels of learning and understanding providing for a rich senior year experience.

Operational Definitions

Senioritis. Senioritis, as manifest in the Lincoln Regional High School District, is defined as senior year students demonstrating a lack of engagement with school, a perception that the senior year lacks meaningfulness, a period of lowered expectations for seniors among students, teachers, and parents, and an increase in absenteeism, tardiness, and class cutting among twelfth grade students. The key domains and components of student engagement at the high school level are participation, attitudes, relationships, and commitment to learning (National Research

Council, 2004). The National Research Council (2004) in the report, *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*, defines engagement as “involving both behaviors and emotions” (p.31). The National Research Council’s report identifies the terms effort and attention, as well as enthusiasm, interest, and pride in defining the characteristics of engagement. Active participation, completing work, and taking challenging courses are also discussed as evidence of engagement (National Research Council, 2004). The perception of meaningfulness can be seen through the domain of students’ perception of the senior year’s applicability to future plans and current interests. The sense of “commitment or investment in one’s education” (Educational Engagement, 2007, p.1) is an indicator of meaningfulness and purpose.

Curriculum and instruction. The literature suggests myriad definitions for curriculum and instruction. For the purpose of this study, curriculum is inclusive of all the courses offered, instructional strategies in use, assessment practices, structures in place, and experiences offered for students. Wiggins and McTighe (2008) present a 21st century model for a high school curriculum that will be used to guide the research.

The mission of high school is not to cover content, but rather to help learners become thoughtful about, and productive with, content. It's not to help students get good at school, but rather to prepare them for the world beyond school—to enable them to apply what they have learned to issues and problems they will face in the future. The entire high school curriculum—course syllabi, instruction, and especially assessment—must reflect this central mission, which we call *learning for understanding*. Learning for understanding requires that curriculum and instruction address three different but interrelated academic goals: helping students (1) *acquire* important information and

skills, (2) *make meaning* of that content, and (3) effectively *transfer* their learning to new situations both within school and beyond it. (p.36)

Expectations. The conveyance of what teachers and students anticipate will most likely happen in the senior year concerning instruction and learning.

Teacher expectations. Teachers frame the year with certain expectations creating an environment that can promote high achievement and greater academic performance from students or an environment that supports lower levels of achievement and minimal academic performance from students.

Student expectations. Students frame the year with certain expectations that influence the motivation and engagement students have with school and academic work.

Cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and norms. The mental models of societal traditions, customs, and mores shape the attitudes, stereotypes, and norms that support the structures, patterns, and events of the high school senior year.

Academic ability grouping. The Lincoln Regional High School program of studies offers multiple levels of difficulty in various courses. These levels or groups place students in classes that are appropriately challenging for students of varying ability. The following academic ability grouping identifiers are used throughout the research and are presented here in ascending order based on level of difficulty and rigor. These labels are defined in the program of studies guide for the district and summarized below.

Academic. Academic courses are standard college preparatory courses. Students will be expected to cover much of the same subject matter as required in advanced. The depth will be less complex and the pace adapted appropriately to meet the ability levels of the students. Some of the more complex content will be excluded.

Advanced. Courses designated as advanced are intended to provide a course of study and standards for achievement that would provide the college bound student with extensive preparation and background in a given field of study. Advanced courses require students to refine their study skills, research techniques, and develop their abilities for independent and creative solutions to complex problems or assignments.

Honors. Honors courses are designed to challenge highly motivated and academically skilled students. These courses often include an in-depth study of a particular subject accompanied by rigorous demands upon students in terms of study skills, homework, and independent projects. Instructional strategies for honors courses simulate the approaches utilized in the most competitive colleges and universities.

Advanced Placement (AP). Advanced placement courses, similar to honors courses, are designed to challenge highly motivated and academically skilled students. These courses follow the curriculum recommended by the College Entrance Examination Board. Students who enroll in these courses may take the advanced placement test for that course offered by Educational Testing Service. Students who take advanced placement tests may be awarded credit or advanced placement by the college they attend.

International Baccalaureate (IB). International Baccalaureate courses similar, to honors courses, are designed to challenge highly motivated and academically skilled students. These courses follow the IB curriculum and are designed to prepare students for the International Baccalaureate examination. They are part of a larger, more comprehensive program, The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, a rigorous pre-university course of study that meets the needs of the highly motivated secondary school student.

Program of studies guide. The program of studies guide details all the course offerings and academic requirements of the Lincoln Regional High School District and is designed to assist parents and students in the planning of their four year educational program.

Curriculum guides. These guides are the written curriculums for specific subject disciplines detailing course descriptions, course objectives, competencies, essential skills, and assessment practices. The curriculum guides include suggested instructional strategies, activities, and course materials.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Researching the high school senior year, the problem of senioritis and the senior year enigma is centered on a review of literature that best informs the research questions. High school reform in the areas of curriculum and instruction, as well as the related topics of assessment and structures, is receiving increased attention as educational leaders struggle to find solutions to the problem of what many view as a year of lost opportunity. Inadequate preparation for and lack of alignment with post-secondary experiences in college or in the workplace along with the lack of academic rigor, lack of motivation, lack of engagement, and low expectations are all seen as problems with the high school senior year. Scholarship is emerging in this field of study as secondary school reform efforts move to the forefront following decades of successful school improvement initiatives in the lower grades. Many point to a lack of student engagement with school as a primary problem with the senior year. This study places the focus on expectations. The research in the field of student expectations and teacher expectations is explored to establish the theoretical base of this important component to student achievement, motivation, and engagement. Literature on the culture of the senior year reveals the entrenched nature of the problem and establishes a framework for the understanding of teenage culture in our high schools. Surveying the research on alternative senior year initiatives provides a base of knowledge of the proposed and practiced actions developed as alternatives to the current structures. Establishing the national and state context begins the review, properly framing the problem as a resolute appeal for action to address a problem of significance for educational leaders and all those concerned with providing high school seniors with a rich educational experience.

The National Focus: High School and the Senior Year

High school seniors, the senior year in high school, and high school reform have received increased attention by educational leaders and national leaders since the publication of the 1983 Nation at Risk report (Viadero, 2001a, 2001b). More recently, in June of 2000, the National Commission on the High School Senior Year was formed to study the final year of high school and to propose approaches for improvement (National Commission, 2001a, 2001b). Two reports were issued by the commission: *The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year: Finding a Better Way Summary of Findings* (National Commission, 2001a), followed by *Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind: Final Report, National Commission on the High School Senior Year* (National Commission, 2001b). The National Governors Association, in a joint effort with Achieve Incorporated, published in 2005 *An Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools*. This agenda, released on the eve of the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools, outlined recommended actions to begin the transformation of high schools into 21st century learning environments (National Governors Association [NGA], 2005). *Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America's High Schools*, a joint report authored by the National Governors Association (2008) and other national associations of state education policymakers followed the 2005 report, again bringing high school reform to the national agenda. These two reports emphasize the need for the development of a comprehensive plan to ensure that high school graduates are prepared for post-secondary education and work (NGA, 2005, 2008).

The initial report of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year, issued in January of 2001, outlines the commission's major findings while making no recommendations. Problems identified in the report present difficult barriers to the successful transition of seniors into the world of work, college, and adulthood. These barriers are identified as "shifting

economies, low expectations, poor alignment, lack of motivation, inadequate counseling, ill-timed assessments, and insufficient professional development for teachers” (National Commission, 2001a, p.9). Reporting on the trends most closely related to senioritis, the National Commission maintains:

For a variety of reasons, student motivation drops in the senior year. Short of a miserable failure in the senior year, practically every college-bound student knows that what they have accomplished through Grade 11 will largely determine whether or not they attend college, and if so, which college. As a result, serious preparation for college ends at grade 11. The focus switches to the college admissions processes. (p. 6)

Stanford University Professor Michael W. Kirst (2001) in *Overcoming the High School Senior Slump: New Education Policies*, a paper prepared for the National Commission on the High School Senior Year, postulates that there are “systemic incentives for senior slump” (p.11). Kirst describes a senior year occupied by two overarching goals for senior students, graduating on time and being admitted into college. Kirst points to the disconnect between secondary education and post-secondary education as supporting what Kirst calls the senior slump and, therefore, senioritis. From the perspective that high schools treat senior year as the terminal educational experience, Kirst states, “senior slump appears to be the rational response of high school seniors to an educational system in which no one claims the academic content of the senior year as a basis for further education” (p.13). Eric Hoover (2003) writing for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* finds “Educators on both sides of the [college] admissions process agree that the malady is becoming more prevalent....The rise of early decision, some guidance counselors say, speeds the onset of the senior slump”(p.2). Leon Botstein (1997) in his provocative book *Jefferson’s Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture* finds:

The inadequacies of high school ...have only deepened the role of high school as merely a transitional phase in education....In better high schools, an inordinate amount of time and psychological energy are spent on thinking about college, applying to college, and preparation for it. (p. 89)

Four questions surrounding the topic of the senior year in high school organized the National Commission's (2001a) initial work with a particular focus on the changes that could be made in the existing structure of secondary education "to increase achievement for all students at the end of their senior year" (p.1). Other questions focused the National Commission's work on current structures and the effectiveness of those structures in post-secondary preparation, work place preparation, and the disconnect between secondary schools and post-secondary schools (National Commission, 2001a).

The final report, issued in October of 2001 by the National Commission on the High School Senior, year details the work of the National Commission and the National Commission's charge to "closely examine students' experiences in their last year of high school and recommend ways to improve them" (National Commission, 2001b, p.9). The National Commission proposes three recommendations, detailed later in this review, labeled the Triple-A Program intended to improve alignment of secondary schools with post-secondary schools, raise achievement for all high school students, and provide more alternatives for students in their final year of high school (National Commission, 2001b). Nancy Sizer (2002) followed her service on the National Commission with the instructive publication *Crossing the Stage: Redesigning Senior Year*. Sizer states, "America's high school seniors are in such trouble that a national commission was created to analyze the problems inherent in the senior year and come up with solutions" (p. xvii). Sizer, using qualitative data from interviews with students, educators, and

parents, concludes the senior year in high school must be redesigned to stave off senioritis and make the senior year more than a holding pattern for what is to come next.

High School Reform: Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, and Structures

Secondary school reform is receiving increased attention from educational leaders across the nation. Changes in the senior year are often incremental, not systemic, and accomplished in isolation from whole school reform (NGA, 2005; Wise, 2007). However, systemic and incremental high school reform will influence the senior year, and it is difficult to separate one from the other. “Reclaiming the senior year of high school as a time for serious academic work will require efforts by a large cast of institutions and policymakers”(Kirst 2001, p.21). The National High School Alliance (2005), in its paper *A Call to Action Transforming High School for All Youth*, emphasizes the need to provide all stakeholders, national, state, district, school, and community, engaged in high school reform, with a common framework and underscores “that deep and lasting change requires a systemic approach” (p.3).

Kirst (2001) places the primary causes of the problem with the senior year on what he calls several “disjunctures between K-12 and post-secondary education systems” (p.8). Kirst refers to a system of standardized assessments that typically end with eleventh grade, a college admissions process that places little emphasis on the senior year, a lack of coherence between high school curriculum and college level sequencing, contradictory assessments between college placement tests and K-12 assessments, a universal emphasis on access and admission to college with minimal attention to academic preparation, as the causes of much of the rationale behind senioritis. Hammond (2008) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* argues that in schools where advanced placement testing is firmly entrenched “college admission is the bottom line in much

of the high school experience” (p.3). Hammond further asserts that high schools have transformed into places for simply amassing credentials for admission into college.

High school graduates that are not college-bound and plan on entering the workforce need many of the same skills of those planning to pursue post-secondary education, “Consequently, *all* students—those attending a four-year college, those planning to earn a two year degree or get some post-secondary experience, and those seeking to enter the job market right away—need to have comparable preparation in high school” (NGA, 2005, p.3). *The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year: Finding a Better Way Summary of Findings* (National Commission, 2001a) supports many of the same causes for senioritis. The National Commission’s report summarizes:

Short of a miserable failure, practically every college-bound senior knows that what they have accomplished through Grade 11 will largely determine whether or not they attend college....As a result, serious preparation for college ends at Grade 11. The focus switches to college admissions processes. (p.6)

Poor curriculum alignment between K-12 and post-secondary education, ill-timed assessments, and lack of intrinsic motivation and excitement for learning are outlined in the report as additional causes for a senior year cast, by the National Commission, as a lost opportunity. Sizer’s (2002) cultural imperatives, discussed later in this chapter, places the cause of senioritis primarily in the entrenched cultural attitudes and the sustaining source of the problem, the typical American high school model and the senior year curriculum.

Anne Nelson (2007), an educational studies writer, explicates the five key components of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s high school reform proposal. The proposal calls for high school reform through changes in five areas: assessment,

personalized learning, flexible use of time and structure, new professional development models, and business and community engagement (Nelson, 2007). Nelson summarizes, “the movement toward reform of the century-old high school model is gaining momentum, with nearly all interested parties—students, teachers, administrators, colleges, businesses, and state and national governments and agencies—supporting or implementing elements of change” (p.2). Ewing (2007) examines the proposals outlined by Nelson in detail. Ewing emphasizes the need to introduce multiple assessment strategies into the high school curriculum to better prepare high school seniors for post-secondary education and work place transition and encourages educators to incorporate assessments of skills “that are increasingly considered essential by employers as well as post-secondary educators” (p.4). Portfolios, research projects, oral arguments, applied projects, demonstrations, senior projects, exhibitions, and other alternatives are being urged to better prepare high school graduates and keep them engaged in the senior year (Ewing, 2007). Eaton and Nelson (2007) build momentum for structural flexibility in high schools that:

Allows students to reach their academic goals and ensure future success either in college or when transitioning from high school directly to the workplace. To help students achieve their goals schools can implement alternate graduation requirements, including independent study options, online courses, and internships. (p.1)

Structural flexibility is seen as the key to the success of the other ingredients of high school reform proposed by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Eaton & Nelson, 2007). Particularly the:

flexibility to rearrange work and school schedules to facilitate participation in community-based learning activities, the flexibility to accept work experience in

exchange for course credit, and the flexibility to allow students to use activities they are interested in to keep them engaged are critical. (p.5)

Structural flexibility that allows schools to foster partnerships with the community and business is a strategy that will engage seniors in meaningful alternatives.

Kirst (2001) advocates high school reform that addresses the present disconnect between secondary and post-secondary education. Noting that 70% of high school graduates move directly on to some form of post-secondary education, Kirst recommends policies for reclaiming the senior year as a time for serious academic work. Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) contend, “A major problem is that students’ and teachers’ poor knowledge of college policies makes good college preparation difficult” (p. 34). Preparation for post-secondary education should be the cornerstone of the senior year. *Accelerating the Agenda: Actions to Improve America’s High Schools* proposes similar recommendations, noting rigorous academics that propel students into post-secondary schooling and then into a career should be embraced by high schools (NGA, 2008). The gap between post-secondary preparation and workplace preparation needs to be narrowed and a college preparatory curriculum needs to be the standard. Anne Lewis (2004) in her commentary for *Phi Delta Kappan* comments on the American Diploma Project (2004) report *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. Lewis finds that the skills high school graduates should have for success whether in college or the workplace are synonymous. Kirst (2001) remarks, “Students should understand that access to higher education, college admission, is only one aspect of their senior year, not the sole goal” (p. 21). Coursework should center on preparation for college placement exams, college level content, and prepare senior year students for the requirements they will face in their first year of college (Kirst, 2001). To avoid having to take remedial courses in college, Kirst proposes that senior

year math and writing courses be emphasized. Kirst recommends that dual enrollment programs, allowing students to take college courses for high school credit, be available for all students in their senior year. College admissions policies and placement priorities need to be aligned with the K-12 assessments and standards with explicit standards for senior year performance, course load, and academic credit and freshman placement exams should be shared with high schools as well as the remediation rates for students in their first year of college (Kirst, 2001). Barton (2007) advocates for the inclusion of employable skills noting attendance, timeliness, work ethic, decision making, and taking individual responsibility for learning among the workplace skills needed. “We can prepare students for both college *and* work....Arrangements that combine school and work (such as internships, apprenticeships, and cooperative education programs)...can provide the preparation and work experience employers want” (p.27).

The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b), with its Triple-A program for improving the senior year, shares similar recommendations:

The nation needs to take the next step in its long-term educational evolution. It is time to move beyond separate systems in which curriculum and assessment systems in K-12 and post-secondary education bear little relationship to each other to a more seamless system in which standards, curriculum, and assessment...are aligned and integrated. (p.23)

Along with improved alignment between secondary and post-secondary education and support for a P-16 system of education, the National Commission further proposes two other recommendations for changes to the senior year in high school. Raising academic achievement for all students by making a college preparatory curriculum the approved course of study for all students is a proposal of the National Commission. The National Commission posits, “High school itself no longer can be viewed as the culmination of anyone’s education” (p. 30). The

final recommendation encourages the development of more alternatives for high school seniors as they bring to a close their high school educational experience:

The Commission calls for moving away from a system in which the senior year is just more of the same to one in which the senior year provides time to explore options and prove knowledge and skills. Ideally, every senior should complete a capstone project, perform an internship, complete a research project, participate in community service, or take college-level courses. (p. 25)

Options for the senior year need to be demanding, challenging, rigorous, and linked with academic coursework and the options should contribute to a successful transition from high school to college or the workplace providing meaningful learning opportunities (National Commission, 2001b). The National Commission (2001b) recommends high schools increase dual enrollment opportunities, provide more Advanced Placement programs, create opportunities for service, and work based learning for credit, make use of distance learning technology, promote senior portfolio exhibits and capstone projects, and investigate flexible scheduling. Authentic assessment of applied skills through senior projects and similar experiences would “provide a vehicle for teaching and testing skills that we know employers value, such as effective self-management, communication, and problem solving” (DiMartino & Castaneda, 2007, p.38).

Sizer (2002) speaks to the need for the high school curriculum to be restructured. However, in lieu of complete high school reform that will take time and resources before full implementation, Sizer recommends high schools move to establish a course of study designated the senior seminar. Conley (2007) also speaks to the need for a senior seminar as one of a number of strategies to meet the challenges of the senior year. The design of the seminar would engage seniors in meaningful topics, focus in depth on key issues of the topic, and create a

college experience in high school helping students navigate the difficult transition of the senior year and avoid the pitfalls associated with senioritis (Conley, 2007; Sizer, 2002). Whole high school reform is advocated by the Washington D.C. based National High School Alliance (2005) in its document *A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth*. The document outlines six core principles that serve as “a framework for guiding the complex process of transforming the traditional, comprehensive high school” (p.3). Similar to the five key components of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development’s high school reform proposal outlined by Nelson (2007), the recommendations of the National Governors Association (2005, 2008), and the recommendations of the American Diploma Project (2004), the six principles form a core structure for high school reform. Emphasizing that high school reform needs to be systemic, include bottom up as well as top down initiatives, and be contextual, the six principles focus on establishing personalized learning communities, strengthening academic engagement, empowering educators, leadership accountability, engaging the community and youth, and an integrated system of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment (National High School Alliance, 2005). The National High School Alliance (2005), analogous with Ewing (2007), the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b), and Sizer (2002) advocates multiple assessment strategies of the skills necessary for post-secondary success in college and the workplace, particularly in the senior year, that includes performance- based portfolios, public exhibitions, capstone projects, and related measures. Alignment of curriculum with the entrance standards of post-secondary education as proposed by Kirst (2001) and Conley (2003) is also supported by the National High School Alliance (2005) and particularly affects education for high school seniors. Conley (2003) supports the alignment

of standards between high schools and colleges stating, “While work related standards are necessary, college related standards will affect more students in the foreseeable future” (p.10).

Grubb and Oakes (2007) question high school reform initiatives that rely heavily on raising standards and increasing rigor resulting in states increasing graduation requirements and adopting exit exams. Arguing in their policy paper, *‘Restoring Value’ to the High School Diploma: The Rhetoric and Practice of Higher Standards*, Grubbs and Oakes (2007) stress the need to consider rigor less in terms of test based and course based rigor, and more in the expressions of rigor as depth of study, sophisticated levels of understanding, and transfer of learning. The standards movement should not sacrifice student interest and curriculum relevance. Grubbs and Oakes (2007) recommend the following:

A more promising approach to reshaping high school involves pathways, structured around a coherent theme, either broadly occupational or non-occupational. Focus on a single theme nurtures multiple concepts of rigor...and it provides students with the benefits of curricular choice and several routes to graduation. (p.2)

Curriculum choice and options providing alternative routes to graduation, particularly for high school seniors, are part of the extensive recommendations for high school reform being proposed in New Jersey through the New Jersey Department of Education’s (NJDOE, 2008b) *New Jersey High School Redesign* proposal. Along with increased credit requirements, *New Jersey High School Redesign* recommendations include assessment and standards aligned with post-secondary education, personalized learning approaches and learning communities, and the establishment of a P-16 council to create an aligned system of public education (NJDOE, 2008b). Most critical to the senior year is the support for alternative paths to graduation and credit

through independent study, online learning, work-based programs, service learning, dual enrollment, and other options (NJDOE, 2008b).

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2004) publication *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* recommends seven cornerstone strategies and 31 core recommendations for high school reform. Among the core recommendations are strategies particularly focused on the senior year that support those discussed by Conley (2003), Ewing (2007), Kirst (2001), Nelson (2007), Sizer (2002) as well as the National Commission (2001b), NGA (2005, 2008), and the National High School Alliance (2005). Among the core recommendations offered by the NASSP (2004) are strategies to increase the level of academic rigor, making challenging college preparatory classes available to a greater number of students, encouraging project based learning, internships, senior projects, portfolios, dual enrollment, and other learning experiences that expand options for students. Greater collaboration between high school and post-secondary institutions is encouraged, including alignment of high school standards with college admission requirements, sharing of information on success rates of admitted college students, their preparation for post-secondary work, and the effectiveness of the high school curriculum (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2004).

Student and Teacher Expectations in the Senior Year

The conveyance of what teachers and students anticipate will most likely happen in the senior year concerning instruction and learning significantly influences student engagement and exacerbates the problem of senioritis. Teachers and students frame the year with certain expectations, creating an environment of high expectations that promotes achievement and greater academic performance, or an environment of lowered expectations promoting less

achievement and minimal academic performance. From the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001a) study, Miller (2001) observes, “the schools themselves are sending messages that the senior year is a time of low academic expectations” (p.4). Good (1981) summarizes “this differentiating behavior affects and, over time, will shape students’ self concepts, achievement, motivation, and levels of aspiration and...students’ achievement and behavior will conform more closely to teachers expectations” (p.417). Covington (1999) researches the nature of intrinsic motivations for learning as contrasting to the extrinsic motivations of good grades or fear of failure. Covington’s research is significant when analyzing senior year students having low expectations for academic work as many seniors point to the extrinsic reward of the college acceptance as the primary motivator in the early months of the senior year. Boesel (2001), in his exploratory paper on student disaffection with high school, speaks of the emphasis on college planning as becoming increasingly more important to high school students in their senior year. Data from 1976 to 1999, gathered from the Monitoring the Future survey, show seniors in high school mention planning to graduate from college at an increasing rate compared to other elements of status in their school (Boesel, 2001). Catsambis (2002) analyzed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 for her research into parental involvement in the education of high school seniors. Parental expectations of high school students shift during the senior year and become focused on the high expectations parents have for their children’s preparation for college admission (Catsambis, 2002).

Covington (1999) in his study explores intrinsic motivators that encourage higher expectations for achievement and engagement. Intrinsic valuing versus extrinsic rewards is researched in Covington’s paper on subject matter appreciation and nurturing. Covington’s research examines obstacles in the way of valuing learning, reasons for achieving, the nature of

rewards, and caring about learning, concepts vital to the examination of the senior year in high school. Three obstacles that serve as impediments to personal engagement are explained in Covington's study: the nature of rewards, the scarcity of rewards, and the reasons for achieving. Covington posits that grades are the ultimate extrinsic reward and as asserted by Condry & Chambers (1978) in Covington (1999) are "essentially unrelated to the act of learning itself" (p. 129). Covington explains:

For this reason, learning is in danger of becoming a means to an end, that is, for the acquisition of rewards per se, not an end in itself, so that when rewards are no longer offered or available learning is likely to wane, to say nothing for subject matter appreciation. (p.129)

This conclusion is essential to the problem of the senior year, as the extrinsic rewards are achieved very early on in the senior year. College applications and transcripts are finalized, standardized test have been completed, and the overall grade point average is solidified. Boesel's (2001) research data support the conclusion that seniors in high school are "more likely to think that their own education and the things they are learning are inadequate" (p.6). Replacing the extrinsic reward with a focus on the "process of learning itself, which may be attended by curiosity, personal creativity and an appreciation for what one is learning" (Covington, 1999, p. 129) is very difficult after years of valuing extrinsic motivators. Covington's (1999) research has limits to its generalizability. Covington uses high achieving college students in his research; however, the study does "raise and illustrate motivational issues that may have broader application across the grade levels and for a variety of student groups" (p.128).

McCarthy and Kuh (2006) in their analysis of student engagement data from the 2006 High School Survey on Student Engagement conclude with the declaration “to get more, we must expect more—from teachers, communities, and especially students” (p.4). McCarthy and Kuh find:

Students who devote more time and energy to various educationally purposeful activities in high school get better grades, are more satisfied, and are more likely to graduate and go on to college. (p.1)

Particular emphasis in the analysis is placed on the senior year, as McCarthy and Kuh refer to the notion that the senior year is viewed as an educational wasteland. Research into the function of motivation, self-confidence, and expectations on academic achievement among high school students has led Tavani and Losh (2003) to find in their results that the level of students’ expectations are significantly correlated with motivation. Students’ that have an increased level of motivation also tend to have an increased level of expectation for academic success (Tavani & Losh, 2003). The research was based on archived surveys of 4,012 freshman students at a large university who participated in a Freshman Survey Instrument developed by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. Tavani and Losh find, among other factors that serve as predictors of academic success, that “Expectations are the strongest predictors of students’ performance in school.... [And] motivation levels are also strong predictors of student performance (p.147). Thompson and Thornton (2002) in their paper on the difficult transition from the high school classroom to the college classroom specifically note that grades are the extrinsic motivation for academic success in high school. Thompson and Thornton further claim that in the transition to college this is problematic. Expectations and motivation as predictors of academic performance, as determined by Tavani and Losh (2003), are highly correlated;

therefore, as Thompson and Thornton (2002) conclude, students “need to come to class to learn, because learning is intrinsically motivating, rewarding, exciting, and of real benefit to the student” (p.786).

Expectations and levels of engagement are heightened when students have a sense of ownership for their work (Newman, 1989). Newman (1989) discusses student ownership of their work as an ingredient to engagement and higher expectations. Students need to “have some influence on the conception, execution, and evaluation of the work itself” (p.35). Bartholomew (2008) in her paper on motivational paradigms reasons that “building lessons around students’ interests, talents, and personal goals can yield rapt attention....And offering students choices about their work will create a sense of ownership” (p.56). Miller, DeBacker, and Greene (2000) researched student valuing of school tasks and conclude that intrinsic valuing is most likely to occur when school work is “instrumental to personally valued future goals”(p. 258). Legault, Green-Demers, and Pelletier (2006) in their research on academic motivation found “when an undertaking is valued, it is internalized and thus executed out of willingness and adopted with a sense of volition” (p. 569). Students develop ownership when they study topics and construct knowledge in subject matter they consider important (Newman, 1989). Fallis and Opotow (2003) researched a similar concept in their study of class cutting and found creating a school climate that increases opportunities for student voice and engagement gives students a sense of ownership over their education maintaining higher expectations for the potential outcomes. Advocating for increased opportunities for students to participate in school decisions Fallis & Opotow (2003) summarize “when students lack the opportunity to participate, offer their perspective, and have it acted upon, they may find themselves faced with institutional conditions they find untenable” (p.116). Conner (2007) supports this claim in her research on student

engagement citing structure, autonomy, and involvement as critical contextual components of student expectations and engagement. According to Connor (2007), self-determination theory:

contends that students will become engaged when they are in environments that challenge them with high expectations (structure), that provide them with opportunities to align their behavior their values and or interests (autonomy support), and that allow for meaningful caring relationships to develop with instructors (involvement). (p.8)

The American High School Senior: Cultural Perspective, Stereotypes, and Norms

Thomas Hines (2008) in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* chronicles the history of American teenagers as they adapt over the years to the changing American landscape. Hines succinctly makes the claim “without high school, there are no teenagers” (p.139). As a society, we have inextricably tied the mysterious teenage years with the institution of high school. The cultural traditions, stereotypes, and norms of the teen years are part of the “invention of high school” (p.138). Hines asserts, “high school is the threshold through which every young American must pass....It brings young people together, providing a fertile ground for the development of youth culture” (p.139).

Sizer (2002) defines the youth culture in the senior year of high school as a year “filled with cultural imperatives” (p. xx). Sizer summarizes these imperatives as a year full of transitions and rites of passage. Seniors expect school to be easy yet it is a daunting job. Seniors expect to be honored; it is a year to cement friendships, yet seniors anticipate great changes to come. The glorious senior year trumps all personal attributes and circumstances, yet seniors are living in the past, present, and future all at once and the culture demands these imperatives all be handled effortlessly (Sizer, 2002). Kirst (2001) uses the phrase “senior slump” to characterize the senior year in high school and asserts it has become part of American culture, and further

claims the senior slump is uniquely American, not a universal phenomenon. Michelle Cahill (as cited in Viadero, 2001a), a senior program officer of the Carnegie Corporation, which is active in the restructuring of high schools, observes that “In many places, high school is a cultural icon invested with a lot of other meanings....People have images of high school that really need to be questioned as to whether those are really meeting the goals that young people have for themselves” (p.3).

Schneider and Stevenson (1999) in *The Ambitious Generation* discuss the lack of alignment high schools have with the ambitions of teens. Using case studies and data the authors present a strong argument that America’s youth are actually very ambitious and goal oriented, but schools, educators, and others in the community are not giving them proper guidance to channel these motivations (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b) in its final report supports Schneider and Stevenson and the assertion that the ambitions of high school teens are not properly guided. The National Commission (2001b) writes:

In communities across the country, parents argue that their children need to “take some time off,” “relax before they enter adulthood,” or “enjoy the end of adolescence.”...In fairness to students and their parents, many high school faculty and administrators share these same attitudes. (p.31)

Evidence of the high ambitions and goals of high school students can be found in the 2008-2009 *State of Our Nation’s Youth* annual survey sponsored by the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans. Conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates Incorporated, a leading research firm, random samples of students from across the country were surveyed revealing an interesting profile of high school students (Horatio Alger Associates, 2008). The

survey finds high school students that are “confident, ambitious, and optimistic” (p.2). The survey reveals that 70% of high school students plan to attend a four-year college or university, while 23% state they are planning to attend either a two-year college, community college, or a technical school (Horatio Alger Association, 2008). Only 4% say they have no plans for post-secondary education, and just 3% are undecided (Horatio Alger Association, 2008). The ambitions of high school students are made clear as 93% of those surveyed report the intent to continue their education beyond high school (Horatio Alger Association, 2008). Preparation for post-secondary education in the final year of high school, maintaining academic rigor, and avoiding the senior slump associated with senioritis needs to be addressed if high school seniors across the country want to achieve their goals. Career choices also point to the importance of higher education as “nearly all their top choices for future careers require several years of college or professional schooling” (p.36). Comparable data is provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2009) in their study of the enrollment in post-secondary schools by those that complete high school. The National Center for Education Statistics found that close to 70% of graduating high school seniors immediately enrolled in college, suggesting the perceived value of a college education. High school seniors in 2004 took more high-level courses in their senior year than in previous years and their participation in a variety of extracurricular activities remained fairly constant from 1972 to 2004 with athletic participation leading the way with a participation rate of 44% in 2004 (Ingels, Dalton, & LoGerfo, 2008). The ambitions and expectations that high school seniors have for post-secondary schooling do not translate into timely success or completion of degree programs. Statistics show that of the students that enter four-year colleges only 35% earn a degree in four years and only 56% graduated in six years (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Whitmore, 2006 in Conley, 2007). Alarming, 43% of students

attending public two-year colleges and 29% of those attending public four-year colleges are required to enroll in remedial courses (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Whitmore, 2006 in Conley, 2007). Furthermore, as determined in a survey of 688 students enrolled in remedial courses by the authors of *Diploma to Nowhere* “was that even the most motivated high school students find themselves in remedial courses.... Eighty percent said that they would have worked harder if their high school had set higher expectations” (cited in Perkins-Gough, 2008, p.88-89). Levine (2007) argues high schools need to respond to the sentiment expressed by almost 40% of recent graduates reporting a lack of preparation for post-secondary work in a poll conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates in 2005 “that if they could do high school over again, they would work harder and take more challenging courses” (Levine, p.17). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (as cited in NASSP, 2004) in *Breaking Ranks* I warns the entrenched cultural attitudes surrounding high school are an impediment to change and reform; “The rituals of high school, whatever their shortcomings, appeal to many people who suspect that substantial reform would undo the essence of teenhood” (NASSP, 2004, p. xvii).

Alternative Initiatives for the Senior Year

High schools are responding to the clarion call of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b) with innovative alternatives to educating high school seniors to combat senioritis. “From more rigorous courses during the twelfth grade to individual projects and internships, school districts across the country are taking a variety of steps for the purpose of keeping seniors engaged in learning during the senior year of high school” (Chmelynski, 2004, p.2). The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b) includes in its final report an appendix of model programs that support the goals of the commission and its recommendations for changes to the senior year of high school. Programs that improve

alignment between secondary and post-secondary education, improve achievement, and provide alternatives for high school seniors are briefly discussed by the National Commission. Examples from the National Commission include Project Write, an initiative to have college instructors work with high schools to prepare students for college writing, the Buhler High School senior project that includes a reflective portfolio along with a semester long research project, and the Maryville High School Senior Project. The Maryville High School Senior Project has three programs: senior inquiry, senior transition, and senior independent project, as part of their strategy to offer alternative programs in the senior year (National Commission, 2001b).

D'Andrea (2005) in *Reclaiming Senior Year* highlights the need to keep “nurturing the whole child right up to graduation” (p.3). D'Andrea speaks of the need to continue to stimulate the mind, body, and spirit of high school seniors by creating opportunities for alternative academic challenges, internships, leadership programs, and community service. The notable New Trier High School senior leadership program provides opportunities for seniors to assist in the classroom and rather than “strategizing how [New Trier High School] might prod seniors through a ‘status quo’ senior year [New Trier High School] decided to view ...seniors as a source of leadership who could enhance how...teachers deliver instruction” (Dreis, & Rehage, 2006, p.6). Gutekanst (2003) concludes his case study of senior exhibition projects asserting that:

The findings in this case study clearly suggest that participation in a Senior Exhibition Program engages high school students in their learning and leads to personal growth and fulfillment. The research also shows that the senior year in high school is a critical year for the students to experience a significant learning experience, one that requires them to assume more, not less, responsibility for their learning. (p. 208)

D'Andrea (2005) provides examples of providing seniors with more responsibility from Monsignor Donovan High School. Job shadowing professionals, independent study, students as teaching assistants, and community service opportunities as alternative learning experiences are successful programs in the effort to reclaim the senior year (D'Andrea, 2005). Dreis and Rehage (2006) commenting on the responses collected from students and teachers involved in the New Trier's Senior Instructional Leadership Corps proclaim, "The net result is students, in the capstone year of their high school experience, who are fully engaged.... 'senioritis' met its match" (p.9).

Egelson, Harman, and Bond (2002) researched the outcomes of senior project programs established in selected North Carolina high schools. Senior projects have been supported by the Southeastern Region Vision for Education (SERVE), a university based research center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and in numerous secondary schools across the Southeast since 1994 "when district and secondary educators requested [SERVE's] assistance in creating a high school experience that was more rigorous, real world and motivating for all students" (Egelson, Harman, & Bond, 2002, p.5). The senior project is describe as a culminating assessment for twelfth grade students consisting of writing research papers, developing related portfolios and products, and presenting their work to a panel for review. The design is intended to assuage senioritis and provide students an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned, apply skills, and gain self-confidence for the transition out of high school and into post-secondary education or the workplace (Egelson, Harman, & Bond, 2002).

Egelson, Harman, and Bond (2002) selected four senior project schools and four similar non-senior project schools based on a set of demographic and academic criteria. Their research focused on four questions comparing senior project schools with control schools. The questions

centered on post-secondary and workplace preparation, instructional and assessment methods, skill development, and academic and formative experiences in senior project and non-senior project schools (Egelson, Harman, & Bond, 2002). Data was gathered, primarily through surveys and focus group methodology, from teachers, administrators, twelfth grade students, and graduates. The results of the research indicate that, though there are many similarities in the educational program and experience for high school seniors at both project and non-project high schools, there are a few relevant differences (Egelson, Harman, & Bond, 2002). Egelson, Harman, and Bond found the amount of project-based instruction and performance-based assessment is significantly greater in the senior project schools. Students were more likely to be engaged in some real world experience, volunteer activities, additional instruction outside of school, among other similar activities. Alternative assessment measures were more likely to be used in senior project schools, such as portfolios, rubrics, projects, and journals and students in senior project schools reported “enjoying and getting more out of classes that were performance-based” (p.23). Egelson, Harman, and Bond conclude:

Ultimately it is reasonable to conclude that Senior Project imparts important knowledge and formative experiences to high school seniors. And because it is required...Senior Project ensures that all students have the opportunity to do research, synthesize findings in writing, engage in applied learning, and practice public speaking—opportunities that in many schools are available only to the “best and brightest”....The real value of Senior Project is not likely to be realized until students are out of high school and called upon to use their senior Project-related knowledge and skills in a real-world setting, such as their workplace or an institution of higher learning. (p.24)

The second semester of the high school senior year was seen as an opportunity by

Lehigh University to begin the transition into post-secondary education for students admitted into the university (Bishop & White, 2007). Examining ways to improve college retention rates, Lehigh University, as well as other universities have established freshman transition programs however, finding time in busy college freshman schedules for transition programs has been problematic (Bishop & White, 2007). Responding to the report of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b), Lehigh University looked to the second semester of the senior year in high school as an opportunity to “use that time to link students with post-secondary studies and begin setting their expectations for the academic rigors and social expectations of college life *prior* to matriculation” (Bishop & White, 2007, p.359). Lehigh’s Clipper Project program offers online college level courses to pre-matriculated high school seniors to facilitate the transition process and Bishop and White (2007) researched the effectiveness of this program in successfully transitioning high school seniors to their first year in college. Similarly, Ohio State University and two high schools conducted a program designed to align writing expectations of seniors in the two high schools with the standards expected of freshman at the university (Acker & Halasek, 2008). The goal of this program, labeled the ePortfolio Project, was to improve the student participants understanding of the expectations for writing that was held by the college faculty (Acker & Halasek, 2008).

Dual enrollment programs differ from the Lehigh University Clipper Project and the Ohio State University ePortfolio Project; however, all intend to address the lack of preparation for college work among high school seniors. Dual enrollment particularly attempts to address the need for more rigor and sustaining serious study in the senior year in high school. Dual enrollment allows high school seniors to enroll in college courses as part of their regular high school academic program and earn, simultaneously, high school credit as well as college credit.

Bailey, Hughes, and Karp (2002) reviewed dual enrollment programs across the United States. Establishing a closer link between secondary and post-secondary institutions, exposing high school students to college level coursework, preparing secondary students for the transition to college, and increasing curricular choices are some of the objectives of dual enrollment programs (Bailey, Hughes, & Karp, 2002). Dual enrollment is also “seen as a way to encourage students who might otherwise ‘slack off’ to engage in demanding coursework during the final year of high school” (p.9). Many dual enrollment programs are restricted to high achieving students; however, offering academically challenging and engaging courses to all students, including those that are under achieving, is seen as a way to raise expectations and motivate students in their final year of high school whether they are bound for college, technical schools, or the workplace (Bailey et al., 2002).

Though Bishop and White’s (2007) research is primarily designed to determine the effectiveness of post-secondary transitions of Clipper Project participants, it supports the study of the high school senior year: first, by its investigation into the rationale of instituting a program for second semester seniors, and secondly, by its acceptance that the second semester of the senior year is a time where high school seniors, having already been accepted into college, have little else to do. Using both qualitative and quantitative data sources, Bishop and White gathered data over the course of four years from participants and non-participants in the universities Clipper Project program for incoming freshman students. The research findings concluded that the on-line courses may have been effective in helping students transition to college and this is relevant and useful information for post-secondary institutions however, the researchers did conclude that the data suggests the best time to engage incoming students may not be during their senior year (Bishop & White, 2007). Bishop and White found slightly more than half of the

high school students enrolled in the on-line project classes withdrew from the course. High school seniors that dropped the on-line classes cited the difficulty they had finding time to complete the coursework while completing senior year requirements and “engaging in senior year extra-curricular activities” (p.372). Bishop and White’s findings also indicate that those that continued in the courses did not do well on their final course grade. The teaching faculty cited students not realizing the amount of time they would need to devote to the classes as the reason for the high percentage of withdrawals and low grades (Bishop & White, 2007).

Research by Acker and Halasek (2008) found success for the ePortfolio Project as participants “demonstrated improved writing competency ...The study does point to the benefits of high school and college faculty writing instructors working together to address the complicated transition from high school to college writing (p. 10).

Orr (as cited in Bailey, Hughes & Karp, 2002) points to the scarcity of research available regarding the outcomes of dual enrollment programs; however, there is evidence that students enjoy the programs and find them motivating, useful, and satisfying. The research, however, is still inconclusive. Bailey, Hughes and Karp (2002) report that analysis suggests dual enrollment may better prepare students for college and may motivate students to take more challenging, engaging, and rigorous courses in their senior year. The potential for dual enrollment warrants further commitment to programs based on further assessment and research into the outcomes, targeted students, and design of the programs (Bailey et al., 2002). Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, and Bailey (2008) in their brief for the Community College Research Center summarized a study designed by the center to fill the gap in the research on dual enrollment program effectiveness. The study focused on dual enrollment programs in New York City and Florida with a particular emphasis on the results of the program for students enrolled in career and

technical education programs as well as students in more academically focused programs (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2008). Karp et al. concluded, “The positive association between dual enrollment participation and post-secondary outcomes is particularly strong for groups who struggling in post-secondary education, especially males and low-income students” (p.6). The research recommends expanding dual enrollment programs, sequencing dual enrollment courses, and opening dual enrollment programs to a greater range of students through less restrictive eligibility requirements (Karp, et al., 2008).

Henriksen, Stichter, Stone, and Wagoner (2008) detail the Senior Year Options program developed for students at Northern University High School. Responding to the research findings of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b), a senior year experience was developed around three core principles: a strong curriculum, an advisory program, and a senior options program:

The goal is ...to provide every student with a personalized and meaningful senior year that allows him or her to make a seamless transition from high school to a post-secondary experience....What seniors do in their senior year must be significantly different from what the underclassmen and juniors are doing and must enable seniors to choose not only what to do but also how and when to do it.

(Henriksen et al., 2008, p.36)

Dual enrollment, independent study, senior projects, online classes, internships, senior projects, and volunteer service are all components of the senior year option (Henriksen et al., 2008). Survey results found 75% of the students involved in internships found them to be very beneficial to their transition to post-secondary experiences, 95% of the students involved in dual enrollment courses felt the experience helped prepare them for college, and 90% of the students

involved with senior project studies found the effort beneficial and engaged them in pursuing a field of personal interest (Henriksen, et al., 2008).

The programs discussed in this section attempt to meet the recommendations made by the many national organizations, commissions, projects and educational researchers to address the shortcomings of the senior year in high school. Core principles cited in the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b), as well as recommendations from Kirst (2001), Sizer (2002), the National High School Alliance (2005), the National Governors Association (2005, 2008), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004), and Nelson (2007), Ewing (2007), and Eaton (2007) writing for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development are evident in the programs. Research into the effectiveness of the programs in alleviating the problem of senioritis and the senior slump, as well as addressing the urgent concern for improvement in the educational experience of high school seniors, needs to be continued.

Summary

Reviewing the body of literature surrounding the senior year in high school, high school reform, expectations, the mental models of the high school senior year, and the alternative programs in practice reveals consistent themes. Since the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b) issued its final report, many national and state associations, organizations, commissions, and projects have come forth with recommendations for changes to the senior year in high school and high school reform. These proposals, reforms, and recommendations have been discussed extensively in this literature review.

Causes for the problem of senioritis, the senior slump, and a senior year viewed as a vast wasteland center on themes common to the majority of the research. Lack of preparation for

post-secondary school and the workplace, poor alignment between the high school system and post-secondary institutions, the college admissions process, low expectations, lack of intrinsic motivation, and lack of options and alternatives that would engage students and better prepare them for what is to come next, are consistently represented in the literature review.

Recommendations to address the problem also formulate around common themes. The literature review supports the concept that the gap between workplace preparation and preparation for some form of post-secondary schooling should be narrowed if not closed. High school students, particularly seniors, the research finds, need similar skills to be successful with college transitions as well as workplace transitions. Similarly, the research supports the maintaining of academic rigor in the senior year, academic rigor that is part of all students' education. Expectations for high levels of achievement have to be evenly applied to students of all abilities, not solely for those enrolled in the most challenging courses. Enrollment in challenging courses, such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes, should be open and available to a greater range of students. Assessment practices that are authentic and assess skills that are considered essential for post-secondary education and the workplace need to be part of the curriculum. Portfolios, applied projects, exhibitions, research seminars, and capstone activities are a few of the assessment practices recommended in the literature. Structural flexibility that allows for alternative pathways and options for graduation and credit requirements is a central recommendation supported in the literature. This structural change would allow students the opportunity for dual enrollment programs, internships, community service learning, and other meaningful alternatives that open the school to partnerships with businesses, the community, and post-secondary institutions.

Research in the field of expectations reinforces the recommendations for reforming the senior year in high school and illuminates further the causes of senioritis. Expectations for high levels of engagement, achievement, and motivation, can be found when students and teachers actively participate in learning activities they have constructed together in a meaningful way. Learning experiences that are supportive of students' future goals and ambitions, personalized, and student generated will develop a sense of student ownership that raises student and teacher expectations for greater engagement and self-motivation. When connections are made with post-secondary expectations, workplace expectations and student-learning experiences, expectations for engaging, motivating, and meaningful activities takes hold. Motivation and engagement increase as students expectations for meaningful experiences surface. The intrinsic value of learning becomes more obvious to students when they have constructed meaningful learning experiences for themselves in collaboration with teachers, counselors, and school leaders. Research finds that in the high school senior year extrinsic rewards are often met early on. The literature review reveals that intrinsic rewards can fill the void when expectations for engaging, motivating, and self-initiated learning is constructed by students and future benefits can be realized.

Mental models supporting the structures, patterns, and events of the high school senior year that contribute to senioritis are evident in the literature. Cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and norms are explored in the literature and reveal a senior year experience that is deeply entrenched in American culture. Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kleiner (2000) discuss the extent mental models support systemic structures. When exploring mental models, Senge et al. propose asking, "What is it about my thinking and everyone's thinking that causes this structure to persist?" (p.83). The authors further explain:

Systems often take their shape from the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the people in them. That's because our mental models, our theories, about the way the world works influence our actions, which in turn influence the interactions of the system. (p.83)

Researching the systemic nature of senioritis warrants increased attention if system wide change is to occur.

Schools have been responding to the challenge presented by senioritis and reform in the senior year with alternative programs seeking to remedy the malady. These programs respond to many of the recommendations found in the literature on high school reform, senior year reform, and senioritis. The review of literature finds many programs reviewed; however, research into the effectiveness of the programs is, to some extent, lacking. Many of the programs receive positive reviews from those that have developed the programs, supported primarily with anecdotal evidence. Senior projects, senior exhibitions, senior options, dual enrollment, internships, community service, student leadership initiatives, and other programs are evaluated, discussed, and researched. The literature certainly supports the claim that action is being taken and schools are responding to the call to make the senior year more meaningful, engaging, and successful in preparing high school seniors for the next stage in their development.

As research, recommendations, and proposals surrounding the senior year in high school continue to be published, the systems thinking of Margaret Wheatley holds significant meaning. Wheatley (2006) in her book, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, claims that "Stasis, balance, equilibrium, these are temporary states. What endures is process-dynamic, adaptive, creative" (p.90).

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this research study is to uncover the deeply entrenched and sustaining source of senioritis that exists in the Lincoln High School District. Following this introduction, the chapter is arranged into subdivisions describing participants, instruments, and sampling procedure used in the study. Discussion on the reliability, validity, and ethics of the research process occurs throughout the chapter as well as in a separate section.

The research methodology was guided by the overarching focus on gathering data from relevant sources that would best inform the research questions established in chapter one and are supported by the review of literature found in chapter two. The goal of the methodology is to establish a researched base of knowledge informing the research questions, thereby providing rich and relevant data to inform recommendations that address the research problem of senioritis and the senior year in high school. Keeping seniors meaningfully engaged throughout their senior year through changes in instructional strategies and curriculum, maintaining high expectations of both students and teachers for seniors and the senior year, and acquiring insight into the mental models that sustain the current structure will lead to increased levels of learning and understanding, providing for a rich senior year experience.

Qualitative methodology was used to guide a significant portion of the research with a survey providing an extensive quantitative data source. Archived historical data, detailed later in this chapter, was used to support the qualitative and quantitative research and further inform the research questions. Creswell (2003) explains:

This mixed methods model has many strengths....It provides a study with the advantages

of both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition, by using the two different methods in this fashion, a researcher can gain perspectives from the different types of data or from different levels within the study. (p.218)

Creswell notes that the limitation of the mixed method approach comes with the integration of the data in the analysis stage. However, Creswell asserts the advantages from gathering both forms of data in a mixed methods approach can provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem, with the methods informing each other, and supporting triangulation of the data sources.

Qualitative research methodology includes the researcher as “part of the investigation as a participant observer, an in-depth interviewer, or a leader of a focus group but also removes himself from the situation to rethink meanings of the experience” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1995, p.25). There are multiple perspectives and sources of information included in the research process, and these multiple data sources provide triangulation of the data (see Table 1). Stringer (2008) asserts, “Triangulation involves the use of multiple and different data sources, methods, and perspectives to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research problem and its outcomes” (p. 49). These perspectives provided a diverse source of relevant information increasing the power and scope of the process, thereby enriching the data informing the research questions and the research problem. The motivating words of Michael Quinn Patton (as cited in Maykut & Morehouse, 1995) informed the research process. Patton offers the following inspirational words:

Go forth now. Go forth and question. Ask and listen. The world is just beginning to open up to you. Each person you question can take you into a new part of the world. For the person who is willing to ask and listen, the world will

always be new. The skilled questioner and the attentive listener knows how to enter into another's experience. (29)

Participants

The participants in the study included stakeholders that have a relevant perspective on the research problem and were able to best inform the research questions. Multiple sources were used to provide for a diversity of perspectives to avoid the possibility of any one perspective shaping the outcomes of the investigation (Stringer, 2008). Purposefully selected participants will be used to “best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2003, p.185). Specific participants in the research are detailed below. Maykut and Morehouse (1995) emphasize, “it is the working knowledge of the contexts of the individuals and settings that lead us to select them...for inclusion in [the] study” (p.57).

Graduating seniors. Students currently concluding their high school senior year, referred to in the study as graduating seniors, were used in the research as a data source to inform research question one. Graduating seniors were part of the population of survey respondents as well as focus groups. Students concluding their final year in high school have an intimate understanding of the degree the curriculum and instructional program has influenced senioritis.

Rising seniors. High school seniors moving into their senior year, referred to in the study as rising seniors, were used in the research as a data source to inform research questions one and two. Rising seniors were part of the population of survey respondents and participated in focus group discussions. They have a unique perspective on both research questions one and two. In addition, an understanding of their expectations for themselves as seniors and for their senior year in high school brings rich insight into the research question.

Rising juniors and rising sophomores. High school juniors and sophomores moving into their junior and sophomore year, referred to in the study as rising juniors and rising sophomores, were used in the research as a data source to inform research questions one and two. They were part of the population of survey respondents. These populations of new juniors and new sophomores have experiences with the curriculum and instructional program and are formulating expectations for their high school senior year.

Rising freshmen. Incoming freshmen, new to the high school, were used as data sources to inform research question two. These students were part of the interview data source for research question two. They have yet to experience the high school curriculum; however, they are formulating expectations for their high school senior year.

Teachers. Teachers from the entire teaching faculty were used as a data source informing research question one. The teaching faculty participated in a survey informing research question one.

Teachers of seniors. Teaching faculty that teach or have taught seniors as the majority of their teaching responsibility were used to further inform research question three. They participated in the same survey as the entire teaching faculty for research question one; however, they completed further survey questions related to research question three. Additionally, random samples of teachers, selected from this group, were interviewed to bring greater depth and rich insight into the expectations teachers have for seniors and the senior year in high school.

Guidance counselors. Guidance counselor focus groups were used to inform research question three. Counselors were interviewed as a data source for research question three. Counselors' expectations for seniors and the senior year in high school is a useful source of data to further inform research question three.

Building level administrators. Building level administrators were interviewed to inform research question four. The mental models established in each building that sustain senioritis will be explored through interviews with building level administrators. These administrators have significant years of experience in the district and add rich insight into the mental models in place in their respective schools.

District level administrators. District level administrators met as a focus group to inform research question four and further explore the mental models established in the district that sustain senioritis. These district leaders are long time employees of the district. They have served in various capacities over the course of their employment and have a profuse understanding of the mental models that have been in place in the district.

Non-teaching faculty. The non-teaching faculty comprised of the child study team, nurses, student assistance counselors, and librarians were used in the research to further examine the mental models that sustain senioritis. They responded to a questionnaire providing data for research question four. They have a unique vantage point: while not being directly involved with curriculum, instruction, or academic counseling, they are directly involved with the structures in place in the two high schools.

Instruments and Sampling

Qualitative data instruments were used extensively in the research methodology. Maykut and Morehouse (1995) suggest, “The data of qualitative inquiry is most often people’s words....The most useful way of gathering these forms of data are participant observation, in-depth interviews, [focus] group interviews, and the collection of relevant documents” (p. 46). Purposeful selection with random sampling was used when appropriate; however, where participants were limited in number by the nature of their position, whole groups were invited to

participate. Selecting participants that represent a range of experience with the research problem provided for maximum variation sampling (Maykut & Morehouse, 1995). Quantitative data was gathered through an extensive survey of two populations within the context of the study.

Guiding the development of the research instruments and sampling procedures was a reliance on the critical attributes that emerged through the external review of literature in chapter two and the problem statement, research questions, and exploratory research discussed in chapter one. The survey questions designed for research question one targeted students intrinsic valuing of learning, the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, personal ownership of schoolwork, and the connection with schoolwork and future plans. The survey questions designed for research question two and three targeted levels of expectations, change in expectations, expectation for academic rigor, and expectations for post-secondary preparation. Test specificity matrices were developed for the survey questions to establish consistency. Questions for the focus group discussion, interviews, and questionnaires were designed with these critical attributes as a methodological guide allowing for elaboration and follow up questioning. Research question four focused on the critical attributes of beliefs and attitudes supporting the mental models surrounding the senior year. The questions were designed to generate discussion on those attributes. All instruments and sampling methods are detailed below.

Survey. Two survey instruments were used in the research process. The surveys are titled student survey and teacher survey. The student survey has 18 questions that were used to inform research question one and two (see Appendix I). Nine questions are designed to inform question one, seven are designed to inform question two, and two questions relate to demographics. The survey was sent to all rising sophomores, rising juniors, rising seniors, and

graduating seniors in both high schools in the district. The survey responses were collected using an electronic survey tool. The survey responses were anonymous. Letters accompanied the survey and were sent to all parents, guardians, and students informing them of the student's selection for the study and requesting permission for their voluntary participation and informed consent for their participation in the research study.

The teacher survey has 17 questions designed to inform research question one and three (see Appendix J). Nine questions are designed to inform question one, seven are designed to inform question three, and three questions relate to demographics. The survey was anonymous and was made available to the entire teaching faculty in both high schools in the district. Teachers were invited via email asking for their voluntary participation in the anonymous survey and informed consent for participation in the research. The survey responses were collected using an electronic survey tool. There are 215 teaching faculty between the two high schools.

Focus groups. Focus groups of randomly selected graduating seniors were created to inform research question one. Students concluding their senior year have an intimate perspective on this research question and focus group methodology allows for the rich discourse necessary for qualitative data. Graduating seniors at Truman High School were selected randomly from a list of the entire senior class of 299 students. Each student was assigned a student identification number at the start of the school year that identifies them as part of the 12th grade. These numbers were randomly selected using a research number randomizer into a set of 12 students. The same selection methodology was used at Woodrow High School, from a graduating senior class of 324 students, resulting in a second focus group of 12 students. Between the two high schools, two focus groups with a combined sum of 24 graduating high school seniors were randomly selected to participate in the discussion groups. Two groups were used to achieve

depth and breadth of knowledge from the perspective of graduating senior year high school students in the district. Facilitating and encouraging an open dialogue with a comfort level among the participants guided the decision to have the two groups meet in their respective schools with their own randomly chosen classmates.

Focus groups of randomly selected rising seniors were created to inform research question two. Students beginning their senior year in high school have a unique perspective on this question bringing rich discussion and insight necessary for focus group research. The groups of rising seniors were formulated in the same manner as the groups of graduating seniors, resulting in two randomly selected groups of rising seniors from each high school, that met in their respective schools, with their own randomly chosen classmates. Open-ended questions were developed that allow for follow up questioning and encourage discussion among the participants (see Appendix A and B). Letters were sent to parents and students informing them of the random selection for the study and requesting permission for their voluntary participation and informed consent for their participation in the research. The focus groups met for approximately 60 minutes. The discussions were digitally recorded and later transcribed.

Guidance counselors from both high schools were invited to participate in a focus group discussion to provide data from their perspective to inform research question three. Counselors from Truman High School formed one group of six and counselors from Woodrow High School formed a second group of six for a total of 12 guidance counselors. All counselors were invited to participate in the focus group. They are a small group; therefore, random sampling was not used. Their immediate supervisors were not included to allow for an environment that is free of undue influence and an open dialogue.

District level school leaders, comprised of the superintendent, director of curriculum, director of staff development, and the director of special services, were invited to participate in a focus group discussion to provide data from their perspective to inform research question four. All district level leaders were invited to participate in the focus group. They are a small group; therefore, random sampling was not used. This group of four district leaders met together providing a unifying district level perspective on the mental models surrounding the senior year in high school and seniors that sustain senioritis. Open-ended questions were developed that allow for follow up questioning, and encourage discussion among the participants (see Appendix C and D). Letters were distributed to the participants requesting their voluntary participation and informed consent for their participation in the research. The focus groups met for approximately 60 minutes. The discussions were digitally recorded and later transcribed.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) point to the usefulness of focus groups at any time during the research process. They do make note of the limitation on the generalizability of focus groups to the larger population. Stewart and Shamdasani point to the composition of the groups as being important to the level of discussion, allowing for purposeful selection of groups. This shift away from an emphasis on generalizability, according to Morgan (1997), “means a shift from random sampling toward theoretically motivated sampling” (p.35). Morgan states “such ‘bias’ is only a problem if ignored” (p.35). Theoretical sampling, also classified as purposeful selection, is based on the decision to control the group composition to match carefully chosen categories of participants, and is useful in focus group research methodology particularly to facilitate discussion on a topic (Morgan, 1997). Multiple groups can be used in a single study to “capture a wide range of potentially distinct perspectives” (p.37). Johnson and Christensen (2000) discuss the free-flowing discussion that is more likely to occur in a homogeneous group setting.

Selective sampling, accessibility sampling, purposeful group selection, and comparison groups are tools often used in focus group development to search for themes and patterns that emerge across a range of groups. Johnson and Christensen point to the usefulness of focus groups in providing in-depth information in easy to understand terms in a relatively short time period. They do point out that the researcher must be aware of generalizing since most groups are not randomly selected. Morgan explains the advantage of a segmented design is the variety of potentially diverse perspectives.

Interviews. Interviews of randomly selected teaching faculty that teach or have taught seniors as the majority of their teaching responsibility were used to inform research question three. Interviews of teachers from Truman High School and Woodrow High School were used in the research. Teachers from Truman High School were selected by initially building a list of teachers that taught seniors as part of their teaching assignments. There were 39 teachers that have had experience teaching seniors in the group. Random numbers were assigned to this list of teachers by a research number randomizer and then these numbers were randomly selected by the research number randomizer into a set of 10 teachers to be interviewed from Truman High School. The same selection methodology was used at Woodrow High School resulting in 31 teachers that have had experience teaching seniors in the group. This resulted in a randomly selected group of 10 teachers from Woodrow High School. Between the two high schools, two interview groups with a combined sum of 20 teachers were randomly selected to participate in the interviews.

Interviews of building level administrators, principals, assistant principals, and guidance directors, were used to inform research question four. All building level administrators were invited to participate in the interviews. They are a small group; therefore, random sampling was

not used. Questions were developed that are open-ended in nature, allow for follow up questioning, and encourage dialogue (see Appendix E and F). The interviews were approximately 60 minutes each and were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Letters were distributed to the participants requesting their voluntary participation and informed consent for participation in the research.

Interviews of randomly selected rising freshmen were used to inform research question two. Students beginning their first year in high school have a unique perspective on this question. The interview group of rising freshmen was formulated in the same manner as the groups of graduating seniors. This resulted in two randomly selected groups of 12 rising freshman from each high school that was selected to be interviewed for a total of 24 rising freshman students. Questions were developed that are open-ended in nature, allow for follow up questioning, and encourage dialogue (see Appendix G). Letters were sent to parents and students informing them of the random selection for the study, requesting permission for their voluntary participation, and informed consent for participation in the research. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes and were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The insights provided previously by Johnson and Christensen (2000), Morgan (1997), and Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) to guide focus group discussion were used to guide the understanding of interview group selection and processes. Furthermore, the words of Seidman (1998) support the focus group and interview process: “interviewing as a method...is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives constitute education” (p. 7).

Open-ended survey questionnaire. The non-teaching faculty, comprised of the child study team, nurses, student assistance counselors, and librarians were given an open-ended

questionnaire to inform research question four (see Appendix H). All non-teaching faculty, with the exception of guidance counselors, were invited to participate in the questionnaire. The positions are limited in number, in some cases one or two people, therefore random sampling was not used. They were invited by letter asking for their voluntary participation and informed consent for participation in the research in the anonymous questionnaire using an electronic survey tool.

Archived data, documents, and artifacts. Archived data, documents, and artifacts were included in the research at the outset and as the research process emerged. Archived quantitative data was collected in the following areas: attendance, tardiness, grades, and discipline referrals relating to class cuts. Attendance records were collected for the four years of high school for the graduating classes of 2007 and 2006 allowing for an analysis of the four-year trend for two different classes of students. Tardiness to school records were gathered in the same method. Discipline referrals relating to class cuts were gathered for the 2007 school year by grade level. End of year grades were collected and collated for four different classes (2007, 2006, 2005, and 2004) for all four years of high school for each class, allowing for a thorough analysis of trends over the course of high school for four different classes of students. Attendance, tardiness to school, and final grade data was collected from both Truman High School and Woodrow High School. Attendance and tardiness records are useful in the study of this topic to examine if students become less engaged with school by being absent more often, being late more frequently, and therefore possibly missing more class time in the senior year. Discipline referrals, specifically cutting class, is a useful measure to see if students are purposefully missing class time. Final grades were used to analyze possible trends that may occur in the senior year compared to other years in school. Document information will include a review of the program

of studies and a sampling of curriculum guides. Pertinent data, documents, and artifacts were included, when relevant, to inform the four research questions as the research process emerged and participant's perspectives were revealed (Stringer, 2008).

Reliability, Validity and Ethics

Reliability and validity was established for the methodology and the instrumentation throughout this chapter to confirm consistency and dependability of the measures, the data sources, and data collection. Focus group, interview, questionnaire, and survey questions were pre-tested and revised to focus responses specifically on the research questions. Professional colleagues, advisors, and peers in the dissertation cohort reviewed the instruments. The data sources were triangulated by using different measures, data sources, and perspectives (see Table 1).

Focus group, interview, and questionnaire data were categorized, coded, and rated to construct trends and themes relative to the research questions. However, to establish inter-rater reliability for the qualitative data, two colleagues independently coded samples of the responses. Qualitative data collection most often looks to inter-rater reliability as an instrument to measure reliability. Likert scale questions included both favorable and unfavorable items to limit response sets, encourage careful consideration of the items, and increase reliability. All operational definitions were explained, the settings for the data collection were as consistent as possible using conference rooms, classrooms, and lounges. Participants took the survey in a place of their own convenience. Validity considers the extent the research instruments are measuring what they are intended to measure. External literature review, along with dialogue among professional educators and colleagues establishing peer consensus, provided validity for

the research methodology. Triangulation of the data sources and the sampling procedures detailed earlier further established validity of the measures.

Table 1

Triangulation Matrix: Data Collection Plan

Research questions	Data Sources			
	Data source one	Data source two	Data source three	Data source four
1	Student Survey	Teacher Survey	Graduating Seniors Focus Groups	Archival Data*
2	Student Survey	Rising Seniors Focus Groups	Incoming Freshmen Interviews	Archival Data
3	Teacher Survey	Teacher of Seniors Interviews	Guidance Counselors Focus Group	Archival Data
4	Building Administrators Interviews	District Administrators Focus Group	Non-teaching Faculty Questionnaire	Archival Data

* Archived data, documents, and artifacts as described in chapter 3.

All Board of Education procedures have been followed and Board permission obtained. Informed consent from all participants or their legally authorized representative in the study were sought and documented. There were minimal risks to the subjects, selection of subjects has been clearly delineated, is reasonable, and provisions were established to protect the privacy of the subjects and confidentiality of the data. With servant leadership as the foundation, the ideas of school improvement, democratic community, and social justice formed the guiding principles for this research study.

Chapter Four

Data Analysis: Results and Findings

Significant findings and results from the data collected to inform each research question is the focus of this chapter. The chapter is organized by research question, beginning with a brief description of the data collection process for each research question followed by the findings revealed through the analysis of the data collected for each question. The findings for each question are reported beginning with the most prominent and continue in descending order. Each section concludes with a summary synthesis and interpretation of the research findings for each question. Uncovering the source of the deeply entrenched and sustaining source of senioritis that exists in the Lincoln Regional High School District, the purpose of this study, through gathering and analyzing relevant data addressing the established research questions, is the framework for this chapter.

Research Question One

Research question one seeks to find to what degree the curriculum and instructional program influences senioritis. Based on the extensive literature review and exploratory research, four critical attributes of the curriculum and instructional program provided the framework for the research of this question. They are intrinsic valuing of learning, the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, personal ownership of schoolwork, and the connection with schoolwork and future plans.

Data Collection

Student survey. The student survey, as described in the methodology, was sent to the email addresses of all students in all grade levels and their parents or guardians in both high schools using a web-based electronic survey tool. There are approximately 2621 students in the

Lincoln High School District: 1366 attend Woodrow High School and 1255 attend Truman High School. Five hundred sixty four students responded to the survey for an overall response rate of 22%. This successful response rate was matched by an almost even distribution between the two high schools with Truman High School recording 283 respondents and Woodrow High School recording 281. The data were further strengthened by the distribution of responses among grade levels in the aggregate and when disaggregated by school. Additionally, the data were enhanced by the distribution of responses by ability grouping mirroring the populations in both buildings. The survey responses for the aggregate of the 564 student respondents to the rating statements and questions on research question one can be found in Appendix K.

The survey question addressing research question one asked students to rate seven statements on a four point Likert scale from strongly agree(4), agree(3), disagree(2), and strongly disagree(1). The survey statements designed for research question one were directed at the following critical attributes: intrinsic valuing of learning, the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, personal ownership of schoolwork, and the connection with schoolwork and future plans. Positive or favorable responses were those that strongly agreed or agreed with school encouraging students to have an intrinsic valuing of learning, shared decisions on constructing meaningful learning experiences, opportunities to study topics personally chosen by students, and a connection with schoolwork and future plans. Reversal statements were included, and the response of disagree or strongly disagree to those items is considered a favorable or positive response.

Teacher survey. The teacher survey, as described in the methodology, was sent to the email addresses of all instructional faculty teachers in all grade levels in both high schools using a web-based electronic survey tool. There are 215 instructional faculty teachers in the Lincoln

High School District: 112 at Woodrow High School and 103 at Truman High School. One hundred and twenty-two responded to the survey for an overall response rate of 57%. This very successful response rate was strengthened by the distribution between schools with 56 respondents from Woodrow High School and 66 from Truman High School. Of the 122 teachers that took the survey, 87 responded to the open-ended question. Their responses have been coded and categorized. The survey responses for the 122 teacher respondents to the rating statements and questions can be found in Appendix L.

The survey question addressing research question one asked teachers to rate seven statements on a four point Likert scale from strongly agree(4), agree(3), disagree(2), and strongly disagree(1). The survey was designed to measure the same critical attributes as described in the student survey. Teachers also responded to an open-ended question asking their perspective on the influence the curriculum and instructional practices in their school have on the senior year experience.

Senior student focus group. Focus group discussions were held with randomly selected graduating seniors from Woodrow High School and Truman High School. Students from Woodrow High School and students from Truman High School participated in the focus group discussions held in the library classroom of their respective schools for approximately one hour. The discussions were digitally recorded and later transcribed using a data transcription service. The transcripts were analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

Findings

Research Question One: To what degree do the curriculum and instructional program influence senioritis?

Finding one. The research finds that in the Lincoln Regional High School District the curriculum and instructional program does not cultivate the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences between teachers and students. The results are consistent between schools, across grade levels, and among ability groupings. Further, the data find that students in lower ability classes are more likely to have less opportunity for a shared construction of meaningful learning experiences than those in higher ability groups.

Student survey responses (see Table 2) are unfavorable to both of the items that measure the statements on the critical attribute of the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences. Supporting the survey results are the data from the focus group discussion with senior students. The majority responded that they did not have many opportunities to construct meaningful learning experiences with their teachers and decide together on different ways to demonstrate their learning. Students remarked, “I would say that it’s more you’re just going with whatever the teacher assigns and it’s....I guess mostly it’s just whatever the teacher issues out to you, you do”. “I never really had an option. It’s always usually like a test or an essay. Like, they never really asked us”.

Table 2

Student Survey Response: Shared Construction of Meaningful Learning Experiences

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
My teachers and I often decide together different ways I can show what I have learned.	5.3% (28)	35.4% (186)	49.6% (261)	9.7% (51)	2.36	526
My teachers and I rarely decide together the types of assignments I will do.	22.2% (116)	44.0% (230)	28.1% (147)	5.7% (30)	2.83	523

Note. Rating average of second statement reversal item converts from 2.83 to 2.17.

Students responded unfavorably by strongly disagreeing or disagreeing that they often decided with teachers different ways to demonstrate their learning at a 59.3% response rate with a Likert rating average of 2.36. Unfavorable responses, agreeing or strongly agreeing with teachers and students rarely deciding together on the types of assignments they will do, were recorded at a 66.2% rate with a Likert rating average of 2.17. When the data are filtered by high school, both schools respond with a similar high unfavorable rate to the statements addressing the critical attribute of shared construction of learning experiences.

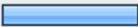
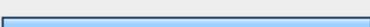
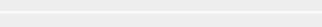
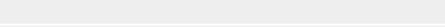
Analysis of samples of the written curriculum in the core academic areas of Math, History, and English find a standardized philosophy in the approach to assessment of student learning (see Appendix M). The philosophy asserts that assessments and assignments should be developed that give students varied opportunities to demonstrate what they know. However, the philosophy does not include the critical attribute of a shared construction of these learning experiences and opportunities for students to demonstrate what they have learned between teacher and student. Additionally, the analysis finds the curriculum guides methods of evaluation of student learning do not include approaches that indicate shared decision making on ways a student can demonstrate their learning, a critical attribute of this study (see Appendix N).

When students were asked to choose all that apply from a list of instructional assignments and assessment methods they have done as part of their schoolwork, “group projects” was chosen in much greater numbers, both in the aggregate and when filtered by school, grade level, and ability group, than the other available choices. This was followed in descending order by original research based project, multimedia presentation of work, portfolio assignment, public exhibition of work, and participation in seminar class (see Table 3). The review of literature relevant to the critical attribute of shared construction of meaningful learning experiences points

to more personalized assignments as an integral component of the attribute. Therefore, teacher-made tests, quizzes, and homework assignments were not included among the choices.

Table 3

Student Survey Response: Instructional Assignments and Assessments

8. As part of my schoolwork I have done the following (choose all that apply).			Response Percent	Response Count
PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT		45.2%	240	
PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF MY WORK		27.5%	146	
ORIGINAL RESEARCH BASED PROJECT		78.1%	404	
PARTICIPATION IN A SEMINAR CLASS		16.4%	87	
MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF MY WORK		66.1%	351	
GROUP PROJECT		91.9%	488	
NONE OF THE ABOVE		5.5%	29	
			<i>answered question</i>	531

The data reveal that activities that are more personalized, portfolios, public exhibition of work, and seminar classes, are selected the least as being part of students' schoolwork experience. This supports the findings that students are not likely to construct meaningful and personalized experiences with their teachers; rather, they do what is assigned or make decisions as part of a group.

Students in all grade levels record a high unfavorable response to the two statements measuring the critical attribute of shared construction of learning experiences. However, the data reveal that students in higher-grade levels (see Table 4) select portfolios, public exhibition of work and seminar classes, as part of their schoolwork experience in much greater numbers.

This is reflective of the course of study guide, as students in the highest grade levels have opportunities to take classes, specifically in the IB program, as discussed below, that include these strategies (see Appendix O).

Table 4

Student Survey Response: Instructional Assignments and Assessments by Grade Level

8. As part of my schoolwork I have done the following (choose all that apply).					
	I am a:				
	FRESHMAN	SOPHOMORE	JUNIOR	SENIOR	Response Totals
PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT	30.5% (25)	37.0% (44)	39.6% (61)	62.5% (110)	45.2% (240)
PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF MY WORK	7.3% (8)	29.4% (35)	26.6% (41)	36.4% (64)	27.5% (146)
ORIGINAL RESEARCH BASED PROJECT	61.0% (50)	79.0% (94)	78.6% (121)	79.0% (139)	76.1% (404)
PARTICIPATION IN A SEMINAR CLASS	9.8% (8)	13.4% (16)	13.6% (21)	23.9% (42)	16.4% (87)
MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF MY WORK	62.2% (51)	61.3% (73)	61.0% (94)	75.6% (133)	66.1% (351)
GROUP PROJECT	91.5% (75)	89.1% (106)	91.6% (141)	94.9% (167)	92.1% (489)
NONE OF THE ABOVE	8.5% (7)	5.9% (7)	7.8% (12)	1.7% (3)	5.5% (29)
<i>answered question</i>	82	119	154	176	531

When the survey data is filtered by student ability group, the significant finding of an unfavorable response to the statements measuring the critical attribute of shared construction of meaningful learning experiences is consistent across the ability groups, with all groups responding unfavorably. This finding is supported by the focus group discussion and expressed in the following comments. “I’ve been in a lot of honors classes and a lot of advanced classes and I’ve like been...so rigid. Like, it’s just you take the test and I’m a really bad test taker too,

so it's never worked in my favor". However, the data find that students in the highest ability groups have experienced the more personalized assignments and instructional strategies in much greater numbers than those in lower ability groups. As the data in Table 5 illustrate, IB students have indicated they have these schoolwork experiences in significantly greater numbers, particularly when contrasted with students in academic and advanced level classes. Analysis of the IB curriculum guide finds portfolio assignments, exhibitions of work, and a two-year seminar designed course as integral components of the program.

Table 5

Student Survey Response: Instructional Assessments by Ability Group

6. As part of my schoolwork I have done the following (choose all that apply).						
	The majority of my classes are (choose one).					
	ADVANCED	ACADEMIC	HONORS	AP	IB	Response Totals
PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT	27.6% (53)	15.2% (7)	42.3% (58)	65.1% (28)	84.9% (90)	45.0% (236)
PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF MY WORK	24.0% (46)	4.3% (2)	23.4% (32)	32.6% (14)	48.1% (51)	27.7% (145)
ORIGINAL RESEARCH BASED PROJECT	72.9% (140)	47.8% (22)	78.1% (107)	83.7% (36)	90.6% (96)	76.5% (401)
PARTICIPATION IN A SEMINAR CLASS	13.0% (25)	6.5% (3)	10.9% (15)	18.6% (8)	34.0% (36)	16.6% (87)
MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF MY WORK	60.9% (117)	45.7% (21)	66.4% (91)	65.1% (28)	85.8% (91)	66.4% (348)
GROUP PROJECT	90.1% (173)	73.9% (34)	96.4% (132)	97.7% (42)	99.1% (105)	92.7% (486)
NONE OF THE ABOVE	7.3% (14)	19.6% (9)	2.9% (4)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.2% (27)
<i>answered question</i>	192	46	137	43	106	524

Portfolio assignment, public exhibition of work, and participation in a seminar class are the least frequently selected as part of their schoolwork experience by those students in advanced and academic classes. When the data are filtered to examine the response of seniors with their ability group, the data further establishes this finding. Seniors in the higher ability groups report having these personalized schoolwork experiences as part of their high school experience in much greater numbers than their peers in lower ability grouped classes did.

Results from the teacher survey support the finding (see Table 6). The statements measuring the critical attribute of shared construction of meaningful learning experiences received a mostly unfavorable response. Teachers strongly agreed or agreed, an unfavorable response, at a 71% response rate with a 2.22 Likert rating average that students and teachers rarely make decisions together on the types of assignments students will do. Likewise, only 45% with a 2.45 Likert rating average agreed or strongly agreed, a favorable response, that teachers and students often make decisions on different ways students can demonstrate their learning. The data indicate a strong unfavorable response among teachers to statements on the critical attribute of the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences.

Table 6

Teacher Survey Response: Shared Construction of Meaningful Learning Experiences

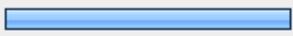
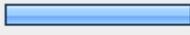
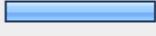
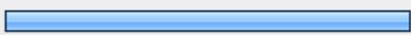
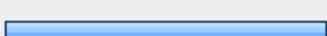
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
In this school, students and teachers rarely decide together the types of assignments students will do.	9.9% (12)	61.2% (74)	25.6% (31)	3.3% (4)	2.78	121
In this school, students and teachers often decide together on different ways students can demonstrate their learning.	3.3% (4)	42.6% (52)	50.0% (61)	4.1% (5)	2.45	122

Note. Rating average of first statement reversal item converts from 2.78 to 2.22.

Both high schools have similar unfavorable responses to the items measuring shared construction of meaningful learning experiences. Woodrow teachers have a 2.46 and a 2.25 rating on the two items and Truman teachers have a 2.44 and a 2.30 respective Likert rating average on the items.

Table 7

Teacher Survey Response: Instructional Assignments and Assessments

3. I have given my students an opportunity to do the following (check all that apply):				
			Response Percent	Response Count
SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH BASED PROJECT		58.7%	71	
PORTFOLIO OF THEIR WORK		38.0%	46	
PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF THEIR WORK		30.6%	37	
PROJECT INVOLVING APPLYING THEIR LEARNING		83.5%	101	
MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF THEIR WORK		66.1%	80	
NONE OF THE ABOVE.		6.6%	8	
			<i>answered question</i>	121

When teachers were asked to choose all that apply from a list of assignments their students have had an opportunity to do (see Table 7), “project involving applying their learning” was selected in much greater numbers both in the aggregate, when filtered by school, and when filtered by core academic program or elective program. This choice was followed in descending order by multimedia presentation of work, research based project, portfolio, and public exhibition of work. The data reveal that the elective program responded in greater numbers to

portfolio assignments and public exhibition of their work at greater rates than teachers in the core academic program did (see Table 8).

Table 8

Teacher Survey Responses: Instructional Assignments and Assessments by Program.

3. I have given my students an opportunity to do the following (check all that apply):			
	I teach in the (choose one):		
	ELECTIVE PROGRAM	CORE ACADEMIC PROGRAM	Response Totals
SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH BASED PROJECT	67.9% (19)	62.7% (47)	64.1% (66)
PORTFOLIO OF THEIR WORK	50.0% (14)	34.7% (26)	38.8% (40)
PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF THEIR WORK	42.9% (12)	26.7% (20)	31.1% (32)
PROJECT INVOLVING APPLYING THEIR LEARNING	82.1% (23)	85.3% (64)	84.5% (87)
MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF THEIR WORK	71.4% (20)	64.0% (48)	66.0% (68)
NONE OF THE ABOVE.	0.0% (0)	5.3% (4)	3.9% (4)
<i>answered question</i>	28	75	103

Open-ended responses relevant to this attribute summarize this trend. “The school does not actively recognize or reward application activities or alternative assessments. The only reward comes from student feedback, and that is often not positive in senior year. Many students have grown accustomed to a ‘traditional’ education and resist the opportunity to be creative and self-motivated”.

Finding two. The research finds the curriculum and instructional program has not encouraged in students an intrinsic valuing of learning. Grades, the data find, are the overwhelming motivator for students. The data further reveal that college acceptance is a

primary factor for students wanting to maintain high grades. Though the results are consistent between faculty and students in both schools, there are some differences found in the research among students based on ability group. Lower ability grouped students, though motivated by grades, report being motivated by grades in fewer numbers than their peers in higher ability groups are.

Most teachers, 67.8% a 2.21 Likert rating average, disagree or strongly disagree that students are mostly motivated by learning new things and 90.7% a 1.69 Likert rating average, agree or strongly agree that students are mostly motivated by grades (see Table 9).

Table 9

Teacher Survey Response: Intrinsic Valuing of Learning

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
In this school, I find that though grades may be important to students they are mostly motivated by learning new things in class.	0.8% (1)	31.4% (38)	56.2% (68)	11.8% (14)	2.21	121
In this school, I find that students are mostly motivated by grades.	40.3% (48)	50.4% (60)	9.2% (11)	0.0% (0)	3.31	119

Note. Rating average of second statement reversal item converts from 3.31 to 1.69.

Teachers in both schools respond unfavorably to the items measuring intrinsic valuing of learning with some slight variation. Woodrow teachers have a 2.36 and a 1.93 Likert rating average in response to the items while Truman teachers have a 2.09 and a 1.48 Likert rating average on the items. This is supported by responses found in the open-ended question asking teachers their perspective on the influence the curriculum and instructional practices in their school have on the senior year experience. The following comments capture the essence of those

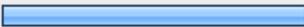
responses relevant to the critical attribute of the intrinsic valuing of learning. “I think that the emphasis on grades as a vehicle for college admissions means that once a student is accepted, they don't value their grades and have never really valued learning”.

Those students who do not participate in the IB curriculum view senior year little more than mandatory attendance with an expectation of an acceptable grade, especially after the college application process is complete. Therefore, most begrudge any attempt to learn citing the senior year as their last opportunity to do nothing.

When asked to make a choice among grades, parents, learning new things, teachers, or other as to what mostly motivates them to do schoolwork, 62.5% of the students chose grades as the motivator over the other choices. Parents followed with 16.4% and then learning new things at 9.8% (see Table 10).

Table 10

Student Survey Response: Intrinsic Valuing of Learning: Motivators

7. I am mostly motivated to do schoolwork by (choose one).			
		Response Percent	Response Count
GRADES		62.5%	331
MY PARENTS		16.2%	86
LEARNING NEW THINGS		9.8%	52
MY TEACHERS		1.5%	8
OTHER		10.0%	53
<i>answered question</i>			530

This response was consistent across schools, grade levels, and ability groups. Parental influence was highest among freshman, though far below grades, and declined as students moved through the grade levels (see Table 11).

Table 11

Student Survey Responses: Intrinsic Valuing of Learning: Motivators by Grade Level

7. I am mostly motivated to do schoolwork by (choose one).					
	I am a:				
	FRESHMAN	SOPHOMORE	JUNIOR	SENIOR	Response Totals
GRADES	66.3% (55)	63.9% (76)	58.8% (90)	62.9% (110)	62.5% (331)
MY PARENTS	20.5% (17)	16.8% (20)	17.0% (26)	13.7% (24)	16.4% (87)
LEARNING NEW THINGS	3.6% (3)	10.1% (12)	10.5% (16)	12.0% (21)	9.8% (52)
MY TEACHERS	1.2% (1)	1.7% (2)	2.6% (4)	0.6% (1)	1.5% (8)
OTHER	9.6% (8)	7.6% (9)	11.1% (17)	10.9% (19)	10.0% (53)
<i>answered question</i>	83	119	153	175	530

The data find lower ability grouped students were motivated by parents at greater rates than were students in higher ability groups. The lowest ability group responded they were influenced by grades at a 44% rate almost 20% lower than the total average and more motivated by their parents and learning new things than any other ability group. The IB ability group students were the only ability group to choose “learning new things” at greater rate than “parents” as a choice as a motivator (see Table 12).

Table 12

Student Survey Response Intrinsic Valuing of Learning: Motivators by Ability Group

7. I am mostly motivated to do schoolwork by (choose one).						
	The majority of my classes are (choose one).					
	ADVANCED	ACADEMIC	HONORS	AP	IB	Response Totals
GRADES	60.9% (117)	44.4% (20)	71.5% (98)	60.5% (26)	63.2% (67)	62.7% (328)
MY PARENTS	17.7% (34)	24.4% (11)	15.3% (21)	23.3% (10)	10.4% (11)	16.6% (87)
LEARNING NEW THINGS	8.9% (17)	17.8% (8)	6.6% (9)	7.0% (3)	14.2% (15)	9.9% (52)
MY TEACHERS	1.6% (3)	2.2% (1)	1.5% (2)	0.0% (0)	1.9% (2)	1.5% (8)
OTHER	10.9% (21)	11.1% (5)	7.3% (10)	9.3% (4)	10.4% (11)	9.8% (51)
<i>answered question</i>	192	45	137	43	106	523

When asked if high school inspires them to learn new things, a majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that school inspires them to learn new things. Though, as previously discussed, the data find when asked to choose from a list that includes grades, learning new things is not the majority choice. Freshmen respond more favorably to school inspiring them to learn new things at a greater rate than seniors. The difference of 14% in the response rate represents the highest variation among grades with statements addressing research question one (see Table 13).

Senior focus group data support these findings. Students respond that college acceptance and maintaining good grades inspired and motivated them. “I know college was probably the biggest factor in motivating me. I mean, I started looking at colleges before freshman year”.

“...I know I wanted to get into a good college and I wanted to challenge myself and if I didn’t challenge myself during the four years in high school, then I wouldn’t get into a college”.

Table 13

Student Survey Response: Intrinsic Valuing of Learning by Grade Level

		FRESHMAN	SOPHOMORE	JUNIOR	SENIOR	Response Totals
My high school inspires me to learn new things.	Strongly Agree	20.5% (17)	20.3% (24)	13.2% (20)	12.6% (22)	
	Agree	72.3% (60)	68.6% (81)	65.8% (100)	66.1% (115)	
	Disagree	7.2% (8)	10.2% (12)	17.1% (26)	18.4% (32)	
	Strongly Disagree	0.0% (0)	0.8% (1)	3.9% (6)	2.9% (5)	
rating average		3.13 (83)	3.08 (118)	2.88 (152)	2.89 (174)	2.97 (527)

Supporting the survey data, some students in the focus group did have favorable comments toward school inspiring them to learn new things, particularly among those students in the highest ability group, adding further support to the survey responses. “I know because of IB, I’ve taken TOK... It definitely woke me up to the different ways of thinking and different ways of like how you know things and like use different mentalities that I didn’t have before”.

“...great classes that inspire you to think... and this past year, these past two years we’ve been working on integrating all subjects and you kind of see how you could apply them and you could mix them together and not just do English for English’s sake”. The IB curriculum supports a seminar class called the Theory of Knowledge, referred in this quote as “TOK”. Analysis of the curriculum for this course supports the comment above by an inspired student, as the course

seeks to relate core subjects to each other and study them from the perspective that they are interrelated in their pursuit of knowledge.

Finding three. The research finds the curriculum and instructional program has provided students with opportunities to study topics they have personally chosen encouraging a sense of personal ownership of schoolwork. There is a favorable response between faculty and students in survey data and focus group discussion to support this finding. However, the responses by teachers to the open-ended survey question and some students in focus group discussion offers somewhat mixed results and points to a lack of personal choice for students in lower ability groupings. Additionally, the data find little evidence of personal choice on topics of study within the classroom with the exception of those students in the highest ability grouped classes.

Responding to the statement that high school has given them an opportunity to learn topics they have personally chosen to study, 78.9% of students responded favorably with a Likert rating average of 2.96. Responding to school giving them few opportunities to study topics they have personally chosen, students disagreed or strongly disagreed, a favorable response, at a 67.9% rate with a Likert rating average of 2.75 (see Table 14).

Focus group data support the survey finding with many students pointing to the elective course offerings providing them with personal choice. “I think that they offer a lot of types of courses... so I think the school does have a wide variety of electives that they offer to the students, which is good”. The following comment further supports the finding:

I think that the first maybe two years of high school, you don't really have those opportunities...but junior and senior year, I think more spaces in your schedule do open up, so I'd say that's the time when you can really take advantage of like the

electives and you can follow your interest in taking any class that you want.

Table 14

Student Survey Response: Personal Ownership of Schoolwork

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
My high school gives me an opportunity to learn topics that I have personally chosen to study.	19.8% (104)	59.1% (311)	18.3% (96)	2.9% (15)	2.96	526
My high school gives me few opportunities to study topics I have personally chosen.	5.0% (26)	27.1% (141)	55.4% (288)	12.5% (65)	2.25	520

Note. Rating average of second statement reversal item converts from 2.25 to 2.75.

However, students also commented on the demands of credit requirements limiting their choices.

“...but I don’t see how really it’s necessary to take them ‘cause students are not interested in that, it’s just kind of like a pain to like have to go to that class every day versus like something they actually want to take.” Others commented on the lack of options:

Well, I know our school doesn’t do this, but my friend’s school does this in their senior year, they actually decide what they might want to do, and they really narrow in on their interests and everything and they actually go out and instead of going to some classes, they go work and internship somewhere.

Teachers respond favorably, 67.2% with a 2.78 Likert rating average, to students having opportunities to personally choose topics for study. When the data is disaggregated between teachers that teach primarily in the core academic program and those that teach in the elective program (see Table 15), the data find that 89.3% of teachers in the elective program and 56% of the teachers in the core academic program respond favorably to the statement measuring

personal ownership of schoolwork. Teachers in the core academic program’s response rate are 33% lower than the response rate of teachers in the elective program.

Table 15

Teacher Survey Response: Personal Ownership of Schoolwork by Program

		I teach in the (choose one):		Response Totals
		ELECTIVE PROGRAM	CORE ACADEMIC PROGRAM	
In this school, students often have opportunities to choose topics for study that they are personally interested in.	Strongly Agree	21.4% (6)	8.0% (6)	
	Agree	67.9% (19)	48.0% (36)	
	Disagree	10.7% (3)	41.3% (31)	
	Strongly Disagree	0.0% (0)	2.7% (2)	
rating average		3.11 (28)	2.81 (75)	2.75 (103)

Responses relevant to the critical attribute of personal choice found in teacher responses to the open-ended survey question supports this mixed result and reflects the student data:

Having a myriad of electives and activities makes it easier for seniors to stay involved in school by involving them socially as well as academically. The semester scheduling also helps change the pace mid-year, which is refreshing to students going through the school year.

However, this mostly favorable response is balanced with the following responses, which find a difference among personal ownership and choice based on ability grouping:

Those who would like technical training have no opportunities in this school to explore alternatives to college. Vo-tech is becoming increasingly more selective, which leaves a

good percentage of my students high and dry. There are also no electives offered at the academic level to help them discover new areas of interest.

This comment is further supported with the following observations: “The top tier students have a variety of electives from which to choose....Electives in the core academic programs need to be both appealing to the academic and studies student and offered at that level”.

Seniors have very different experiences based on the level of courses they are enrolled in...There should be a balance achieved so that our upper level students have more choices with regard to their assessments and our lower level students should have creative options to continue their studies.

The program of studies guide for the district finds a number of elective choices available for students in all ability groups. However, consistent with the open-ended response survey data and focus group data, the core academic program lacks elective choices for those students in the academic ability group (see Appendix P). The elective program course offerings (art, music, business, technology, and consumer science) do include a wider range of classes offered at different ability levels. Significantly, the program of studies guide does not include extensive discussion of a non-traditional high school course of study allowing for a program of theme-based options, interdisciplinary studies, magnet programs, exchange programs, distance learning, internships, community service, college courses, and other potential programs referred to as option two programs. The program of studies simply states that requirements for these types of alternative options are under review (see Appendix Q).

Further analysis of the sample of curriculum guides finds that students have few opportunities to choose topics for study as part of their assigned schoolwork. The curriculum guides do reveal that students enrolled in the highest ability courses, most notably IB courses,

have opportunities to personally choose topics for study. The extended essay requirement of the IB program engages students in independent research of a topic that they have chosen from a student selected subject area. The program also encourages student choice for oral commentaries, experimental studies, scientific investigations, and document-based papers (see Appendix M, N, & O).

Finding four. The research finds that the curriculum and instructional program makes connections between schoolwork and students' post-secondary plans. There is a high favorable response between faculty and students in survey data to support this finding. Focus group responses from students relevant to this attribute are generally favorable with some noteworthy exceptions that are also reflected in the open-ended responses from teachers. The results are consistent between both high schools and among grade levels. Noteworthy is the degree to which students in the academic ability group respond unfavorably at a higher rate to statements measuring response to the critical attribute of the connection with schoolwork and future plans.

High favorable responses (see Table 16) were recorded for students responding that the things they learn in high school will be very helpful to them in the future with a 79.3% favorable response with a 2.98 Likert rating average. Students also responded favorably, 71.9%, by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement indicating they find little connection with school and their future plans, though 28.1% responded unfavorably with a Likert rating average of 2.84. However, as previously noted, academic ability grouped students respond less favorably when asked if they find a connection between schoolwork and future plans compared to students in the higher ability groups, with 42.2% agreeing or strongly agreeing, an unfavorable response, that they find little connection between schoolwork and their plans following high school.

Table 16

Student Survey Response: Connection of Schoolwork with Future Plans

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
The things I learn in high school will be very helpful to me in the future.	21.3% (112)	58.0% (305)	18.4% (97)	2.3% (12)	2.98	526
I find little connection between my schoolwork and my plans following high school.	5.5% (29)	22.6% (118)	54.3% (284)	17.6% (92)	2.16	523

Note. Rating average of second statement reversal item converts from 2.16 to 2.84.

Focus group data was generally favorable; however, students commented more on the preparation for post-secondary college work than actual connections with their post-secondary plans. Many commented that they did not think the classes they were taking now had much connection with their plans other than preparation for college. This response is reflected in the following quote, “Well, in terms of subject matter, I don’t think there’s any connection whatsoever, but work preparation, I think there is”. Another student reveals:

Well, it’s like, if you took a class this year that was [similar to one] taking in college and like my psychology class...I feel like that helped prepare me because I really feel like I learned a lot in that class, but like other classes that I’m never going to be taking again, I just like don’t really see how they helped at all.

As found in Table 17, teachers also respond favorably to school providing a connection between schoolwork and future plans with 71% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the item and 67.2% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the reversal item.

Table 17***Teacher Survey Response: Connection of Schoolwork with Future Plans***

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
This school organizes learning experiences that are useful to students' plans following high school.	4.1% (5)	66.9% (81)	25.6% (31)	3.3% (4)	2.72	121
The school places little emphasis on making a connection between students' schoolwork and their plans following high school.	3.3% (4)	29.5% (36)	55.7% (68)	11.5% (14)	2.25	122

Note. Rating average of second statement reversal item converts from 2.25 to 2.75.

The responses were consistent between high schools. Teacher responses to the open-ended survey question, relevant to the critical attribute of connection with post-secondary plans, reflect findings from the student focus group. Teachers also indicate college preparation as a strength of the curriculum and instructional program providing a connection with future plans. “The senior year experience usually prepares our seniors for college. Our school provides the students with classes that give college level work and assignments to help students prepare...for future success”. However, the following observations by teachers note the lack of content connection and workplace experience. “Students do not always see the connection between what they are learning academically and the value it will have in their life”. “I don’t feel that the senior experience educationally is too much different than other grade levels”. “It would be more useful to make direct connections to what students may be faced with in either college level work or in their work experiences”.

Teachers’ comments support the survey data pointing to the lower ability grouped students responding unfavorably in greater numbers to this critical attribute. Teachers highlight

the lack of workplace related experiences available for students that may not be moving on to a four-year college.

Summary Synthesis and Interpretation of Findings: Research Question One

The research findings assert that the curriculum and instructional program influences senioritis by not emphasizing and infusing into the curriculum and instructional program the critical attributes identified as essential in the literature review and exploratory research as practices that work to mitigate the causes of senioritis. Student survey data, teacher survey data, and focus group data, support this finding. Curriculum guide analysis and program of study analysis lend further support to the findings.

Shared construction of meaningful learning experiences between teachers and students is an attribute of the curriculum and instructional program that this dissertation research finds notably lacking. Personalized learning experiences that support a shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, particularly portfolios, public exhibition of applied knowledge, and seminars are not a significant part of the high school learning experience. Students in the higher ability groups report having these personalized learning experiences to some degree, though not in the early high school years. These learning experiences are dramatically lacking in the high school experience of lower ability groups at all grade levels, notably including the senior year.

Cultivating the intrinsic valuing of learning, a critical attribute essential in alleviating senioritis, is found to be inadequate in the curriculum and instructional program. Though students may report school inspires them to learn new things, particularly in the early high school years, grades are overwhelmingly the motivator for them to do school work. Achieving high grades for acceptance into college is the primary motivating factor found in the research. When

this extrinsic reward is achieved, there does not appear to be an intrinsic motivation for learning to fill the void left by the external reward being accomplished. Interestingly, students in the lower ability groups report grades as a motivator in much fewer numbers than their peers in higher ability groups do. Students in the highest grouping, particularly in the IB program in the senior year, find inspiration in the challenges of the program and its interdisciplinary design.

Providing students with opportunities to study topics they have personally chosen encourages the critical attribute of personal ownership of schoolwork in students. This attribute contributes to creating a high school experience that counteracts the problem of senioritis and, as this dissertation research finds, is emphasized in the curriculum and instructional program. However, the choice seems to be limited to a student's experience with being able to select from a menu of elective classes, particularly in the higher grades, rather than choosing topics for study. Furthermore, this research finds the elective program does not appeal to the personal choices of students in lower ability classes and provides limited options beyond those established in the program of studies. Opportunities to study topics of personal choosing within the classroom, as part of students schoolwork, is rarely mentioned in this research data and does not seem to be part of the high school curriculum and instructional program with the exception of students in the highest ability grouped classes, specifically the IB program.

Making connections between schoolwork and students' post-secondary plans is a critical attribute identified in the external literature as an important ingredient of a high school curriculum and instructional program, particularly for seniors, and lessens the problem of senioritis. This dissertation research finds the curriculum and instructional program supportive of students' post-secondary plans. Preparation for post-secondary plans, particularly college, is emphasized in the research findings more so than direct links or connections. Though

connections are made, this research finds it is more in terms of preparation for post-secondary work in college rather than a link with what they are studying or doing now and what they will be studying or doing in the future. Students in lower ability groups find little connection between schoolwork and their post-secondary plans to a greater degree than those in higher ability groups.

Research Question Two

Research question two seeks to find how the expectations students have for themselves as seniors and for their senior year contribute to senioritis. Based on the extensive literature review and exploratory research, the following critical attributes provided the framework for the research. They are consistent level of academic expectations and the possible change in those expectations, expectation for academic rigor, and expectations for post-secondary preparation for college and the workplace.

Data Collection

Student survey. The student survey described in the methodology and detailed in the data collection for research question one was also used for research question two. The survey responses for the aggregate of the 564 student respondents to the rating statements on research question two can be found in Appendix K. The survey question addressing research question two also asked students to rate seven statements on a four point Likert scale. The survey questions designed for research question two were directed at the following critical attributes: consistent level of academic expectations and the possible change in those expectations, expectation for academic rigor, and expectations for post-secondary preparation students in all grades held for themselves when anticipating their senior year experience. Positive or favorable responses were those that strongly agreed or agreed with expectations that supported consistent

levels of academic achievement, enrollment in challenging classes, and serious academic preparation for post-secondary plans. Reversal statements were included, and the response of disagree or strongly disagree to those items is considered a favorable or positive response.

Rising senior focus group. Focus group discussions were held with two randomly selected groups of rising seniors in the Lincoln Regional High School District as discussed in the methodology. The discussions were held in the first full week of school in the library classroom for approximately one hour. The discussions were digitally recorded, later transcribed using a data transcription service, then analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

Freshmen interviews. Interviews were conducted with randomly selected rising freshmen in the Lincoln Regional High School District as described in the methodology. The interviews were held for approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, then analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

Findings

Research question two: How do the expectations students have for themselves as seniors and for their senior year contribute to senioritis?

Finding one. The research finds a student's expectation of a decline in academic effort in the second semester of the senior year increases considerably as student's progress through high school, with a significant majority of seniors having an expectation that their academic effort will decline in the second semester. This trend is further supported by data revealing that, though the majority of students expect to give a consistent academic effort throughout their senior year, when specifically asked about their academic effort in the second semester, the

majority anticipate a decline in effort. The expectation for a consistent academic effort throughout the senior year declines as students progress through the grade levels. Furthermore, the data find that though this is consistent across ability groupings, students in higher ability groupings expect a decline in their academic effort in the second semester in greater numbers than their peers in lower ability groups. This is further supported by data showing students in higher ability groupings expect less consistency in their academic effort throughout the senior year than their peers in lower ability groups.

When asked to respond to the expectation of a decline in academic effort in the second semester of the senior year, 69.7% of seniors strongly agree or agree that they expect their academic effort to decline in the second semester of their senior year, an unfavorable response to the statement. Seniors respond favorably to this statement at a 30.4% rate by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with a Likert rating average of 2.14. This is compared to a favorable response to the statement of 70.4% from freshman with a Likert rating average of 2.84, 56.8% from sophomores with a Likert rating average of 2.59, and 53.2% from juniors with a Likert rating average of 2.51 (see Table 18).

Seniors expectations for consistent academic effort throughout the senior year is less than the expectations of other grade levels with a considerable move away from a positive response as students progress through their high school years. Table 19 shows seniors responded favorably to the statement on the expectation of maintaining a consistent level of academic effort throughout the senior year at a 63.7% rate with a Likert rating average of 2.73, juniors 79.0% with a Likert rating average of 3.04, sophomores 81.6% with a Likert rating average of 3.04, and freshman 86.9% with a Likert rating average of 3.3.

Table 18

Student Survey Response: Change in Academic Expectation by Grade Level

		I am a:				Response Totals
		FRESHMAN	SOPHOMORE	JUNIOR	SENIOR	
My academic effort will most likely decline in the second semester of my senior year.	Strongly Agree	7.7% (7)	4.8% (6)	13.8% (22)	23.8% (43)	
	Agree	22.0% (20)	38.4% (48)	33.1% (53)	45.9% (83)	
	Disagree	49.5% (45)	49.6% (62)	41.9% (67)	22.7% (41)	
	Strongly Disagree	20.9% (19)	7.2% (9)	11.3% (18)	7.7% (14)	
rating average		2.16 (91)	2.41 (125)	2.49 (160)	2.86 (181)	2.54 (557)

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts to 2.84, 2.59, 2.51, 2.14, and 2.46 respectively.

The data illustrate that though students indicate they will maintain a consistent effort throughout the year, when specifically asked about expectations for a decline in effort in the second semester, the majority of seniors and close to half of the juniors and close to half of the sophomores respond that they expect a decline in their effort in the second semester of their senior year.

Focus group data from rising seniors, seniors in the early weeks of senior year, support the survey data. The data find a majority of seniors indicating a decline in their level of academic effort as the year progresses. Similar to the survey data, students comment that they expect to give a consistent academic effort throughout the year. However, consistent with the survey data, the majority conclude their comments with an admission that their effort will most

Table 19

Student Survey Response: Academic Expectation by Grade Level

		I am a:				Response Totals
		FRESHMAN	SOPHOMORE	JUNIOR	SENIOR	
I expect my level of academic effort to remain consistent throughout my senior year.	Strongly Agree	44.0% (40)	24.0% (30)	28.4% (46)	14.8% (27)	
	Agree	42.9% (39)	57.6% (72)	50.6% (82)	48.9% (89)	
	Disagree	12.1% (11)	16.8% (21)	17.3% (28)	30.8% (56)	
	Strongly Disagree	1.1% (1)	1.6% (2)	3.7% (6)	5.5% (10)	
rating average		3.30 (91)	3.04 (125)	3.04 (162)	2.73 (182)	2.98 (560)

likely decline as the year progresses. “Senior year I know I got to work hard and everything because it’s my senior year, but at the same time you know you say it’s your senior year so you kind of just want to relax and do nothing, just have it go through as easier”. Some hope to give a consistent effort. “I want to get better grades and I want...when I get into a college I want them to see that I’m still going to be working hard – hopefully”. “I don’t think it has that ability to let up that much, but I’m sure it’s going to be that way”. The majority point to the college admissions and acceptance timetable as the cause of their decline in effort. Once they have been accepted into college, most students responded that they expect to give less effort to their academic work. “To me once you get into college then you realize that it’s not that important any more, this school”. One student summarizes:

Yeah, and I think along with that it is kind of like we’ve always been told, “Well, if you don’t get good grades you’re not getting into college”, so it’s always been our motives for

doing well. But once we're in it's gonna be like, okay, so I've done that, so I can just like relax a little bit until that next step.

Others report similar thoughts, "The first half of the year is still like very important. Like colleges look at that....Once you're into college, though, I think you can kind of cool it down. It's like not necessarily the most important thing".

Interview data indicate that these expectations are formulated as early as the first year in high school. Although the survey data finds underclassmen responding more favorably than seniors with respect to maintaining a consistent level of academic effort throughout their senior year, many freshmen interviewed already have an expectation for a decline in effort in the senior year. The essence of freshman expectations is found in the following quotes. "I think as I said before, like the first half of the year I'd give a lot more effort than the second half of the year. Just judging by like what the older seniors say I guess that's how it is...". "I think I'll probably like already apply for college... like then you'll get accepted. And then I would think your senior year isn't going to mean as much". However, some freshmen commented favorably supporting the survey findings, yet still have their doubts. "Probably nothing too overboard, but still normal, because I'm not a bad student. So I guess I'll still try my best".

As the data in table 20 illustrate, students in the higher ability groups expect their academic effort to be consistent at a lower average and Likert rating average than students in lower ability groupings. The AP and IB students responded favorably at an average of 52.3% and 67.9% respectively with respective Likert rating averages of 2.48 and 2.88 that they will maintain a consistent level of academic effort throughout their senior year. Students point to the end of the external assessments, the IB and AP exams, as the time when they expect to give less

of a consistent effort to their schoolwork. “Well, I’m in IB so I’m expecting heavy workloads up until like May, and then it’ll just stop”.

Table 20

Student Survey Response: Academic Expectation by Ability Group

		ADVANCED	ACADEMIC	HONORS	AP	IB	Response Totals
I expect my level of academic effort to remain consistent throughout my senior year.	Strongly Agree	22.8% (44)	23.9% (11)	34.8% (48)	11.9% (5)	24.5% (26)	
	Agree	58.0% (112)	58.7% (27)	45.7% (63)	40.5% (17)	43.4% (46)	
	Disagree	17.6% (34)	13.0% (8)	18.8% (26)	31.0% (13)	27.4% (29)	
	Strongly Disagree	1.6% (3)	4.3% (2)	0.7% (1)	16.7% (7)	4.7% (5)	
rating average		3.02 (193)	3.02 (46)	3.14 (138)	2.48 (42)	2.88 (108)	2.98 (525)

“Well, I know our AP teachers and for IB, they know that we’re going to be like checked out once the test is over”. Those in the advanced and academic classes responded favorably at an 80.8% and 82.6% rate with a Likert rating average of 3.02. This trend is further supported by data from statement four (see Table 21) asking students their expectation for a decline in academic effort in the second semester of their senior year. Only 23.8% of AP students and 41.9% of IB students disagreed or strongly disagreed, in this case a favorable response, with a Likert rating average of 1.88 and 2.37 respectively. In comparison, the average for advanced students was 50.6% for a Likert rating average of 2.49 and academic students 57.8 for a Likert rating average of 2.51. This data supports the finding that students in the higher academic ability groups anticipate a decline in their academic effort in the second semester of their senior year at greater rates than their peers in the lower academic ability groups. Nevertheless, the data

indicate that in all academic groupings, across all the grade levels, anywhere from 40% to 70% of the students expect a decline in their academic effort.

Table 21

Student Survey Response: Change in Academic Expectation by Ability Group

		The majority of my classes are (choose one).					
		ADVANCED	ACADEMIC	HONORS	AP	IB	Response Totals
My academic effort will most likely decline in the second semester of my senior year.	Strongly Agree	13.0% (25)	13.3% (6)	4.3% (6)	38.1% (16)	19.0% (20)	
	Agree	36.5% (70)	28.9% (13)	35.5% (49)	38.1% (16)	39.0% (41)	
	Disagree	39.1% (75)	51.1% (23)	47.8% (66)	21.4% (9)	27.6% (29)	
	Strongly Disagree	11.5% (22)	6.7% (3)	12.3% (17)	2.4% (1)	14.3% (15)	
rating average		2.51 (192)	2.49 (45)	2.32 (138)	3.12 (42)	2.63 (105)	2.53 (522)

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts to 2.49, 2.51, 2.68, 1.88, 2.37 and, 2.47 respectively.

Finding two. The research finds that students’ expectation for academic rigor in their senior year varies considerably by ability grouping. Although a small majority of students in the academic ability group plans to have an academically challenging year, a rather large percentage plans on their senior year being an easy year of schoolwork. The data reveal students in lower ability groupings plan to enroll in less challenging classes and make their senior year an easy year of schoolwork in greater numbers than their peers in higher ability grouped classes. Seniors in the lower ability groups overwhelmingly plan to make their senior year a less challenging academic year. This finding is consistent between both high schools and among the grade levels.

An expectation for enrolling in challenging classes in the senior year, statement two, and the reversal statement of enrolling in less challenging classes, statement five, supports the finding. Students enrolled in the most academically challenging classes expect to continue to enroll in challenging classes at very high rates, over 90%. Programmatically, this is to be expected as focus group data reveal. Students that voluntarily identified themselves in focus group discussion as being in the higher ability groupings supported this expectation; simply stated they "... expect it to be academically rigorous". Survey data found in Table 22 reveal those enrolled in the lower ability groups expect to enroll in challenging classes in their senior year at a 60.9% rate. Close to 40% of students in the lowest ability grouping respond unfavorably to the statement. The reversal statement finds a similar response with 45.7% of those students in the lower ability group responding unfavorably by expecting to enroll in less challenging classes while their peers in higher ability groups again responded favorably at high rates.

Lower ability grouped students in academic classes, along with those in the advanced level classes, expect to make their senior year an easy year of schoolwork at higher rates than their peers in higher ability groups. Academic and advanced level students respond favorably by disagreeing or strongly disagreeing to this statement at a 42.2% response rate and a 56.8% response rate respectively, with a 2.24 and a 2.63 Likert rating average. In comparison, those in the higher ability groupings have a Likert rating average response of 3.07 for honors, 2.79 for AP and a 3.29 for IB, at a 78.4%, 66.6%, and 84.5% respective response rate (see Table 23).

Table 22

Student Survey Response: Expectation for Academic Rigor by Ability Group

		The majority of my classes are (choose one).					
		ADVANCED	ACADEMIC	HONORS	AP	IB	Response Totals
I anticipate enrolling in academically challenging classes in my senior year.	Strongly Agree	24.9% (48)	15.2% (7)	59.4% (82)	47.6% (20)	81.0% (85)	
	Agree	55.4% (107)	45.7% (21)	36.2% (50)	45.2% (19)	18.1% (19)	
	Disagree	19.2% (37)	37.0% (17)	3.6% (5)	7.1% (3)	1.0% (1)	
	Strongly Disagree	0.5% (1)	2.2% (1)	0.7% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	
rating average		3.05 (193)	2.74 (46)	3.54 (138)	3.40 (42)	3.80 (105)	3.33 (524)
In my senior year I intend on enrolling in classes I think will be less academically challenging.	Strongly Agree	4.1% (8)	10.9% (5)	1.4% (2)	2.4% (1)	0.0% (0)	
	Agree	30.6% (59)	34.8% (16)	9.4% (13)	16.7% (7)	3.8% (4)	
	Disagree	47.2% (91)	41.3% (19)	49.3% (68)	57.1% (24)	38.7% (41)	
	Strongly Disagree	18.1% (35)	13.0% (6)	39.9% (55)	23.8% (10)	57.5% (61)	
rating average		2.21 (193)	2.43 (46)	1.72 (138)	1.98 (42)	1.46 (106)	1.93 (525)

Note. Rating average of second statement reversal item converts to 2.79, 2.57, 3.28, 3.02, 3.54, and 3.07 respectively.

When filtering responses by seniors with their ability group, the expectation for the lower ability groups to make their senior year an easy one is more pronounced. Seventy percent of academic level seniors respond unfavorably and 54.9% of seniors in advanced groups respond unfavorably expecting to make their senior year an easy year of schoolwork.

Table 23

Student Survey Response: Expectation of Academic Rigor by Ability Group

		The majority of my classes are (choose one).					
		ADVANCED	ACADEMIC	HONORS	AP	IB	Response Totals
I expect to make my senior year an easy year of schoolwork for me.	Strongly Agree	7.3% (14)	26.7% (12)	2.2% (3)	7.1% (3)	2.9% (3)	
	Agree	35.9% (89)	31.1% (14)	19.4% (26)	26.2% (11)	12.6% (13)	
	Disagree	43.2% (83)	33.3% (15)	47.8% (64)	47.6% (20)	36.9% (38)	
	Strongly Disagree	13.5% (26)	8.9% (4)	30.6% (41)	19.0% (8)	47.6% (49)	
rating average		2.37 (192)	2.76 (45)	1.93 (134)	2.21 (42)	1.71 (103)	2.15 (516)

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts to 2.63, 2.24, 3.07, 2.79, 3.29, and 2.85 respectively.

Focus group data support the survey finding. Though not asked to identify their ability group, the majority of students responded that they wanted to make the year less rigorous in some way. They accomplish this by enrolling in less challenging courses as this student asserts:

I want it to kind of be easier, because ever since I came here I've been like I couldn't wait for like my senior year, and I thought it was going to be just really easy and everything. So I kind of just want it to be like a pretty easy year.

Trying to find a balance between challenging classes or those perceived to be less challenging, another student maintains:

I chose classes that I knew would be easier for me, except for the harder classes are classes that I really like, so I know I'll enjoy it without having to stress over it as much.

So like my year is easier, but the harder classes I'm taking, I actually enjoy taking, so I don't mind taking the harder classes.

Along with attempting to complete requirements in the junior year to find room in schedules to take courses of interest as this student acknowledges:

Kind of what C said. Like I kind of piled it on last year so I would have a little better time this year. Like I decided to take science because I like have a science requirement for graduating, so I got that out of the way last year so I could take an elective this year. So I kind of tried to adjust it that way.

Interviews with freshmen further support these findings as they begin to formulate their own expectations for academic rigor in the senior year. Freshman students give a mixed response with some indicating they expect to enroll in challenging classes and have a rigorous year and others who clearly state they are looking for a relatively easy year.

Finding three. The research finds that students plan on their senior year being a time of serious academic preparation for college and their post-secondary plans. However, a significant number of seniors indicate their academic effort will be minimized once their post-secondary plans are established. This finding is consistent between high schools, among ability groups, and among grade levels.

Students responded favorably to their senior year being a time for serious academic preparation for college and/or the workplace with 79% of the students giving a favorable response with a Likert rating average of 3.02. Students also reacted favorably to the effort they would give to schoolwork once they are into college or secure in their post-secondary plans. Favorable responses were recorded by 74.7% with a Likert rating average of 2.94 (see Table 24).

Table 24

Student Survey Response: Expectation of Preparation for Post-secondary Plans

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
My senior year will be a time for serious academic preparation for college and/or the workplace.	25.2% (139)	53.8% (297)	18.5% (102)	2.5% (14)	3.02	552
In my senior year, after I get into college or settle on a job, I expect to give minimal effort to my schoolwork.	5.6% (31)	19.7% (110)	49.6% (276)	25.1% (140)	2.06	557

Note. Rating average of second statement reversal item converts from 2.06 to 2.94.

Interviews with incoming freshman support the survey data, yet illustrate uncertainty as the following comment depicts:

I want to – yes and no. I want to put a lot more into like junior year, so senior year is more like, you know, it’s the last time I’m going to be with my friends in high school, so I want to try and focus on that too. But I also want to be prepared, too, for what’s after high school and what’s after senior year.

The data reveal that seniors expect to give minimal effort once their post-secondary plans are secured at higher rates than underclassmen. “I mean you’ll still have to make some effort, but it’s not going to be nearly as hard as you were working before to get into school”. Seniors responded unfavorably (see Table 25) to the statement by strongly agreeing or agreeing that they expect to give minimal effort to their schoolwork once they are accepted into college or settle on a job at a 39.2% rate and 2.67 Likert rating average. As one of the students stated:

I mean it’s like the only grade where you have like halfway through the year you know that you’re into college already. So at that time you realize that there’s no really good

purpose to keep going....Whereas in other grades you always have the goal of getting into college.

Juniors followed with a 24.4% unfavorable response and a 2.96 Likert rating average, sophomores 12.8% and a 3.16 Likert rating average, and freshman 16.5% and a 3.16 Likert rating average, a spread of over 27 percentage points in unfavorable responses. Explaining this decline in effort, one student offers this observation:

I mean like right now I'm still in like a junior mindset, but once I'm getting towards like getting into college it's going to be like, okay. And I noticed last year that happened too with the old seniors, like they were trying at the beginning of the year. Then they decided not to really try, and then they didn't do anything much – they were just done.

Table 25

Student Survey Response: Expectation of Preparation for Post-secondary Plans by Grade Level

		I am a:				Response Totals
		FRESHMAN	SOPHOMORE	JUNIOR	SENIOR	
In my senior year, after I get into college or settle on a job, I expect to give minimal effort to my schoolwork.	Strongly Agree	5.5% (5)	0.0% (0)	5.0% (8)	9.9% (18)	
	Agree	11.0% (10)	12.8% (16)	19.4% (31)	29.3% (53)	
	Disagree	45.1% (41)	58.4% (73)	50.6% (81)	44.8% (81)	
	Strongly Disagree	38.5% (35)	28.8% (36)	25.0% (40)	16.0% (29)	
rating average		1.84 (91)	1.84 (125)	2.04 (180)	2.33 (181)	2.06 (557)

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts to 3.16, 3.16, 2.96, 2.67, and 2.94 respectively.

Summary Synthesis and Interpretation of Findings: Research Question Two

The research findings assert that the expectations students have for themselves as seniors and for their senior year, in relation to the critical attributes consistent with the external literature and exploratory research, contribute considerably to senioritis.

Students in their senior year have a high expectation for a decline in their academic effort as the year progresses, particularly in the second semester. An expectation of giving a consistent academic effort is a critical attribute in relation to the concept of senioritis. The research clearly finds students in the upper grades anticipate having a decline in their academic effort as their senior year moves into the second semester. Many students view college acceptance and the college admission process as the cause for this decline in effort as they see the college process as the end game for them. Interestingly, students in the highest ability groups expect this decline in effort in greater numbers than their peers in lower ability grouped classes pointing to the end of external assessments in the spring as the time for them to give less effort to their academics.

The research emphasizes that the expectation for academic rigor is lowest among students in lower ability groupings. Students in the lower ability groups have an expectation of making their senior year less challenging and as easy as possible. An expectation among students for academic rigor is a critical attribute in relation to senioritis. Students' expectations for a challenging senior year can help avert several of the problems of senioritis. Many students across all ability groups attempt to shape their senior year schedule with courses they find to be easy, enjoyable, or ones they have an interest in regardless of rigor.

This dissertation research finds preparation for college and post-secondary plans is an attribute the majority of students expect of themselves in their senior year. Underclass students also expect to continue to prepare for post-secondary experiences once those plans are secured.

These expectations work to reduce the problems associated with senioritis. However, seniors have an expectation of giving less effort to preparation for post-secondary plans once those plans are known to them. This expectation seems to counteract the expectation for preparation, as serious preparation for most seniors, the research claims, wanes once the plans are known.

Student expectations contribute significantly to senioritis. Students expect to give less effort as the year progresses and enroll in less challenging classes, therefore anticipating less academic rigor. Although they expect to prepare for what comes after high school, this expectation is countered by an expectation to give less effort once they know their future plans.

Research Question Three

Research question three seeks to find how the expectations teachers have for the seniors they teach and for the senior year contribute to senioritis. Based on the extensive literature review and exploratory research, the following critical attributes provided the framework for the research: the consistent level of high academic expectations and the possible change in those expectations teachers have for the seniors they teach, the expectation for academic rigor, and the expectations for post-secondary preparation teachers have for their students.

Data Collection

Teacher survey. The teacher survey described in the methodology and detailed in the data collection for research question one was used for research question three. However, teachers were first asked in the survey if they teach or recently have taught seniors prior to accessing part two of the survey. Of the 122 teachers that took part one of the survey, 83 identified themselves as having experience teaching seniors and continued with part two of the survey. Teachers also responded to an open-ended question asking their perspective on the expectations they have for seniors as they move through the year together and the

communication of those expectations. Of the 83 teachers that took part two of the survey, 68 responded to the open-ended question. Their responses have been coded and categorized. The survey responses, for the 83 teacher respondents to the rating statements in part two of the survey, can be found in Appendix L. The survey question addressing research question three, in part two of the survey, asked teachers to rate six statements on a four point Likert scale as well. The survey questions designed for research question three were aimed at the following critical attributes: consistent level of high academic expectations and the possible change in those expectations, expectation for academic rigor, and expectations for post-secondary preparation teachers have for their students. Positive or favorable responses were those that strongly agreed or agreed with expectations that supported consistent high levels of academic expectations throughout the year and serious academic preparation for post-secondary plans. Reversal statements were included, and the response of disagree or strongly disagree to those items is considered a favorable or positive response.

Teachers of seniors interviews. Randomly selected teachers from Woodrow and Truman High Schools that teach or have taught seniors as the majority of their teaching responsibility were interviewed. Nineteen interviews with teachers took place in their respective schools and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed then analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

Guidance counselor focus group. Focus group discussions were held with guidance counselors in the Lincoln Regional High School District. These discussions lasted approximately one hour and were digitally recorded, later transcribed, analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

Findings

Research question three: How do the expectations teachers have for the seniors they teach and for the senior year contribute to senioritis?

Finding one. The research finds that there is an expectation in the Lincoln Regional High School District among teachers and counselors that the academic effort from seniors will decline as the year progresses particularly in the second semester. The research further reveals a shift in the curriculum and instructional methodology in response to this expectation of a decline in academic effort. This finding is consistent between both high schools and supported by extensive interview data, focus group data, and survey data. Historical grade and attendance analysis contributes additional support to the finding.

When teachers were surveyed (see Table 26) on the critical attribute of their expectation for the academic effort from seniors in the second semester, 84.1% responded that they strongly agree or agree a 3.17 Likert rating average, that they anticipate the seniors they teach to give less effort in class during the second semester.

Table 26

Teacher Survey Response: Teacher Expectations of Seniors

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
During the second semester, I anticipate the seniors I teach will give less effort in my class.	34.1% (28)	50.0% (41)	14.8% (12)	1.2% (1)	3.17	82

Although survey data reveal teachers anticipate maintaining consistently high academic expectations for seniors, the data also reveal teachers expect the effort from seniors to decline as the year progresses, particularly in the second semester. Extensive teacher interview data found

an overwhelming majority expected seniors to give less effort in class in the second semester. As this teacher conveyed:

My realistic expectation, or my knowledge-based, experiential-based expectation is that halfway through the year things are going to start to shut down for my seniors, and that getting them to produce at the same rate that they did in the first half of the year is going to be more difficult than it was certainly prior to that.

Guidance counselor focus group data support the finding as counselors talk of a strong start for students followed by a period where students “take a step back”. “I think in this particular building the expectation is that they get off to a very strong start to their senior year and then in the second half of the year, once the [college] decision is already made, the expectation is okay, you don’t have to put on a show any more”.

When asked if they in turn lower their expectations for the effort from seniors as the year progresses, the results found in Table 27 are mixed; 34.1% strongly agree or agree with the statement while 65.8% strongly disagree or disagree.

Table 27

Teacher Survey Response: Change in Teacher Expectations

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
My expectations for academic effort from the seniors in my classes are lowered as the year progresses.	6.1% (5)	28.0% (23)	37.8% (31)	28.0% (23)	2.12	82

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts from 2.12 to 2.88.

Interview data support this mixed result and is encapsulated in the following statement by an experienced teacher:

The academic expectations I have for my seniors is that in the beginning of the year, I expect them to be very focused and motivated, especially the ones that are driven towards getting accepted in a good college. As the year continues...my experience and my kind of rational expectation is that once the IB and the AP test are done and spring comes around and they're into college and they're 18 years old and they have cars and they're going off to, you know, on a European trip that I don't expect them to be very focused on academics.

Another teacher comments:

... I would say it would probably – it starts probably from me. I think I find myself, to be honest,... making with them probably in my language and agreement saying, “Hey, you're going to go hard until May 10, May 8, you know, whatever it may be, May 8 this year and then after that, yeah we are going to relax in here a little bit”.

In addition, while 41.3% of the teachers in the core academic program respond that their expectations for the academic effort from seniors in their classes is lowered as the year progresses only 30.7% of teachers in the elective program responded in the same way (see Table 28). The teachers in the elective program, particularly music and art, point to the culminating performance or portfolio exhibition as a reason to maintain high expectations through the end of the year, as the following teacher details:

You could tell the students were coming in with lower expectations about what they were supposed to be doing and I said this: in your other classes that you're maybe winding down, but musically as you get to a concert it has to be more intense. Every rehearsal has to be more intense. You've got to be better at the music. You have to be more energetic. The rehearsals have to be more energetic because if they're not they're not like

performance. I mean performance has to be the highest energy you can give and you have to rehearse at the same level as you perform.

Table 28

Teacher Survey Response: Change in Teacher Expectations by Program

		I teach in the (choose one):		Response Totals
		ELECTIVE PROGRAM	CORE ACADEMIC PROGRAM	
My expectations for academic effort from the seniors in my classes are lowered as the year progresses.	Strongly Agree	3.8% (1)	8.7% (4)	
	Agree	26.9% (7)	32.6% (15)	
	Disagree	34.6% (9)	37.0% (17)	
	Strongly Disagree	34.6% (9)	21.7% (10)	
rating average		2.00 (26)	2.28 (46)	2.18 (72)

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts to 3.0, 2.72, and 2.82 respectively.

Significant data gathered from the open-ended response question answered by 68 teaching faculty commenting on the expectations they have for seniors as they move through the year together overwhelming support these findings. Teachers write of the high expectations they have for seniors, yet expecting a decline in academic effort by their senior students. Their comments range from those that see a mild change in the second semester to a greater number expressing frustration at the decline in academic effort. The following quotes capture the essence of this range in perspective. From the mild, “I demand that seniors put in the same effort to their work throughout the year; however, I do anticipate that this does not happen”. In

addition, “I anticipate that the seniors will give less effort as the year progress, but I will not reduce my expectations”. To those expressing a great deal of frustration and resignation:

In January, seniors are as engaged as students were during the entire first semester. By February, the seniors are "finished". It is at this point where I find I have to threaten (unsuccessfully) all sorts of things just to get the students to be interested in course material. By early May, the course has become one of “edutainment”.

Sadly, I do feel that my expectations lower somewhat at the end of the year. I find that it is hard to continue at the same rate of work at the end of the year as we did in the beginning of the year. I find that this is a challenge for everyone involved especially in an Advanced level class as opposed to an IB/AP class where the "test" looms over everyone's heads and can provide more motivation to continue on at a good pace.

End of year course grades provide evidence that expectations may indeed be lowered.

Historical grade data reveal that aggregate senior year final grades as measured by the number of A's, B's, C's, D's, and F's, are consistent with or even higher than earlier years in high school. An analysis of aggregate historical attendance finds that seniors are absent or tardy to school in much greater numbers than any other grade level. Seniors tend to be absent or tardy more often than underclassmen, yet their final grades remain consistent or actually improve over their other years in high school (see figures 1-12).

Many comment on the need to adjust their instructional strategies in response to the anticipated decline in effort. “It is unrealistic to expect seniors to maintain the effort and attention necessary to succeed with demanding tasks such as research, writing, calculations, detailed observation or analysis. Recognizing this, I try to design lessons toward the end of the year that are less demanding”. Others respond: “I do not lower my expectations as the year

progresses. However, I do emphasize activities that have intrinsic value". Curriculum guide analysis finds no specific benchmark dates for accomplishing curriculum course content, goals, and objectives or a shift in instructional strategy as the year progresses. However, end of course exams in AP and IB classes typically begin the first week of May and are completed within two to three weeks. End of course exams in core courses typically begin in the third week of June and complete in four to five days. Teachers' shift in instructional and curricular strategy, the research reveals, is in response to a shift in senior year academic expectations.

Finding two. The research finds that teachers and counselors expect to maintain high academic expectations for the seniors in the Lincoln Regional High School District throughout the year; however, teachers identify specific points of reference throughout the year where they find it necessary to adjust their expectations. When surveyed, teachers overwhelmingly state they maintain consistently high expectations for their students throughout the year. Yet, in extensive interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with counselors, and teacher responses to the survey's open-ended question, the research finds that the expectations fall short of the full school year in response to institutional challenges created by college admission and the early external assessment process. This is consistent with finding one above where the research reveals teachers alter their instructional and curricular methodology in response to a decline in academic expectations:

What rings in my head is a little bit of a self-evaluation of how much do I allow what I expect to get actually influence the way in which I manage the classroom. I think a great deal, believe it or not, sadly to say. Although I believe I try and keep expectations at a high level, I know that my expectation base diminishes in the second half of the year, in practice.

The survey data reveal (see Table 29) 95.2% of the teacher respondents strongly agree or agree, with a 3.47 Likert rating average, that they maintain consistently high academic expectations for the seniors they teach throughout the year.

Table 29

Teacher Survey Response: Level of Academic Expectation

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
I maintain consistently high academic expectations for the seniors I teach throughout the year.	51.8% (43)	43.4% (36)	4.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	3.47	83

Overwhelmingly, teachers interviewed stated they maintain high expectations for the seniors they teach throughout the year. However, a large majority acknowledge those expectations are stymied in response to the decline in academic effort they expect from seniors as the year progresses, particularly after students have been accepted into college and after the culmination of spring IB and AP external assessment.

College acceptance establishes a benchmark for an attitudinal shift in seniors as perceived by teachers and counselors. One teacher summarizes:

I feel they see college admission as a turning point.... I think they get accepted and then the pressure's off and they lose enthusiasm.... I think by now they feel detached from school as a learning institution and more as a socializing tool, as they see this as the last opportunity to hang out with their friends.

Guidance counselors' find:

... once they get in, then I think they throttle back. Not that they – I'm not saying they throw in the towel; they do have to be encouraged and all that... I mean for three and a half years we've been preaching at them, "You got to do this, this and this to get into

college.” And finally they’ve got that piece of paper, and...“Yeah, I’m going to coast a little bit.”

The majority of teachers share the following sentiment:

...most of the time in September ready to work and then by October, November, December they’re doing their college applications and they’re getting accepted to college early January and then you start hearing the questions, “When are we gonna stop doing stuff? Why are we still doing stuff? I got into college. I’m not going into math in college? Why do I need to know this?” They definitely feel that they should – they don’t need to complete a full school year of academic information.

Significant data, supporting the finding, can be found in the open-ended response question relevant to college acceptance being a critical benchmark in the shift in academic effort by seniors. Teachers write of the influence the college acceptance has on students’ academic effort moving forward. Clearly stated: “Once accepted to their college of choice, most seniors lower their own standards, even the best and the brightest of the group. Its either human nature or western hemisphere nature. I lower my expectations accordingly”. Similarly affirmed: “Once they get that letter, they assume senior year is over. I expect them to be real students until the end, but most have little interest once they are accepted to a college”.

External assessments in IB and AP courses begin the first week of May and signal the end of serious academic coursework for students enrolled in those programs. The expectation for a drastic decline in academic effort for students taking those exams is acknowledged in teachers approach to the school year. “What do you do now after their exams are over? And what’s their incentive now to perform for three or four weeks of school”? One frustrated teacher commented on the difficulties of teaching during this testing sequence:

It's a terrible – it's impossible to teach during that time period. For those three weeks, any day – there was one day I had 6 out of 26 kids in the class and then the next day you've got, you know, 18 and then the next day they're all there. And then, you know, in one section, in my morning section, maybe they're all there. In my afternoon section, they're not. It's chaos. Everything is disrupted and then you're trying to pick up the pieces after what they've been through. No, I think that's a real problem with our schedule at the end of the year, that they – that testing period sets the tone of okay, school is over. Then you've got another month after that.

As found in the open-ended comments many teachers find that after the external tests there is little expectation for continued academic effort. One teacher comments, "I have high expectations for my seniors throughout the year...until testing is done". This is reiterated by the following comment, "I maintain high expectations throughout the year but find it difficult after AP and IB exams are completed". As well as this teacher's declaration, "Therefore, our course is very serious up to that AP exam".

Finding three. The research finds that though there is an expectation that seniors will prepare for the challenges of post-secondary education and the workplace, there is a strong expectation among teachers of seniors that the college admission process will be seen by seniors as more important than academic preparation for their post-secondary plans.

Teachers overwhelmingly respond that they expect the seniors they teach to prepare for the challenges of post-secondary school and/or the workplace with 87.9% responding favorably to the statement with a 3.2 Likert rating average. However, many teachers, 38.3% with a 2.32 Likert rating average, also respond that they think the college admissions process is more

important to the seniors they teach than academic preparation for college (see Table 30 & Table 31).

Table 30

Teacher Survey Response: Expectation for Post-secondary Preparation

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
I expect the seniors I teach to prepare in my class for the challenges of post-secondary school and/or the workplace.	34.9% (29)	53.0% (44)	9.8% (8)	2.4% (2)	3.20	83

Table 31

Teacher Survey Response: Expectation for Post-secondary Preparation and the College Process

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
I expect the college application/admissions process to be more important to the seniors I teach than academic preparation for college.	7.4% (6)	30.9% (25)	48.1% (39)	13.6% (11)	2.32	81

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts from 2.32 to 2.68.

Considerable data from focus group discussions with guidance counselors and interviews with teachers support the survey data. The conflicting belief among counselors and teachers is characterized in the following comment from a focus group discussion with counselors:

From the student perspective, it's getting in. Now from our perspective the two go hand-in-hand. You're taking a rigorous curriculum because it prepares the student for the rigor of college, and therefore by being prepared, the colleges will want them. So the ticket to get accepted is having done the preparation. But the students are looking at it from a

different perspective. The preparation aspect for what they're going to do in college is less important than getting in the door.

This response is further reflected with this additional comment from focus group discussion with counselors. "Even some of the strongest students would still say, 'Hey, I've got in the door. This is my last chance to just have fun. I'll work next year'".

Interviews with teachers clearly indicate they expect the seniors they teach to prepare for the challenges of post-secondary school and/or the workplace. When asked in individual interviews teachers respond favorably that they expect students to prepare for their post-secondary experiences. "...college especially, but we can look at the workplace if we're talking about organization and deadlines and stuff like that then yes". Most view it as an outcome of the course work and not necessarily a purposeful connection between high school and students post-secondary plans. "So in a way, yes, like the content that we're covering and the skills that they're learning are things that are absolutely going to be relevant for them to be successful". Some mention independent research projects as preparation, others speak of essay assignments that may mirror college requirements, others talk of writing and reading skills they incorporate and stress to students as needed skills for post-secondary experiences. "In terms of their writing especially to prepare them. And I always mention that too – this is the kind of assignment you're going to be doing in college for instance. I'll say that when I give an assignment". These expectations for post-secondary preparation among the seniors they teach are tempered by the expectation that seniors view college acceptance as more important than preparation for post-secondary experiences. "I mean it's hard to even convince them that they will need to know this....They want to get to college and pursue whatever they want".

As illustrated in Table 32, teachers in the elective program strongly agree or agree at a 50% response total that they expect the college admissions process to be more important to the seniors they teach than academic preparation for college while teachers in the core program respond at a 35% rate.

Table 32

Teacher Survey Response: Expectation for Post-secondary Preparation and the College Process by Ability Group

		I teach in the (choose one):		Response Totals
		ELECTIVE PROGRAM	CORE ACADEMIC PROGRAM	
I expect the college application/admissions process to be more important to the seniors I teach than academic preparation for college.	Strongly Agree	7.7% (2)	6.7% (3)	
	Agree	42.3% (11)	28.9% (13)	
	Disagree	34.6% (9)	51.1% (23)	
	Strongly Disagree	15.4% (4)	13.3% (6)	
rating average		2.42 (26)	2.29 (45)	2.34 (71)

Note. Rating average of this reversal item converts to 2.58, 2.71, and 2.66 respectively.

Nevertheless, large majorities of teachers in both groups respond that they expect the seniors they teach to prepare for the challenges of post-secondary school and the workplace.

As one teacher summarizes:

I don't see them preparing themselves for the workplace at all. I see them preparing themselves possibly for college, but I don't know how much of the college experience you can really bring them and I don't know if by the end of the year or as the senior

progresses, whether you're fighting what they believe college is going to be as opposed to what you feel college would be.

This view is supported by many other teachers as they indicate preparation for post-secondary experiences is not a priority for students and is something students view as being distant from them as seniors in high school:

I think that we are often reflecting on what the college experience is like, but I think it is distant for most of them...I think many of them read it as a restart to their freshman year in high school in the sense that there's going to be some, I don't want to say coddling, but some introductory process that will help them to engage...I think they expect to be slowly brought into the college experience in the academic sense.

Summary Synthesis and Interpretation of Findings: Research Question Three

The research findings assert that the expectations teachers have for the seniors they teach and for the senior year, in relation to the critical attributes consistent with the external literature and exploratory research, contribute considerably to senioritis. Furthermore, the research finds teacher expectations for consistent high levels of academic expectations often conflict with student actions resulting in a shift in teacher expectations.

Teachers overwhelmingly expect to maintain high expectations for the seniors they teach throughout the year. However, teachers also expect the seniors they teach will give less effort to academics as the year progresses. This certainly establishes a conflict with teacher expectations and the academic effort they anticipate they will receive from seniors. Many teachers respond by changing their expectations and alter their curriculum and instructional strategies, still others struggle through a period of frustration that in some instances is a mild acceptance of the decline in effort to intense frustration. Teachers and counselors point to institutional challenges created

by the college admissions process and early external assessment as hindering their effort to maintain consistently high academic expectations throughout the senior year. This tension in expectations establishes an untenable balance between teachers' expectations and student actions.

Similarly, teachers overwhelmingly have the expectation that seniors will prepare for the challenges of post-secondary education and the workplace, yet this also conflicts with the actions of senior students. Though teachers and counselors emphasize the need for preparation for students' future plans they find that once these plans are established student preparation and effort declines. Most teachers view the preparation for post-secondary plans as an outcome of the coursework and course content. Many do not make a purposeful connection with students' plans following high school and in turn, students see the preparation as losing import once their plans are known.

Teacher expectations are often in conflict with student behavior and student expectations. The oppositional forces created between teacher expectations and reality compromise the critical attributes necessary to offset the onset of senioritis.

Research Question Four

Research question four seeks to find to what extent do the mental models of cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and norms surrounding the senior year in high school sustain senioritis. The structures, patterns, and events of the high school senior year that contribute to senioritis are evident in the literature and in the exploratory research. The exploration of the thinking that may or may not sustain the concept of senioritis in the Lincoln Regional High School district provided the framework for the research.

Data Collection

Building level administrator interviews. Interviews were held with building level administrators in both Woodrow and Truman High Schools. The building Principals, Assistant Principals, and Directors of Guidance from each building were interviewed for approximately 45 minutes each in their respective schools. The eight interviews were digitally recorded, later transcribed, analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

District level administrator focus group. A focus group discussion was held with the Superintendent, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Staff Development, and Director of Special Services in the Lincoln Regional High School District. The discussion were held in the conference room of the district office building and lasted approximately one hour. The discussion was digitally recorded, later transcribed, analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

Non-teaching faculty open-ended survey questionnaire. The non-teaching faculty, comprised of child study team, nurses, student assistance counselors, and librarians were given an open-ended questionnaire as described in the methodology. The questionnaire was sent to 18 non-teaching faculty members with seven responding. The responses were collected, analyzed, categorized, and coded with the findings and results described in this chapter.

Findings

Research question four: To what extent do the mental models of cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and norms surrounding the senior year in high school sustain senioritis?

Finding one. When building level administrators, district level administrators, and non-teaching faculty were asked to respond to questions on their own beliefs and attitudes about the

senior year in high school focus group, interview, and questionnaire data generated the following recurring patterns and themes. The data reveal a mental model of the senior year as a year being overwhelmed by the college process. Furthermore, the data find a year dominated by transitions to experiences beyond high school. The research finds that the mental models associated with the senior year of high school in the Lincoln Regional High School District support and sustain the concept of senioritis.

Interview data with building level administrators in both schools found a large majority (7 of 8) believed the senior year was dictated by the college admissions experience. Questionnaire data collected from the non-teaching faculty supported this with four of seven reporting the college process as being a prevailing part of the senior year experience. Focus group discussion with district level administrators provided data that revealed participants frequently commenting on the college process as driving the senior year. This mental model of emphasis on the college admissions process, as the data illustrates, becomes the primary focus in the early months of the senior year and minimizes the academic credibility of the later months. Building level administrators interview comments are encapsulated in the following quote:

I think it's part of this system of college acceptance that's driving this, but it's almost like it's a disconnect of the senior year....I think there's a disconnect of what we're trying to accomplish academically and what the real world of college acceptance wants students to do.

Remarking on the college application an administrator observes: "That seems to be that culminating event that they're all striving for in that college application... and once that application is out, there seems to be a little bit of an attitude like my job is done". This attitude and belief is further supported by an experienced administrator's comment, "...so although the

courses may continue, I seriously think, from my experience...that senior year basically ends by first semester, January”.

Questionnaire data finds non- teaching faculty supporting this mental model:

I think that once a student has determined which college he/she will be attending, it's a "done deal" and little effort is necessary in school. Maybe this attitude occurs once the applications are in the mail! This personal attitude may have historically emerged from societal views regarding finishing up your high school education and moving on to college.

Focus group discussion with district level administrators, recognizing the emphasis on the college process in the senior year, finds them questioning the current state of the high school senior year. One district level administrator summarizes in this response:

I think it's just, it's kind of sad for me to watch kids in high school now to say well I'm going to college. I want to do this. I want to do that. Instead of saying who am I and how am I developing right now as a person. And it has to do a lot with society. I really feel, I feel very strongly about that, that high schools have to just look at themselves, where are we going? What are we doing, and what's our purpose here?

In summary, a district level administrator comments on the need to respond to a mental model that the college process eclipses the senior year. “I don't want to give into that in the sense of saying okay well that means we're going to let them go, because I think that's an abrogation of our responsibilities of running a comprehensive high school”.

Additionally, the data find significant discussion of the transitional nature of the senior year as being an essential mental model associated with the senior year. Questionnaire data find five of seven responding to the transitional nature of the senior year. Interview data and focus

group data support the belief of this being a transitional year and further point to the need for preparation for what is to come next. Focus group discussion highlighted the transitional nature of the senior year and the need for readiness skills for post-secondary experiences, "...and it is, it's college readiness, it's workplace readiness". "When I think about transition, I think how well prepared is this student to take the next step"?

Building administrators speak of the transition as a year of searching. "It's a question year, I think, for seniors trying to figure out where they are, where they're going, for us to try to figure out for them and help them figure out where they are and where they're going". Non-teaching faculty share the belief as they stress, "It is an important transition year as students' futures are creeping up on them and some are not sure what they are going to do".

Finding two. When building level administrators, district level administrators, and non-teaching faculty were asked to respond to questions about their own attitudes and beliefs regarding seniors in high school focus group, interview, and questionnaire data generated the following recurring patterns and themes. The data reveal a mental model of the high school senior as a young person to some extent disengaged with the academic aspect of their final year in high school, under stress to determine their post-secondary plans, and immersed in activities that are co-curricular, social, and celebratory. The research finds that the mental models associated with the senior year of high school in the Lincoln Regional High School District support and sustain the concept of senioritis.

Questionnaire data reveal four of seven reported the belief that seniors are disengaged with two using the termed "checked out". Questionnaire data find seniors are in a very stressful situation with three of seven believing seniors "could use extra support to deal with the stress and anxieties of this transitional year". Interview data support this finding with six of eight

responding they have a mental model of second semester seniors becoming disengaged with academics and engaged with senior year activities that are more social in nature. Interview data also find a majority of respondents remarking they have a belief that seniors are faced with a degree of stress and anxiety. Focus group discussion addressed both the stress of the senior year as well as the disengagement with academics.

Interviews with building level administrators bring to light the belief in seniors deemphasizing academics. “I think culturally... it’s something that kids want to enjoy. They enjoy the school but you hate to say that academics I think almost take a backseat to the senior experience. I think a lot more of it’s social”. This belief in the social nature of the senior year is supported by other administrator comments analogous to the following:

For the majority of the kids, the senior year is one of a traditional we’re all in this together. This is my class. There’s pride in your class. There’s pride in your athletics as to how well your teams are doing, and there’s a fun component attached to it as leaving and exiting the high school.

Questionnaire data from non-teaching faculty find comparable responses to the decline in emphasis on academics as one respondent states, “Seniors in high school are ‘checked out’ and don’t put the same effort into their studies as they did in prior years”. Focus group discussion on the theme of a decline in academic effort can be encapsulated by the following data revealed in a district level administrators remarks:

I think, when I look at a senior, I think there’s something about human nature that says there’s been a road that I’ve been on and I’m still on, and I’ve worked hard, and now I’ve applied for what’s coming next, and I’ve been accepted, and it’s December, and I’ve got

five months to go, and I'm going to, you know what, I'm going to put my feet up a little bit and I'm going to relax.

Stress and anxiety are recurring themes uncovered by the data analysis. Most focus group, interview, and questionnaire data point to a belief that seniors are going through a period of apprehension and tension. A building administrator believes:

I think the pressure that these kids are under to get into a name college has far exceeded anything that was in the past. It's becoming more of a very difficult task for these kids to encounter. One kid this morning. She was practically in tears because she was afraid she was going to miss the November 15 deadline. We're on October 29. There's no reason for this stress.

This attitude and belief is intensely reinforced with the following two statements. The first from a district level administrator stating, "The amount of pressure on those kids has got to be amazing. Amazing". The second from a building level administrator:

...stop the insanity. Because the senior year... they're applying to college. It's almost like having a ninth course in their eight-period day to do the research, to do the applications, to sit down and make a good decision. Now, on top of that, the stress, they got to apply for scholarships and you got to do this and you got to do that.

Finding three. When building level administrators, district level administrators, and non-teaching faculty were asked to respond to questions pertaining to the structures, patterns, and thinking that exists that support the attitudes and beliefs in relation to the high school senior year and seniors in high school focus group, interview, and questionnaire data generated the following recurring patterns and themes. External factors, particularly the college admissions process, external testing sequences, cultural rites of passage, and the absence of a sustained

response to the problem of senioritis by a continuation of established structures were the structures, patterns, and thinking revealed by the data that support and sustain the mental model of the senior year and seniors in high. The participants in the data collection demonstrated a focus on singular patterns and themes within their respective domain and not a consistent response across the data collected.

The majority of district level administrators, three of four, in focus group discussion raised the notion of a lack of a response to what they recognize as a problem in the senior year with senioritis, "...it's just the way high schools are... I think high schools have to catch up to... how do we design experiences so that we're honoring the kids where they are and not just putting it into the next step". One district level administrator asks, "While they are taking on that very natural mindset, are we giving them experiences that are adding to who they are as individuals, that are adding to the values that we want them to part this system with". District level administrators express the belief that the district has not responded with a sustained effort to provide a structure and pattern that mitigates senioritis. "I don't think we've had a sustained response to it". Four of eight building administrators commented on their belief in a lack of a structure that responds to the problem particularly with the population of students not in the highest academic ability group with the most rigorous courses. "We really have nothing in place to help those kids... who have really moved on, mentally, to another place". Questionnaire data from non-teaching faculty do not reveal statements relative to the lack of structures; however, three of seven offer ideas on structures they would like to see put into place.

Interview data with building administrators support a belief that that the high school senior year has structures in place in response to the external pressure of the college admission process that contribute to the focus of attention being the college process. Early admission, early

action, and priority deadline admissions have made the junior year the most critical in terms of academic accomplishment in preparation for college applications. Building administrators remark, “If you’re applying early decision, October/November, you don’t have any senior grades. So what are the colleges basing their decisions on? It’s your first three years of high school”. The stress of this process is noted by building level administrators as they reference the need for guidance departments to ramp up the college application process. “Everybody has moved up the deadline... so November one became like hysteria”.

External assessments in the senior year, specifically the IB and AP testing timetable, are structures that the interview and questionnaire data find sustain senioritis. “Although it’s not the early admissions, I really think for 20% of the kids the IB program, the IB testing and AP testing... for all intents and purposes, they are done in the middle of May”. Additionally, a building level administrator observes:

...just take that hierarchy of an IB kid or an AP kid that after they take their exams and we put them right back in the classroom, the exam should be the culminating activity of their high school career and we should have a transition piece for them.

Data from interviews and questionnaires reveal observations on the myriad activities, athletic programs, and rites of passage events that are available to students as structures that work to keep seniors engaged with high school:

... you still have your athletic programs. You have your activities. What has happened between ’72 and now it’s the amount of those activities has significantly increased... Kids have a stake and a claim into how well something happens in a school, how well the school is viewed, pride in their school, the more apt they are to stay and go along with

that...I'm still involved with my school. I want to be with the school. My school is important.

Rites of passage events in the senior year, senior year social activities, homecoming, prom, senior night club, senior cut days, semi-formal dances, awards nights, project graduation events, and other festivities for seniors all support a mental model of a celebratory senior year. As one administrator finds: "I mean it's like one thing after another. There couldn't be more stuff for kids in this district... there's a tremendous amount there"

Summary Synthesis and Interpretation of Findings: Research Question Four

The research findings assert that the mental models of cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and norms surrounding the senior year in high school to a certain extent sustain senioritis. There is significant data that support a mental model of the senior year focused primarily on the college admissions process and the transitional nature of the senior year. Additionally, the research finds a mental model of existing structures that support this pattern. The data further reveal district administrators concerned with the lack of structures that alleviate senioritis and, therefore, lending tacit support to the entrenched sources of senioritis. Considerable data reveal a mental model of seniors increasingly disengaged with academics as the year progresses, increasingly under stress to determine their post-secondary plans, and occupied with non-academic activities.

Structures, patterns, and ways of thinking exist that support this mental model. College decisions being made early in the school year minimize the worth of senior year grades. External assessments that mark the end of many courses occur with six weeks of school remaining. Events and activities of a non-academic quality are increasingly thrust into the senior year and given momentous emphasis. Lack of structures that are intended to re-design the high

school experience and offer options and alternatives in a comprehensive high school setting to seniors is a mental model expressed by participants in the study.

The external pressure to make college decisions early in their first semester places extraordinary stress on high school seniors and directs their attention away from their schoolwork. In addition, the external goal of college admissions is so significant to seniors that once achieved they find little motivation to attend to current schoolwork. The mental model of seniors disengaged and in transition exists throughout the research.

Seniors in high school also find themselves immersed in a number of co-curricular and athletic activities, as well as social events marking the rite of passage and an end to high school. Extraordinary emphasis is placed on these activities minimizing academic coursework and academic preparation for post-secondary experiences. A mental model exists of a senior year relegated to traditional rites of passage activities and events.

Summary

The research findings delineated throughout this chapter were arranged by research question. The findings, though presented by research question in order of prominence within each question, do not imply any singular research question findings are more essential than any other research questions findings. Integration of the findings within and across the research questions is found in chapter five with conclusions and recommendations for action. Survey, interview, focus group, and questionnaire data gathered from the many participants in the study, in conjunction with archived data and documents, provided an extensive quantitative and qualitative approach representing the depth and breadth of the research. Participants own words were used where appropriate to establish the goal of providing “rich descriptions...an essential aspect of qualitative research” (Bloomberg & Volpe 2008, p.107).

The research findings reveal a curriculum and instructional program that does not emphasize and infuse critical attributes identified as essential in mitigating the causes of senioritis. Furthermore, the data assert differences in the academic experiences of students, in relation to the identified critical attributes, based on their academic ability group and grade in high school. The findings illuminate a mental model of the senior year that lacks structures that may alleviate senioritis and finds structures, patterns, and ways of thinking that actually support senioritis.

Student expectations, the research reveals, contribute to senioritis. The data further establish differences in the critical attributes associated with student expectations based on grade in high school and ability group. Teacher expectations contribute appreciably to senioritis. Critical attributes associated with teacher expectations of seniors and the senior year often conflict with student expectations resulting in a compromising of those attributes that may allay senioritis.

The four research questions designed to address the research problem were comprehensively explored, resulting in the findings in this chapter. The deeply entrenched and sustaining source of senioritis in the Lincoln Regional High School District has been elucidated in those findings.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to uncover the entrenched and sustaining source of senioritis, as it exists in the Lincoln Regional High School District. Four research questions provided the framework for the inquiry and the findings have been reported in chapter four. This chapter provides conclusions and interpretations of those findings in the context of the relevant literature and current research that provided the critical attributes for the study.

Recommendations for action are presented. In addition, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are articulated. Final reflections on the research study conclude the chapter.

Conclusions

The conclusions that follow are organized by research question. However, where appropriate, this dissertation's findings and the conclusions established in this chapter have been integrated across the research questions providing a synthesis of the findings, conclusions, and research questions. Support for the conclusive answer to each research question and the confidence for the set of conclusions established within each question that follow is found in the analysis of data and findings presented in chapter four. Triangulation (see Table 1) of survey, interview, focus group, and questionnaire data gathered from the many participants in the study, in conjunction with archived data and documents, provided an extensive quantitative and qualitative approach representing the depth and breadth of the research giving support to the findings on which the following conclusions are based.

Research question one. Research question one sought to find to what degree do the curriculum and instructional program of the Lincoln Regional High School District influence

senioritis. External literature and internal contextual exploratory research established four critical attributes of the curriculum and instructional program essential in mitigating senioritis. The absence of these attributes can influence senioritis while their presence can work to alleviate senioritis. These attributes have been identified as the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, intrinsic valuing of learning, personal ownership of schoolwork, and a connection between schoolwork and future plans (Bartholomew, 2008; Boesell, 2001; Covington, 1999; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; National Commission, 2001b; Newman, 1989; Thompson & Thornton, 2002). Following the analysis of rich data sources and the findings established in chapter four, it is concluded that the curriculum and instructional program influences senioritis by not emphasizing and infusing the essential critical attributes identified as necessary to inhibit senioritis. The research findings from the student survey, teacher survey, and focus group data, along with curriculum guide and program of study analysis support this conclusion.

Personalized learning experiences that support a shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, it is concluded from this study, is an attribute notably lacking in the current curriculum and instructional program. Additionally, further interpretation of the findings found in chapter four leads to the conclusion that when this attribute is present it exists primarily in the school experience of students in the highest ability group in upper grades, more specifically those enrolled in culminating IB courses. Lower ability grouped students at all grade levels, most notably for this study those in their senior year, lack schoolwork experiences most often associated with the attribute of a shared construction of meaningful and personalized learning experiences, which have been identified in this study as critical attributes in mitigating senioritis. Nelson (2007) discusses the need for personalized learning experiences as a key component of

the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's proposal for high school reform. This critical attribute of the curriculum and instructional program is necessary to keep students engaged with their learning experience and is accomplished by cultivating shared meaningful learning experiences with their teachers. The research findings of this study strongly indicate students do not have many opportunities to construct meaningful learning experiences with their teachers. The majority of teachers in this study responded similarly, confirming they rarely decide together with students the types of assignments students will do. Ewing (2007) explains to achieve this teachers must recognize their students individuality and "actively listen to the student's opinions, allow the student's input into decisions affecting his schoolwork, and maintain positive attainable expectations for the student" (p. 2).

Portfolios, public exhibition of work, seminar classes, and personal choice of topics to study are personalized learning experiences this study finds as part of the current schoolwork experience of students in the highest ability group, most notably among IB students. Chapter four reveals data showing a dramatic difference in the schoolwork experience of students in lower ability groups and in earlier grade levels specifically targeted to these personalized learning experiences. The learning experiences that are lacking for students in lower ability grouped classes are those identified in this study as aiding in the struggle against senioritis. Conley (2007) speaks to the need of keeping students "fully engaged academically throughout the senior year" (p. 26). Sizer (2002) and Conley support personalized learning experiences particularly senior seminars as a "strategy to deal with the all important senior year" (Conley, p.26). These types of personalized learning experiences, along with senior projects, capstone activities, applied projects and related activities, are advocated by Conley (2007), Ewing (2007), Sizer (2002), and the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b), as well as

the NASSP (2004), NGA (2005, 2008), and the National High School Alliance (2005) to be part of all students personalized learning experience.

Cultivating an intrinsic valuing of learning is a critical attribute that is essential in alleviating senioritis. The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001a) concludes a lack of intrinsic motivation for learning is one of a number of causes for the senior year being cast as a lost opportunity. Intrinsic valuing of learning, this dissertation finds, is not effectively cultivated through the curriculum and instructional program. Additionally, it is concluded that the IB program provides at a degree of intrinsic motivation as this research finds students are inspired by the interdisciplinary thematic design of the courses. Analysis of the curriculum guide and focus group data in this study finds in the IB program a seminar class called the theory of knowledge that students report as intrinsically motivating. This is a noteworthy conclusion as recommendations are being considered. Thompson and Thornton (2002) in their paper on extrinsic to intrinsic motivation in the college experience note:

Much of the motivation for academic success in high school is grounded in extrinsic motivation, namely grades...in college this is not the case...Learning which is intrinsically motivating helps to facilitate the transition of our young people from high school to college” (p. 792).

Achieving high grades for college acceptance, this dissertation finds, is the primary motivating factor for students in relation to their desire to do schoolwork. This is consistent with the external literature as Covington (1999) asserts:

Grades enjoy great credibility among both parents and college admissions officers. And...grades hold extraordinary power, not only to determine who goes

to college and even which college, but more importantly, the power to shape one's sense of worth as a person. (p. 129).

Catsambis (2002) adds parents "active encouragement to prepare for college [is] by far the most important family practice at this stage of schooling" (p. 168). Intrinsic motivation for learning, this study finds, does not fill the void left when the extrinsic reward of college acceptance is achieved. Boesel (2001) reports a steady decline in high school students finding the schoolwork they were assigned meaningful, interesting, and stimulating, therefore not intrinsically motivating. Covington (1999) and Thompson and Thornton (2002) propose approaches to the cultivation of intrinsic valuing of learning with approaches that emphasize the pursuit of one's own goals, exploratory learning, cultivation of personal interests, and making learning relevant. This is consistent with conclusions arrived at earlier in the chapter, that find a lack of shared construction of meaningful learning experiences among the schoolwork experiences of the majority of students in the district, further supporting the research conclusions on the deficiency in cultivating an intrinsic valuing of learning.

Establishing a curriculum and instructional program that supports students' personal choice of topics to study creates a high school experience that counteracts the problem of senioritis. The Lincoln High School District's curriculum this study finds, provides students the opportunity to choose from a menu of electives as they progress through their years of study. This option presents students with a level of personal choice in course selection as they select courses that may include topics they may find of personal interest. Though an array of choices are available in the elective program (art, music, business, technology, and consumer science), this study's analysis of the curriculum finds limited choices of elective course offerings in the core academic program for students in the lower ability groups. Current research into the senior

year supports the view that rigorous academic courses in the core academic program need to be made more accessible to more students (Kirst, 2001; Conley, 2007; Hammond, 2008; NGA, 2005; & NASSP, 2004).

Most significant is the conclusion that the program of studies does not include extensive discussion on the availability of alternative paths to meeting graduation requirements that may be of personal interest to many students. Potentially engaging programs, that involve a high level of personal choice in topics for study, such as internships, distance learning, magnet programs, dual enrollment, interdisciplinary studies, community service, or other theme based approaches and programs emphasizing personal choice, this dissertation finds, are lacking in the current program of studies. The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001b), NJDOE (2008b), NASSP (2004), The National High School Alliance (2005), along with D'Andrea (2005), Egelson, Harmon, and Bond (2002) and Henriksen, Stichter, Stone, and Wagoner (2008) give support to expanding options for students, particularly in response to the challenge of senioritis, creating a learning experience where the senior year is not "just more of the same" (National Commission, 2001b, p25).

This dissertation finds personal choice of topics to study within the classroom as part of the schoolwork experience of students has not been cultivated as an integral ingredient of the curriculum and instructional program. Teachers and students rarely mention personal choice of topics in their expressions during interviews and focus group discussions. Personal ownership of schoolwork begins with choice and leads to greater levels of engagement and higher expectations for academic achievement. Consistent with the shared construction of meaningful learning experience and the cultivation of the intrinsic valuing of learning, personal choice, Newman (1989) concludes, allow students to:

Study topics they consider important and ...for students to construct and produce knowledge in their own words...[this] builds a sense of ownership, enhancing students' interest in and valuing of what is being studied. (p. 36)

The attribute, this research finds, exists to some extent in the IB program, specifically in the higher grades, as students choose topics for independent research, oral commentaries, experimental studies, and scientific investigations. However, as previously noted it is not an integral part of the curriculum and instructional program for those students not in that highest academic program. Bartholomew (2008) discusses the need for personal ownership of work, which comes from students having choices and input on the planning, execution, and assessment of their work. The result, Bartholomew concludes, motivates students to be engaged in their schoolwork. Research on student valuing of schoolwork by, Miller, DeBacker, and Greene (2000) and academic motivation by Legault, Green-Demers, and Pelletier (2006) conclude schoolwork is valued and motivating when it is associated with personal choice and a sense of student ownership.

Preparation for and making connections with post-secondary experiences are critical attributes this study finds supported by the curriculum and instructional program. This essential attribute, an important aspect of the high school experience, this research finds, is infused into the current program. Serious academic preparation for post-secondary experiences for all students, whether that is college or the work place, is a core component of recent high school reform initiatives (National Commission, 2001; NGA, 2005, 2008; American Diploma Project, 2004; & National High School Alliance, 2005). However, of considerable importance to this study and this attribute, this dissertation research leads to the conclusion that preparation for post-secondary experiences, particularly college, declines considerably once students' have

gained acceptance to college and their plans following high school have been established. This conclusion has an influence on senioritis as students' efforts to prepare for post-secondary experiences, particularly college, as this study illustrates, wanes significantly in the second semester. Additional support for this conclusion is found in the research conclusions established for research questions two and three. Kirst (2001) points to the systemic nature of this dilemma, as "Access, rather than preparation, is also the theme of many of the professionals who mediate between high schools and the colleges" (p. 15). Kirst (2001) further reasons, that by continuing serious academic preparation for post-secondary experiences and "curtailing senior slump, we could add valuable months to high school students' education at a critical point in their intellectual development" (p.10).

The research analysis found in chapter four finds, that although preparation for post-secondary plans is evident through the early months of the senior year, definitive connections between current coursework in the curriculum and the coursework and workplace experiences students will encounter following high school need to be made. Conley (2003), Kirst (2001), and Sizer (2001) as well as the NASSP (2004), The National Commission (2001b), NGA (2008), and NJDOE (2008b) emphasize the need for increased connections between the high school curriculums, particularly in the senior year, and post-secondary schools. "While many high school teachers do an excellent job readying students for college, it is unclear how any individual teacher knows he or she is doing the right thing" (Conley, 2003, p.11). Conley addresses the problem encountered by many students when they arrive on college campuses and begin to take courses that are designed to sort those that are prepared for college level work from those that have merely worked to be admitted:

One effect is to increase the freshman dropout rate. Another more insidious

outcome is to cut students off from careers in whole fields. Having failed to complete the first course in a sequence, the student is effectively barred from any major requiring that subject. (p. 11)

Additionally, as found in the analysis of data in chapter four, the curriculum and instructional program influences senioritis in relation to the critical attribute of preparation for and making connections with post-secondary experiences to a greater degree in lower ability grouped students. The National Commission (2001b) strongly supports raising the academic rigor for all students:

A more demanding secondary school curriculum that will enable these students to enter the workforce immediately, if they choose to, confident that they have the skills and knowledge needed on the job and, increasingly in their employer's classroom. They also will be better equipped to attend college later or enroll in specialized training as their careers develop. (p.25)

This research study finds there is less connection for lower ability grouped students between their current program and the plans they have following high school. Students in the highest ability group, this research affirms, benefit from curricular and instructional practices most closely aligned with college level work, an advantage in the struggle against senioritis. Thematic course designs that encourage in depth study of topics and themes "with emphasis on skills and knowledge that are components of a general or liberal arts education" (Kirst, 2001, p.21) rather than survey courses with an emphasis on content coverage should be made more accessible to all students regardless of ability group.

Research question two. Research question two sought to find how the expectations students have for themselves as seniors and for their senior year contribute to senioritis. The

external literature and contextual exploratory research established critical attributes associated with the concept of expectations and their contribution to senioritis. Consistent level of academic expectations and the change in those expectations, expectations for academic rigor, and expectation of preparation for post-secondary experiences in college or the workplace were identified as essential aspects of student expectations that can be a factor in contributing to or mitigating against senioritis (Catsambis, 2004; Connor, 2007; Hammond, 2008; Kirst, 2001; Miller, 2001; National Commission, 2001b). Following extensive analysis of data sources and the findings established in chapter four it is concluded that the expectations students have for themselves as seniors and for the senior year in high school contribute extensively to senioritis. The research findings from analysis of survey, interview, and focus group data along with archived documents and data support this conclusion.

This study establishes that students, as they progress through high school, have an expectation for a decline in academic effort. This expectation is more prevalent in the upper grades and is heightened in the senior year. Students' expectation for a decline in academic effort as the senior year progresses certainly sets the stage for the onset of senioritis. Viewing the college application, acceptance, and admission process as the focal point of the early months of their senior year, the remainder of the year this study asserts, lacks a sense of importance and necessity to seniors. Miller (2001), in his paper prepared for the Association of American Colleges and Universities Greater Expectations Panel commenting on the findings of the National Commission (2001a) concludes:

The wasted senior year affects both high and low achievers. Having gained early admission to college, some students choose to 'blow off' the rest of the school year. There are rarely consequences for falling grades once an individual

is admitted into college. (p.3)

The decline in effort, this dissertation reveals, is particularly acute among students in the highest ability groups. Students that have participated in the most rigorous courses, this dissertation finds, point to the early external assessments as the absolute conclusion of any serious effort toward academic rigor moving forward into the spring and final months of high school. As concluded earlier, students in the highest ability group benefit from a curriculum and instructional program most aligned with the critical attributes necessary to assuage senioritis. The benefits come to an abrupt end when the externally imposed final course assessments are completed. Externally imposed timelines need to be met with the structural flexibility emphatically supported by Eaton and Nelson (2007) when they assert “It is time the school structure be designed to meet the needs of modern students” (p. 3).

Maintaining an academically rigorous course schedule in the senior year is a recommendation supported by high school reform initiatives. The rigor of the path students take throughout high school is important and “every student should be entitled to the high quality coursework required for success on the job or in post-secondary education” (National Commission, 2001b). An expectation for a senior year that is less academically challenging runs counter to high school reform initiatives and contributes to senioritis. As the analysis of data in chapter four illustrates, students in the lower ability grouped classes have an expectation of making their senior year course work less challenging and as easy as possible. Senioritis is supported as “Low level courses and general or non-academic tracks, which are common in traditional, comprehensive high schools, foster and deepen student disengagement” (National High School Alliance, 2005 p.5). Alternatively, the research data analysis in chapter four affirms, those students in the highest ability grouped classes maintain academic rigor in their

schedule if it is a requirement for completion of certain programs, particularly IB diploma students, IB certificate students, and AP students. However, students in this group anticipate giving much less effort to schoolwork as the year progresses; most notably following their culminating external assessments. Therefore, though they may have a rigorous course load, the effort given to these courses declines as the school year moves into the second semester and beyond the external assessments. As the extrinsic motivation of grades and the external assessments required are accomplished, expectations for academic effort decline. Tavani and Losh (2003) in their research on the link between expectations and motivation found that high levels of expectations to accomplish academic tasks motivate students to perform well; correspondingly, low expectations toward accomplishing academic tasks will lead to low motivation and low levels of academic performance. Accomplishing academic tasks early in the senior year, this dissertation reveals, supports lowered expectations and senioritis, as students do not perceive value in the academic tasks that replace those that have been accomplished. Miller, DeBacker, and Greene (2000) posit, “If students do not perceive current academic activities as instrumental to attaining personally relevant future goals, we question whether those activities will have sufficient incentive value to foster the level of student cognitive engagement necessary to produce meaningful learning” (p. 258). Kirst (2001) argues graduating on time, a primary task for senior year, may be easily accomplished “by taking the easiest courses that meet the school’s graduation requirements” (p. 11). Academic rigor is not foremost in the majority of students’ plans for their senior year. Instead, this dissertation finds, courses that capture students’ interest, are thought of as enjoyable, and are considered less rigorous are the courses students expect to select in their senior year.

Preparation for post-secondary plans, whether that is college or the workplace, is an attribute that helps prevent senioritis and a critical aspect of senior year high school reform. An encouraging finding from this study, and in the struggle against senioritis, is that students have an expectation to prepare for college and post-secondary experiences. Conclusions from research question one established preparation for post-secondary experiences is a critical attribute supported by the curriculum and instructional program. However, this conclusion is offset with the research finding that the expectation of serious preparation for their post-secondary plans declines once seniors have solidified those plans. Leading to the conclusion that preparation is seen as a means to establish their next experience, whether that is college, work, or another endeavor yet, once the plans are known, students find little reason to sustain the preparation they may need for a successful transition. Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) in their research on the disconnection between high schools and post-secondary education emphasize:

Access to entrance to college, however, is only half the picture. True college opportunity includes having a real chance to succeed....We found large differences in college knowledge, and in understanding what it takes to succeed in college, among students within schools by academic tracks and between schools by socioeconomic status. It is time to expand policy attention to emphasize not just access to college, but also access to success in college. High School course content, academic counseling, college outreach, and other programming needs to reflect this so that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including community college. (p.36)

Hoover (2003) finds that early acceptance and early decision often encourages a drop in academic preparation as students view the college acceptance as “the finish line” (p. 1) for their preparation for post-secondary school. Hoover’s finding is overwhelmingly supported by

survey, focus group, and interview data found in chapter four of this research study. Conley (2003) argues to increase success in college for students high schools and college need to articulate expectations and requirements to facilitate the “creation of effective placement procedures that could even motivate high school students to continue to work hard to achieve throughout the senior year” (p. 11).

Kirst (2001), in his paper prepared for the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001a,2001b), does not place the blame for a decline in effort and preparation on students alone as he concludes “neither the K-12 system or the post-secondary system provides incentives for high school seniors to work hard” (p.13). Kirst explains:

Seniors continue to accumulate the units needed for graduation with little guidance about the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their next endeavor, be it college or a vocation. Despite the cliché about viewing high school graduation as a commencement, the high schools largely treat the completion of the senior year as an end in and of itself. (p. 13)

Research question three. The expectations teachers have for the seniors they teach and for the senior year and how those expectations contribute to senioritis was the focus of research question three. Congruent with research question two, the critical attributes of a consistent level of high expectations and changes in those expectations, the expectation for academic rigor, and the expectation for post-secondary preparation for college and the workplace were established through internal exploratory research and external literature review as attributes that can contribute to or mitigate senioritis (Catsambis, 2004; Connor, 2007; Hammond, 2008; Kirst, 2001; Miller, 2001; National Commission, 2001b). Following extensive analysis of data sources and the findings established in chapter four, it is concluded that teachers’ expectations for the

senior year and the seniors they teach contribute considerably to senioritis. The oppositional forces created among teacher expectations, student expectations, and actual practice compromise the critical attributes necessary to offset senioritis. The research findings from analysis of interview, focus group, and survey data along with historical grade and attendance analysis support this conclusion.

Teachers and guidance counselors with intimate experience with seniors, this dissertation reveals, are in the midst of conflicting expectations for senior year students. Overwhelming in their declaration that they maintain consistently high levels of academic expectations for seniors, teachers and guidance counselors do not anticipate senior year students responding with the same expectation for themselves. Sizer (2002) asserts, “Once the grades do not matter, schoolwork doesn’t matter. This is the cultural expectation that most clearly demeans high school, yet it is overwhelmingly endorsed by seniors...teachers reluctantly accept it as if it were inevitable as the tide” (p. xxvi). Sizer’s assertion is supported by this dissertation’s findings. This conflict of teachers’ high expectations with the decline in expectations from students, this study reveals, has three unintended consequences. Curriculum and instructional strategies are altered as the year progresses, teachers and counselors acquiesce to the decline in effort thereby altering their own expectations, and levels of frustration rise creating an unconstructive atmosphere in the classroom. Early research on the effect of teachers expectations as reported by Good (1981) infer that students in secondary school can more readily influence teacher behavior as well as teacher strategies. The research supports the idea that teachers consciously or unconsciously alter instructional strategies and lower expectations as “both teachers and students can influence classroom behavior” (p.420).

Counselors and teachers in this study identify the institutional challenges created by the ubiquitous college admission process as a principal hindrance to maintaining their expectations for high levels of academic effort throughout the year. Counselors and teachers contend their expectations are compromised early in the year and their expectations continue to be compromised as the year progresses. Consistent with the conclusions ascertained from research question two, Viadero (2001a) finds, “the slump sets in for most students around the middle of the senior year. With college acceptance already in hand, even the best pupils tend to slack off towards the end of their schooling” (p. 8). Teachers and counselors in this study include the timing of end of course external assessment for many students, effectively concluding the school curriculum by late April as a further hindrance to the maintenance of high academic expectations throughout the senior year. There is an untenable balance between teachers’ expectations and student actions created by these external institutional demands.

Preparation for post-secondary experiences, as concluded in research question two, is an expectation seniors have for themselves in their senior year and this research finds faculty shares this same expectation. As this study affirms, teachers and counselors hold the expectation that seniors will give serious preparation for the challenges of post-secondary education and the workplace. What appears to be a shared expectation often conflicts as teachers, and students as well, find these expectations for serious preparation decline precipitously once the plans are established. Teachers and counselors, as the data analysis in chapter four reveal, share the viewpoint that students see the preparation as a means to establish their plans. However, once these plans are secured, students do not see the connection with continued preparation, thereby compromising their opportunity for success beyond high school. The college acceptance and possible workplace experience becomes the end goal of preparation. As concluded in research

question two, once the end is known, serious preparation diminishes. Additionally, preparation for post-secondary plans is perceived as an outcome of the curriculum coursework and course content and once the plans are known the curriculum loses import. This is shortsighted thinking. However, it is difficult for high school seniors to transcend their feeling of accomplishment when their goal of college admission has been met and graduation from high school is inevitable (Kirst, 2001). This dissertation reveals insufficient direct and purposeful connection is made between what students are currently engaged in and their future plans. The National Commission (2001b), Kirst (2001), and the NASSP (2004), find the lack of alignment and connection between high school and college a significant contributor to senioritis:

The focus on admission to college rather than preparation for success in doing college level work...the lack of alignment between high school and college testing programs and coursework all contribute to ‘checking out early’ and the feeling on the part of many students that the second semester of the senior year is boring, repetitious and pointless. (NASSP, 2004, p. 116)

Research question four. Structures, patterns, and events supported by an institutionally shared mental model of cultural attitudes, norms, and stereotypes of the senior year and the extent they sustain senioritis was the focus of research question four. External literature and exploratory contextual research supports a mental model of the senior year that contributes to sustaining senioritis (Hines, 2008; National Commission 2001b; Levine 2007; Perkins-Gough, 2008; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Sizer, 2002). There is evidence from multiple data sources, established in the findings of chapter four, to conclude that there is a mental model of the senior year, along with existing structures, patterns and events, which sustain the concept of senioritis.

Emerging from the research analyzed in chapter four, is a mental model of the senior year focused principally on the omnipresent college admissions sequence and the transitional nature of the senior year. Furthermore, the study finds a mental model exists of senior high school students being disengaged from the academic aspect of their final year in high school. Absorbed in activities that are co-curricular, social, and celebratory, anxious about their future plans, the data reveal a mental model of seniors relegating their senior year to traditional rite of passage activities and events. This conclusion is supported in the literature as Hines (2008), Sizer (2002), along with Schneider and Stevenson (1999) concur the high school senior year is an icon of American teenage culture. Sizer cogently summarizes:

The senior year is perceived to be not as rigorously academic as earlier high school years. It is both a kind of apogee and moratorium at once, and our young people turn their energy toward other things. 'Being a senior' is far more important than any specific piece of schoolwork a senior might do or any specific qualification a senior might earn. Status outweighs performance, at least academic performance. And ceremony outweighs achievement. (p.xix)

The conclusions arrived at following analysis of the findings of research questions one, two, and three detailed earlier in this chapter, support the conclusions established from research question four. The deficiency in the curriculum and instructional program to foster shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, the lack of cultivating an intrinsic valuing of learning, limited options to personally choose topics and paths for study, and a disconnect between high school and sustained preparation for post-secondary experiences are patterns that this study finds support senioritis. This research uncovers and concludes the difference in schoolwork experiences of students based on ability grouping as having an overwhelming

influence on their high school experience in relation to the concept of senioritis and the critical attributes identified throughout this study. This research reveals the pressure to make college decisions early in their first semester places enormous stress on high school seniors directing their attention away from schoolwork. The worth of senior year grades are minimized, as the junior year grades are the first submitted for review by college admissions personnel, particularly negating second semester grades. Once the external reward of college acceptance is achieved, this dissertation affirms, seniors find it difficult to immerse themselves in their current schoolwork. External assessment marking the end of courses in the most rigorous program occur weeks before graduation and the close of school. Botstein (1997) discusses the inordinate amount of time and emotional energy given to the college admissions process, particularly acute in high performing schools, as relegating high school to a way station to the next phase. “The consequence...is that until college the previous phases of schooling are seen, teleologically, more in terms of where they lead than in terms of what they accomplish” (p. 90). The extraordinary emphasis placed on events and activities unrelated to academics beget the finality of the senior year undermining efforts to engage students in serious preparation for what is to come next. Seniors may be in transition; however, they are not transitioning by giving serious preparation to their post-secondary plans beyond the first semester.

This study finds the current structures that support the concept of senioritis continue to exist, as there is no sustained response to re-design the senior year experience to improve the current reality. “Mental models...limit people’s ability to change” (Senge, et al, 2000, p. 67). The literature review, found in chapter two of this dissertation, is rife with alternative approaches to the current structures of the high school senior year that address the reality of senioritis. High schools across the country have been responding with a multitude of innovative programs

detailed in chapter two. Research into the problem of senioritis in the Lincoln Regional High School District concludes there is also a mental model that laments the lack of a sustained approach to a response similar to those found in the current literature. Wheatley (2006) maintains, “that it’s a particular characteristic of the human species to resist change” (p. 138). Senge (2000) evokes the concept of systems thinking and offers, “The discipline of systems thinking provides a different way of looking at problems and goals, not as isolated events but as components of larger structures” (p. 78).

Recommendations

Uncovering the entrenched and sustaining source of senioritis, as it exists in the Lincoln Regional High School District, the purpose of this study, has led to research findings, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions gathered from the synthesis of rich data sources. The recommendations that follow are based on the conclusions previously discussed in this chapter. The influence of the curriculum and instructional program on senioritis, the contribution student expectations and teacher expectations have on senioritis, and the mental models, structures, and patterns that sustain senioritis have provided the essential questions and organizational framework for the study and the following recommendations. Botstein (1997) contends, “The models we use in our thinking periodically have to be challenged. When we shift the ‘paradigm’ we use, complex problems that seemed insoluble paradoxes turn out to have simple solutions” (p. 92). The following recommendations represent the shift in thinking, supported by Botstein (1997), Senge (2000), and Wheatley (2006) as needed to respond to the challenge presented by the paradox of the senior year enigma. They are not simple solutions to a complex problem, rather they represent a strategic systems approach grounded in current literature and this dissertation.

The recommendations are not to be isolated from one another, rather they are interconnected in the influence they will have on the research problem. With this in mind, they are not organized by research question. They are presented as recommendations that taken together provide the basis for change that will influence the current reality in relation to the problem of senioritis. Margaret Wheatley (2004) instructs that systems large and small are the result of complex interactions that organize for a common purpose and every action in the system will have an affect on the whole system. “We need to work with the whole of a system, even as we work with individual parts or isolated problems” (p. 139). Senge (2000) speaks to the deep learning cycle necessary for enduring change as:

...the interrelated capacity for change inside individuals and embodied in group cultures. Learning takes place when new skills and capabilities, new awareness and sensibilities, and new attitudes and beliefs reinforce each other. Changes in the deep learning cycle can be profound and even irreversible, but they are difficult to initiate. (p. 26)

The following recommendations represent significant paradigm shifts in the current thinking, along with considerable changes in the structures and patterns that presently exist. This will effectively change the current reality and influence the deep learning cycle of the school community.

Recommendation one. The conclusions reached in this dissertation study lead to the recommendation for a purposeful, thorough, and reflective assessment and possible revision of the shared vision and purpose the district has for educating its students in the 21st century. Essential questions need to be asked. Is the current reality and purpose, as Botstein (1997) postulates, less about what is accomplished in the four years of high school and more about where it leads? The research reveals the high school experience culminates with a student’s

acceptance into a post-secondary institution or commits to a similar post-secondary experience and the work of the school centers on that accomplishment. This accomplishment is effectively achieved for many students following three years of high school or shortly thereafter. What takes place before and what follows and how each individual student fits into that current reality are essential questions that need to be addressed as the school examines its purpose and vision. This dissertation further concludes that structures exist that create different schoolwork experiences among students that foster considerable disparity in their education. What vision does the district have for each of its students as 21st century learners? Earl, Torrance, and Sutherland (2006) in their essay on secondary school change contend:

Secondary schools may be in a *paradigm paralysis* where past professional knowledge...is still the norm in a far more complex and changed world. For us this raises the following questions: 'are secondary schools doing the *right* things?' or 'are they working on doing what they have traditionally done, just doing it a little better?' (p. 120)

This recommendation calls for an examination of the current thinking and current systems that support the structures and patterns that this dissertation research find currently exists. As Botstein (1997) maintains, "structures of education do not possess, timeless validity" (p.79). Earl, Torrance, and Sutherland (2006) find, "Schools that are ready for continuous improvement have found that they need to expand and challenge their beliefs, their knowledge, and their practices, again and again and again" (p.123).

The district needs to ask whether it is merely doing what it has always done, just a little better, or is it willing to change the current reality uncovered in this dissertation to meet the

needs of a student population with varying hopes and aspirations and personally engage students in a meaningful 21st century learning experience.

The remaining recommendations are a step in that direction and involve a change in the mental models currently a part of the school culture. As previously discussed, a change in the deep learning cycle of attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions must accompany each recommendation to change the mental model and shift the paradigm. The shared vision established in recommendation one should help shape the guiding ideas that will lead to the structural innovation, theories, and methods that can begin to change the culture and therefore the mental models that currently exist (Senge, et al.).

Recommendation two. Change the current structure of academic ability grouping by reducing the number of academic ability groups with the goal of having all courses taught at the advanced or at an IB level designation. Rigorous college preparatory classes must be within the reach of more students creating a culture of high expectations for all. Preparation for post-secondary experiences will be more aligned with college level demands if students are in classes that are most aligned with college level work. Preparations for post-secondary experiences, the research finds, engage students with their schoolwork. This would also encourage the infusion of the instructional strategies necessary for the shared construction of learning experiences, personal choice of topics for study, portfolio assessments, public exhibitions of schoolwork, and seminar classes that occur more frequently in higher ability grouped classes. These personalized learning experiences that are constructed between teacher and student nurture a more engaging schoolwork experience for students and should be part of each student's high school experience. In addition, the reduction in the number of ability groups will provide room and resources to establish writing, reading, and math labs staffed with appropriate instructors to provide the

academic support needed to assist students that may need help with the increase in rigor. All teachers should be trained in the instructional methodology of the most rigorous program offered; the IB program. Teachers should rotate their teaching schedule alternating between teaching at the IB designation and the advanced designation. This will cultivate a culture based on best practice for all students. Further enhancement of this recommendation can be accomplished through the establishment of learning communities within the current structure. Students can be clustered in these learning communities based on what would best support their individual learning needs, their educational objectives, and post-secondary plans where the function of the group would dictate its form. These communities would provide more interdisciplinary dialogue, counseling, transitional programs, and the flexible structure needed to address the critical attributes associated with this studies recommendations.

Recommendation three. Focus a purposeful, thorough, and reflective assessment and possible revision of the district's written curriculum in relation to the instructional and assessment strategies currently in place. Determine areas where the critical attributes of this study, as related to curriculum and instruction, can be identified, strengthened, or infused. The shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, cultivating intrinsic valuing of learning, fostering personal ownership of schoolwork experiences through personal choice options, and developing stronger connections between the high school experience and the post-secondary experience are strategies that should be specifically written into the curriculum with clearly stated points of reference for their inclusion in classroom instruction. These critical attributes need to be introduced in the first year, be sustained throughout the four years of high school, and be a part of every student's schoolwork experience.

The curriculum and instructional program needs to infuse strategies that encourage the shared construction of meaningful learning experiences and cultivate personal choice options for topics to study into classroom practice. This will result in a more personalized learning experience for students cultivating a sense of personal ownership of their schoolwork. This will encourage students to be more engaged with their schoolwork, a critical attribute in the struggle against senioritis.

Cultivating an intrinsic valuing of learning that competes with the overwhelming motivation that grades have for students is not easily achieved. This is of particular significance for seniors as the extrinsic rewards of grades and college acceptance lose significance as the year progresses as they are met early on in the academic year. Intrinsic valuing of learning, developing a sense of enjoyment for learning, and an understanding of the worth of learning needs to be part of the teaching and learning culture in the district. Personalized learning experiences that are constructed with teachers and students are more relevant to students and will cultivate intrinsic valuing of learning. Incorporating personal choice of topics for study into classroom instructional and assessment strategies supports the intrinsic valuing of learning. As students assume ownership of schoolwork tasks, find value and relevancy in the schoolwork tasks, they assume responsibility for the outcomes and develop an appreciation for the learning process.

This recommendation must include a sustained effort to build instructional capacity targeted toward these critical attributes of the curriculum and instructional program. Professional development opportunities must be made available to train staff in the practical application of shared construction of meaningful learning experiences, personal choice options, personal ownership of schoolwork, and the cultivation of the intrinsic valuing of learning.

Increasing the instructional capacity of teachers through sustained professional growth opportunities committed to these critical attributes as they are infused into the curriculum will change the deep learning cycle necessary for enduring change (Senge, 2000). Currently the curriculum and instructional practice found in the upper level IB courses best develop the concept of shared construction of meaningful learning experiences. These best practice concepts found in the IB program need to be filtered to all students in all grade levels. This can be accomplished through IB teacher training workshops using teachers currently trained in IB instructional strategies training colleagues in the IB model practices. This would encourage, as suggested by Coburn (as cited in Chrispeels and Gonzalez, 2006), the depth, spread, sustainability, and ownership of these instructional strategies, necessary for enduring change, leading to greater instructional capacity among all teachers.

Recommendation four. Articulation with post-secondary institutions needs to be formalized and become part of existing, ongoing vertical and horizontal grade level articulation. Establishing viable, sustained connections with post-secondary institutions to encourage an open dialogue concerning expectations, entry-level course knowledge, performance goals, instructional strategies, and curriculum that will become part of the post-secondary experiences of graduating high school seniors should become part of the high school curriculum structure. Transmitting this to all students as part of a cohesive curriculum strategy will engage students in sustained preparation for their post-secondary plans. Shifting the model from college preparation that ends with the application and acceptance process to a model of sustained preparation through the end of the high school senior year will help students find relevancy with current schoolwork and their future plans, a critical attribute in alleviating senioritis. This shift

in thinking will also help prepare students for what will come next, supporting a successful transition.

Recommendation five. Structural changes that encourage the flexibility in scheduling necessary that would allow for alternative paths to graduation need to be established. Recognizing the diversity of interests, abilities, and skills of the 21st century learner more options for completion of high school should be available, viable, promoted, and sustainable. Not all learners need to be on the same four year path to graduation, some may be eager to complete their studies early while others may need more time. With the resources available in this technologically advanced time, form should follow function. The options for student choice and alternatives are only limited by a lack of vision. Engaging programs, which involve a high level of personal choice in topics for study, a critical attribute in the mollification of senioritis, need to be developed. Internships, distance learning, magnet programs, dual enrollment, college courses, interdisciplinary studies, community service, or other theme based approaches emphasizing personal choice should be available options for students that opt for an alternative path to reach their learning objectives outside the traditional route. Alternative paths to earning credit for graduation must become part of the curriculum offerings available for students and be given similar status and sense of import as those currently available. Most often referred to in New Jersey as option two, these exciting alternatives and diverse paths to meeting graduation requirements have not been fully implemented or embraced (NJDOE, 2008a). The curriculum guide simply states, “Requirements for this option are currently under review by the district and the State of New Jersey” (see Appendix Q). Students that may benefit from an option two plan do not have access to a viable program and therefore are subjected to a one size fits all curriculum and graduation plan that may not meet the needs of the 21st century learner.

Recommendation six. The senior year structure for the majority of students should be fundamentally different from underclassmen providing for a purposeful transition into their post-secondary experience. Final assessments for all seniors taking a core academic full year course should be scheduled for that course in coordination with the external assessments given by IB programs. Rigorous courses in the senior year need to be more accessible and available to all students. All students involved in a full day program, not on an alternative path to graduation, should take a minimum of one IB certificate level course and culminating external assessment or an interdisciplinary seminar course. This effectively raises the level of expectation for academic rigor in the senior year and further prepares students for their post-secondary experience.

Currently, senior students in the lower ability groups have culminating course exams in the final week of school while those in the highest ability group have their external final assessment with up to six weeks of school remaining. This shift in structure would effectively place all senior year students into the same time schedule for final course assessments encouraging a greater emphasis on a concentrated effort toward curriculum completion by the end of May providing students with an academic experience supported by the most rigorous program. Focusing academic effort on course completion in coordination with the most rigorous program will foster a more consistent effort from all students.

The remaining weeks can now be devoted to portfolios, public exhibition of work, senior projects, capstone activities, and other options that will be the culminating personalized learning experience of all senior students. These personalized learning experiences will foster the critical attributes of personal ownership of schoolwork and the intrinsic valuing of learning promoting an increase in the level of academic expectation among students. Time should also be devoted over the remaining weeks to serious preparation for college and other post-secondary

experiences using enrichment strategies, college preparation seminars, career counseling, and similarly designed programs.

Recommendation seven. Investigate flexibility in student schedules to incorporate time for the investigation and process necessary for the establishment of their post-secondary plans. This will focus the attention on this overwhelming external process back into the high school allowing time for completion of this time consuming task. The goal would be to free up student time to focus on their schoolwork and current academic and extra curricular schedule. Creating time in school for the college process and preparation for post-secondary experiences will relieve some of the stress and anxiety associated with the process and lessens the competition for time needed to devote to their academic studies. This process should begin in the first year with progressively more time allotted as students move into the higher grades. All students should be given time during the school year to prepare college essays and applications, investigate post-secondary options, and prepare for the transitional experience that is to come. This can be accomplished by developing seminar classes devoted to this theme. Either a four to eight week program or one period a week throughout the semester or a similar flexible option designed for different grade levels or clusters of students devoted to this seminar should be developed. Incorporating this seminar into the time devoted for health, wellness, and physical well being currently part of every student's course schedule would be an appropriate suggested path to investigate.

Recommendation eight. Establish a formal method for the collection of data on students following high school graduation. Data collected for a longitudinal study to inform the district on the adequacy of student preparation for post-secondary education, the workplace or other post-secondary experience, would provide useful information to evaluate and assess the current

curriculum and instructional program. Curriculum relevancy and perceived preparation for college level work would also be useful data, particularly the number of students needing remedial classes in college, the graduation rates, time needed to graduate from college, and transfer rates. Students that have opted for career choices, rather than post-secondary education could provide data on preparation for their career and the overall effectiveness of learning opportunities provided for them while in high school. This data collection would provide useful feedback to inform future curriculum and instructional decisions.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Limitations of the study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) remind qualitative researchers of “an important assumption that underlies qualitative research is that the world is neither stable nor uniform, and, therefore there are many truths”. (p. 12). The iterative nature of qualitative action research supports this fundamental assumption. This study provided data from rich data sources found in the voices of many relevant groups. As data was collected, patterns and themes were found. The study was grounded in the context of the Lincoln Regional High School District, the student body, teaching and non-teaching faculty, counselors, building, and district administrators all with a first-hand understanding of the districts’ two high schools. The continuous movement between data and ideas suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe lend to certain limitations of the study. Sources that were not included in the scope of this study, parents, college admissions personnel, high school postgraduates, support staff, and the community “may extend our understanding of the issue” (Stringer, (2008), p. 26). Further research into the problem of senioritis including these voices would provide additional data and ideas, patterns and themes, and possibly more truths.

Although the research included data sources from all grade levels in the high school, longitudinal data of specific classes of students over the course of their four years in high school were limited to archived data on attendance patterns and grades. Researching the problem through a longitudinal study of students as they progress through the four years of high school would add to the research findings on the problem of senioritis. Similarly, curriculum and instructional strategies that may have been recently introduced into practice that may eventually influence the research findings are difficult to account for in the research. As these practices and programs develop, they may further represent entrenched sources of the problem or perhaps provide support for the critical attributes identified in the research that assuage senioritis.

Suggestions for further research. This research study found significant differences in the schoolwork experiences among students by ability grouping in relation to the critical attributes identified in the study as having an influence on senioritis. The research also found similar disparities in student expectations by ability grouping relative to the critical attributes identified in the study associated with senioritis. Further research into the different schoolwork experiences and expectations for the senior year of students by ability grouping is recommended. The influence ability grouping has on the success rate of students' post-secondary experiences, on students' access to more challenging classes, and the success rate of those that change ability groups would provide valuable data for informed decisions on curriculum and instruction in relation to ability grouping as well as the study of senioritis.

Comparative research into the problem of senioritis among public schools, private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling would be useful to understand the cultural context of the problem as well as the local context in different settings. The data would provide valuable

insight into the curriculum and instructional practices as well as the mental models, structures, and patterns that are present that either support or allay the attributes associated with senioritis.

Research into the potential of adult learning theory in relation to senior year high school students and their sustained academic effort in preparation for the transition for their post-secondary experiences is recommended. The disconnect high school students have with their post-secondary experience, yet their expectation for preparation for that experience, has interesting implications for research into adult learning theory. An understanding of adult learning theory principles and the high school student may enhance high school seniors' successful transition to college, the workplace, and the level of academic effort they have for their final year in high school.

Final Reflection

Current research and literature reveal high school seniors as ambitious, planning on continuing their education, and having career aspirations that require post-secondary schooling or training. The literature also finds high school seniors that are unprepared for the challenges they will face as they transition into their post-secondary experiences. The juxtaposition of ambition with senior slump, the problem of senioritis, and the high school senior year has drawn national attention. This research dissertation has provided recommendations for professional educators to address this problem in the context of one district. As Sizer (2002) emphasizes, "...we need to decide these questions high school by high school, by looking the experience full in the face, as an expression of our personal but also of our national values" (p. xxvii). This study examined the problem through the contextual lens of one district, high school by high school, as suggested by Sizer. However, the study is transferable, the findings are revealing, the conclusions instructive, and the recommendations actionable achieving the purpose of research

as found in Stringer (2008) of extending “people’s knowledge and understanding, enabling them to make more informed choices and judgments about the complex issues embedded in their professional lives” (p. 3). High school by high school the first recommendation should be the starting point. Re-defining their purpose, high schools must establish a shared vision that they have for educating each of their students as 21st century learners. However, the national attention, the national “call to action”, and the national sense of urgency given to the problem of the high school senior year, reinforced in this dissertation, calls for systems thinking on a national level. The essential starting point for the recommendations requires that this nation re-define the purpose of its high schools and establish a shared vision for educating and preparing our teenage children as 21st century learners.

Core values and principles need to guide the decisions, choices and directions school leaders contend with in the ever-changing landscape of education in the 21st century. With servant leadership as the core, the principles of school improvement, democratic community, and social justice formed the basis for this research dissertation. School district and building level leaders constructing meaningful solutions to complex problems with teachers, parents, and community members, will expand their capacity, and new and expansive patterns of thinking will emerge. It is the hope of this researcher that the collective aspirations of all students, particularly high school seniors, will be enhanced by this privileged endeavor.

APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP: GRADUATING SENIORS

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

A: Would each of you introduce yourself to the group one at a time. Please give your first and last name.

B: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question one.

C: Questions:

1. From your perspective as a graduating senior, did your high school experience inspire you to want to learn new things?

What motivated you in high school? (Grades, learning new things, teachers, parents, college planning, self)

2. During high school, what opportunities did you have to decide, with your teachers and counselors, different ways to demonstrate your learning? What opportunities did you have, to decide with your teachers and counselors, the topics you would study?
3. During high school, what opportunities were available for you to personally choose learning experiences that were of an interest to you?
4. What opportunities were available for you to personally choose learning experiences that were supportive of your future goals and ambitions following high school?
5. From your perspective as a graduating senior, were connections made between your schoolwork and preparation for first year college work? Were connections made between your schoolwork and the skills needed in the workplace?

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP: RISING SENIORS

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

A: Would each of you introduce yourself to the group one at a time. Please give your first and last name.

B: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question two.

C: Questions:

1. What are your expectations for the level of academic effort you will have in your senior year?
2. Do you anticipate your academic effort changing as the year progresses? If you expect your effort to change, in what way will it change? If you expect your effort to change, what do you think will cause that change?
3. During your senior year, what types of classes do you expect to enroll in? Do you expect your classes to be academically challenging? Do you expect them to be academically rather easy? What expectations do you have for the level of academic rigor you want to have in your senior year?
4. Do you expect your senior year to be a time for you to give serious academic preparation for college or the workplace? What expectations do you have for yourself in high school once you are accepted into college?

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP: GUIDANCE COUNSELORS

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

A: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question three.

B: Questions:

1. As a counselor, what are the expectations you have for the seniors you counsel? Do you anticipate your expectations changing as the year progresses? If you anticipate a change, in what way will your expectations change? If you expect a change, what do you think will cause that change?
2. As a counselor what are your expectations for the level of academic effort your seniors will have during the year? Do you anticipate their effort changing as the year progresses? If you expect their effort to change, in what way will it change? If you expect their effort to change, what do you think will cause that change?
3. Do you expect the seniors you counsel to prepare for the challenges of college or the workplace? What academic expectations do you have for seniors once they are accepted into college?

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP: DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR

A: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question four.

B: Questions:

1. What are your beliefs and attitudes about the senior year in high school?
2. What are your beliefs and attitudes about seniors in high school?
3. How did you formulate these beliefs and attitudes?
4. In this high school, what are the structures that are in place that support your attitudes and beliefs? What patterns in the senior year of this high school do these structures support?
5. What is it about your thinking and the thinking of others in this building and district that sustains these structures?

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEWS: TEACHERS OF SENIORS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

A: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question three.

B: Questions:

1. As a teacher with experience teaching seniors, what are the academic expectations *you have for the seniors* you teach? Do you anticipate *your expectations* changing as the year progresses? If you anticipate a change, in what way will *your expectations* change? If you expect a change, what do you think will cause that change?
2. As a teacher with experience teaching seniors, what are your expectations for the level of academic expectations *your seniors* will have during the year? Do you anticipate *their expectations* changing as the year progresses? If you expect *their expectations* to change, in what way will it change? If you expect *their expectations* to change, what do you think will cause that change?
3. Do you expect the seniors you teach to prepare in your class for the challenges of college or the workplace? What expectations do you have for seniors once they are accepted into college?

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEWS: BUILDING ADMINISTRATORS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR

A: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question four.

B: Questions:

1. What are your beliefs and attitudes about the senior year in high school?
2. What are your beliefs and attitudes about seniors in high school?
3. How did you formulate these beliefs and attitudes?
4. In this high school, what are the structures that are in place that support your attitudes and beliefs? What patterns in the senior year of this high school do these structures support?
5. What is it about your thinking and the thinking of others in this building and district that sustains these structures?

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEWS: INCOMING FRESHMEN

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

A: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question two.

B: Questions:

1. During your senior year, what types of classes do you expect to enroll in? Do you expect your classes to be academically challenging? Do you expect them to be academically rather easy? What expectations do you have for the level of academic rigor you want to have in your senior year?
2. Do you expect your senior year to be a time for you to give serious academic preparation for college or the workplace? What expectations do you have for yourself in high school once you are accepted into college?
3. What are your expectations for the level of academic effort you will have in your senior year?
4. Do you anticipate your academic effort changing as the year progresses? If you expect your effort to change, in what way will it change? If you expect your effort to change, what do you think will cause that change?

APPENDIX H

QUESTIONNAIRE: NON-TEACHING FACULTY

QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS: RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR

A: Introduce research study and operational definitions relevant to research question four.

B: Questions:

1. What are your beliefs and attitudes about the senior year in high school?
2. What are your beliefs and attitudes about seniors in high school?
3. How did you formulate these beliefs and attitudes?
4. In this high school, what are the structures that are in place that support your attitudes and beliefs? What patterns in the senior year of this high school do these structures support?
5. What is it about your thinking and the thinking of others in this building and district that sustains these structures?

APPENDIX I
STUDENT SURVEY

4. Student Survey: Part 1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey.

The survey is in two parts.

Part 1 asks a few questions on the expectations you have for your senior year in high school.

Part 2 asks for your opinion on a few questions regarding your high school curriculum and instructional program.

There are 7 total questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Your honest responses are appreciated.

The survey will only take a few minutes of your time to complete.

Answer each of the following items by placing a check in the circle/box next to the response that best represents your opinion.

1. Please rate the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I expect my level of academic effort to remain consistent throughout my senior year.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I anticipate enrolling in academically challenging classes in my senior year.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My senior year will be a time for serious academic preparation for college and/or the workplace.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My academic effort will most likely decline in the second semester of my senior year.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my senior year I intend on enrolling in classes I think will be less academically challenging.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I expect to make my senior year an easy year of schoolwork for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my senior year, after I get into college or settle on a job, I expect to give minimal effort to my schoolwork.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. I am a:

- FRESHMAN
- SOPHOMORE
- JUNIOR
- SENIOR

3. I attend high school at:

- Woodrow High School
- Truman High School

5. Student Survey: Part 2

Student Survey Part 2: Answer each of the following items by placing a check in the circle/box next to the response that best represents your opinion.

1. Please rate the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My high school inspires me to learn new things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My teachers and I often decide together different ways I can show what I have learned.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My high school gives me an opportunity to learn topics that I have personally chosen to study.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The things I learn in high school will be very helpful to me in the future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My high school gives me few opportunities to study topics I have personally chosen.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find little connection between my schoolwork and my plans following high school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My teachers and I rarely decide together the types of assignments I will do.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. I am mostly motivated to do schoolwork by (choose one).

- GRADES
- MY PARENTS
- LEARNING NEW THINGS
- MY TEACHERS
- OTHER

3. As part of my schoolwork I have done the following (choose all that apply).

- PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT
- PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF MY WORK
- ORIGINAL RESEARCH BASED PROJECT
- PARTICIPATION IN A SEMINAR CLASS
- MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF MY WORK
- GROUP PROJECT
- NONE OF THE ABOVE

4. The majority of my classes are (choose one).

- ADVANCED
- ACADEMIC
- STUDIES
- HONORS
- AP
- IB

APPENDIX J
TEACHER SURVEY

3. Teacher Survey: Part 1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey.

The survey is in two parts.

Part 1 asks for your opinion on a few questions regarding the curriculum and instructional program. There are 6 questions in Part 1.

Part 2 asks a few questions on the expectations you have for the seniors you teach and the senior year in high school. There are 2 questions in Part 2.

Only teachers that teach or have taught seniors in the past few years should complete Part 2 of the survey.

There are no right or wrong answers. Your honest responses are appreciated.
The survey will only take a few minutes of your time to complete.

Answer each of the following items by placing a check in the circle/box next to the response that best represents your opinion.

1. Please rate the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
In this school, I find that though grades may be important to students they are mostly motivated by learning new things in class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In this school, students often have opportunities to choose topics for study that they are personally interested in.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In this school, students and teachers often decide together on different ways students can demonstrate their learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The school places little emphasis on making a connection between students' schoolwork and their plans following high school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In this school, I find that students are mostly motivated by grades.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In this school, students and teachers rarely decide together the types of assignments students will do.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This school organizes learning experiences that are useful to students' plans following high school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. I have given my students an opportunity to do the following (check all that apply):

- SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH BASED PROJECT
- PORTFOLIO OF THEIR WORK
- PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF THEIR WORK
- PROJECT INVOLVING APPLYING THEIR LEARNING
- MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF THEIR WORK
- NONE OF THE ABOVE.

3. From your perspective as a classroom teacher, how do the curriculum and instructional practices in our school influence the senior year experience in our high school? Please type in box provided. Your thoughts are valuable research.

4. I teach in the (choose one):

- CORE ACADEMIC PROGRAM
- ELECTIVE PROGRAM
- PHYSICAL EDUCATION and HEALTH PROGRAM
- SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

5. I teach the majority of my classes at:

- Woodrow High School
- Truman High School

6. Thank you for completing Part 1. If you teach or have taught seniors in the past few years please go on to Part 2.

Only teachers that teach or have taught seniors in the past few years should complete Part 2 of the survey.

- I teach or have recently taught seniors and will continue on to Part 2 of the survey.
- I do not or have not recently taught seniors. I am finished with the survey.

4. Teacher Survey: Part 2

Thank you for completing Part 1. Please continue with Part 2. There are 2 questions in Part 2.

Answer each of the following items by placing a check in the circle/box next to the response that best represents your opinion.

1. Please rate the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I maintain consistently high academic expectations for the seniors I teach throughout the year.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I expect the college application/admissions process to be more important to the seniors I teach than academic preparation for college.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During the second semester, I anticipate the seniors I teach will give less effort in my class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I expect the seniors I teach to prepare in my class for the challenges of post-secondary school and/or the workplace.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My academic expectations, for the seniors I teach, are consistently low throughout the year.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My expectations for academic effort from the seniors in my classes are lowered as the year progresses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

2. From your perspective, as a teacher with experience teaching seniors, please comment on the expectations you have for the seniors you teach as you move through the year together. Do you communicate these expectations to your students and if so, how? Please type in box provided. Your thoughts are valuable research.

APPENDIX K

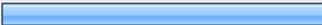
STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE

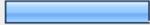
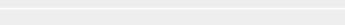
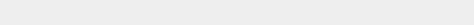
1. Please rate the following statements.						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
I expect my level of academic effort to remain consistent throughout my senior year.	25.5% (143)	50.4% (282)	20.7% (116)	3.4% (19)	2.98	560
I anticipate enrolling in academically challenging classes in my senior year.	44.4% (248)	42.3% (236)	12.5% (70)	0.7% (4)	3.30	558
My senior year will be a time for serious academic preparation for college and/or the workplace.	25.2% (139)	53.8% (297)	18.5% (102)	2.5% (14)	3.02	552
My academic effort will most likely decline in the second semester of my senior year.	14.0% (78)	36.6% (204)	38.6% (215)	10.8% (60)	2.54	557
In my senior year I intend on enrolling in classes I think will be less academically challenging.	3.6% (20)	19.5% (109)	46.4% (260)	30.5% (171)	1.96	560
I expect to make my senior year an easy year of schoolwork for me.	7.3% (40)	26.0% (143)	43.1% (237)	23.6% (130)	2.17	550
In my senior year, after I get into college or settle on a job, I expect to give minimal effort to my schoolwork.	5.6% (31)	19.7% (110)	49.6% (276)	25.1% (140)	2.06	557
	<i>answered question</i>					560

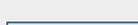
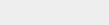
2. I am a:			
		Response Percent	Response Count
FRESHMAN		16.3%	92
SOPHOMORE		22.2%	125
JUNIOR		28.7%	162
SENIOR		32.8%	185
<i>answered question</i>			564

3. I attend high school at:			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Woodrow High School		49.8%	281
Truman High School		50.2%	283
<i>answered question</i>			564

4. Please rate the following statements.						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
My high school inspires me to learn new things.	15.8% (83)	67.5% (355)	14.4% (76)	2.3% (12)	2.97	526
My teachers and I often decide together different ways I can show what I have learned.	5.3% (28)	35.4% (186)	49.6% (261)	9.7% (51)	2.36	526
My high school gives me an opportunity to learn topics that I have personally chosen to study.	19.8% (104)	59.1% (311)	18.3% (96)	2.9% (15)	2.96	526
The things I learn in high school will be very helpful to me in the future.	21.3% (112)	58.0% (305)	18.4% (97)	2.3% (12)	2.98	526
My high school gives me few opportunities to study topics I have personally chosen.	5.0% (26)	27.1% (141)	55.4% (288)	12.5% (65)	2.25	520
I find little connection between my schoolwork and my plans following high school.	5.5% (29)	22.6% (118)	54.3% (284)	17.6% (92)	2.16	523
My teachers and I rarely decide together the types of assignments I will do.	22.2% (116)	44.0% (230)	28.1% (147)	5.7% (30)	2.83	523
<i>answered question</i>						528

5. I am mostly motivated to do schoolwork by (choose one).		
		Response Percent Response Count
GRADES		62.5% 331
MY PARENTS		16.2% 86
LEARNING NEW THINGS		9.8% 52
MY TEACHERS		1.5% 8
OTHER		10.0% 53
<i>answered question</i>		530

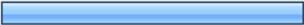
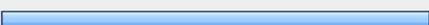
6. As part of my schoolwork I have done the following (choose all that apply).			
		Response Percent	Response Count
PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT		45.2%	240
PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF MY WORK		27.5%	146
ORIGINAL RESEARCH BASED PROJECT		76.1%	404
PARTICIPATION IN A SEMINAR CLASS		16.4%	87
MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF MY WORK		66.1%	351
GROUP PROJECT		91.9%	488
NONE OF THE ABOVE		5.5%	29
<i>answered question</i>			531

7. The majority of my classes are (choose one).			
		Response Percent	Response Count
ADVANCED		36.4%	194
ACADEMIC		8.6%	46
STUDIES		1.3%	7
HONORS		25.7%	137
AP		8.1%	43
IB		19.9%	106
<i>answered question</i>			533

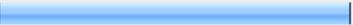
APPENDIX L

TEACHER SURVEY RESPONSE

1. Please rate the following statements.						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
In this school, I find that though grades may be important to students they are mostly motivated by learning new things in class.	0.8% (1)	31.4% (38)	56.2% (68)	11.6% (14)	2.21	121
In this school, students often have opportunities to choose topics for study that they are personally interested in.	12.3% (15)	54.9% (67)	31.1% (38)	1.6% (2)	2.78	122
In this school, students and teachers often decide together on different ways students can demonstrate their learning.	3.3% (4)	42.6% (52)	50.0% (61)	4.1% (5)	2.45	122
The school places little emphasis on making a connection between students' schoolwork and their plans following high school.	3.3% (4)	29.5% (36)	55.7% (68)	11.5% (14)	2.25	122
In this school, I find that students are mostly motivated by grades.	40.3% (48)	50.4% (60)	9.2% (11)	0.0% (0)	3.31	119
In this school, students and teachers rarely decide together the types of assignments students will do.	9.9% (12)	61.2% (74)	25.6% (31)	3.3% (4)	2.78	121
This school organizes learning experiences that are useful to students' plans following high school.	4.1% (5)	66.9% (81)	25.6% (31)	3.3% (4)	2.72	121
	<i>answered question</i>					122

2. I have given my students an opportunity to do the following (check all that apply):		
		Response Percent Response Count
SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH BASED PROJECT		58.7% 71
PORTFOLIO OF THEIR WORK		38.0% 46
PUBLIC EXHIBITION OF THEIR WORK		30.6% 37
PROJECT INVOLVING APPLYING THEIR LEARNING		83.5% 101
MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION OF THEIR WORK		66.1% 80
NONE OF THE ABOVE.		6.6% 8
<i>answered question</i>		121

4. I teach the majority of my classes at:		
		Response Percent Response Count
Woodrow High School		45.9% 56
Truman High School		54.1% 66
<i>answered question</i>		122

5. Thank you for completing Part 1. If you teach or have taught seniors in the past few years please go on to Part 2. Only teachers that teach or have taught seniors in the past few years should complete Part 2 of the survey.		
		Response Percent Response Count
I teach or have recently taught seniors and will continue on to Part 2 of the survey.		68.0% 83
I do not or have not recently taught seniors. I am finished with the survey.		32.0% 39
<i>answered question</i>		122

6. Please rate the following statements.						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Rating Average	Response Count
I maintain consistently high academic expectations for the seniors I teach throughout the year.	51.8% (43)	43.4% (36)	4.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	3.47	83
I expect the college application/admissions process to be more important to the seniors I teach than academic preparation for college.	7.4% (6)	30.9% (25)	48.1% (39)	13.6% (11)	2.32	81
During the second semester, I anticipate the seniors I teach will give less effort in my class.	34.1% (28)	50.0% (41)	14.6% (12)	1.2% (1)	3.17	82
I expect the seniors I teach to prepare in my class for the challenges of post-secondary school and/or the workplace.	34.9% (29)	53.0% (44)	9.6% (8)	2.4% (2)	3.20	83
My academic expectations, for the seniors I teach, are consistently low throughout the year.	0.0% (0)	1.2% (1)	36.6% (30)	62.2% (51)	1.39	82
My expectations for academic effort from the seniors in my classes are lowered as the year progresses.	6.1% (5)	28.0% (23)	37.8% (31)	28.0% (23)	2.12	82
	<i>answered question</i>					83

APPENDIX M

CURRICULUM GUIDE ASSESSMENT PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy Statement

The district recognizes the need for varied assessments that reflect multiple intelligences and different learning modalities. In developing assessments throughout the year, the teacher should consider the higher levels of thinking in Bloom's Taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis) in order to assess the full range in student thinking.

Assessment should also be mindful of the demands and pedagogy suggested by the International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement programs, HSPA and ERB tests, and new SAT.

Assessment Options: English Curriculum

Assessments should be on-going, reflective, and varied. They can be informal and do not necessarily have to be assigned a grade but rather can be used for diagnostic purposes. Using a variety of assessments, including but not limited to essays, exams, visuals, presentations, skits, and creative narratives, teachers will be able to more effectively determine what students know. Assessment should directly coincide with what has been taught. Teachers should avoid process creep, which occurs when enjoyable activities become more important than educational outcomes and take away from the learning process. Alternative assessments that address multiple intelligences should be used to add to students' learning and give them a varied means to demonstrate what they know.

Assessment Options: Math Curriculum

Assessments should be on going, reflective, and varied. They can be informal and do not necessarily have to be assigned a grade but rather can be used for diagnostic purposes. Using a variety of assessments, including but not limited to open-ended questions, portfolios, journals,

presentations of problem solving and/or research, and multiple-choice questions, teachers will be able to more effectively determine what students know. Assessment should directly coincide with what has been taught. Alternative assessments that address multiple intelligences should be used to add to students' learning and give them a varied means to demonstrate what they know.

Assessment Options: History Curriculum

Teachers will be able to more effectively determine what students know by using a variety of assessments. They should be vary in scope (simple to complex), structure (highly directed to independent), and time frame (short to long term). Assessments should be authentic, in that students should be asked to “do” the subject, that is, to efficiently and effectively use a repertoire of knowledge and skills to perform a complex task.

Note: Source: District curriculum guides.

APPENDIX N

METHODS OF EVALUATING AND TESTING

Methods of Evaluating and Testing (sample from grade 11 English course of study)

1. Quizzes
2. Unit tests including objective questions, responses, and essays
3. Final Examination
4. Writing Assignments
5. Homework
6. Oral Presentations
7. Notebook
8. Research Paper
9. Journals
10. Cooperative Learning

Methods of Evaluating and Testing (sample from grade 11 History course of study)

1. Quizzes
2. Unit tests including objective questions, responses, and essays
3. Final Examination
4. Writing Assignments
5. Homework-document based primary and secondary sources
6. Oral Presentations
7. Research Paper
8. Cooperative Learning (Group Projects)

APPENDIX O
INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM (IB) ASSESSMENT PLAN

Diploma Program Assessment

Philosophy

The Diploma Program goals provide students with:

- a broad and balanced, yet academically demanding, program of study
- the development of critical-thinking and reflective skills
- the development of research skills
- the development of independent learning skills
- the development of intercultural understanding
- a globally recognized university entrance qualification.

Diploma Program assessment procedures measure the extent to which students have mastered advanced academic skills in fulfilling these goals, for example:

- analyzing and presenting information
- evaluating and constructing arguments
- solving problems creatively.

Basic skills are also assessed, including:

- retaining knowledge
- understanding key concepts
- applying standard methods.

In addition to academic skills, Diploma Program assessment encourages an international outlook and intercultural skills where appropriate.

Assessment tasks are designed to support and encourage good classroom teaching and learning.

Student results are determined by performance against set standards, not by each student's position in the overall rank order.

Methods

A variety of different methods are used to measure student achievement against the objectives for each course.

External assessment

Examinations form the basis of the assessment for most courses because of their high levels of objectivity and reliability. They include:

- essays
- structured problems
- short-response questions
- data-response questions
- text-response questions
- case-study questions
- multiple-choice questions (limited use of these).

There are also a small number of other externally assessed pieces of work, for example, [theory of knowledge](#) essays, [extended essays](#) and world literature assignments. These are completed by students over an extended period under teacher supervision instead of examination conditions, and are then marked by external examiners.

Internal assessment

Teacher assessment is also used for most courses. This includes:

- oral work in languages
- fieldwork in geography
- laboratory work in the sciences
- investigations in mathematics
- artistic performances.

Assessments are checked by external examiners and normally contribute between 20% and 30% of the total mark.

Some of the [arts courses](#), for example, music, theatre arts and visual arts, have assessment of a major practical component, which can account for as much as 50% of the total mark.

Extended essay

The extended essay is an independent, self-directed piece of research, culminating in a 4,000-word paper. As a required component, it provides:

- practical preparation for the kinds of undergraduate research required at tertiary level
- an opportunity for students to engage in an in-depth study of a topic of interest within a chosen subject.

Emphasis is placed on the research process:

- formulating an appropriate research question

- engaging in a personal exploration of the topic
- communicating ideas
- developing an argument.

Participation in this process develops the capacity to:

- analyze
- synthesize, and
- evaluate knowledge.

Note. Source: *IB diploma programme assessment philosophy*. Retrieved from

<http://www.ibo.org/diploma/assessment/>

APPENDIX P

ELECTIVE COURSE OFFERINGS IN CORE ACADEMIC PROGRAM BY ABILITY GROUP

English

Full Year Course Electives:

Creative Writing (Adv)
Drama 1, 2, 3 (Adv/IB)
Humanities (Adv)
Journalism: Communications 1, 2, 3 (Adv)
Journalism: Yearbook 1, 2/3 (Adv)
Media Literacy* (Adv)

Semester Course Electives:

Film Analysis and Criticism (Adv)
Public Speaking (Adv)
Science-Fiction/Fantasy Literature (Adv)
Sports Literature* (Adv)
Themes in Contemporary Literature** (Adv)

History

Full Year Course Electives:

European History (IB, AP)
Psychology (IB)
Research Methods in Psychology (IB)
Economics (IB, Adv)
US Government and Politics (AP, Adv)
Human Behavior and Development (Adv)
Western Civilization (Adv)

Semester Course Electives:

American Legal System (Adv)
Anthropology (Adv)
Contemporary World Issues (Adv)
Sociology (Adv)
US Government and Politics
(Academic/Studies) *

Mathematics

Full Year Course Electives:

Calculus AB (AP)
Calculus BC (AP / IB – HL)
Computer Science (IB)
Further Mathematics** (Honors / IB)

Statistics (AP)

Probability & Statistics ** (Adv)

Semester Course Electives:

Introduction to Computer Programming (*Advanced*)

Probability and Statistics * (*Academic* Advanced***)

Probability and Statistics** (*Advanced*)

Science

Full Year Course Electives:

Anatomy & Physiology (Adv)

Biology (IB/AP)

Biological Themes (IB)

Chemistry (IB/AP)

Chemical Themes (IB)

Environmental Issues (Adv)

Environmental Science (IB/AP)

Physics Themes (IB)

Physics B (AP)

Physics C (AP)

Semester Course Electives:

Biology: DNA* (Adv)

Chemistry: Forensic Science* (Adv)

Forensic Science* (Stud/Acad)

Note. *offered only at Woodrow High School, **offered only at Truman High School.

Source: District Program of Studies Guide.

APPENDIX Q

OPTION TWO CURRICULUM GUIDE STATEMENT

OPTION 2:

This option is regulated by New Jersey Administrative Code title 6A: 8-5.1. Requirements for this option are currently under review by the Commissioner of Education, the New Jersey Department of Education, and the district as part of the High School Re-Design Initiative.

Note: Source: District Program of Studies Guide.

Figure 1

Attendance summary report class of 2006- Truman High School

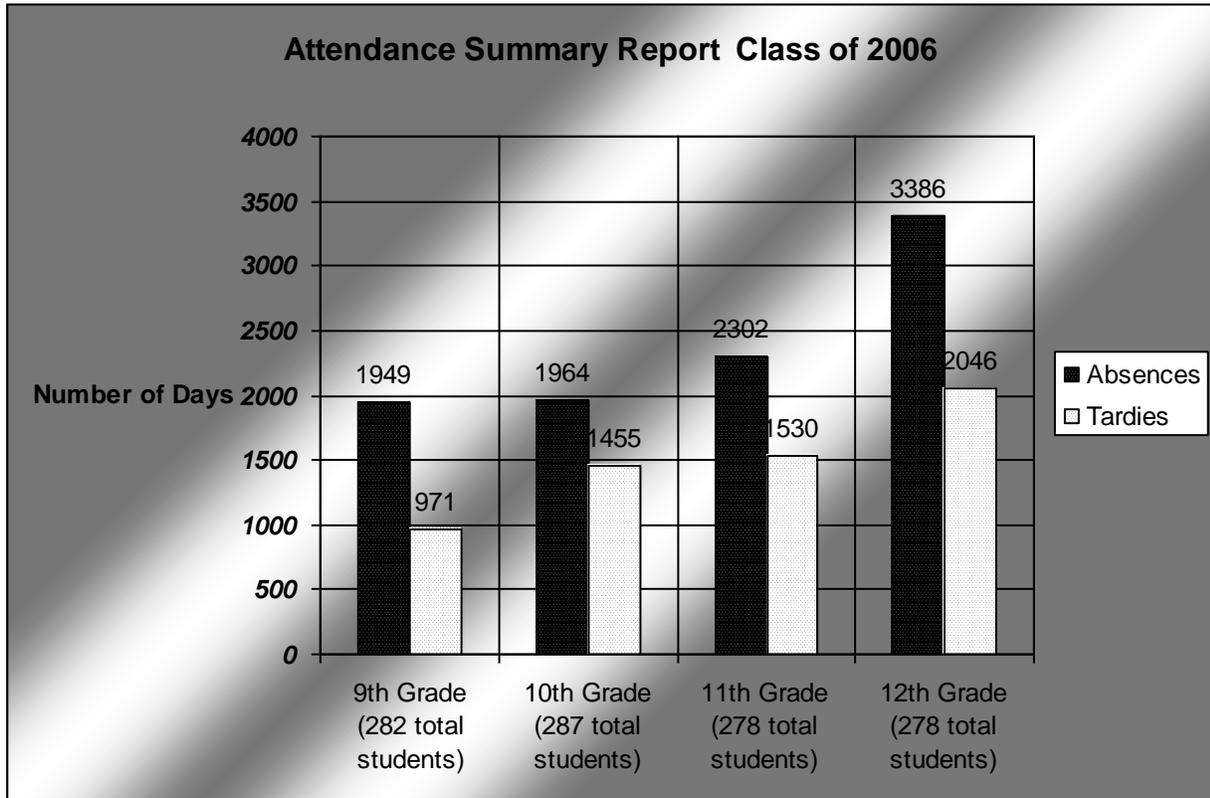


Figure 2

Attendance summary report class of 2006 – Woodrow High School

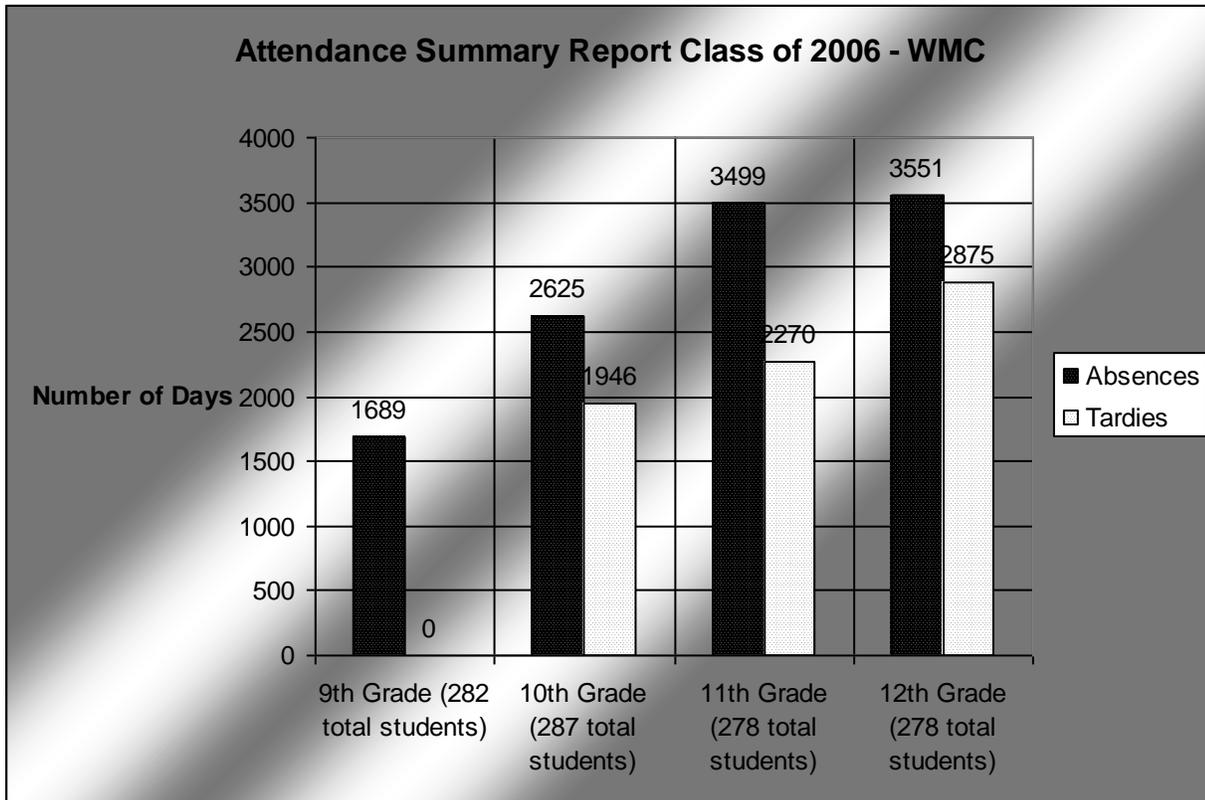


Figure 3

Attendance summary report class of 2007- Truman High School

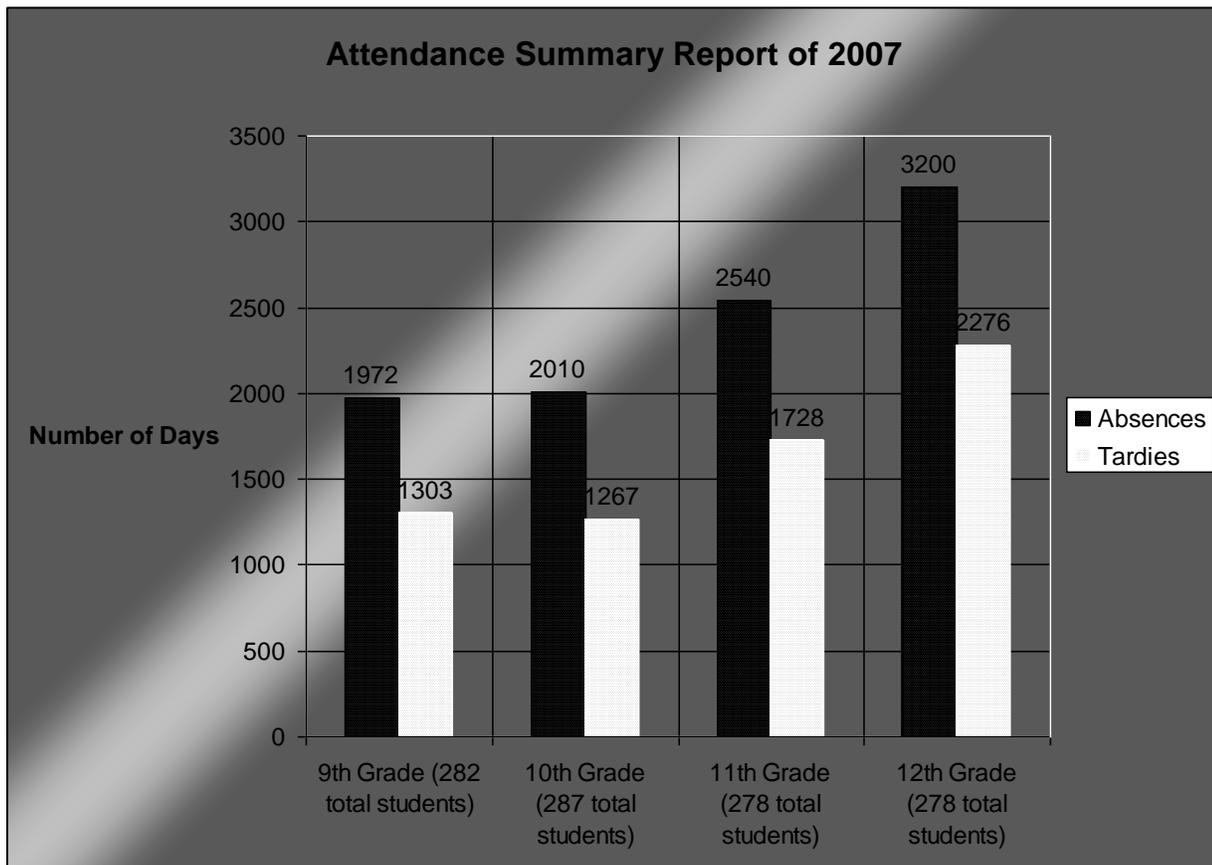


Figure 4

Attendance summary report class of 2007- Woodrow High School

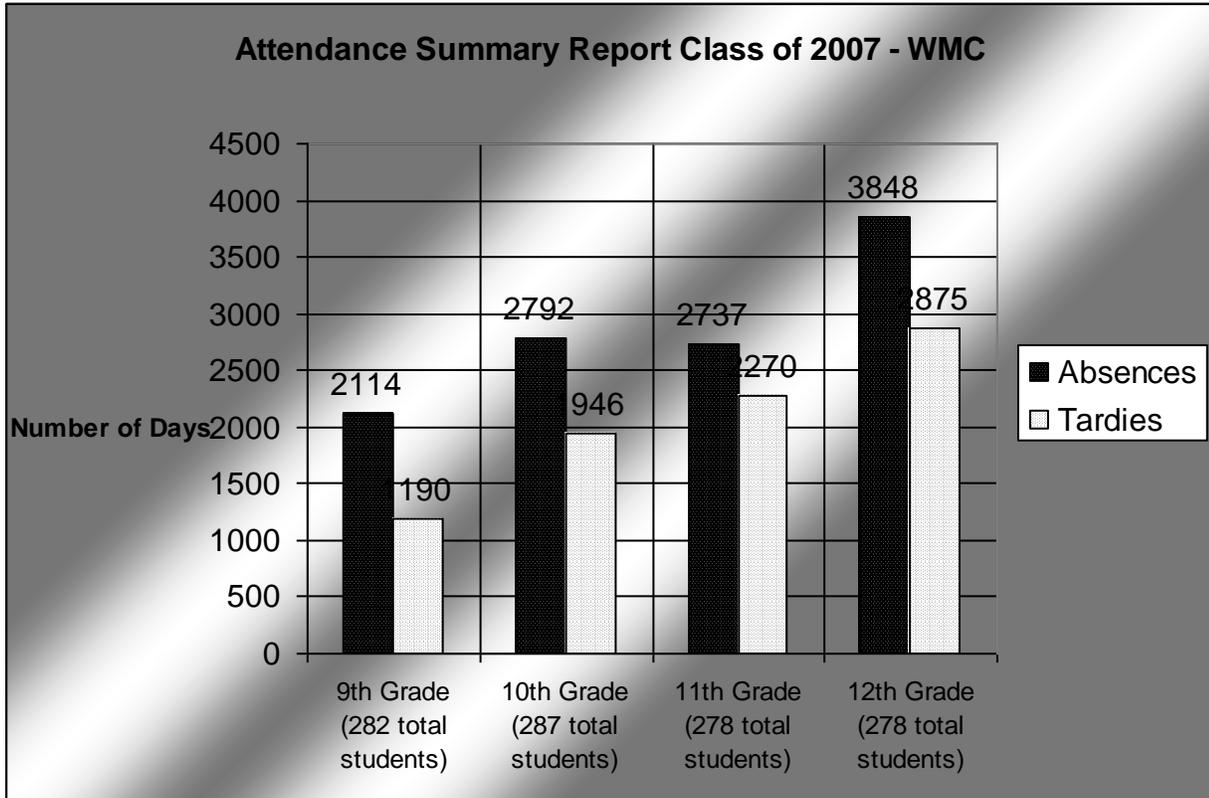


Figure 5

Final grade summary report class of 2007- Truman High School

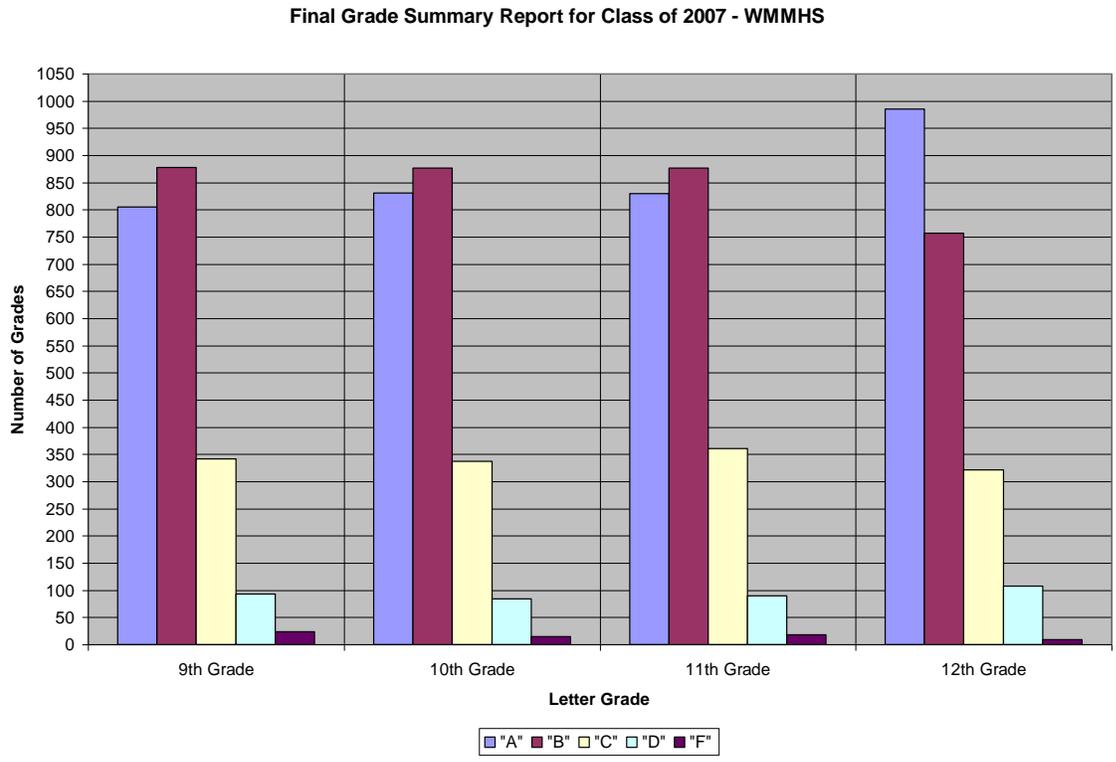


Figure 6

Final grade summary report class of 2006- Truman High School

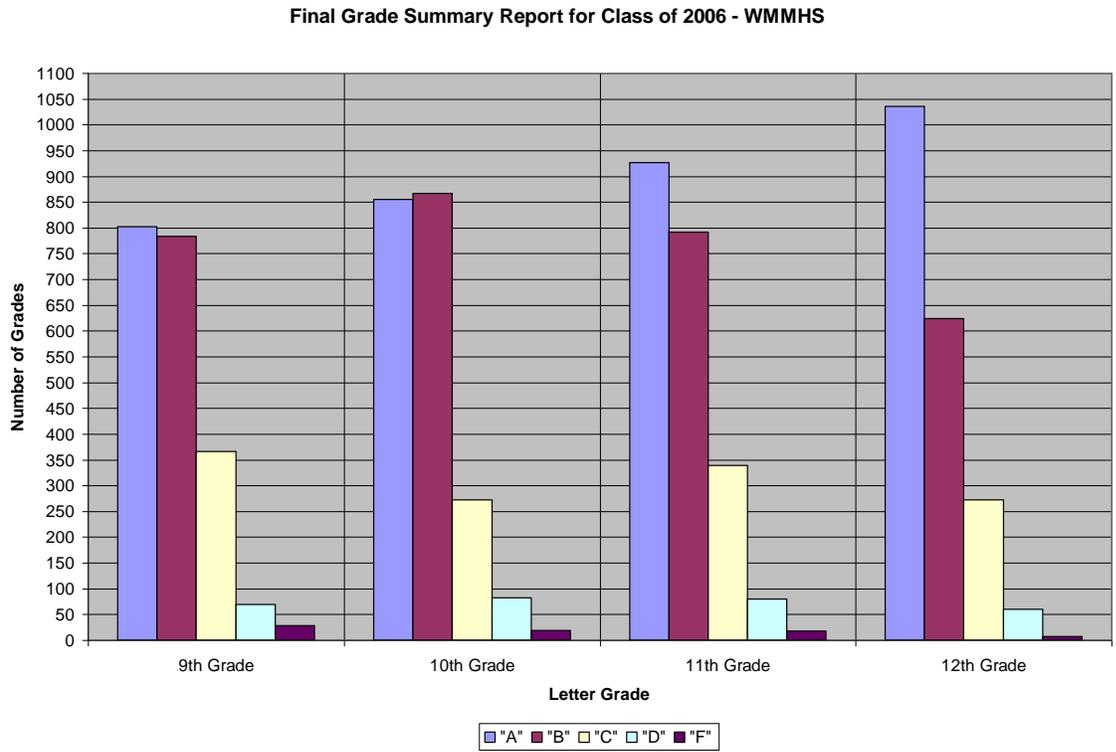


Figure 7

Final grade summary report class of 2005- Truman High School

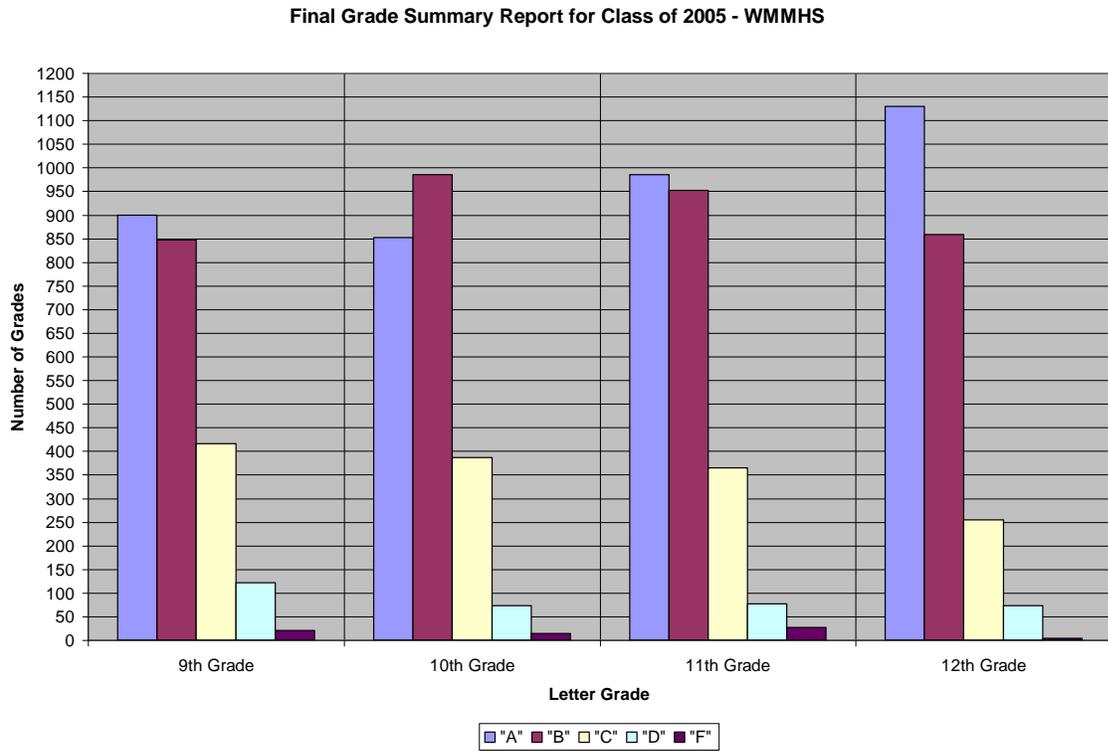


Figure 8

Final grade summary report class of 2004- Truman High School

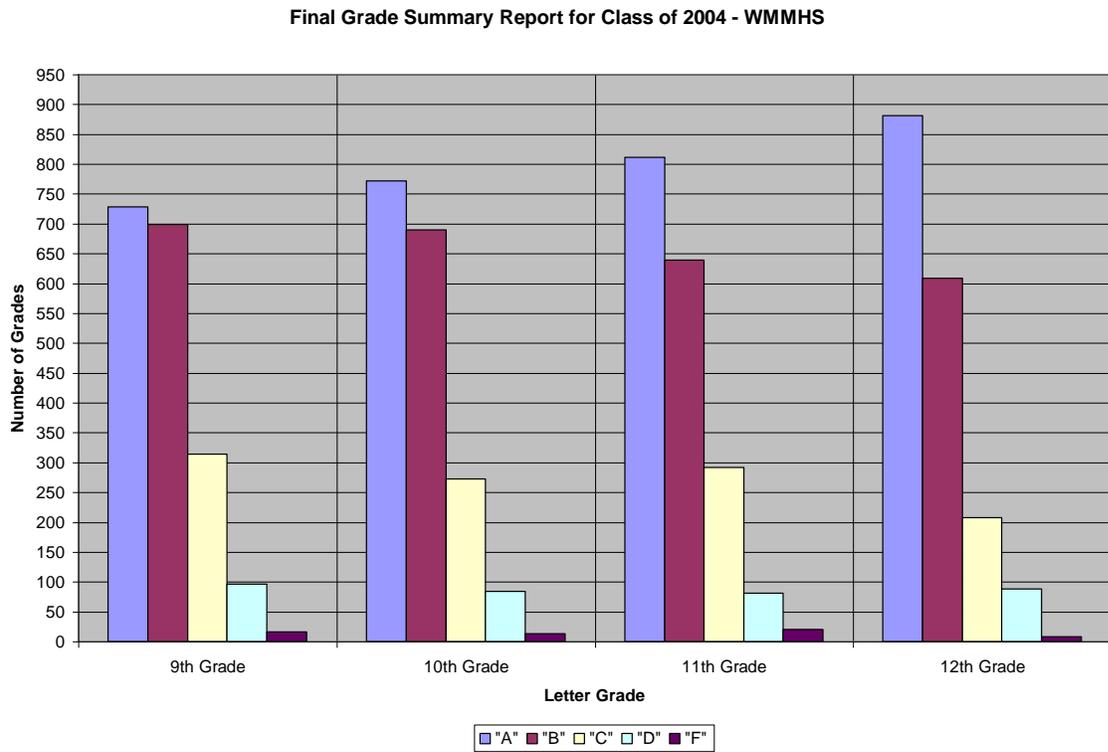


Figure 9

Final grade summary report class of 2007- Woodrow High School

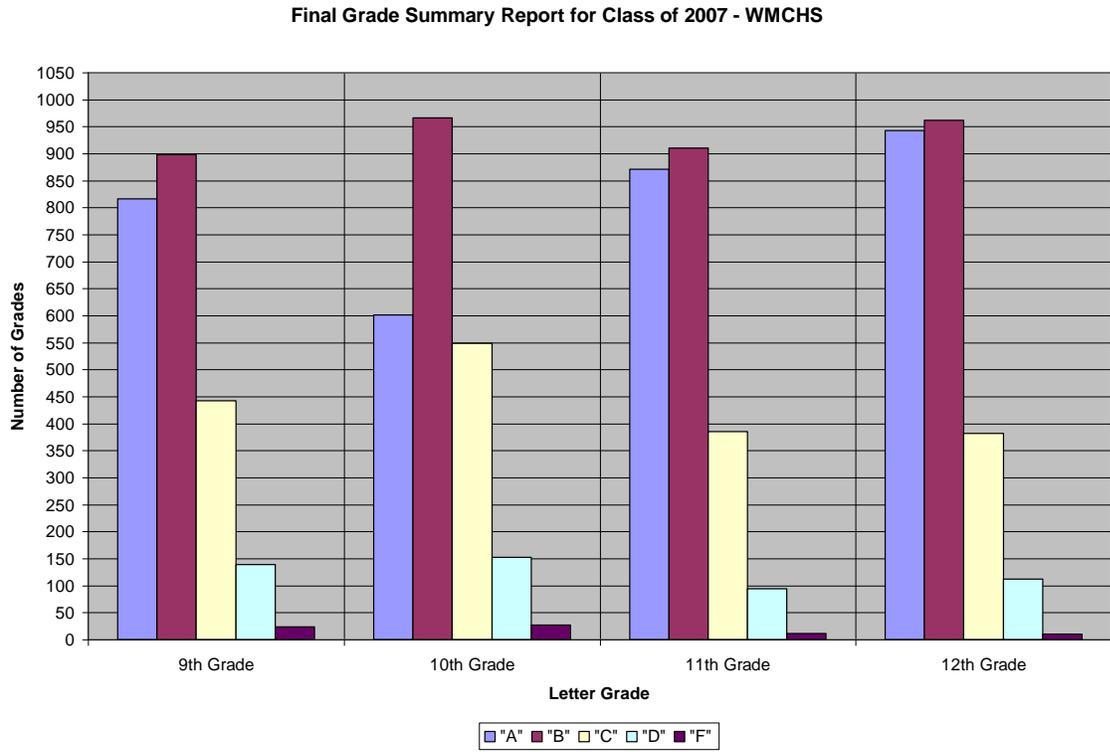


Figure 10

Final grade summary report class of 2006- Woodrow High School

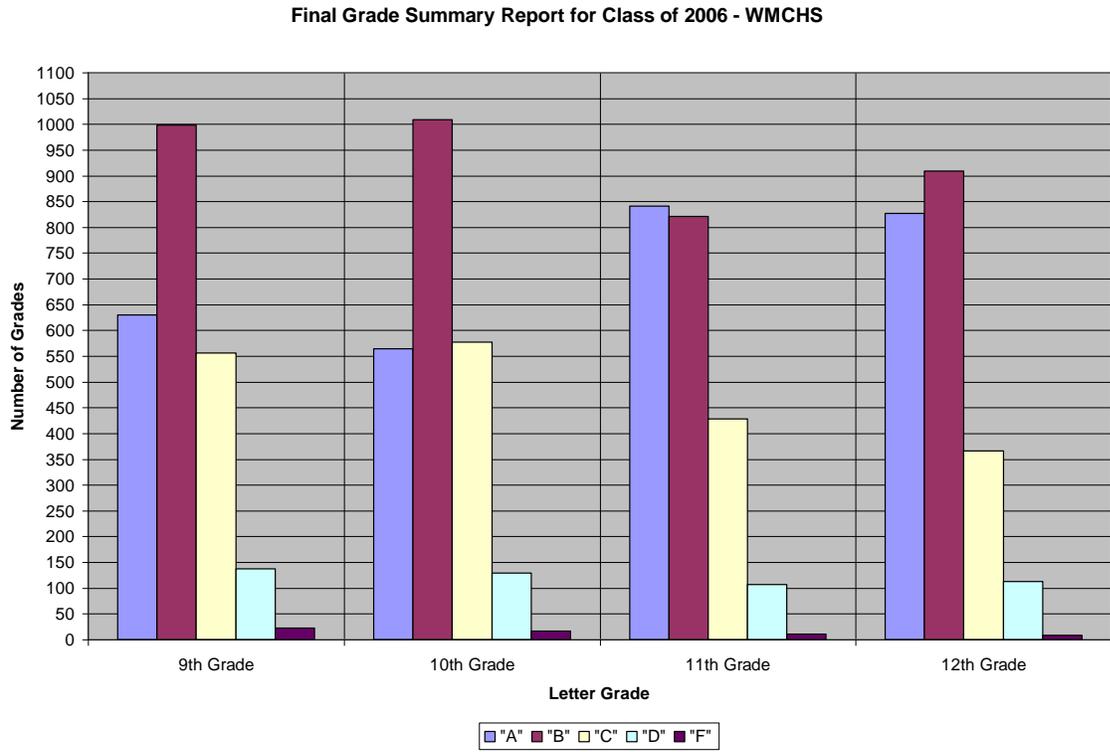


Figure 11

Final grade summary report class of 2005- Woodrow High School

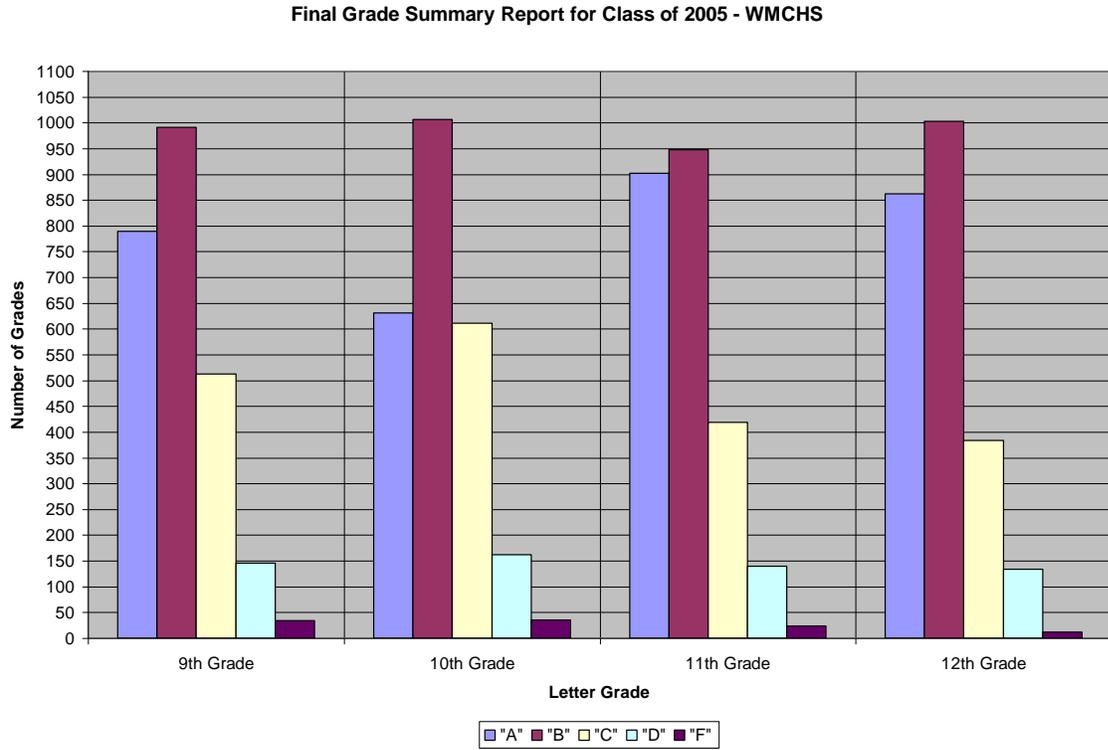
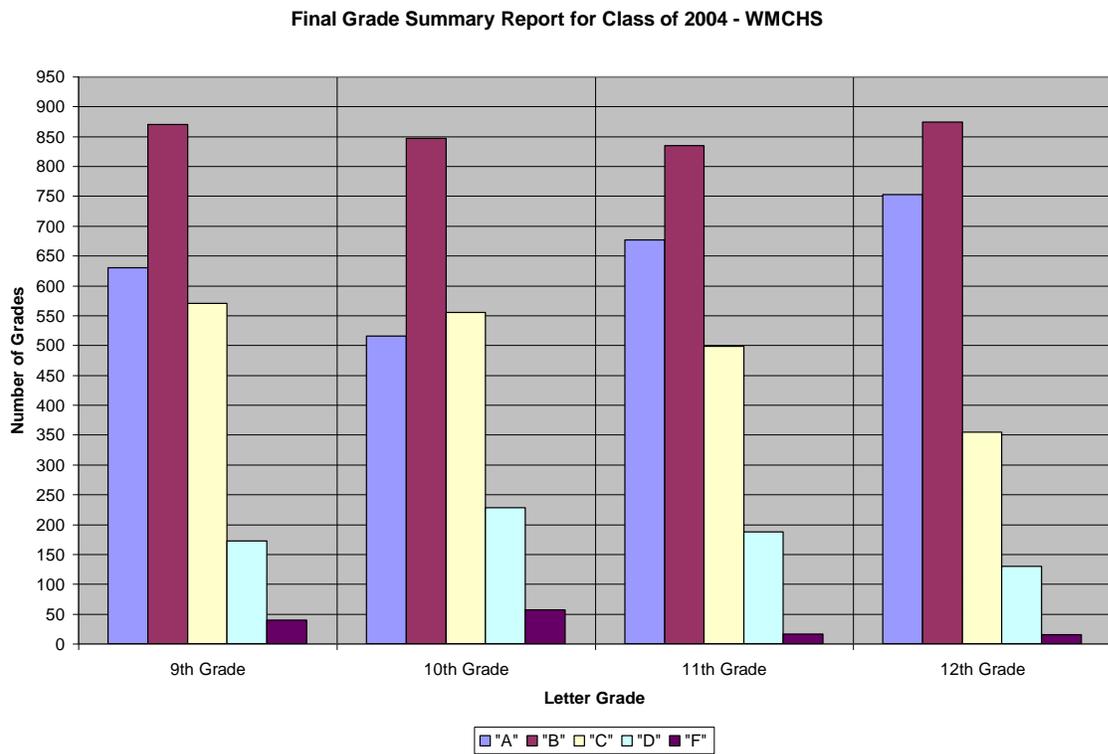


Figure 12

Final grade summary report class of 2004- Woodrow High School



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