

## **ABSTRACT**

Title of Dissertation:

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE  
PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND  
TEACHERS REGARDING THE  
ADJUSTMENT TO SIXTH GRADE  
ACROSS SCHOOL CONFIGURATIONS**

Kristil Fossett, Doctor of Education, 2016

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A qualitative study was conducted in a large urban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States to investigate the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the adjustment to sixth grade across school configurations. The investigation revealed the psychosocial and environmental factors that have an impact on sixth graders according to their grade span configurations.

The study was conducted in the large urban school district, referred to as the "County," which has a history of low and inconsistent achievement of sixth graders across a variety of grade span configurations. Through the analysis of the teacher and parent interviews conducted in two K-6 schools and two 6-8 middle schools, four themes were identified: transitioning, cultural awareness, social adjustment, and

preparedness. The four themes emerged from the perceptions and observations of sixth graders, as shared by parents and teachers of sixth graders, according to their grade span configurations. Each of the responses was compared according to the identified grade span configuration K-6 and 6-8. From the data collected, recommendations were provided to the school district in which the study was conducted to better support teachers, parents, and sixth graders. Further research was also recommended of larger samples of sixth grade span configurations to better understand the complex dynamics of the relationships between grade span configurations for sixth graders and student achievement.

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND  
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SCHOOL CONFIGURATIONS

By

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family; for without their unconditional love, time, support, prayers, and understanding, this accomplishment would not have been possible. To my grandparents and parents, who encouraged me, motivated me, and created high expectations and who instilled in me the desire to reach the highest level of education, I cannot thank you enough for igniting the fire in me to reach this goal. Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to my three beautiful daughters, Kristian, Kennedy, and Kerrington, you are my constant source of love, joy, laughter, and LIFE. I love you!

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## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables .....	vi
List of Figures.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem and Literature Review.....	1
Introduction to the Problem.....	1
Focus of the Study.....	4
History of Middle Grades Education .....	6
Middle Grade Configurations in the County .....	9
Literature Review .....	14
Guiding Conceptual Framework.....	29
County Study of Middle School Options .....	30
Purpose of Study and Research Questions.....	31
Section 2: Methodology.....	33
Research Questions .....	33
Design and Methods.....	33
Data Collection Procedures.....	38
Timeline .....	41
Summary .....	43
Section 3: Results.....	45
Results of the Interview.....	45

Validating the Analysis for the Research Questions .....	64
Recommendations and District Impact .....	66
Recommendations for Future Research .....	69
Conclusions .....	70
Appendices.....	72
Appendix A: Cover Letter .....	72
Appendix B: Teacher Consent Form.....	75
Appendix C: Parent/Guardian Consent Form .....	76
Appendix D: Interview Protocol .....	77
Appendix E: Interview Protocol.....	78
Appendix F: Interview Protocol.....	79
Appendix G: Email to Principals .....	80
Appendix H: Email Reminder to Participants.....	81
Appendix I: Interview Transcripts .....	96
References.....	115



## **List of Tables**

- Table 1. 2010-2012 Maryland School Assessment Data for sixth, seventh, and eighth Grades
- Table 2. Sixth Grade Maryland School Assessment Data for 2009
- Table 3. 2014-2015 Sixth Grade Elementary to Middle School Transition
- Table 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis Results
- Table 5. Average Levels of Attendance and Discipline Referrals in 2014-2015 for Sixth Graders in K-6 and 6-8.
- Table 6. Research Questions, Interview Questions, Research Methods and Data Sources

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: County's 2010 SRI Achievement from Grade 5 to Grade 8

Figure 2: Language Arts Achievement after Transition

Figure 3: Mathematics Achievement after Transition

Figure 4: The Impact of Grade Span Configurations on Students

Figure 5: Transcript Coding System

# THE ADJUSTMENT TO SIXTH GRADE ACROSS SCHOOL CONFIGURATIONS

## **Section I: Introduction to the Problem and Literature Review**

Crossing over the line from childhood to adolescence is difficult because the line is not clear and there are inherent risks involved. It is an emotional leap as well as a physical one, and maintaining a balanced sense of self becomes increasingly difficult. (Milgram, 1992, p.22.)

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Across the nation, educational leaders in urban school districts are trying to identify the most effective setting for sixth graders: K-6, K-8, or 6-8 grade-level configurations. The middle school configuration first emerged in the 1950s and increased in popularity during the 1980s. The creation of middle schools was predicated on the assumption that the middle grades “are not a time for academic learning so much as the social adjustment, individual growth coping with early adolescence, and looking out for the needs of the ‘whole child’” (Yecke, 2005, p. 1).

The study of elementary school students and their successful transition to middle school has been a major focus for educational leaders, researchers, policy makers, and legislators over the past several decades. According to Hough (2003), researchers conducted over 3,700 studies of middle schools between 1993 and 2000. According to Midgley, Anderman, and Hicks, (1995), many of these studies focused on culture, classroom organization, teaching strategies, academic standards, and teacher expectations within the middle school setting. These factors are important to research, to determine why an achievement gap exists in the middle school settings. Researchers provide some insight on the quantitative data and the trends that exists with academic performance;

however, there are other contributing factors that may impede the overall performance of the students in middle school.

A recent increase in the federal demand for higher levels of student achievement and accountability has led to a corresponding increase in the attention given to the middle school (or middle grade) environment. In response to this demand for middle school students, as well as those in elementary and high school, legislators passed the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (the No Child Left Behind Act) with an intent of creating “steady academic gains until all students can read and do math at or above grade level, closing for good the nation’s achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 1). National and state-level data released as part of the increased accountability associated with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) revealed that U.S. middle school students lagged significantly behind their international student counterparts in academic performance. NCLB was designed to address the disparity and to increase teacher and principal performance in order to improve academic achievement for all students.

According to the results of the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress,

[Forty] percent of fourth-grade students performed at or above the Proficient level in mathematics. In reading, the fourth grade students performed 36 percent at or above the Proficient level, which was 1 percentage point below their performance in 2013. The 2015 national achievement of eighth grade students performed

thirty-three percent at or above the Proficient level in NAEP mathematics and 34 percent in reading. (Nations Report Card, 2015, para. 1)

Educators have tried to address the problem of low achievement among middle school students through research and the incorporation of various practices:

- Providing high-quality curricula and instruction to all students;
- Using classroom practices that support equity;
- Connecting to students' cultural experiences and native languages;
- Connecting to "real-world" problems; and
- Organizing schools to foster equity (Successful Stem Education, 2011, p. 2).

A number of researchers and educators have also attempted to address the significant underperformance of middle school students by rethinking the existing grade-level configurations. Bedard and Do (2005), for example, examined the effect of grade level configuration on sixth graders using longitudinal data, and ultimately expressed their support for the reconfiguration of middle grades. The researchers analyzed the effects of grade-level configuration at one junior high (grades 7-9), where students attend elementary schools longer, and a middle school (grades 6-8). The resulting data indicated that moving to the middle school configuration decreases the graduation rate by 1-3% (Bedard & Do, 2005). Likewise, Rockoff, and Lockwood (2010) also found that transitioning students from elementary to middle school in sixth or seventh grade impacts the achievement in both math and English test scores. Transitioning students from elementary to middle school in sixth grade leads to a decrease in achievement on standardized tests in math and English. This study will explore why there is a decrease in academic achievement based on the perceived contributing factors that may exist such as

but not limited to psycho-social, environmental, and social adjustments that are observed by sixth graders in the K-6 and 6-8 grade span configurations.

### **Focus of the Study**

This study will focus on a large urban district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States that will be referred to as “the County.” The County is one of the largest school districts in its state. In the 2008 County Master Plan, district leaders highlighted the need to focus on middle school achievement. However, since that time, the County has also moved to reconfigure some of its middle grades, specifically moving Grade 6 to middle school. The County has commissioned or conducted internally a quantitative study designed to examine the effect of its middle school configurations on student performance. Despite this attention, there has not been an increase in achievement.

According to County data, as of Fall 2015, 128,937 students were enrolled in all of the County schools, of which 19,733 (15%) were sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. There were 30,998 (24%) students enrolled in 60 (K-6) elementary schools and 17 (K-8 grade) academies and dedicated specialty schools in the County (County, 2015). As shown in Table 1, the achievement of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students across the County lagged significantly below the state average in reading and math during the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years.

In 2011, the County hired a consultant to conduct a quantitative study of the Maryland School Assessments and Scholastic Reading Inventory, which resulted in the Elementary-to-Middle School Transition Planning Report, SY2011 (Taylor, 2011). The report indicated that there were approximately 5,000 registered sixth and seventh grade students entering middle school in the County, and that approximately 50 of the 5,000

students entering middle school that year had been retained the previous school year (Taylor, 2011). The report also indicated that based on the 2010 Maryland School Assessment (MSA) performance of the students entering middle school in the County that year, transitioning from an elementary to a middle school had an impact on sixth grade achievement.

Table 1

2010-2012 Maryland School Assessment Data for Grades 6-8

GRADE	Reading MSA						Math MSA					
	2010		2011		2012		2010		2011		2012	
(S) STATE/ (C) COUNTY	S	C	S	C	S	C	S	C	S	C	S	C
6	86%	81%	84%	78%	83%	79%	80%	81%	81%	73%	88%	76%
7	82%	83%	84%	75%	78%	71%	73%	73%	74%	60%	83%	61%
8	80%	82%	83%	71%	77%	70%	65%	67%	66%	44%	71%	50%

Note: Numbers indicate the percent of students who scored proficient and advanced.

While the report noted the achievement differences, it did not explain the contributing factors that impacted students academically, socially, or emotionally as they transitioned from an elementary to a middle school. Therefore, this study will seek to identify the key factors that may contribute to these differences in achievement. Ideally, the resulting data will help school and district leaders (a) provide appropriate support for middle school students, (b) close the achievement gaps, and (c) reduce retention and dropout rates in the County.

## **History of Middle Grades Education**

According to “*The Emergence of Middle Schools, Growth and Maturation of the Middle School Movement*” (n.d.), the birth of the middle school movement began in 1888 at Harvard University, with the support of the institution’s president, Charles Eliot. Eliot and the National Education Association Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies believed that adolescent students needed a rigorous and accelerated curriculum and should have the opportunity to complete secondary school in four years rather than six (para 1). The committee recommended reducing elementary schools to six grade levels (1–6) and increasing secondary grades to six grade levels (7–12). They also recommended that the new secondary schools be designed to allow for the quick promotion of talented, college-bound students so that they could complete the six years of secondary school in as few as four years. As educational leaders implemented these changes, schools began to view Grades 7 and 8 as introductory secondary grades, and educators adjusted the curriculum to include instruction that aligned with the expected instructional level of performance. This adjustment led to school district leaders to combine those grades with ninth grade to form junior high schools.

In 1950, Alvin Howard advocated for the creation of new grade level configuration that ultimately led to the establishment of the middle school (6-8 grades). According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals, (NASSP, n.d.), in 1963, a new movement emerged that addressed the academic and social needs of adolescents. Dr. William Alexander, Donald Eichhorn, Gordon Vars, John Lounsbury, and Conrad Toepfer spearheaded and facilitated a conference at Cornell University to contend that the “new school in the middle” should replace the junior high school model.



The role of the conference supported the middle school movement by reducing class sizes, poor utilization of buildings, and racial segregation (para. 11). Regardless of the middle school or junior high school structure, advocates discovered that the students' needs were still not being addressed (para. 12).

According to "*The Emergence of Middle Schools*" (n.d.), In 1965 only 5 percent of middle-grades schools in the United States were 6-8 or 5-8 middle schools, and 67 percent were 7-9 junior high schools. By the year 2000 these percentages were reversed: only 5 percent of middle-grades schools were 7-9 junior highs and 69 percent 6-8 or 5-8 middle schools. The number of middle schools grew rapidly—from 1,434 (23%) in 1971 to 4,094 (33% in 1981; 6,168 (51%) in 1991; and 9,750 (69%) in 2000. (para. 9)

Despite these efforts, the problems that the middle grade configuration was designed to address still remain. Achievement in grades 6-8 has not shown great improvements, and concerns remain about the social and developmental differences between students in sixth grade and the older eighth grade adolescent. For instance, practitioners, district leaders, and parents across the nation are concerned about the transitions that sixth graders must navigate in middle school. Some parents worry that these students experience behavioral concerns, negative peer pressure, and a significant decline in academic achievement.

Linnenbrink (2010) conducted a study of a five-year cohort group of students in Grades 4-8 in Iowa from 2005 to 2009. The study revealed that students often experienced challenges while adjusting to a new environment; however, not all groups of students experienced a negative relationship between transitions and test scores

(Linnenbrink, 2010). According to the data collected on the Iowa Testing Programs, students who transitioned from an elementary building to a middle school building during Grades 5 through 8 performed lower on the reading and math assessments than did students who did not transition buildings (Linnenbrink, 2010). This study revealed that the transition from elementary to middle school could have a more detrimental effect on math test scores than on reading test scores. According to Weiss and Knipes (2006), sixth graders in an elementary school grade configuration outperformed sixth graders in middle school on standardized tests and received half the disciplinary infractions.

Although the transition into a new educational setting can be a challenge for some students, there are other contributing factors that negatively affect the academic achievement of sixth graders. Behavior and peer interaction, for example, can have a significant impact on sixth graders' academic performance. As Chen (2008) explained, "Children in the sixth grade are at a point in their lives when they are easily influenced by peers" (para. 8). In a middle school setting, students are exposed to older schoolmates, experience independence from direct supervision, and are able to take on more responsibilities. This could also create a challenge as the students begin to try to "fit it" by adopting the negative behaviors and actions of the older schoolmates. Sixth graders could also begin to become shy as they transition, due to fear of being teased and bullied. These are two examples that could impede their academic and social progress.

### **Middle Grade Configurations in the County**

According to the Bridge to Excellence Plan, in 2008, the County decided to consolidate schools to eliminate overcrowding and establish financial equity among district schools. The Board of Education directed the superintendent to conduct a review

and develop a course of action that would outline procedures district leaders could use to change school boundaries and configurations (“Board of Education Approves School Boundaries,” 2009):

The school system will periodically determine, by systemic study, the status of the current and projected use of all educational facilities taking into account the efficient utilization of space and the effective delivery of instruction and then reassign students accordingly, when necessary. It is the ultimate goal of the district to transition all sixth grades to middle school in due course. The procedures shall ensure, at a minimum, that the following factors are considered:

- A. student enrollment trends
- B. school building capacities
- C. capacity utilization rates (a measure of school enrollment to school capacity)
- D. transportation
- E. educational programs
- F. racial composition of the student body
- G. financial consideration
- H. community impact. (p. 2)

On December 11, 2009, the Division of Academics submitted a research report to the County’s Board of Education that compared the benefits of the K-8 and traditional middle school configurations (Taylor, 2011). This report outlined existing research on the benefits and challenges of the K-8 grade configuration and provided examples of successful K-8 models. The report also highlighted the works of Balfanz et al. (2002),

Moore (2008), Offenberg (2001), and Wes and Kipnes (2006), all of whom explored urban school districts in cities like New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Cincinnati.

Taylor's (2011) analysis of these studies revealed seven benefits of the K-8 configurations:

- increased test scores;
- improved student discipline;
- relief of overcrowding in some large middle schools;
- easing of the daunting transition from fifth grade to middle school;
- longer and potentially more positive teacher-student relationships and increase parent involvement;
- lengthier stay in a neighborhood school; and
- more collaboration between elementary and secondary teachers.

Taylor (2011) also noted the following challenges of the K-8 configuration:

- lack of an appropriate and challenging middle grade curriculum;
- facilities that could not always accommodate older students;
- the need for revisions to attendance zones and transportation routes; and
- the risk to other initiatives to improve performance.

Newark Public School superintendent, Marion Bolden stated, "A middle school that is too large struggles. I absolutely think more urban districts will look at the K-8 and create more or keep what they have. It's such a great environment. It's more of a community school" (Nussbaum, 2004, para.10). This belief supports the continuity that is needed for students to be successful and close the achievement gaps that exist during transitions.

Based, in part, on the Division of Academies’ report, the County began to implement K-8 academies in 2010. Maryland School Assessment data in 2010 revealed that the K-8 configurations resulted in higher achievement among students than did the 6-8 configurations. Table 2 shows the average student assessment data on the 2010 Maryland Schools Assessment for a sample of sixth graders from four schools in each of the configurations in the county. The data suggest that sixth graders performed significantly better in academic settings located in elementary schools.

Table 2

The County’s Sixth Grade Maryland School Assessment Data for 2009

School configuration	Total schools	Reading	Math
K-8 academy	4 OUT OF 7	81.3%	75.3%
6-8 middle school	4 OUT OF 24	67.8%	58.8%
K-6 elementary school	4 OUT OF 73	84.0%	83.0%

Note: Numbers indicate the percentage of sixth grade students who scored proficient and advanced.

According to the Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 Educational Facilities Master Plan, “reassignment of grade 6 elementary to selected secondary schools is a part of the effort to make the most efficient use of the available facilities and to advance our educational initiatives” (p. 34). The district’s ultimate goal is to transition all sixth graders to middle school to reduce over-crowding; eliminate small sixth grade classes at identified elementary schools; improve the stability of students’ cohorts; and provide more options for students, including electives, and content specialization, advanced mathematics. The

district also identified some challenges of the reconfiguration, which largely involved resistance from parents accustomed to a K-6 model and the impact of the change on school facilities, finances, and staffing.

In December 2013, the County held a public forum to discuss the sixth grade transition from elementary school into middle schools. County representatives offered the following justifications for the change:

- Transitioning sixth grade to middle school provided students with advanced studies, expanded electives, and peer cohort stability;
- Students that transitioned into the 6-8 middle school configuration would perform better academically than would their counterparts that transitioned into the 7-8 middle school configuration; and
- Other districts had made significant progress with moving sixth grade into middle schools.

On February 13, 2014, County leaders selected 11 additional elementary schools to transition to a K-5 grade configuration.

**County analysis of middle school configurations.** Over the past 10 years, the County has experimented with the three configurations for middle grades (K-6, 6-8, and K-8). In 2014, County administrators requested an examination of the academic and other indicators of sixth graders in each of the three grade configurations. Swinton and Sunwonton (2014) conducted the study, which involved a comparison of the success of sixth graders in the different grade configurations. The researchers defined “success” as proficiency in reading and math, low absenteeism, and fewer suspensions (Swinton & Sunwonton, 2014). They examined student achievement from the end of the fifth grade to

the end of the seventh grade, and the results showed that students who experienced a middle school transition appeared to have lower reading achievement the year of their transition when compared to the other students who did not transition that year (Swinton & Sunwonton, 2014). The data also revealed, “diverging trajectories of those students who stay in K-8 configurations from fifth to eighth grade and those students who transition into middle school in sixth grade had the most consistent gain in achievement over time” (Swinton & Sunwonton, 2014, p. 19). Figure 1 shows the gains for the cohort that started middle school in 2010.

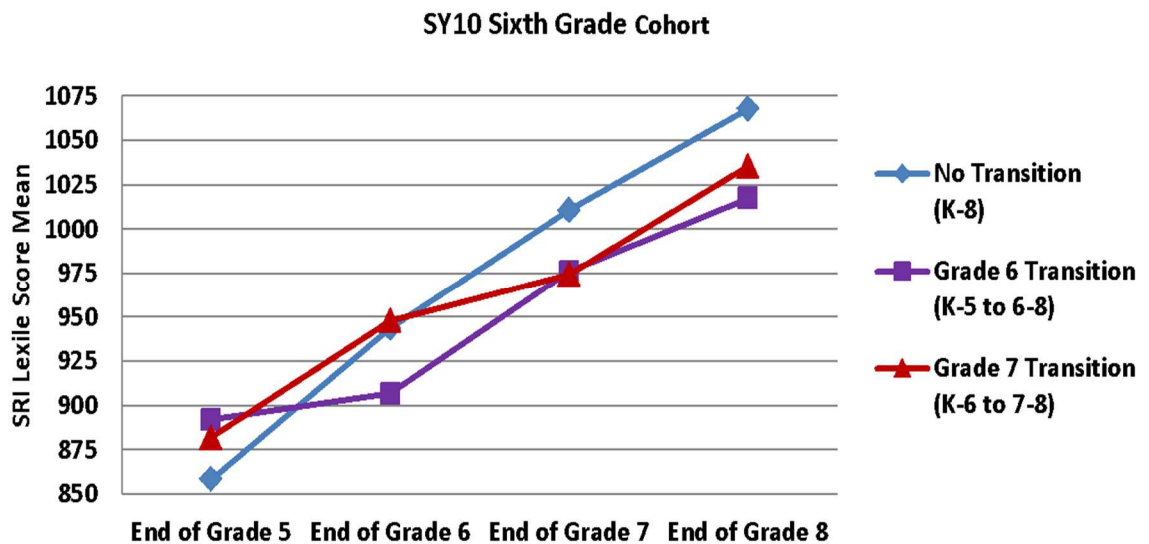


Figure 1: County’s 2010 SRI Achievement from Grade 5 to Grade 8 (Swinton & Sunmonu, 2014).

Swinton and Sunmonu (2014) used existing County data and did not conduct an in-depth exploration of the possible causes for the decline in performance among the sixth graders that transitioned into the middle school setting. However, other studies conducted in school districts, such as North Carolina, have revealed additional factors

that negatively impact the transition of sixth graders into the middle school setting. The literature review that follows will present a comprehensive exploration of these studies.

### **Literature Review**

The framework for the study is based on educational research related to middle school transition. The literature review is divided into four sections. The first section presents an analysis of the research literature on the psychosocial effects of middle school. The second section highlights research on the environmental effects of the middle school. The third section reviews literature that has explored the achievement of students as they transition into the middle school configurations, and the final section lays out a conceptual framework that the researcher has developed to examine the factors one should consider when selecting the best configuration for sixth graders in the County.

A number of researchers have found that features of middle school environments may have an impact on the emotional well being of sixth grade students. Some of these environmental characteristics may include school size, teacher-student ratios, the pedagogic practice, the quality of peer interactions, and extracurricular activities. This literature review will focus on studies that address the best grade-span configuration for sixth graders and identify environmental and internal issues perceived by parents and teachers. This review incorporates literature obtained from online databases using keyword searches that included various combinations of the aforementioned characteristics. A return of limited results indicated a gap in the literature relating to the environmental and internal issues of sixth graders in middle school configurations.

**The psychosocial effects of middle school.** There are some psychosocial effects that may impact students during their sixth grade year. These effects are not primarily



related to the environment of the grade span configuration that they are assigned; however, there could possibly be some contributing factors that may have an impact on a students' psychosocial stability. Administrators, practitioners, parents, and students often perceive the transition from elementary to middle school as an emotional roller coaster. (Hertzog, 1992, p. 27), expressed that "student are on an emotional and developmental roller coaster, and they need help dealing with their feelings and problems." With the speed, steep incline, dramatic drops, and stomach-dropping experiences that take our breath away, each second on a roller coaster can leave one feeling anxious, excited, and fearful of the unknown. Therefore, it is important that students receive the necessary support as they transition to minimize the feeling of fear, stress, and being overwhelmed.

Transitioning into the "unknown" of middle school from an elementary configuration can impact adolescents emotionally, physically, and mentally. As Milgram (1992) noted, "Crossing over the line from childhood to adolescence is difficult because the line is not clear and there are inherent risks involved. It is an emotional leap as well as a physical one, and maintaining a balanced sense of self becomes increasingly difficult" (p. 22). With the change, students are not able to understand or resolve their emotions; thus, reacting with defiant behaviors and attitudes towards their peers, teachers, and school.

***School climate.*** Researchers and district leaders have noted the importance of a positive school climate for practitioners, parents, and most importantly students. For teachers, the benefits of a positive school climate include increased job satisfaction (Ma & MacMillan, 1999), increased retention and attendance, and better home-school relationships (Brown & Medway, 2007; DiStefano, Monrad, May, McGuinness, &

Dickerson, 2007). Additionally, researchers have found that a positive school climate is positively related to indicators of school success, such as standardized test scores, annual yearly progress (AYP) measures, and school report card information (DiStefano et al. 2007; Greenberg, 2004; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006). Under the guidelines of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, policy makers support the accountability of assessing a school’s climate as a measure of a school’s success.

The Consortium of Chicago School Research (CSSR) used information from principals, teachers, and students across more than 200 schools to identify five essential supports for school improvement (Sebring et al., 2006). The results from the survey identified four student factors, five teacher factors, and four parent factors, as identified in Table 3.

Table 3

Exploratory Factor Analysis Results (Sebring et al., 2006)

Student Factors	Teacher Factors	Parent Factors
Learning environment	Working conditions/leadership	Learning environment
Social-physical environment	Home-school relationship	Social-physical environment
Home-school relationship	Instructional Focus	Home-school relationship
Safety	Physical environment safety	Teacher care and support

Note: The students, parents, and teachers identified the above “five essential supports for school improvement.”

The study conducted by (Sebring et al., 2006), acknowledged there is an impact on school climate and its alignment with student achievement. It is an unknown how a

school's climate and culture differs from one grade span to another and its impact on academic sustainability.

**The environmental effects of middle school.** The study conducted in North Carolina (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2006) led the “national trend of incorporating sixth grade” into the middle school program. During the 1999-2000 school year, more than 90% of North Carolina's 379 middle schools served students in Grades 6-8. (McEwin, Greene, and Jenkins, 2001). According to Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, and Vigdor (2007), “Students who attend middle school in sixth grade are twice as likely to be disciplined relative to their counterparts in middle school” (p. 3). The researchers also found that the behavioral problems of these middle school sixth graders “persist beyond the sixth grade year” and that “exposing sixth grader to older peers has persistent negative consequences on their academic trajectories” (p. 4).

The middle school environment is very different from the elementary school environment. A sixth grader in elementary school is typically assigned to one teacher for most of the day and remains in one classroom for the day. A sixth grader in a middle school is typically assigned to a team of teachers, and the cohort of students move from one classroom to the next. Policy makers who must decide whether to locate sixth graders in middle or elementary school should consider the impact an environment has on the behavioral and academic performance of sixth grade students.

**Grade level configuration and academic achievement.** A number of researchers have explored grade-level configurations over the past three decades. Moore (1984), for example, compared student achievement, attendance, and attitudes towards school among students at nine K-8 schools and nine junior high schools (7-9) in New York City. The

results revealed that the K-8 students outperformed the junior high school students in academic achievement, showed more positive attitudes towards school, and had better attendance (Moore, 1984).

Simmons and Blythe (1987) conducted a three-year longitudinal study in Milwaukee and found that students attending a school with a K-6 or a K-8 configuration received more psychological support than did students attending a 7-9 junior high school. The authors concluded that the K-6 and K-8 configurations helped students make a smoother transition into adolescence, which led to greater self-esteem and more active participation in school activities than that demonstrated by the students who attended a junior high school with a 7-9 configuration (Simmons & Blythe, 1987).

West and Schwerdt (2010) conducted a quantitative study in the largest school district in Florida, Miami-Dade, that explored whether students entering middle school in sixth or seventh grade experienced a drop in assessment scores that differed from that experienced by students in K-8 schools (West & Schwerdt, 2010). The researchers also compared the achievement of ninth grade students who attended either K-12, 6-12, or 7-12 grade schools. West and Schwerdt (2010) gathered data from the state assessments in both reading and math to identify any differences in the students' performance and achievement over time.

West and Schwerdt (2010) found that the transition to middle school caused a significant decrease in the students' test score performance. Overall, student performance in reading and math was lower for the students who transitioned into middle school as sixth graders. Compared to students who attended a K-8 school, the students who transitioned as sixth graders scored lower by 0.23 standard deviations in math and 0.14

standard deviations in reading. Furthermore, the data indicated that middle school students did not catch up academically to their peers in the K-8 configuration once they entered high school. The researchers also determined that some sixth graders that entered middle school were less likely to enroll in the tenth grade because they dropped out of school altogether.

Pearson and Hooper (2010) studied 281 public schools in Arkansas to understand the relationship between grade-span configuration and student behavior and achievement among sixth graders. Data collected from the Arkansas Benchmark Examination for reading and mathematics revealed an increase in math performance; however, the reading scores for the target population remained stagnant. The researchers concluded that other factors had an impact on students' academic performance, and they attributed the math achievement gains to newly implemented instructional practices. They also suggested that school district leaders look for grade span configurations that best fit their community and facilities and closely monitor financial resources so that they can support instructional program that will effectively close existing achievement gaps.

The four aforementioned studies explored sixth grade achievement by examining state assessments and grade-span configurations. This review includes additional research conducted to determine other contributing factors that may impact the academic achievement of sixth graders as they transition into middle school. In North Carolina, for example, Abella (2005) studied the working conditions in middle schools, and in Australia, Mansfield (2010) examined the motivators and goals that help students perform well in secondary schools.

Abella (2005) wanted to establish which grade configuration helped schools best meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of young adolescents. The researcher selected 13,433 public K-8 and middle school teachers to participate in the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWCS) and collected data from 40% of the sample group (Abella, 2005). The results revealed that teachers' perceptions of their working conditions within the K-8 configuration were more positive than those who worked in the 6-8 configuration. The findings also indicated that the teacher demographics did have an effect on teachers' perceptions of working conditions. The strongest correlation observed in the data was the relationship between ethnicity and professional development. Teachers expressed the need to develop instructional strategies through professional development to meet the needs of at risk students in a large urban district (Abella, 2005).

Abella (2005) concluded that the teachers in poorer performing schools have negative perceptions of their working conditions and recommended that district leaders make every effort to provide continuity among the middle schools in their districts. These findings indicate that when implementing the middle school philosophy, district leaders must ensure continuity within a school system to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all students.

In a study conducted in Australia, Mansfield (2010) investigated the range of goals that influenced students' desire to do well in school and explored the relative importance of predetermined goals for a group of adolescents. Mansfield surveyed 195 student volunteers between the ages of 12 and 17 in Western Australia. According to the results from the open-ended questionnaire, younger adolescents did not make a

connection to future goals and the purpose of school. The data also revealed that 80% of the older adolescents indicated future goals. Mansfield suggested that schools should place more emphasis on helping younger adolescents set future goals because without such goals, the resulting lack of motivation can lead to a decline in achievement. In fact, Mansfield found that most students within the age range studied revealed that they did not see the relevance of an education or the purpose of attending school.

**The effects of multiple transitions.** Research suggests that difficulties in coping with multiple transitions may have negative effects on students moving from elementary to middle school (Eccles et al., 1993). These effects include a decline in motivation and academic achievement (Alspaugh, 2001; Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004); loss of self-esteem, particularly when the transition occurs at younger ages (Rudolph et al., 2001; Simmons & Blyth, 1987); a strain on interpersonal functioning (Barber & Olsen, 2004); and, in the long term, increased risk of dropping out of school (Alspugh, 1998; Rumberger, 1995). According to Barber and Olsen (2004), these declines in academic achievement and self-esteem among middle school children could cause the student to drop out of school or experience self-esteem issues.

Braddock and McPartland (1993) noted that changing needs and conditions can have a significant impact on students' behavior and development. The authors asserted that as they make the transition to middle school, students are not ready for many of the changes within their new environments, including teacher control of classroom assignments and discipline, fewer opportunities for student choice and self-management classrooms, less variety of learning tasks and materials within the class, increased use of between-class ability grouping, more competition for grades, stricter standards, more

public evaluations, less instructional attention to cognitively challenging activities, and more attention to memory of teacher assigned material.

**Middle school environmental effects.** According to Eccles (1999), “The key task of an adolescent is to become an autonomous individual” (p. 40). This process occurs during biological processes such as puberty that materialize during a child’s adolescence years. Maturity levels affect many students at different periods of life.

Although there is an abundance of research on middle school students, there is a lack of research on how students and teachers perceive the middle school transition. Research has also neglected to explore the effects of the sixth grade transition on the motivation levels, social adjustment, and academic achievement levels of middle school students from urban environments.

As the oldest students in their elementary school setting, sixth graders are the “seniors” of the school. Conversely, a sixth grader in a middle school environment is the youngest student in the school. The developmental changes experienced by early adolescents and their peers can influence the social and academic challenges that a sixth grader faces in the middle school environment.

Jang (1999) explained that while peer influence on behavior is already significant during early adolescence, it peaks during middle adolescence and then begins to decline. Peer influence may take a variety of forms both directly or indirectly. Direct peer influences that affect the middle school environment can include initiation of fights, recruitment into delinquent gangs, alcohol and drugs, sexual misconduct, companionship in truancy, and an appreciative audience for rowdy behavior. “Indirect influence may



occur through modeling illicit behavior” (Reinke & Walker, 2006, p.5). Jang stated that adolescent delinquency suggests a developmental pattern of delinquent peer influence.

All schools are unique and have their own characteristics that can have both positive and negative effects on student behavior. Some of the characteristics that define a school are its climate, demographics, location, parent involvement, and socioeconomic status.

According to Eccles (1999), “Adolescents are trying to figure out who they are as individuals. They must establish sexual, ethnic, and career identities, or are confused about what future roles to play” (p. 33). Similarly, Sternberg (2001) noted that this time of the students’ lives is critical and can have effects on students that may impede their ability to sustain their quality of life. Research on this topic has greatly expanded, as many researchers have shown immense concern over the nature of the problem and have identified this as a chance for total school reform (Braddock & McPartland, 1993).

Eccles (1999) noted that about 15-30% of students drop out before entering high school. It was suggested that for the students to have a more successful transition, they should enter middle school earlier. The author also stated that self-esteem issues become problematic, and that the arrest rate for this group is the highest of all school-age groups. Adolescents often experience hormonal changes and frequently go through mood swings, peer pressure, and sexuality changes, which causes students to perform poorly in school.

Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, and Kurlakowsky (2001) explained, “Studying individual differences in reactions to the middle school transition may yield vital information about why early adolescence is a high-risk period for the onset of psychological difficulties in some youth” (p. 929). The authors also mentioned that these

specific changes during adolescence have led to many problematic issues, such as declines in academic achievement, low self-esteem, and increased stress. Eccles et al. (1997) indicated that the problems students experience ultimately caused an increase in the dropout rate.

Psychologically, adolescent middle school children must simultaneously deal with changes in their bodies and their brains. As Spinks (2002) noted, 95% of the brain has been formed by the time many children are five or six. Nevertheless, once a child enters the puberty stage, the brain, specifically the pre-frontal cortex, begins to grow again. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for decision-making, and this divide of synapses is the second time that this happens (the other being during childhood). Spinks (2002) also explained that this time period is a very important stage in brain development, and noted that if the student does not use the brain cells in the pre-frontal cortex, they will be lost forever.

Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin, and Vigdor (2006) stated that there was a strong argument for separating sixth graders from older adolescents because of the emotional impact it has on being around older students in the same grade span configuration. The authors explained that placing sixth graders in middle school increases behavior problems because of the influence of their older peers. According to Cook et al., the problem behaviors included, but were not limited to, illicit drug use and distribution, delinquency, sex, and other activities that were in a violation of the target school district's code of conduct. The researchers also concluded that there was a 1-3 percent decline in the on-time graduation rates of participating sixth graders who transitioned from an elementary setting to a middle school setting.

**Achievement loss during transition.** Several researches have concluded that life-changing experienced like school transitions can cause distress in students' lives (Blythe et al., 1983; Gonzales et al., 2004). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2005) concluded that low-income, underrepresented students were two times as likely to underachieve in reading, and three times as likely to underachieve in mathematics, compared to their wealthier peers. Researchers have shown that these students' academic achievement in reading and mathematics declined after transitioning to middle school (Alspaugh & Harting, 1995; Midgley et al., 2002). Ultimately, transitioning from elementary to middle school can result in negative academic and societal outcomes for low-income, disadvantaged students during and beyond middle school if the proper interventions are not planned and delivered to support them with this life-changing event. Epstein (1995) also noted that many parents begin to distance themselves from their children's lives during the middle grades. The need for parental involvement during the transition to middle school appears to be a possible missing link in helping the students achieve academically at such a critical time in their lives.

The South Bay City Elementary School District (SBESD) demonstrates this national problem of practice. SBESD is a small urban school district that serves primarily low-income underrepresented students. At SBESD, 144 of 447 students (32%) showed a decline in scores on the 2005 mathematics California Standards Test (CST) at the end of their seventh grade year, their first year in middle school (see Figure 2). Additionally, 108 of 437 transitioning students (25%) showed a decrease in the 2005 language arts CST (see Figure 3). Of the students who were proficient or advanced in both language arts

and mathematics in the sixth grade, 33% showed a decrease in achievement after they transitioned to middle school (South Bay City Elementary School District, 2003-05)

**Declines in student achievement after the middle school transition.**

Researchers have associated students' decline in achievement upon entering middle school with adolescent development, school organization, socio-emotional fears, student-environmental mismatch, and the lack of parental involvement. Research on school structures found that students involved in a pyramid transition from multiple elementary schools into a single middle school experienced a greater decline in achievement than did students in a linear transition from a single elementary school to a single middle school (Alspaugh, 1998a; Felner et al., 2001).

Other researchers have attributed the decline in achievement during the transition to middle school to students' socio-emotional fears, such as attending a larger school; getting to class on time; getting on the right bus; and finding lockers, lunchrooms, and bathrooms (Arrowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Schumacher, 1998). Other researchers have argued that when the middle school environmental structures are not conducive to adolescent developmental changes, the transition to middle school can cause students' achievement levels to plummet (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993a; Midgley et al., 2002; Midgley & Urdan, 1992). As mentioned previously, the decline in parental involvement during the middle grades also negatively impacts student performance in school (Epstein 1995; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

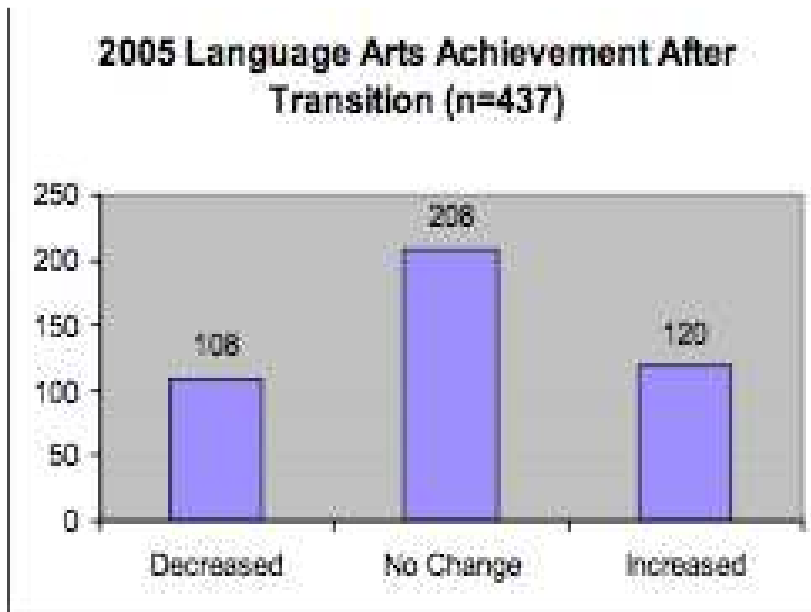


Figure 2. 2005 Language arts achievement after transition. (Yuen, 2007)

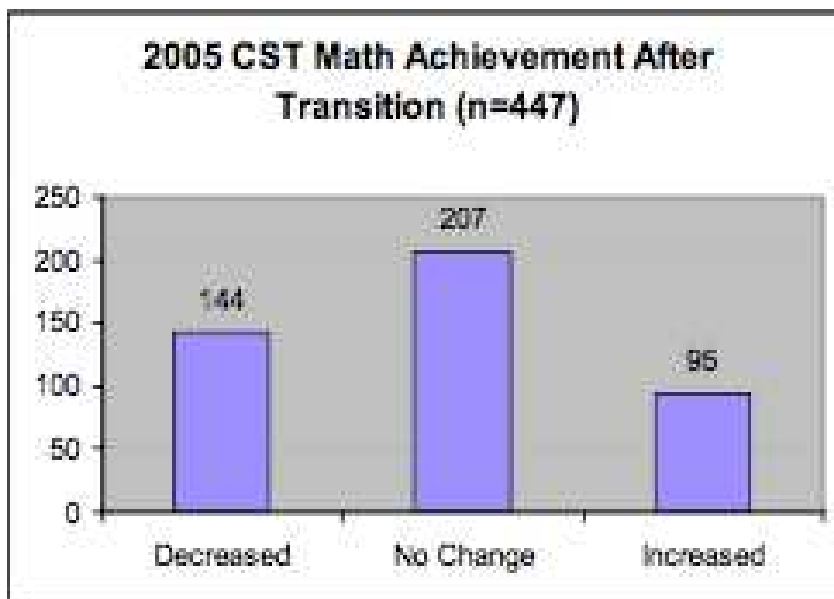


Figure 3. 2005 Mathematics achievement after transition. (Yuen, 2007)

**Parental involvement during the transition into middle school.** Research indicates that parental involvement decreases as students move from elementary to middle school for a variety of reasons. Many parents feel intimidated by the unfamiliar location and size of the middle school, the complexity of the subject matter students learn

in the middle school classes, and a desire to promote independence in their children's lives. In addition, low-income, disadvantaged families usually do not have access, or do not know how to access, information about the school system (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Camblin, 2003), which negatively impacts their tendency to get involved with their students' schooling during the middle grades (Halsey, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

A number of researchers have suggested that parental involvement is one of the principal determinants of student achievement levels during middle school (Halsey, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003; Wherry, 2004). Research also indicates that parental involvement can lead to increases in academic achievement during school transitions (Falbo et al., 2001; Kurita & Janzen, 1996; Simons-Morton & Crum, 2003) as parents can play a significant role in helping students to adjust to middle school (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

According to Kaufman (2006), many teenagers grow up wanting to be like their parents, but once they enter the stage of adolescence, they begin to figure out who they are as a person and start to think seriously about their lives—what they want to do and who they really want to become. While research shows that a number of students experience significant challenges when moving to middle school at the beginning of their transition into adolescence, some students go through this phase in their lives with minimal problems, especially if their parent plays an active role in their lives.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The guiding conceptual framework displayed in Figure 4 was designed by the researcher to capture how teachers and parents perceive some factors that affect the

experiences of sixth graders in the two grade span configurations. The three portions of the framework depict the overarching topics that guide the focus of the study: (a) psychosocial factors, (b) environmental factors, and (c) adjustment impacts. Under each of the three topics, the researcher listed common terms that were generated through the literature review.

These findings, along with those from the previously reviewed literature, indicate that psycho-social and environmental factors may have a notable impact on sixth graders as they make the transition from elementary to middle school. As such, this researcher provides strategies to support sixth graders in his or her assigned grade span configurations to maintain achievement. The central hypothesis of this study is that a particular school characteristic—school span—influences behavioral outcomes and, subsequently, academic achievement. To address this problem of practice in the County, this researcher will use a qualitative method that involves interviewing parents, teachers, and administrators in each of the grade level configurations. The subsequent section provides greater detail on the approach and research process.

### **County Study of Middle School Options**

Swinton & Sunmonu (2014) conducted an analysis in the County, to determine whether sixth graders were more successful in the grade span configuration of their assigned school. The study by Swinton and Sunmonu used a hierarchical linear model (HLM) to examine the characteristics of the schools, the sixth grade students, and the grade span configuration, to evaluate if these factors had an impact on student achievement.

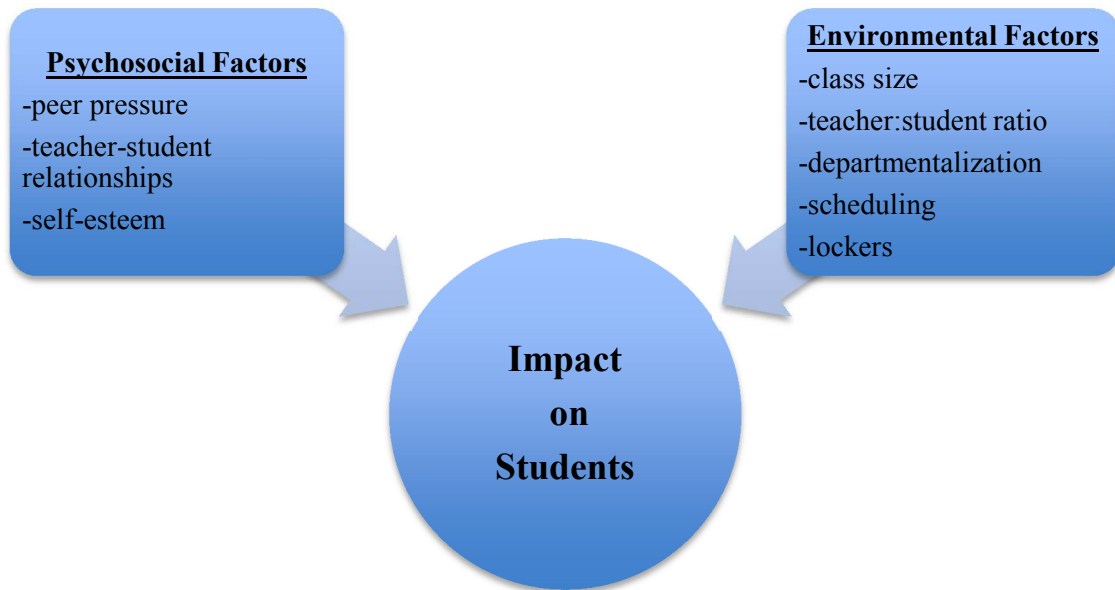


Figure 4. The impact of grade span configurations on students.

The results of the study revealed that it is common for students to experience challenges while adjusting to a new environment regardless of when they transition. These challenges often impact the sixth grade students' achievement in reading and math, absenteeism, and behavior. The following provides the findings revealed from the study conducted in the County suggested that sixth graders in the County, who transitioned to another grade span configuration, experienced a decline in reading achievement. As it relates to the math achievement of the sixth graders, Swinton and Sunmonu (2014) found that there was a consistency in performance across all cohorts; however, sixth graders that attended a 6-8 grade span configuration increased proficiency on the math MSA in 2011, compared to the sixth graders attending a K-6 school.

In terms of attendance, results from the study revealed that there are no differences for sixth graders across the two grade span configurations (K-6 and 6-8), as it



relates to the absenteeism. Further, while there are contributing factors that impede achievement for sixth grade students, Swinton and Sunmonu (2014) suggest that in school year 2012, a sixth grader in a 6-8 grade span configuration was 2.2 times more likely to be suspended compared to a sixth grader attending a K-6 grade span configuration. Finally, the research indicated that sixth grade students who transition from high-performing elementary schools to low-performing middle schools are often impacted by a decline in their academic and social adjustment.

The study did not identify contributing factors; however, the authors did suggest that the transitions for sixth grade students from one building to another often requires students to make an adjustment. Swinton and Sunmonu (2014) did not identify potential risk factors that could contribute to the achievement of sixth graders in the County. Potential risk factors could have been explored by delving deeper into the environments within the schools according to the identified grade span configurations (K-6), (6-8), and (K-8). By exploring the environments, the researchers could have analyzed the benefits of any strategies that are provided to support the students during their transitions and reveal any potential challenges that are experienced during the adjustment time.

### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

While district leaders in the County continue to grapple with the best approach to improving middle schools, they have also made a commitment to move sixth grade out of elementary school and into a middle school configuration; despite the fact that there is (a) a lack of definitive evidence that supports the middle school configuration and (b) no evaluation in process to monitor the effectiveness of the model. Because previous research has failed to isolate the effects of the three types of grade configurations on sixth

graders' academic achievement in the County, this study delve deeper into contributing factors that may impede the achievement of sixth graders.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of classroom teachers regarding the dominant psychosocial and environmental influences that affect sixth grade students in each of the two grade span configurations?
2. What are the perceptions of parents regarding their sixth grade student's experiences across the two grade span configurations?

The findings of this study will add to the existing knowledge base on the relationship between the middle school configuration and the academic achievement of sixth graders in the County. By contributing to the literature and research, this study seeks to help the county and other district leaders respond effectively to the increasing academic challenges experienced by sixth grader students and to create quality grade span configurations.

## **Section II: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to identify common themes in the perceptions of teachers and parents of students in the two types of sixth grade configurations (K-6 elementary and 6-8 middle schools). The researcher explored (a) parent and teacher perceptions about the influence of psychosocial and environmental factors on sixth graders in each of the grade-span configurations and (b) the observable behaviors of the target sixth grade students.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the implementation of the study:

1. What are the perceptions of classroom teachers regarding the dominant psychosocial and environmental influences that affect sixth grade students in each of the two grade span configurations?
2. What are the perceptions of parents regarding their sixth grade student's experiences across the two grade span configurations?

### **Design and Methods**

This study utilized a qualitative design to address both research questions. Creswell (1998) defined a qualitative method of study as a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. Creswell explained that in qualitative investigations, the researcher “builds a complex, holistic picture; analyzes words; reports detailed views of informants; and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). Using a qualitative approach for this study allowed the researcher to examine the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding the observable behaviors of sixth graders enrolled in two grade-span configurations.

A qualitative inquiry into this area of study is important because a gap exists in the literature with regard to the perspectives of parents and teachers on the experiences of sixth graders during the transition into middle school. The findings from this research will provide an understanding of the perceived psycho-social influences on the sixth graders across grade span configurations in the County and the effects grade-span configuration can have on students' achievement. The study also provides insight into the potential effects that environmental factors can have on students during the transition to sixth grade within the various grade span configurations.

**Selecting school sites and teacher participants.** The first phase of this study was to identify and select four schools, two with K-6 grade span configuration and two with a 6-8 grade configuration. The first step was to identify all of the schools in each of these categories. In the County, there are a variety of grade span configurations. There are (a) 22 middle schools with the 6-8 grade span configuration, (b) 3 middle schools with the 7-8 grade span configuration, (c) 63 elementary schools with the K-5 grade span configuration, (d) 60 elementary schools with the K-6 grade span configuration, and (e) 17 K-8 academies. For the purpose of conducting this study in the County, only the K-6 elementary schools and 6-8 middle schools were selected. The two grade span configurations were selected because sixth graders are enrolled in each of those configurations. K-8 schools were not selected because those schools are identified in the County as academies. Each of the academies provides a specialty program, and the majority of students who are enrolled in those programs must audition or be accepted through a lottery process. Lastly, the K-5 elementary schools and the 7-8 middle schools were not selected because they did not have sixth graders enrolled. The researcher wanted

to focus on schools with a traditional comprehensive program for sixth graders to maintain consistency from one school to the next.

Within each of the two groups of schools, the researcher looked for those with similar total enrollments and student demographics (e.g., student: teacher ratio, percentage of FARMS, and number of full-time teachers, feeder patterns, and data trends). The schools selected in this study were required to have sixth graders enrolled in either of the K-6 or 6-8 grade span configurations. In order to begin the process and confirm a school's participation, the researcher conducted a process of elimination of the 60 elementary schools with the K-6 grade span configurations. Likewise, the researcher conducted a process of elimination of the 22 middle schools with the 6-8 grade span configurations. The researcher sought to target the elementary and middle school feeder patterns. The purpose of targeting the feeder pattern between the K-6 and 6-8 schools was to determine if there were similar approaches to supporting sixth graders in each of the grade span configurations. Following this process, the researcher sent an email (see Appendix D), or contacted each principal of 10 schools in the County with sixth graders enrolled in their current grade span configuration. Of the 10 schools contacted, the first four schools that responded within two weeks were selected.

The initial emails to principals inviting their schools to participate in the study were sent on March 21, 2016. The principals of School B and School D immediately accepted the participation in the study. Follow up phone calls were made to the principals of School A and School C. Two of the principals of schools never responded to the email or returned the phone calls, so they were not selected. Additionally, there were principals who responded after the four schools were selected. Likewise, there was one school that

declined to participate because their school appeared on the County website as a K-6 grade span configuration; however, this was the first school year without sixth grade for that school.

The four schools are referred to within this study as School A, School B, School C, and School D. Table 6 presents an overview of each school.

Table 6

The County's School Demographics

<b>School</b>	<b>Student enrollment</b>	<b>Full-time teachers</b>	<b>Teacher-student ratios</b>	<b>% FARMS</b>
<b>School A</b>	746	50	14.9	84.6%
<b>School B</b>	591	30	20.2	51.9%
<b>School C</b>	791	56	14.1	43.5%
<b>School D</b>	705	50	14.3	51.6%

The researcher then selected two teachers and two parents from each school in each of the grade span configurations (K-6 and 6-8). Eligible teachers were recruited through an information session that was conducted at each school during the scheduled time provided by the principal. Since it was important for the researcher to interview teacher participants in Schools A, B, C, and D who teach sixth grade. Only those teachers were invited to attend the meeting. To conduct this study, the researcher first met with the team of sixth grade teachers at each of the participating schools, Schools A, B, C, and D. At School A, there were two teachers present during the meeting and they both agreed to participate in the study. At School B, three teachers met with the researcher and only one teacher confirmed to meet. Six teachers initially volunteered to participate at School C; however; three teachers confirmed the date and time to meet but only two maintained their commitment. Lastly, School D, there were four teachers that met with

the researcher, only two teachers confirmed and fully participated in the interview process.

The researcher provided an incentive in the form of a \$20 electronic gift card for every teacher or parent that participated in the study's interview. The following is the timeline that was created to complete this study.

**Inviting parent interviewees.** For this study, parent participants had to have a child who is currently enrolled in sixth grade in one of the two grade span configurations in the County. The parent selection process utilized a gatekeeper. In qualitative research, gatekeepers can assist the researcher in gaining access and developing trust with the community of the study (Hatch, 2002). The principal of every identified school participating in the study served as the gatekeeper.

In order to recruit the parent participants, the researcher asked all the sixth grade teachers to distribute a letter inviting parents of sixth graders to participate in the study (see Appendix C for a copy of the parent letter). The letter included the purpose, process, and security procedures to protect potential parent participants' confidentiality. The researcher also asked the teachers and principals to refer the researcher to parents who might be willing to participate. At Schools A, B and D, parents who expressed an interest in participating in the study contacted the researcher via telephone or by email. School C had the most parent responses to participate in the study. There were a total of six parents that contacted the researcher by phone to participate in the study. There are parents who continued to call up to the last week in April requesting if another opportunity would be provided for them to participate in this study. Email correspondences were often used to arrange a scheduled time and location to conduct the

interview. At School A, the principal referred the researcher to one parent, who immediately contacted the researcher to schedule the interview. The original intent was to select four sets (parent and teacher) from each of the four schools (Schools A, B, C, and D); however, confirming teacher interviews was the most challenging. The interview time frame occurred during the week prior to the County's spring break. A time to conduct the interviews could not be secured for majority of the teachers until the week after spring break. The researcher only secured 14 out of 16 participants to include, (1) eight parents and (2) six teachers. From School A, (2) parents and (2) teachers were interviewed; at School B, (2) parents and (1) teacher were interviewed; at School C the researcher interviewed (2) parents and (2) teachers; and at School D, (1) teacher and (2) parents participated in the interviews.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Interview instrument.** The researcher developed two sets of interview questions, one for teachers and one for parents (see Appendix C-3 for copies of the interview questions). The teacher interview collected demographic information (i.e., experience with sixth graders, years of experience teaching, and years teaching in the district) and data on teachers' general observations and perceptions of sixth graders related to the grade span configuration. The parent interview addressed questions related to the respondents' observations of their sixth grade students. Sample interview questions related to the first research question included the following:

- What are some observable environmental factors that affect sixth graders in the K-6 or 6-8 grade span configuration?



What are some observable psychosocial factors that affect sixth graders in the K-6 or 6-8 grade span configurations?

Sample interview questions related to the second research question included the following:

- Were there any observable behaviors that concerned you during your child’s experience as a sixth grader? If so, describe the observed behaviors.
- How has your child adjusted socially and academically as a sixth grader?

Interview questions were mapped onto the research questions. Table 7 shows the alignment of interview questions and research questions.

Table 7: Research Questions, Interview Questions, Research Methods and Data Sources

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Interview Question #</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Research methods</b>	<b>Data sources</b>
1. What are the perceptions of classroom teachers regarding the dominant psychosocial and environmental influences that affect sixth grade students in each of the two grade span configurations?	Question #1a	PS	Classroom teacher interviews	sixth grade teacher interviews
	Question #1b	PS		
	Question #1c	PS		
	Question #1d	PS		
	Question #2	B		
	Question #3	E		
	Question #4	PS		
2. What are the perceptions of parents regarding their sixth grade student’s experiences across the two grade span configurations?	Question #1	E	Parent interviews	sixth grade parent interviews
	Question #2	PS		
	Question #3	PS		
	Question #4	B		
	Question #5	B		

	Question #6	B		
	Question #7	PS		
	Question #8	B		
	Question #9	B		

Key: \*\*E: Environmental, PS: Psychosocial, B: Both

**Interview process.** For the second phase of this study, the researcher conducted interviews with teachers and parents of sixth graders. The interviews averaged 30 minutes and were scheduled and conducted at convenient times and locations for the participants. At the time of the interview, participants were informed again of the purpose, process, and safety procedures to maintain their confidentiality in participating in the study. Each of the documents was reviewed. They were also told that the interview questions would include questions related to their perceptions and observations of sixth graders in identified grade span configurations. A copy of the interview questions was provided for the participants to refer to during the interview as needed. Additionally, the researcher also provided the participants with the written interview protocol. (Appendix H). The researcher took copious written notes and recorded the interviews through the use of a handheld audio recording device, which were later transcribed by Verbalink. The recording device was shown to the participants and placed on the table between the researcher and the participant.

Through the data analysis and coding of the transcripts from the interviews, the researcher carefully looked for similarities and differences in the views and opinions of the participants. After the interviews were completed, the researcher reviewed the transcripts of the audio recordings. During this process, the researcher collected and analyzed the data to determine similarities and differences of the perceptions and

observed behaviors of sixth graders as expressed by the teacher and parent participants. Using these data, the researcher examined themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews as referred to by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007).

The researcher identified and developed a coding system and a table to support the identification of themes and patterns from the teacher and parent interviews. Using the matrix presented in Table 7, the researcher created codes to analyze the connections between the research and interview questions. The coding system is also depicted in Figure 5. Each interview question for the teachers and parents were cut and pasted into two separate word documents (See Appendix F). For every question, the researcher cut and pasted the responses from the interview transcripts for every teacher and parent participant and placed it directly under the corresponding question.

### **Timeline**

This study took place according to the following timeline:

- March 21, 2016- March 25, 2016 – Identification and confirmation of schools' participation in the study
- March 23, 2016 – March 25, 2016 – Meetings with the six schools to discuss the purpose of the study and the survey process
- March 23, 2016 – April 8, 2016 – Administration of the interviews
- April 11, 2016- April 22, 2016 – Analysis of interview data

### **Human Subject Review and Confidentiality**

To meet the requirements for conducting this study, as dictated by the University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher adhered to

all ethical guidelines set forth by the IRB regarding the treatment of research participants.  
Based on the study's purpose, there are no identifiable risks for participating.

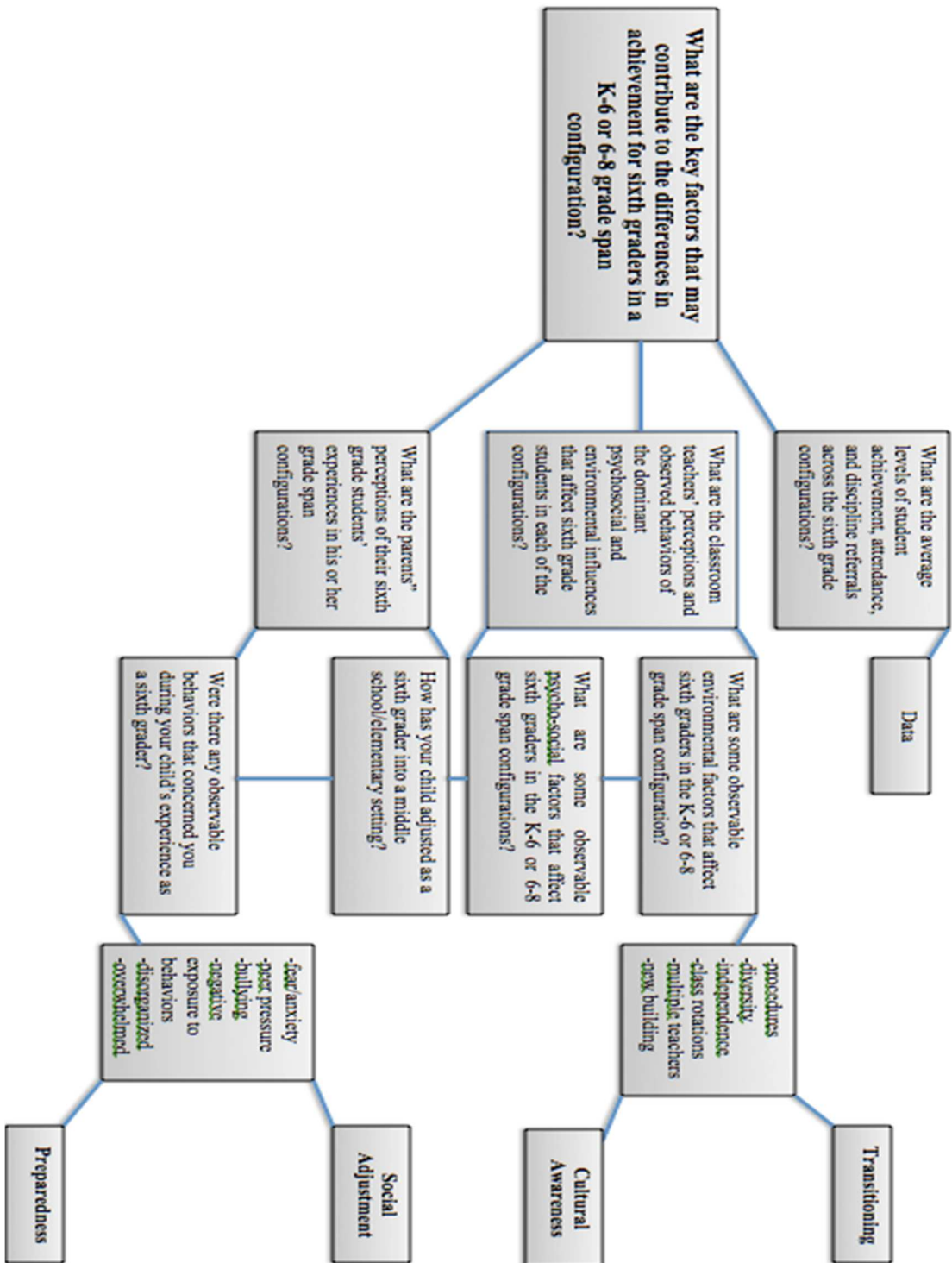


Figure 5. Transcript Coding System

All participants received a copy of the cover letter stating the purpose of the study (see Appendix A).

- All participants received a copy of the informed consent, which states the purpose of the study and the possible benefits.
- To ensure the confidentiality of each of the participants, the researcher replaced names with numbers that were used throughout the summary and data analysis.
- To protect the identities of the participants, the district, schools, and participants, the researcher utilized pseudonyms in all data collected, frameworks, and dissertation defense.
- Following the analysis of the data, each participant received an electronic copy of the completed study.

The researcher stored the data collected and analyzed for this study on an encrypted memory storage device and a personal laptop for approximately three years. Only the researcher has access to the data, and she will not share it with any other individuals under any circumstances.

### **Summary**

This section provided an overview of the methodology for this study, which included the process for gathering information about the perceptions and observations that teachers and parents have about sixth graders in K-6 or 6-8 grade span configurations in the County. The section included a discussion of the process for selecting the participants in this study and interview questions that aligned with the established

research questions. Finally, the section provided a brief description of the processes for collecting, analyzing, and storing data.

To provide district leaders within the County with the information necessary to close the achievement gaps for sixth grader students in middle school, the researcher used qualitative research methods to understand parent and teacher, perceptions of observed behaviors of target sixth graders in a K-6 or 6-8 grade span configuration. The overall purpose of this study was to gain additional insight in the effect of grade-span configurations on the academic achievement of sixth grader students. The analysis will also inform additional research-based recommendations that would support and benefit the County and its future policies and procedures regarding grade-level configurations for sixth graders.

Ideally, this research will support other researchers in their quest to build on the body of literature to develop strategies and techniques that with further assist in closing the achievement gaps that exists with sixth graders. The study will also serve to encourage district leaders, school-based administrators, practitioners, parents, and other researchers to continue to transform their perspectives about grade-span configurations and provide intensive support for sixth graders as they transition into middle school.

### **Section III: Results**

This study focused on the perceptions of teachers and parents regarding the behaviors of sixth graders in two different grade span configurations, (K-6) and (6-8). This section presented the results of the analysis of the qualitative interview data, including the development of themes that emerged from the parent and teacher interviews, and includes a final summary and recommendations.

#### **Results of Interviews**

Using the coding system depicted in Figure 5, the researcher first created a matrix to disaggregate the themes that were developed from the teacher and parent interview responses. Each interview question was aligned to the research questions. The researcher then identified common terms in each of the teacher and parent responses separately. The terms were compared and then placed into categories and labeled as subthemes that corresponded with the interview questions. The sub-themes were analyzed to develop the overarching themes.

In the next section, the researcher provided responses from both parents and teachers of sixth graders. The responses reflect their shared experiences, observations, and perceptions of sixth graders in the K-6 and 6-8 grade span configuration and how it is aligned to each research question. The data from the interviews are presented in three parts: (a) brief background information about the interview participants, (b) the interviewee's perception of sixth graders in the identified grade span configuration, and (c) the interviewee's observations of sixth graders in the grade span configuration. Based on the information gathered and analyzed from the teacher and parent interviews,



commonalities and similarities were reviewed to develop the patterns, themes, and subthemes that were aligned to the research questions.

**Background information about the parent and teacher participants.** During the scheduled interview, the researcher set the tone for the interviews by getting to learn more about the interviewees. Initial information gathered was centered on how many children they have, how they liked the school and the school district, how many years have they been teaching, how many years have they taught sixth grade, and how many years have they taught in their current school. During that time, each parent and teacher interviewees received an assigned pseudonym to protect their identity for the purpose of the qualitative study. The following provides the list of parent pseudonyms that were assigned for this study and brief information about each interviewee:

- **Parent 1 (K-6):** Parent 1 was a married African American female, age 35-45, who has two children. She registered her children in the County three years ago. She liked their assigned school.
- **Parent 2 (K-6):** Parent 2 was an African American, single female, age 35-45, who has two children. Her children attended the County schools since kindergarten. Her son was in high school and her daughter is in sixth grade. She liked both of her children's assigned schools.
- **Parent 3 (6-8):** Parent 3 was a married African American female, age 35-45, with three children--one adult child and two children that in the sixth grade. One of the daughters was a stepdaughter. Her daughter attended a County school and she had very few concerns except for the bullying. Her son attended and graduated from a County high school.

- **Parent 4 (6-8):** Parent 4 was a married African American female, age 35-45, who has only one child. She enjoyed the school that her child attended. She did not have any concerns at the time of the study.
- **Parent 5 (6-8):** Parent 5 was a married African American female, age 30-40, with two children—an infant and a sixth grader. Her sixth grader was enrolled in the County the year the study took place, but had previously attended a private school.
- **Parent 6 (6-8):** Parent 6 was a married African American female, age 35-45, with two sons. One son was in pre-k and the oldest son was enrolled in a middle school in the County. She was a very active parent in the school and currently did not have any major concerns with her son's assigned school.
- **Parent 7 (6-8):** Parent 7 was a married African American female, age 35-45, with a son enrolled as a sixth grader in the County. She did not express any concerns with the assigned school at the time of the study.
- **Parent 8 (6-8):** Parent 8 was a married, educated African American female, age 35-45 with a son, who was very active in the school

The following provides the list of teacher pseudonyms that were assigned for this study and brief information about each interviewee:

- **Teacher 1 (6-8):** Teacher 1 was a married Caucasian male, age 30-40, who had taught for the last 15 years. He taught sixth grade for 11 of those years. He was experiencing his first year as a sixth grade teacher at his school during the study.

- **Teacher 2 (6-8):** Teacher 2 was a married African American female, age 30-40, who had taught for nine years. She had taught sixth grade for the past two years at her assigned school.
- **Teacher 3 (K-6):** Teacher 3 was a single African American female, age 60-65, who had taught for 34 years. She had taught sixth grade for the past 22 years in the County.
- **Teacher 4 (K-6):** Teacher 4 was married a Caucasian male, age 30-35, who had taught for five years and this is his first year teaching sixth grade.
- **Teacher 5 (6-8):** Teacher 5 was a married African American female, age 35-45, who had taught for 13 years. Her teaching experience had allowed her to teach overseas in Germany. She had taught in the County for a total of five years.
- **Teacher 6 (6-8):** Teacher 6 was a married African American male, age 30-35, who had taught for four years in the County. He had taught in the 6-8 grade span configuration for the past three years.

**Perceptions of participants regarding configurations.** As the participants shared their experiences, they were eager to highlight their personal views and opinions as it related to the topic of sixth graders. Many were also eager to share their own personal experiences while in the sixth grade and the differences that exist. While meeting with the sixth grade teachers at School B, the teachers were keen to share their opinions and perspectives of sixth graders at their schools. The passion during the discussion made it difficult to bring their discussion to a close. The teachers were sharing great details, examples, and observed behaviors that they were experiencing this school year with their sixth graders. The researcher concluded the meeting in order to collect the

information shared during the one-on-one interviews. Below are some of their comments related to their perceptions of sixth graders across the two grade span configurations.

- **Parent 3 (6-8):** “One of the disadvantages is I think that they should have kept sixth grade from K-6 like it was 10 years, 5 years ago. That’s one of the disadvantages I see because some sixth graders aren’t as mature as the seventh and eighth graders. And putting them in that setting can be a negative and a positive. It can have them growing up a little too fast thinking they need to fit in. I think that the advantage is, it shows them how to be mature in certain situations and how to develop and deal culturally with older kids.”
- **Teacher 1 (6-8):** “Well, you have some – judging from 14 years of being in an elementary setting where I didn't have a transition to a middle school I really didn't notice a transition to the middle school impact them in negative ways. I mean, yeah, you have some confusion with any change. You know the deal with lockers. They have to deal with teacher switches, but their fears are more peer related fears.”

“They tend to be more afraid of I'm going to get jumped in the bathroom and those types of things. And once they realize that the environment is safe, that disappears within a week or so.”

Some of the teachers shared the observable behaviors of the sixth graders within their schools’ identified grade span configuration:

- **Teacher 1 (6-8):** “Another anxiety – especially for young ladies with their body changes at this age and having to go through menstruation for the first time there's

a lot of anxiety about that. And when you're dealing with 30 kids you don't see it as much. When you're dealing with 110 kids there are more instances of that and cause and emotional distress with my young ladies.”

“Confusion, if that's an emotion. They're confused. Especially having to deal with so many teachers and even still to this day there's still confusion about homework. Typically, that's more with my special ed population. General population, although I do teach about 32 special ed kids, so out of those 32 special ed kids I've had 20 of them get constantly confused when homework is due. If you try to hand me other teacher's papers, things like that. It's a lot. Nine teachers is a lot to deal with.”

- **Teacher 5 (6-8):** “The young ladies start noticing the boys, and the boys start noticing the girls. The girls want to be cuter so they start wearing makeup whereas they weren't before. Their uniform pants begin to get tighter, the shirts are becoming tighter. The boys are becoming more disrespectful, to the point where I would have to escort them out of the classroom. I see a change in 55% of them. They start thinking they are older or wanting to be older. That really concerns me because I need them to act their age. They're not in eighth grade, but a lot of them of modeling some of the things they see from the eighth graders.”

**Teacher 4 (K-6):** “There's definitely the awkwardness with – and it's primarily it's with the girls. They're trying– no matter what the temperature in the room is, no matter what the temperature is outside they want to wear sweatshirts. They want to wear baggy concealing clothing. They're uncomfortable with the changes

they're going through. The boys I have – the one who sprouted up and I have a couple who have now real deep voices, and they're very conscious of that and when someone mentions it they get uncomfortable. They blush. They're not comfortable in their own bodies at this point. It's a lot of physical change that's kind of affecting where their head is at.”

- **Teacher 6 (6-8):** “When fifth graders initially enter the sixth grade in a middle school atmosphere they appear to be overwhelmed. Their behaviors are viewed as immature and out of place for the middle school environment. Students have been observed running up and down hallways playing tag and demonstrating an inability to self-regulate their behavior. Often students need a tremendous amount of coaxing to transition between classes within the 3-4 minutes allotted. They congregate in the hallways and in the bathrooms because they are craving social time. That congestion can sometimes cause conflict because some students have no prior relationship. Students are often coming from up to five different feeder schools and the newness of individuals can cause confrontation which sometimes become physical. Each feeder school sends their challenging students to middle school and for some reason the challenging students find each other during the first two weeks of school. These are the ones who typically take the entire school year to get a grasp on the rules and rituals of middle school. There still are few students who find it difficult to make it to their homeroom, even this late in the school year.”

Some of the parents shared the observable behaviors of the sixth graders within their schools' identified grade span configuration:

**Parent 3 (6-8):** “The number one flag that I saw was bullying because of their appearance. A lot of the seventh and eighth grade girls wear colored lipstick and their hair is colored. Whereas my child is not allowed to have colored hair and wear colored lipstick. She goes to a uniform—a school that requires uniforms, so all of the kids have uniformity—shoes. So that’s a plus for me. But a lot of the girls—their dispositions and their attitudes. Of course not while their parents are not around, because I’m one of the parents where I will pop up at the school at any given time. And the challenge of just adjusting.”

**Parent 7 (6-8):** “My child has always been very articulate and confident regarding his schoolwork. He consistently achieved honor roll every quarter and year; he was inducted into the International Baccalaureate Program. Since attending middle school, he has often felt overwhelmed and demonstrated feelings of anxiety and stress. As a parent, I don’t always receive the communication from the school (or teachers) in a timely manner to provide any intervention. This school should have some type of early intervention program that makes it easier for teachers to report issues of concern, and for children to be referred for proper intervention. This type of intervention already exists in many college settings.”

**Parent 8(6-8):** “My child has adjusted well to the sixth grade middle school/setting. However, just as with any change, the adjustment required a lot of

reassuring and extra attention to my child's social, emotional, and organizational needs.”

**Themes.** As the researcher analyzed the transcribed parent and teacher interviews, themes and subthemes began to emerge to provide an overarching analysis of sixth graders' observable behaviors and perceptions as shared by both teachers and parents during the interviews. The researcher also made connections to the psycho-social themes that were identified in the research as displayed in Figure 4. As displayed in Figure 4, peer pressure, self-esteem, and teacher-student relationships also emerged in this study as expressed by both teachers and parents. In this following section, each theme and subtheme will be presented by highlighting the comments made by the teachers and parents during the interviews.



**Theme 1: Transitioning.** The parents who participated in the interview process of this study observed their sixth graders experiencing adjustments affected by the change. According to the statements made during the interview, six out of eight of the parents initially expressed that they perceived that their sixth grader adjusted fairly well. K-6 parents and teachers had little to no concerns related to the transition for their sixth graders. K-6 teachers shared that in their school, the sixth graders transition between two teachers. They have minimal movement. The 6-8 teachers and parents shared a different perspective. Their sixth graders have to learn to make adjustments. Many of the sixth graders come to the 6-8 grade span configuration without experiencing transitions to their lockers, different teachers, and multiple expectations. While it takes some time for some sixth graders to become acclimated initially, they learn to make the necessary adjustments with the right support.

- **Parent 4 (6-8):** “She’s adjusting well now. She took a little while to get started, but I think now that this is the third quarter, she’s doing pretty good now. I think a part of the impact was that she came from a private school over to a public school. I think another part of the impact of course was moving from fifth grade to sixth grade. The work was a little more challenging, and she took a little while to get familiar with how much work and work was given.”
- **Parent 7 (6-8):** “The adjustment has been challenging. I do not think that the middle school was aware of what to expect since this was their first year receiving sixth graders. Specifically, while my child was adjusting to a new school environment and teachers, he was also juggling the new expectations

(i.e., self-reliance, responsibility, and procedures) that the teachers and administrators had for him.”

The data collected from the interviews revealed that the teachers’ perceptions of sixth grade students’ experience was similar to the parents’ perceptions.

- **Teacher 6 (6-8):** “When fifth graders initially enter the sixth grade in a middle school atmosphere they appear to be overwhelmed. Their behaviors are viewed as immature and out of place for a middle school environment. Students have been observed running up and down hallways playing tag and demonstrating an inability to self-regulate their behavior. Often students need a tremendous amount of coaxing to transition between classes within the 3-4 minutes allotted....”
- **Teacher 2 (6-8):** “Very like not organized. An emotional process just them trying to get used to the different rules, different teacher, a notebook for this class, a notebook for that class. They’re just all over the place when they first got here. Just like deer in headlights.”

In the comments made by both teachers and parents, transitioning was a consistent theme that emerged. The sixth graders in a K-6 configuration do not often experience having multiple teachers. More often than not, they remain in self-contained classrooms where all subject matters are taught. This configuration lends itself to sixth graders having to make annual adjustments between teachers and teaching styles versus daily adjustments between one subject matter to the next. This experience led parents and

teachers to observe sixth graders displaying emotions of being overwhelmed, stressed, disorganized, and anxious.

- **Parent 5 (K-6):** “One of the major disadvantages that sticks out is the difficulty in organizing and managing both time and materials.”
- **Parent 2 (K-6):** “So, whereas, where she came from it was you know she didn’t have to have everything didn’t have to be separate because she pretty much had the same class all day for all of her subjects. Whereas now she has to carry this notebook, she had to have different tabs for every subject now and that has helped her literally get her life together. Like literally. She now knows where everything is. She keeps everything in order. Where she used to have everything everywhere. She used to have math mixed up with science, and science mixed up with English. It was just paper everywhere; it was hard for her. Initially, she couldn’t find anything. It was hard to do homework; and she was going through all of these papers looking for homework versus now, she opens her notebook and goes to the section and what she is looking for is right there. So she’s just much more organized.”
- **Teacher 1 (6-8):** “Okay. Fear, you know at least for the first two weeks fear is – you can smell it off the students. I mean it really; it drips off them for about two weeks. And that was not something I saw at my old school unless it was a new kid to the school, because you have 110 new students, at least I deal with daily. And they are a little clueless. And as human beings, we don’t like to be clueless.”

- **Teacher 2 (6-8):** “Just, I remember this one student just pulling out a piece of paper for that on specific class. And turning back in homework and classwork and different things like that, the stuff would be there. They just don’t remember it’s there. They can’t find it in their notebook. And they’re flipping through a whole bunch of papers. And then I remember this one kid he had all this stuff ready to turn in. He just never turned it in. And it was sitting in his notebook the whole first quarter.”

According to the statements and beliefs shared by both parents and teachers during their interviews, sixth graders required an effective environment for them to make the necessary adjustments and maintain academic achievement regardless of their assigned grade span configuration.

This next theme is closely related to the first theme. The enrollment and demographics begin to change from one grade span to the next grade span configuration and from one school to the next school. Each school is made up of its own character and it has its own climate and culture. This creates a unique environment in each school.

**Theme 2: Cultural awareness.** The parents and teachers both expressed during their interviews that as the sixth graders begin to make the necessary adjustments, they seek to “fit in.” There is an urgent sense to make connections to the environment and their peers. They are quickly exposed to a diverse population, cliques, and what is and not acceptable. As the sixth graders become more aware of their surroundings, teachers and parents expressed that in the K-6 grade span configuration, the grade level is often isolated. They are relocated in a different section in the building. “This often creates a feeling of being on an island,” said Teacher 3 (K-6).

The teachers are required to teach middle school curriculum in sixth grade in a K-6 grade span configuration, but can't participate in the collaborative planning with K-5 colleagues because the expectations for teaching and learning are different. Teachers also shared that the behavior incentives are often developed for the primary kids, leaving little to no motivation for the sixth graders. For an example, Teacher 3 (K-6), shared that most prizes and incentives to support the school's PBIS (Positive Behavior In Schools) program, do not motivate the sixth graders to reach the monthly goals. Goals are set to motivate the students to display appropriate social and academic skills each month. Teacher 3 (K-6) also shared that the sixth graders have expressed that the incentives are too "babyish" for them. Parents and teachers of sixth graders in the 6-8 grade span configuration did not express this same feeling of isolation as a grade level. Parents and teachers of sixth graders in the 6-8 grade span configuration only stated the observations related to the feelings of isolation were observed during the initial transition at the beginning of the school year. Students were observed displaying a sense of isolation as they were trying to adjust to a new setting.

This feeling of isolation for any individual or a grade level can have a negative impact on the morale for teachers and sixth graders. It becomes a part of the culture and climate that could also greatly impact achievement. The following highlights comments shared during the interviews, that provide evidence for the perceptions and observations of the experiences of sixth graders as they adjust to the culture within the grade span configurations:

- **Teacher 2(6-8):** "Just like to find out what they're used to and then what we expect from them and then to try to meet in the middle. I mean it is a big

adjustment especially with them being used to going to a K-6 schools. You know they're thinking they're the top people at the school this year. And they lose that moment to shine.”

- **Teacher 4 (K-6):** “So my kids were still- they acted like fourth and fifth graders. They acted like they had when I had them, but when they were in the cafeteria or they were doing activities and there were kids from middle school, they other kids were definitely acting more mature, more like they ran the show. You know more confident in themselves, and my kids quickly had to start mimicking their behaviors. They were afraid of being made fun of or looked down upon, so they quickly tried to mimic the social behaviors they saw.”
- **Parent 4 (K-6):** “So going into the sixth grade in a different wing of the building, she didn't know some of the kids. So adjusting to the cliques and because she's a newcomer. That was a big adjustment for her. Another adjustment for her was the boys warmed up to her more and started to be more welcoming versus some of the girls. She came from a very diverse and culture – the teachers were very diverse, with different ethnicities, and now the majority is the minority. That was a different setting for her.”
- **Parent 5 (6-8):** “Advantage...more independent. She had to learn more about time management. Lockers, transition. Book bags were not allowed whereas now in middle school she now is responsible.”
- **Parent 2 (6-8):** “Well, because she went from only transitioning from maybe one or two- two or three teachers to six or seven teachers now. You know,

transitioning from multiple classes all day then having to keep up with A schedule, and B schedule, you the different schedules. She's now adjusted well though."

**Theme 3: Social adjustment.** The researcher asked the participants to share personal experiences or observations of the sixth graders during the interviews that they perceived to have an impact on them in their current grade span configuration. Based on the information gathered, the following statements capture their responses, and appeared to be aligned with the explanation of Chen (2008), "Children in the sixth grade are at a point in their lives when they are easily influenced by peers." Based on the responses from both teachers and parents of sixth graders in the two grade span configurations, there were noted similarities and differences. Peer interaction and acceptance is a major factor for sixth graders. It is evident based on the responses that the sixth graders experience an awakening of their appearance and acceptance of their peers. The K-6 parents and teachers expressed that the social acceptance has had an impact on their academic achievement. The sixth graders in a K-6 configuration are more conscious of their stages of puberty and begin to make comparisons with their peers. The 6-8 parents and teachers expressed that the sixth graders are more noticeably immature in the beginning of the school year; however, quickly begin to imitate the behaviors of the seventh and eighth graders, in order to fit in.

- **Teacher 4 (K-6):** "I have one student, a male student, who is extraordinarily short. And a lot of other kids have hit puberty. He hit puberty over the summer or through the course of this year. And some of them are exceedingly tall. And he is very, very insecure about it. So he is reacting. It's a negative

way. He's trying to be more smart-alky and more insulting to try to make his presence felt. And I'm trying to redirect that kind of energy to something more productive."

- **Teacher 3 (K-6):** "She's friendly. She's very, very friendly. She's the tallest thing in sixth grade. But she's not accepted. I'll laugh with you in class, but I'm not going to sit with you at lunch. I'm not going to hang out with you in my neighborhood. I'm just not going to – the buck stops here if you will. So it's difficult for her. I'm sure it's difficult for my African student, my two Caribbean boys. They want to fit in, because they're the minority....."
- **Parent 2 (6-8):** "Some of the behavior that she's kind of getting mingling in with some of these kids is not of my liking."
- **Parent 6 (6-8):** "He has adjusted well in both categories, socially was far easier as you mentioned previously he was united with a sibling, which makes social interactions easier."
- **Parent 4 (K-6):** "Okay, so negative is that you feel like it's because of the exposure, you feel like they are growing up too fast getting negative behaviors. It can have them growing up a little too fast thinking they need to fit in. But then, on the flip side, you feel like it's also helping them to adapt to the current situation based on the culture of the school."
- **Parent 3 (6-8):** "That's one of the disadvantages I see because some sixth graders aren't as mature as the seventh and eighth graders. And putting them in that setting can be a negative and a positive. It can have them growing up a little too fast thinking they need to fit in. I think that the advantage is, it



shows them how to be mature in certain situations and how to develop and deal culturally with older kids.”

- **Parent 8 (6-8):** “One of the most observable advantages of moving into the sixth grade in middle school setting was the social aspect. For example, many of the students who were with my child in the fifth grade were also with him in the sixth grade, which naturally formed a cohort that he could share the experience with, therefor “easing the shock” of moving into the middle school culture. He was not alone. Another, observable advantage was the physical separation of the upperclassmen from the incoming students. I believe it gave the sixth graders an opportunity to adjust without feeling a need to compete with seventh and eighth graders who are intellectually and socially already adjusted to the environment. The disadvantages were minimal.”

**Theme 4: Preparedness.** As the students approach the sixth grade in the County, preparation looks differently from one grade span configuration to the next. Sixth graders in the K-6 grade span configuration become the leaders in the building. The sixth graders that transition to a 6-8 grade span configuration become the “newbies” in the building. The parents of sixth graders in the K-6 grade span configuration did not have concerns related to the lack of preparation for sixth grade. They believed that their sixth graders were prepared for the necessary adjustments because their student did not experience a transition. Despite the different experiences, there is a great need to be prepared for the academic and social adjustments to maintain achievement. According to the shared experiences, observations, and perceptions of the teachers and parents, this is a theme that requires more attention. There were similarities in the information shared by both

teachers and parents in the interviews that supported their mindset and belief. Their belief is also aligned to Bandura's description of effective schools: "High expectations and standards for achievement pervade the environment of efficacious schools" (Bandura, 1997, p.244).

- **Parent 7 (6-8):** "Academically, my child is trying to maintain and demonstrate his competency in all subject areas. He has a goal to make honor roll in middle school; so far he has not been able to achieve honor roll yet. Although his work (i.e., Science Fair, National History Day, Research on Spanish Country) has been recognized and selected to represent the school during school-wide exhibits and events."
- **Parent 6 (6-8):** "One of the major disadvantages that sticks out is the difficulty in organizing and managing both time and materials. While things have normalized during the course of the year in the beginning of the school year it was bit difficult for him to manage all the different classes and assignments."
- **Parent 8 (6-8):** "Developing relationships with students and parents assists educators in developing instruction that is fun and interesting by creating environments that mirror the environments where students are most comfortable in order to promote high levels of learning. For most environments include the home. So adding aspects of home is a good strategy. Some examples may include field trips, social events that incorporate food and gathering together, opportunities for academic achievement through games and healthy competition, expressions of

spirituality, arts, music, sporting/athletic events and/or opportunities for exercise and experiencing nature.”

In this study, the researcher reviewed the transcripts of the parent and teacher interviews. During the interviews, both the teachers and parents shared specific observations and experiences they have encountered with sixth graders.

To gain a better understanding, the researcher compared each interviewee’s responses according to each question. In analyzing the statements from the interviewees, the researcher began to look for emerging themes and patterns to learn and better understand the central phenomenon of sixth graders.

To capture the data, a framework was created for every question and response. During this process, the researcher took copious notes and highlighted common terms stated during the interviews. The terms were placed in categories supporting environmental effects versus psychosocial effects. The terms were labeled sub-themes. The researcher reviewed the sub-themes to create an overarching theme that was aligned to the interview questions and the problem of practice.

### **Validating the Analysis for the Research Questions**

Cresswell (2000) suggested that a qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive. Ultimately, this means that the researcher develops an interpretation of the data collected for themes, categories, and drawing conclusions that support the study. To maintain the validity of the analysis of the data collected, the researcher used expert review. (Cresswell, 2000) described expert review as a strategy used in qualitative research to ensure that the appointed experts critique all of the important aspects of the study. Two colleagues of the researcher agreed to conduct the expert review. One

colleague was an administrator and the second was a program coordinator. The interview transcripts, research questions, and interview questions were provided for their review and analysis. After their review, a discussion of the findings was conducted, where the researcher shared the findings, analyses, and overall interpretation of the data. Through collaboration, the themes and patterns were shared and compared.

While the purpose of this qualitative study was to identify any common themes that exist between the two types of sixth grade configurations (K-6 elementary and 6-8 middle schools), the researcher does not imply in the interpretation of the findings that an answer has been discovered. It is the intent of the researcher to provide insights on the perceptions and observations of both teachers and parents of sixth graders in two grade span configurations. This knowledge will build to the current literature that is available, inform educational leaders, researchers, parents, and policy makers to potentially improve and close the achievement gaps that exist in sixth grade.

It is also important to share that the researcher had two separate experiences while conducting the study that further support the recommendations for future study. The first experience was during the meeting with the sixth grade teachers at School B. During the meeting, the teachers were very passionate about their perceptions and observations of their assigned sixth graders. They also shared that the district should consider focus groups for sixth grade teachers in all grade span configurations. The focus groups would serve as a networking opportunity to share best practices, concerns, and to develop strategies to best meet the needs of sixth graders related to the psychosocial and environmental factors that impact their overall success. As indicated previously, the

meeting was brought to a close because of the great information that shared, the researcher desired to capture during the scheduled face-to-face interviews.

The second experience was when the researcher discussed with a sixth grader their experiences as a middle school student in the County. During the discussion, the sixth grader shared that she has had a successful school year. She began to provide reasons why she believed that every child is different and that every sixth grader should not be in middle school. There are some students who would benefit in a K-6 configuration. She also shared that in a K-6 grade span configuration, puberty is harder to deal with. It is a smaller setting and as your body changes, it is more obvious because sixth graders are the oldest and are always looked up to by the younger kids. In the 6-8 grade span configuration, it appears that everyone is going through puberty. She expressed that it is less uncomfortable. The teachers in the 6-8 grade span configuration support this physical change better than the K-6 teachers did in her opinion.

As the sixth grader shared her personal experiences, the researcher immediately began to reflect on her own personal views and beliefs of where sixth graders should be assigned. This personal experience created an epiphany for the researcher. The sixth grader suggested that the students should be given the autonomy to select the grade span configuration that best meets their needs (K-6 or 6-8). She shared that the students have a variety of needs that could be addressed by finding the right school environment for them. This discussion further supported the need for further research to explore the best grade span configuration for sixth graders. Researchers should delve deeper into conducting interviews with sixth graders in both grade span configurations. Additionally,

it confirms that the County needs to facilitate study groups to hear the experiences and needs of sixth grade teachers and sixth grade students.

### **Recommendations and District Impact**

Conducting this study provided me with an opportunity to add to the current literature, and study that has been conducted in the County. The following recommendations were developed to provide support for sixth graders, teachers, and district leaders:

**Recommendation 1:** To date, the county does not have an administrative procedure or policy to support the current sixth grade transition process for the 6-8 grade span configuration. A community forum should be considered to outline the respective needs of the schools and community. The County should invite sixth grade teachers and administrators to share in the decision making process. Additionally, the County should create a policy to strategize the process so that it is tailored to the needs of the students and teachers, to provide stability within a school setting in order to provide more student success. The District should collect data so that internal and external auditors can evaluate the processes involved in placing students in the various sixth grade configurations. This information should be thoroughly documented and made transparent to the key stakeholders.

**Recommendation 2.** Studies show that schools attempt to solve the middle school transition problem in many ways, such as: creating an environment that fits the needs of adolescents, remediation, interdisciplinary instructional teams, and transitional programs. In the County and nationally, remedial academic programs were developed for students who are not performing at grade level in reading and mathematics during their

first year in middle school. The County should provide a continuum of academic support for underperforming students after their first year of middle school.

**Recommendation 3:** The County should provide continuity of services from one grade span configuration to the next (e.g., specialty programs, instructional programs, etc.). The sixth grade teachers should also have the same professional development opportunities and collaborative planning sessions as a professional learning community. This will allow best practices, strategies, and techniques to be shared to meet the instructional and social needs of sixth graders. The development of these strategies should be implemented within the feeder pattern of schools. This recommendation will foster and address Research Question 1 and 2. As expressed by our interview participants, sixth grade students often experience confusion, anxiety, and fear of the expectations of learning and achievement. Creating a systematic and unified approach for sixth graders for note taking, notebook organization, and continuity of specialty programs, will help to better prepare sixth graders as they make the necessary adjustments within his or her grade span configuration.

**Recommendation 4.** Finally, the County and other school districts have participated in some traditional transition programs to acquaint the elementary school students with the middle school before and after the transition. The three most common activities are having elementary students visit the middle school, having middle-grades and elementary administrators meet together on articulation and program, and having middle-grades counselors meet with the elementary counselors or staff (MacIver & Epstein, 1991). However, MacIver and Epstein (1991) found that nationally, only 20 percent or fewer of the principals interviewed in their study indicated the use of

transitional activities. These traditional activities included having elementary school students attend regular classes at the middle grades school, having summer meetings at the middle grades school, and having a buddy program that pairs new students with older ones on entry into the school.

To help students maintain academic success as they adjust as sixth graders in the K-6 or 6-8 grade span configuration, it is important that schools invite and solicit the help of parents during their child's adjustment to sixth grade. Making connections is very important for students as they make an adjustment to a new environment. As one teacher expressed in the interview, she provides "getting to know you" activity for her students to make connections at the beginning of the year. The feeder pattern of schools should create campus pals between the schools at the beginning of the school year. The students can share their experiences throughout the year. Additionally, there should be at least required two visits to the feeder school. This will provide the students the opportunity to meet their campus pal, visit the school, and share experiences and lessons learned.

Two parents who participated in the interviews reinforced this belief as they shared that their child's adjustment was much smoother because they had older siblings that attend or attended the same school. While there will be students without siblings, this approach will close that gap that exists.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This qualitative study, the researcher identified four schools in the County who reported their perceptions and observations of sixth graders in two grade span configurations. The researcher used interviews as a means of a qualitative method to



explore, to better understand, and to learn more about factors that contribute to the decline in achievement for sixth graders in the County.

There were some limitations to this study because of the focus was placed on a single school district. To grasp an in depth understanding of the factors that can possibly affect sixth graders in the two grade span configurations, future research should be conducted with more school districts.

Future research should also be examined of schools and school districts that provide (a) professional learning community for sixth grade teachers within both grade span configurations, (b) a mentoring program between feeder pattern of schools, and (c) maintain academic and specialty programs between feeder pattern of schools. Once these strategies, initiatives, or best practices have been identified, the findings will be helpful to teachers, district leaders, policy makers, and researchers to design new or update existing models to support sixth graders.

## **Conclusion**

Research has indicated the creation of middle schools was predicated on the assumption that the middle grades “are not a time for academic learning so much as the social adjustment, individual growth coping with early adolescence, and looking out for the needs of the “whole child” (Yecke, 2005, p.1). When sixth grade students make connections with their peers and teachers, familiarize themselves with a new environment, and receive the support needed to adapt to their phases of puberty, they will have a more successful adjustment in their grade span configuration as sixth graders.

To promote and provide students with a feeling of safety, security, belonging, and positive interaction between peers and staff, Byrnes and Ruby (2007) suggested that

teachers, parents, and students should develop strategies to further support helping adolescents make better adjustments as they transition. Developing relationships takes time. According to Lounsbury (2009), students feel a sense of belonging when a school community invests in relationship building with the adults. The required time and student-teacher ratio may impact this much needed and effective strategy.

This qualitative study collected the experiences, observations, and perceptions as shared by both teachers and parents of sixth graders. It also provided a platform to research and explore potentially important factors related to the psychosocial and environmental factors that impede sixth graders. A more explicit and intentional approach to broaden the sample and schools will better help the development of strategies and programs to prepare sixth graders as they make adjustments in any grade span configuration.

There is a need to place a greater emphasis on other factors that impede the achievement of sixth graders within his or her grade span configurations. Those decisions should be made by the key stakeholders within the school's community and supported by the financial resources that are allotted. Moreover, the school districts should make decisions in partnership with all key stakeholders, related to grade span configurations that support the projected enrollment, school operating resources, and instructional outcomes. Empowering teachers, parents, researchers, and educational leaders to develop a stronger, more effective, and meaningful approach to meet the "whole child" will lead to a stronger generation of sixth graders.

**Appendices**  
**Appendix A: Cover Letter**

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to shed light on the experiences of sixth grade students in a large urban district as they transition into an assigned grade-span configuration. Your participation will contribute to this body of research. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision about whether you would like to participate. If you have any questions throughout your decision-making process, please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate in this study because you have a child in the sixth grade child attending a County school, teach sixth grade in the County, or are an administrator for sixth grade students in the County.

**Problem of Practice:** An Investigation of the Relationship Between Sixth Grade School Settings and Academic Achievement in the County

**Purpose of the Project:** This study will investigate the observed experiences of sixth graders in the County and their academic achievement as they transition into an assigned grade-span configuration.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes of your time, will be audio recorded, and will take place at a convenient location. During this interview, you will be asked a series of questions designed to help you to share your experiences as a parent of a sixth grade child in the County, as a sixth grade teacher in the County. Additionally, you will also be

asked to participate in an interview, during which you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences with or observations of sixth graders in the County. Any identifiable information provided will be deleted for the final submission of this study.

You will receive a copy of the results once the study is complete.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:** There are no known risks or discomforts associated with participating in this research study.

**Benefits:** The information gained from this study may help the researcher to better understand the experiences of sixth graders and their academic achievement according to his or her grade span configuration.

**Confidentiality:** During the interview, a pseudonym will be provided to maintain confidentiality. The pseudonym that is provided will be used throughout the documentation collected for the sole purpose of this study. Once the interview is transcribed, the audiotapes and interview transcripts will be kept for three years in a secured location. The information obtained for the purpose of this study may be published in educational journals or presented at educational workshops, but the data will be prepared and maintained as aggregated data.

**Compensation:** The only compensation for your participation will be a \$10 gift card.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** Questions are always welcomed concerning this research. Feel free to contact K. Fossett at (301)-599-2500 or via email at [4dstny@gmail.com](mailto:4dstny@gmail.com). If you have further questions regarding your participation in this research study, you may contact the University of Maryland, College Park or the County Institutional Review Board.

Freedom to Withdraw: As a research participant in this study, you may decide not to participate in or withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision will not adversely affect your relationship with the researcher; the University of Maryland, College Park; or the County.

Consent: If you voluntarily participate in this study, you will be interviewed. Your signature below certifies that you acknowledge this requirement of your participation in this study. Additionally, you have read and understood the information presented. Upon the provision of your consent to participate in this study, a copy of this agreement will be provided.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I hereby give consent to audio record my interview for the purpose of this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B: Teacher Consent Form

### An Investigation of the Relationship Between Sixth Grade School Settings and Academic Achievement

You are being invited to participate in a research study in a large urban school district. You are eligible to participate in this study because you teach or have taught sixth grade. As the researcher of this study, I am interested in understanding your experiences and observations of sixth graders. This research study will investigate the observations of psychosocial and environmental effects that grade-span configurations have on the academic achievement of sixth graders.

Your participation in this research will take about 60 to 90 minutes of your time. First, you will be interviewed for a half hour. The interview will be audio- recorded and transcribed for the sole purpose of this study. The interview will take place at an agreed upon location and time. The results of the study may be published in educational journals or shared during educational workshops. Your identity will remain confidential. During any time of your participation, please feel free to ask questions.

In the section below, confirm your participation in this research study by checking “Yes,” which indicates you have read and understood this document and have agreed to participate in this study. If you wish to decline to participate in this research study, check “No,” which means you have read and understood, but do not agree to participate in this study. Thank you for your consideration.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I have read and understand this form and agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I have read and understand this form and do not agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C: Parent/Guardian Consent Form

### An Investigation of the Relationship Between Sixth Grade School Settings and Academic Achievement

You are being invited to participate in a research study in a large urban school district. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a parent or guardian of a sixth grader in the County. As the researcher of this study, I am interested in understanding your experiences with and observations as a parent/ guardian of a sixth grader. This research study will investigate the observations of psycho-social and environmental effects that grade-span configurations have on the academic achievement of sixth graders.

Your participation in this research will take about 60 to 90 minutes of your time. First, you will be interviewed for a half hour. The interview will be audio- recorded and transcribed for the sole purpose of this study. The interview will take place at an agreed upon location and time. The results of the study may be published in educational journals or shared during educational workshops. Your identity will remain confidential. During any time of your participation, please feel free to ask questions.

In the section below, confirm your participation in this research study by checking “Yes,” which indicates you have read and understood this document and have agreed to participate in this study. If you wish to decline to participate in this research study, check “No,” which means you have read and understood, but do not agree to participate in this study. Thank you for your consideration.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I have read and understand this form and agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I have read and understand this form and do not agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

### An Investigation of the Relationship Between Sixth Grade School Settings and Academic Achievement

#### Interview Protocol-Teachers

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introduction

- Introduction of researcher and presenter
- Review the purpose of the study
- Provide and explain the informed consent forms
- Outline the procedures and structures of the interview (audio recording and confidentiality)
- Questions
- Interview and recording preparation

#### Interview Questions About Sixth Graders

1. Think about transition of sixth graders in your school's grade-span configuration.
  - a) Describe the observed initial behaviors as the sixth graders transition.
  - b) What adjustments are immediately required by you to support the sixth graders?
  - c) Can you recall a time that you observed a sixth grader having difficulty transitioning?
  - d) Explain. What were the observed behaviors?
2. What observable behaviors are displayed throughout the year as sixth graders transition?
3. What are some observable environmental factors that affect sixth graders during their transition into middle school?
4. What are some observable psychosocial factors that affect sixth graders during their transition into middle school?
5. What support is needed to better prepare sixth graders for the transition into middle school?



## Appendix E: Interview Protocol

### An Investigation of the Relationship Between Sixth Grade School Settings and Academic Achievement

#### Interview Protocol-Parents

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introduction

- o Introduction of researcher and presenter
- o Review the purpose of the study
- o Provide and explain the informed consent forms
- o Outline the procedures and structures of the interview (audio recording and confidentiality)
- o Questions
- o Interview and recording preparation

#### Interview Questions About Sixth Graders

1. How has your child adjusted to the transition as a sixth grader into a middle school setting?
2. What were some of the advantages and disadvantages observed as your sixth grade child transitioned?
3. Were there any observable behaviors that concerned you during your child's transition? If so, describe the observed behaviors.
4. How has your child adjusted socially and academically since he or she transitioned into middle school?
5. From your perspective, what are the perceived school practices that impeded or supported the elementary to middle school transition?
6. From your perspective, what are the perceived family practices that impeded or supported the elementary to middle school transition?
7. What strategies do you think parents should use to help students make a successful transition to middle school?
8. What strategies do you think schools should use to help students make a successful transition to middle school?
9. Do you feel that you have received support from the school as a parent to help your child transition to middle school?

Thank you for your time.

## **Appendix F: Email to Principals**

### **An Investigation of the Relationship Between Sixth Grade School Settings and Academic Achievement**

Re: Sixth Grade Relationship Between Settings and Academic Achievement  
From: K. Fossett ([4dstny@gmail.com](mailto:4dstny@gmail.com))  
To: Participants' email address

Dear Principal of XYZ School,

I am currently conducting an investigation of the relationship between sixth grade settings and academic achievement. I am writing to ask if your school would be willing to participate in this study. Your school has been selected to participate because you currently have sixth graders, and you could provide an in-depth understanding of your perception of their observed behaviors, adjustments, and academic performance during their transition into sixth grade.

This study will explore current research nationally and current practices in the county. Your participation in this study will give us first-hand perceptions of observed behaviors. Your school is one of the six schools to provide us with this opportunity.

If you agree to participate in this study, I would like to arrange a time with you for further discussion of this research project, either in person or by phone.

I have obtained permission to conduct this study from the University of Maryland and the county. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) will also assist in conducting this study. Attached to this email, you will find, the IRB approval from The University of Maryland and the county.

Thank you in advance for considering your participation in this study

## **Appendix G: Email Reminder to Participants**

### **An Investigation of the Relationship Between Sixth Grade School Settings and Academic Achievement**

Re: Sixth Grade Relationship Between Settings and Academic Achievement

From: K. Fossett ([4dstny@gmail.com](mailto:4dstny@gmail.com)) email address

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As shared, your participation is greatly appreciated, in an effort to further enhance research and an investigation of the relationship between sixth grade school settings and academic achievement. Please accept this reminder to arrange a time and place to conduct the agreed upon interview. Thank you again for your dedication, support, feedback, and time.

## Appendix H: Parent Interview Scaffolding Template

### Interview Questions About Sixth Graders

1. How has your child adjusted as a sixth grader into a middle school/elementary school setting?

#### **Parent 1:**

She's adjusted fairly well, the school did a good job with developing the kids, teaching them how to study, teaching them things like how to high light, how to come to teachers and ask for help, how to do team work umm and yet individual work. In fifth grade they started to rotate classes to prepare them for sixth grade and when they move to the next building for seventh and eighth grade.

#### **Parent 2:**

Actually, I think she adjusted pretty well. Better than I expected to be honest. I thought that it was going to be difficult for her.

Well, because she went from only transitioning from maybe one or two—two or three teachers to six or seven teachers now. You know, transitioning from multiple classes all day and then having to keep up with A schedule, and B schedule, you know the different schedules. She adjusted really well.

#### **Parent 3**

Her experience was the same, the seventh and eighth graders are very impactful. The behaviors, the body language that she sees from the seventh and eighth graders has been very impactful. There are a lot of questions are being asked daily about their behavior, disposition and body language.

#### **Parent 4**

She's adjusting well now. She took a little while to get started, but I think now that that this is the third quarter, she's doing pretty good now. I think part of the impact was that she came from a private school over to a public school. I think another part of the impact of course was moving from fifth grade to sixth grade. The work was a little more challenging, and she took a little while to get familiar with how much work and homework was given. Within a couple of months, she was able to organize her time management better and she is doing better now.

#### **Parent 5**

The adjustment was hard. She started school earlier. It was not only hard for her but for me. There was a huge age grade span difference.

#### **Parent 6**

My child has adjusted well in his transition from elementary school to middle school

## **Parent 7**

The adjustment has been challenging. I do not think that the middle school was aware of what to expect since this was their first year receiving sixth graders. Specifically, while my child was adjusting to a new school environment and teachers, he was also juggling the new expectations (i.e. self-reliance, responsibility, and procedures) that the teachers and administrators had for him.

2. What were some of the advantages and disadvantages observed as your child moved into the sixth grade?

### **Parent 1:**

Some of the advantages I think was that she was very well prepared. I think that because they keep the sixth graders and below at her school she has the opportunity to be in a leadership role for some of the younger kids. Some of the disadvantages are seventh and eighth graders at another building so I think that that's going to, my concern is how that would work with them rotating between different campuses. If that's going to be too much, if they're going to have enough time in their core classes, so I don't necessarily see that as an advantage. Separate buildings away from each other.

### **Parent 2:**

I don't know if this answer is going to answer your question and what you are looking for. I think the advantage is we're fortunate to have a son who is a grade ahead of her, so we were able to get a feel for it before she went through it.

So, I guess I could say my advantage is the fact that I have a child who already did the transition from elementary school to middle school.

(Female student) was really scared before she started. So she was really nervous and scared. She didn't think she was going to be able to keep up.

### **Parent 3:**

Her experience was the same, the seventh and eighth graders are very impactful. The behaviors, the body language that she sees from the seventh and eighth graders has been very impactful. There are a lot of questions are being asked daily about their behavior, disposition and body language. One of the disadvantages is I think that they should have kept sixth grade from k-6 like it was ten years; five years ago.

So going into the sixth grade in a different wing of the building, she didn't know some of the kids. So adjusting to the clicks and because she's a newcomer, that was a big adjustment for her. Another adjustment for her was, the boys warmed up to her more and started to be more welcoming vs the girls. She came from a very diverse and cultural—

the teachers were very diverse, with different ethnicities, and now the majority is the minority. That was a different setting for her.

#### **Parent 4**

One thing I did notice is in this particular school is they have an honors class. When she first came to the school they started her off in the regular classes, but in second quarter they realized her grades were pretty good, her test scores were excellent and they moved her from the regular class to the honors class, so I think that's an advantage because the honors class gives them more challenging work. So the advantage with that is if you student does well, they can do excellent or even better because they are being pushed more.

I think 6-8 is good. Most of the kids are ready for middle school in the sixth grade. They're ready for more than k-6.

#### **Parent 5**

Advantages...more independent. She had to learn more about time management. Lockers, transition. Bookbags were not allowed now whereas in middle school she now is responsible.

#### **Parent 6**

The major advantage for my child was that he was reunited with a sibling as he entered middle school. Another advantage was the ability to take multiple classes that interested him, versus a set of pre-determined classes in elementary school. One of the major disadvantages that sticks out is the difficulty in organizing and managing both time and materials. While things have normalized during the course of the year in the beginning of the school year it was a bit difficult for him to manage all the different classes and assignments.

#### **Parent 7**

##### **Advantages**

Makes great use of technology in learning and assignments.

- I love the fact that the Spanish textbook has so many features for kids to engage in the language; and that there are study abroad opportunities to support learning.
- I also like the use of Edmodo to help engage students and their classmates in learning and supporting one another in learning. Edmodo makes it easy for parents to also stay in the loop with learning as well. Class Dojo is also a great way to build a learning community around what children are expected to know.

- Google Classroom is another tool used; although it is too embedded and requires several layers to access information.
- My child also uses TenMarks to practice math and receives extra credit for his effort in practicing his math.

Expanded curriculum opportunities (i.e. health, Spanish, and orchestra)

- There is a lot of project-based learning which allows students to incorporate multiple disciplines.
- Students have a dedicated class time in their schedule with clear learning objectives.

### **Disadvantages**

Organizational structure lacks engagement and support services for students.

- Current structure holds students accountable for success even when they lack the awareness of expectations or resources to recover from setbacks.
- The middle school should provide opportunities for engaging parents and students in learning through the use of technology. So far opportunities to engage parents have only been informational.
- Not all teachers are using technology (i.e. Edmodo, Class Dojo, Google Classroom, etc.) to engage children in learning or to keep parents informed.

Availability of Textbooks

- I believe that learning has no boundaries and that it begins at home and continues at school and throughout individual experiences. While I embrace the application of technology, instructional materials need to be accessible both in and out of class. Specifically, when learning different concepts, I could show my son how to solve the problem; but it may not be the way he learned in school. This issue has happened on multiple occasions. My child was given 20-35 geography words to define and told to go online to look them up. Many of the words did not provide a geographical context, yet he was going to be given a vocabulary test on them. Without access to instructional materials, it is difficult to support learning at home.

Communication

- Teachers continuously observe behaviors (i.e. poor study skills, time management, etc.) that need support without engaging students/parents or seeking out support services.

- The agenda books are encouraged, but teachers are not incorporating them in their classroom as tools for time management or note-taking.

3. Were there any observable behaviors that concerned you during your child's experience as a sixth grader? If so, describe the observed behaviors.

**Parent 1:**

Socially she got a little more comfortable. (laughs) . So her school is primarily made up of white students. And being one of five black students out of 58 kids, she got a little more comfortable with some of those kids and a little more social.

**Parent 2:**

She became more organized.

She was a hot mess. Prior to, that girl had paper everywhere

So, whereas, where she came from it was—you know she didn't have to have—everything didn't have to be separate because she pretty much had the same class all day for all of her subjects. Whereas now she has to carry this notebook, she had to have different tabs for every subject now and that has helped her literally get her life together.

Like literally. She now knows where everything is. She keeps everything in order. Where she used to have everything everywhere. She used to have math mixed up with science, and science mixed up with English. It was just paper everywhere, it was hard for her. Initially, she couldn't find anything. It was hard to do homework; she was going through all of these papers looking for homework. Vs now, she opens her notebook and goes to the section and what she is looking for is right there. So she's just much more organized.

**Parent 3**

That's one of the disadvantages I see because some sixth graders aren't as mature as the seventh and eighth graders. And putting them in that setting can be a negative and a positive. It can have them growing up a little too fast thinking they need to fit in. I think that the advantage is, it shows them how to be mature in certain situations and how to develop and deal culturally with older kids.

The number one flag that I saw was bullying their appearance. A lot of the seventh and eighth grade girls wear colored lipstick and their hair is colored. Whereas my child is not allowed to have colored hair and wear colored lipstick. She goes to a uniform—a school that requires uniforms, so all of the kids have uniformity; shoes. So that's a plus for me. But a lot of the girls—their dispositions and their attitudes. Of course not while their parents are not around, because I'm one of the parents where I will pop up at the school at any given time. And the challenge of just adjusting.

**Parent 4**



She sure did. When they switched her from the regular class to the honors class, she held back a little bit. I think part of that had to do with the fact that she was unsure if she would fit in with the honor class, even though she's there academically, I think socially she had a problem trying to make friends with them. The teacher did call me, and stated that she was kind of sheltered and holding back and not making friends like she should. So I spoke with her, and asked what was the problem behind that and she told me that because she was in the honors class she wanted to really well and that she wasn't holding back on making friends but holding back so she could focus. So she didn't socialize as much because she wanted to do well in the class.

**Parent 5**

My concern primarily her focus is on the social aspect. She does not have a problem with socializing. There is recess and modified weeks where they get additional academic support as needed

**Parent 6**

Thankfully there were no behaviors that concerned us during his transition to middle school.

**Parent 7**

My child has always been very articulate and confident regarding his school work. He consistently achieved honor roll every quarter and year; he was inducted into the International Baccalaureate Program. Since attending middle school, he has often felt overwhelmed and demonstrated feelings of anxiety and stress. As a parent, I don't always receive the communication from the school (or teachers) in a timely manner to provide any intervention. This school should have some type of early intervention program that makes it easier for teachers to report issues of concern, and for children to be referred for proper intervention. This type of intervention already exist in many college settings.

4. How has your child adjusted socially and academically as a sixth grader?

**Parent 1:**

So one of the things that I noticed is they also taught her that if she needs help, to come seek it out. So I think that from a social aspect as well as just turning in to a young lady and just being a pivotal time in their life, to teach her talk to adults. To go on and ask when she needs help. They also teach them to work in small groups with their peers. Which I think sometimes you get things, if the adult isn't explaining it in a way you understand, then maybe

someone your age can explain it better. They also did workshops at the end of the day. So every week they would have a writer's workshop from 3:00- 4:00 the kids could go to, or they would have reader's workshops or you could come early in the morning. Another big thing was they taught them to be accountable and responsible. So if you didn't have your homework, email me right away. Their English teacher taught them don't email me and start off just rambling I forgot my homework. Always use a greeting. Always use a closing. Always sign your full first and last name. Always address Mr. or Ms. No long subject line. So she kind of taught her, which I thought was good because that's something we use now with how to type an email. Then, to be true about it. Hey I honestly forgot my homework, can I turn it in tomorrow or however. So I like that. The only negative I can think of, it didn't—can I cross over and talk about my son?

**Parent 2:**

Socially, I would have to say 50/50. She's in class with students, well kids that she was previously in class with, so she's familiar with them, she's already friends with them. I don't hear her talk much about any new friends, so she seems to have stuck with the old ones. Some of the behavior that she's kind of getting mingling in with some of these kids is not of my liking. Yes. Well I don't see the change in her because once she brings it up; we have a conversation about it. We go what's right, what's wrong. She seems to understand. I haven't had that issue with her just yet, but that doesn't necessarily mean it isn't happening, it just hasn't been brought to my attention.

Tell me about that, in that regards, because that's one of those observable behaviors that has changed over time. So tell me how that has impacted or negatively impacted her—because you've seen an increase within just this year, now that she's in that middle school setting. Well, we monitor it and we only allow it during certain times. So as far as her school work is concerned, that hasn't changed at all. Now, we're getting into, I wouldn't necessarily say peer pressure, but we're getting into—and I think bullying is not the word either that I'm really looking for. I think it's more so, young people being young people saying things that they shouldn't say, and then her reacting to those things. But outside of that, that's pretty much it. It hasn't been anything really bad or anything super serious—but a couple of incidents where we had to address some things. And it wasn't necessarily her; it was her being pulled into situations. And, you know, us as parents, having to shut that down.

**Parent 3:**

Okay, so the negative is that you feel like is because of the exposure, you feel like they are growing up too fast getting negative behaviors. But then on the flip side, you feel like it's also helping them to adapt to the current situation based on the culture of the school?

That's one of the disadvantages I see because some sixth graders aren't as mature as the seventh and eighth graders. And putting them in that setting can be a negative and a positive. It can have them growing up a little too fast thinking they need to fit in. I think that the advantage is, it shows them how to be mature in certain situations and how to develop and deal culturally with older kids.

**Parent 4**

**Parent 5**

Extra-curricular activities have had a negative impact on her progress, which impede her progress. So it causes me as a parent to maintain Kids don't know enough to maintain accountability to her own progress. NO progress monitoring . There was no preparation of this form of accountability and time management in an elementary level.

**Parent 6**

He has adjusted well in both categories, socially was far easier as mentioned previously he was reunited with a sibling which makes social interactions easier. Academically while he struggled in the beginning to keep himself organized, that was more of a personality over an issue grasping the academic material.

**Parent 7**

Socially, my child has adjusted well. He continues to go to school with many of the neighborhood friends and children that he attended with in elementary school.

Academically, my child is trying to maintain and demonstrate his competency in all subject areas. He has a goal to make honor roll in middle school; so far he has not been able to achieve honor roll yet. Although his work (i.e. Science Fair, National History Day, Research on Spanish Country) has been recognized and selected to represent the school during school-wide exhibits and events.

5. From your perspective, what are the perceived school practices that impede or support your child as a sixth grader?

**Parent 1:**

So, if you took a test and you failed the test, they would let you take it over.

In another couple of days. They'll give you time to prepare again and let you take a retake; so that I hated because I think he looked, oh if I mess up the first time, I have this second opportunity. So he didn't prepare as hard as he should have.

But they're different students too. But—I didn't like—they still offer that, but my daughter is a strong enough student where she didn't need—she's a strong enough student where she didn't need to do the retakes

**Parent 2:**

They have two specific days for tutoring, so if she feels as if she is falling behind or didn't quite grasp the material during the day, she has the opportunity to go to tutoring after school. Well, she did have one little altercation that transpired outside of school on social media. Me and her dad told her, when she gets to school on Monday go directly to the counselors office, explain the situation, show the counselor what needs to be seen and they were very helpful. I think they took care of the situation pretty well.

**Parent 3:**

The one thing that I do like is that the school has different student deans. They have different student deans for the students to go to so that they can rectify their problems, I do like that. However I do not like the way that they have mediation with the kids first before involving the parent. I understand what they're trying to do but on the onset of an issue the parents should be involved.

**Parent 4**

I'm not sure if this is a school practice or just teacher specific, but I did have some issues with one of her teachers in the sense that homework was given late and she didn't have enough time to manage that particular work along with the other work that she has. That work is due in couple of days and it should really take more time. Also, they give notices for a particular event; they give them late in the week. I think we need a little more time for things.

**Parent 5**

The dynamics shifted between fifth and sixth grade. More time is required.

**Parent 6**

I do not feel that anything in the school environment in middle school impedes him. I do think that one of the things that greatly help him is Viking Time. This is a free period in which they are offered the chance to visit which ever class he feels he needs additional instruction.

**Parent 7**

Student support services play an important role in promoting successful outcomes. Many students often lack the “social know-how” in which to manage complex decisions/expectations. Having a process in place (i.e. an early alert system) to identify children that are capable of learning, yet starting to fall behind and dedicating services (i.e. developing self-esteem, Learning styles, time-management, note-taking skills, study skills, etc.) to help them would improve persistence, retention, and achievement.

At the elementary school there used to be a parent advocate and resources available that parents could use and talk to about resources and services they needed to help support their child. I have not seen anything like this in the middle school environment.

6. From your perspective, what are the perceived family practices that impede or support your child as a sixth grader?

**Parent 1:**

So for her, it's more independent work. We—she knows, when you're in extended day or after care, you do as much of your homework as possible. And then after that, if there is something you need help with; try to catch your teachers before you even start your homework. And then we also try to teach them to be independent. So she knows she needs to get her work done. She knows she needs to not rely on asking hey mom can you help me on this, unless she really can't get it. And then also to study in advance. So we try not to do that, wait till the last minute deal.

**Parent 2:**

No—let's see—and that's from the parents in the home right? When we leave after school, its homework. All homework is done before we can do anything. No TV, no phone, no snack. None of that until all homework is done. It works out pretty well. We started that last year when (male student) went to middle school and it carried over.

**Parent 3:**

As a sixth grader, my expectations of her are very high academically. So, unless she is facing a serious challenge, her responsibility is her homework, and research. I hold her accountable. Sometimes I feel like I hold her too accountable as a sixth grader.

Because I tell her C's are unacceptable in my house. She is not allowed to bring home a C. All she has to do is go to school, that is her only job to focus on. School comes first. Math is not her strong suit, and I think sometimes because I stress that C's aren't acceptable in my house, and she may get a C on a quiz, that adds a lot of pressure on her

**Parent 4**

One practice that we have is we don't allow her to have her cell phone during the week. We noticed that when we take her cell phone during the week, she focuses a little more on her homework; she focuses more on her school work. So we found that when we take her cell phone away, she can focus more on what she needs to focus on.

**Parent 5**

When I was growing up, sixth was in the elementary

### **Parent 6**

Having engagement with your family to help and assist with your homework, assignments and special projects has greatly helped him. In our particular case having multiple siblings in high school (recently in middle school) and with another already in middle school he always has a ready available study partner.

### **Parent 7**

Our family and extended family (to include uncles, grandparents, Godparents) are all supportive and participate in encouraging my child's learning. My child has a set routine to include family time and a set bedtime. Sometimes church activities (i.e. rehearsals) and afterschool activities conflict with his ability to fully participate and complete assignments on-time. Especially when large homework assignments have short turnaround times for completion. Spending hours completing homework each night is counterproductive; the child loses interest and the parents end up completing half the work.

7. What strategies do you think parents should use to help students become successful as a sixth grader?

### **Parent 1:**

So I like kind of what the school is doing, teaching them to write emails. Teaching them to be accountable. Teaching them to be responsible for things, don't always point the finger at somebody else. Seek out help; don't wait for your teacher to come to you. Be independent, but at the same time, know to work in groups. You can work with others, be it if it's your friend or even the people you hate, they do a good job at mixing the tables with people they know are your friends and some they know might not be your friends and they make you do group work together.

### **Parent 2:**

I would say, make sure that you keep the communication with them open.

With both. I definitely recommend that you become on a first name basis with the teachers and let the teachers know that, phone call, email any time any hour. I think also that in this time and age that the parents should monitor very closely all social media and phones. I do believe kids do deserve a little bit of privacy but at this age, I think that you should invade their privacy, I really do. As far as who their texting, who their talking to. If they are—if you do allow your child to be on social media, that you follow them and check up on that daily to make sure that they're not putting things out there that they shouldn't be putting out there, and at the same time have a conversation with your kids on what's right and what's wrong, what you should and should not do, what's appropriate, what's inappropriate out on the social media since social media is such a big

thing now. I think also it's a time to actually give them more responsibility and kind of step back a little bit. At least in the beginning and see if they can handle a little bit more. You know, see if they're responsible enough to actually go home, sit down and get their homework done and know that it's done without having to back check them, and allow them to be able to come to you and say I need help on something. I do think that's a good opportunity to try that, see how far you can go with that because you know as you get higher in grades, at some point, you do have to rely on and trust that they're doing. So I think it should start, with little baby steps in middle school.

**Parent 3:**

Being an open book. Sixth grade is one of the toughest grades. I think that parents need to be an open book, we need to listen to our kids and encourage them in any way possible whether its academically, whether it's with friendships. I think it's very important.

**Parent 4**

I think the biggest thing is time management for the kids. Kids are not very good at time management and I think when the parents help in that department, it helps the kids a lot. You guide them along.

**Parent 5**

As a parent, the ownership was to look on line at SchoolMax to monitor the grades and progress

**Parent 6**

I think the most important strategy is to communicate with your child. This allows for a constant stream of feedback to help guide them through the transition. I also believe having the parents in communication with the teachers and educators, via text, IM and phone calls also help them transition. This way you get not only your child's perspective on how things are going but the teacher's point of view as well.

**Parent 7**

Parents should be an advocate for their child. Parents know how their specific child learns best. When my child has homework or a project to complete, the whole family gets involved and uses everyday real-world opportunities to draw relevance to the topic. Without parent support, you have not even scratched the surface on the learning potential within the child. Because of my child, I am stronger, wiser, and can be of better support.

8. What strategies do you think schools should use to help students become successful as a sixth grader?

**Parent 1:**

One of the big things that I—that I noticed lacks with some kids is teaching them how to study. They teach students how to memorize at a younger age, and then when you start to get to fifth and sixth grade, they start to transition to teach them things like highlighting. Find the main character. Ok read this whole page and now summarize it in one paragraph. So that's kind of a big deal, a lot of kids I don't think know how to do or how to solve a problem in more than one way. To think outside the box.

**Parent 2:**

I haven't been in any type of situation where it hasn't been handled properly. I can't really speak on that right now. Yes, I do think that they should start preparing them for that in fifth grade. I do think that, I do believe that. That would be very helpful for the kids. I also think what would be a good idea too is—I know for some schools during the summer time they have an orientation a month or two prior, or a couple weeks prior to the first day of school. I think that would be a good idea because then it will allow the kids to come into the building, see what it looks like, where they'll be, get familiar with their surroundings, and maybe even do a little presentation on what's expected day one. Some helpful tips on how to get started, such as putting your binders together and things of that nature. I think that would be a good idea. I don't know if some schools do that now or not, but if they don't; I know (female student) school didn't. I think that would be a good idea.

**Parent 3:**

I think mentorship should be incorporated into the curriculum. I think career day should be put back into the school. I also believe parent involvement makes a huge difference as well. We have to be involved; the school can't do it alone. We can't put that weight on educators alone.

**Parent 4**

I think the biggest thing is support coming from the schools. My daughter has a number of teachers and you can tell the difference in her approach to the classes based on the teacher. There is one teacher that gives her a lot of support and encouragement and she does really well in that class. The other class, the teacher is really hard on them and doesn't give as much support on encouragement or quality feedback as the others, and she's not doing as well in it, so I would say more support. For instance, is there is a child that you know that gets good grades in a particular subject and in another subject they're not doing that well, I think that's when you should sit down with the child and find out what's going on. That helps the child express themselves. So support and encouragement, especially in the sixth grade.

**Parent 5**

Provide parents with more insight on the demands, study skills, and time management should be provided.

I was not mature enough to be in a setting with eighth graders. seventh graders were different from eighth and ninth graders. I just don't think they are mature enough. All of her



friends She is learning things earlier than I expected. Because I have not been in that configuration, I was not prepared to prepare her better.

**Parent 6**

While not feasible for an overall approach, I do believe certain students would benefit from a more specialized/individualized education. Not everyone learns/comprehends material in the same way yet school instruction is delivered to everyone in the same fashion.

**Parent 7**

For starters, develop a course that teaches children to become more self-reliant and how to use those skills in other courses. For example, goal setting, learning styles, time management, note-taking, study skills, test taking strategies, etc.

Next, teachers need to receive professional development on how to collaborate and develop interdisciplinary grade-level outcomes that create a seamless transition from elementary to middle; and from sixth to seventh; and seventh to eighth; rather than just the outcome for their own specific discipline.

Lastly, engage parents! Let's them know what you need and want them to do to support their child and the school. I actively participate in my child's school; not because I am asked; rather I observe and when I recognize a need or gap, I use my resources to step up and support. I am sure more parents will be willing if they knew more about what was needed.

9. Do you feel that you have received support from the school as a parent to help your child as a sixth grader?

**Parent 1:**

We do conferences every trimester, because our school has trimesters. So we do conferences every trimester. If there is—I can always email teachers and say hey, my daughter is having a problem with this and they'll say ok, she can either come in at 7:30. She can come in at recess or she can come in after school. If none of those work, let me know. So all the teachers always make themselves available for if there is any type of additional help or any concerns that I may have. She had a standardized test that she had taken and I had concerns about it and I just verbally talked to one of the outplacement teachers on a whim and she said, hey why don't you come in next week , let me look at

her test scores over the years. And when I came, they actually had test scores from second grade all the way up to sixth grade so that we can compare them across. They had a sample test that I could look at so that I can look at so that I can define what each bucket was. They actually had a sheet with things that she could do over the summer to prepare for when she's ready for the outplacement process in eighth grade. Things that she can do to improve in some of the areas of testing. So just things like that, I thought was above and beyond the standard.

**Parent 2**

No, and like I said, I thought the first go around was going to be rough, but she got Honor Roll first semester which was very surprising, and I'm serious because that's a big deal. That's completely different. It's huge, and for her to have adjusted and pop out the grades that she popped out, was huge for me. We gave her kudos for it, you should be proud of yourself. You did very—because it wasn't the same with my son. His grades didn't decline, but he didn't do as well as he should have.

**Parent 3**

Yes I do. The school has different resources to help the student excel. I like the open communication. I like the fact that they send homework home every day. I like the online system and real time data.

**Parent 4**

I think communication between parent and teacher is a big thing, and I would say that the school is really good at responding to parent inquiries. I communicate with my daughters teachers at least once a week. That's a big plus, the communication.

**Parent 5**

I do. I am thankful for our principal. I have met with her. She knows about her and she sets expectations. She has individualized the program to meet Trinity's needs. The extra curricular activities provide balance, but I just think that sixth grade is the wrong time to do that. It is a hard time for sixth grade. I cannot compare her to my experience. Each child is different. sixth grade was a wake up call.

**Parent 6**

Yes my child, and myself have received all the support needed from the school faculty in order for him to succeed.

**Parent 7**

Yes and no. Yes, I think as a parent I receive support when I specifically go in the school to inquire about things; however I think there is little communication in an effort to be proactive

## Appendix I: Teacher Interview Scaffolding Template

### Interview Questions About Sixth Graders

1. Think about the current sixth graders in your school's grade-span configuration.
  - a) Describe the observed initial behaviors of the sixth graders.

**Teacher 1** A lot of time sixth graders come in what I call little children. They have not hit full out puberty yet. So you really have a group of kids that are kids still. And as we are now, we're just at the end of the third quarter. Most of my little kids are not little kids anymore. They've gone through the beginning of puberty and they're starting to really get physically and emotionally more adult like, which really impacts how they interact with the world.

#### **Teacher 2**

Very like not organized. An emotional process just them trying to get used to the different rules, different teachers, a notebook for this class, a notebook for that class. They're just all over the place when they first got here. Just like deer in headlights.

#### **Teacher 3**

They're in groups. I think what folks fail to realize is because they're Spanish speaking they think everybody is in one group. My El Salvadorian students are in a group. My Mexican students are in a group. My Honduras students are in a group. They don't intermingle with each other. And I've always found that amazing, because we just assumed that they're in one melting pot just like society assumes for us. Be from southeast I don't deal with you. And I'm from over here.

#### **Teacher 4**

Well, it's interesting. I have looped with them. This is my third year looping with them. The same cohort. So I have like a really unique perspective on them. The beginning of the year they were pretty much like they were in fifth grade. So some of them were starting to feel their oats, get a little big for their britches. I don't know how to put it, but for the most part they still seemed like elementary kids.

By this time now they're all different. They're all you know – I like to say the puberty fairy has visited them, but they're all middle school acting. They're all – they're not this little kid stuff

anymore. And they've kind of look down on everybody else in the school.

#### **Teacher 5**

It varies from student to student. There are some that are shy and reserved, and a little nervous. There are some who were probably the top notch of their classes before they came to middle school. Then I have those students who have to prove a point, like they feel they can rule my class.

#### **Teacher 6**

When fifth graders initially enter the sixth grade in a middle school atmosphere they appear to be overwhelmed. Their behaviors are viewed as immature and out of place for the middle school environment. Students have been observed running up and down hallways playing tag and demonstrating an inability to self-regulate their behavior. Often students need a tremendous amount of coaxing to transition between classes within the 3-4 minutes allotted. They congregate in the hallways and in the bathrooms because they are craving social time. That congestion can sometimes cause conflict because some students have no prior relationship. Students are often coming from up to 5 different feeder schools and the newness of individuals can cause confrontation which sometimes become physical. Each feeder school sends their challenging students to middle school and for some reason the challenging students find each other during the first two weeks of school. These are the ones who typically take the entire school year to get a grasp on the rules and rituals of middle school. There still are few students who find it difficult to make it to their homeroom, even this late in the school year.

The parents are also, at times, enablers to the immature behavior because they are expecting teachers to be as nurturing as an elementary school teacher and frankly middle school teachers cannot afford to cater to the social-emotional needs of each student. Students are going from working with a teacher who may have 30 students to working with a teacher who has 125 students. Therefore, students are pushed to overcome the immature behaviors and to become self-reliant. It takes time for parents to realize that they must empower their students to be independent because they now have 5 courses and 5 teachers to communicate with on a daily basis. Sometimes, the parents may send a message to one teacher asking him/her to then communicate a message with a second teacher because the parent is overwhelmed. Little do they know who the second teacher may be on the other side of the school and not seen by the initial teacher until the staff meeting. It is a high mountain to climb for all involved.

b) What adjustments are immediately required by you to support the sixth graders?

**Teacher 1**

Patience. You have to be willing to explain the same questions over and over even if on the surface they seem very immature, I kind of think of it when I have my six year old always asks me the same questions about death and about dying. Middle schoolers have always asked the same questions about, "Where is lunch? Is this an A day or a B day? Where do I go?" And it takes about a week to two weeks to get that out of their systems.

**Teacher 2**

Just like to find out what they're used to and then what we expect from them and then to try to meet in the middle. I mean it is a big adjustment especially with them being used to going to K-6 schools. You know they're thinking they're the top people at the school this year. And they lost that moment to shine. You know in the K-6. But see I grew up in Howard County, so I'm used to K-5, 6-8, 9-12. So when I started teaching in PG it was weird to me that there was only – there was K-6 and 7-8 and then 9-12.

**Teacher 3**

I usually make them sit by their enemy. Because that's the way the world is. You have to learn how to get along with everyone. You have to understand that there are cultural differences within your own culture. And until I can see that we're functioning as one in here then you're going to sit where I assign you. And that's why we're kind of this horseshoe in here.

**Teacher 4**

It's interesting. In all honesty, like the most direct thing I can point it to was they did go to North Bay for a week where it was just sixth graders. And they had to deal with sixth graders from actual middle schools and things of that nature. And I think that kind of started it off. And then more recently they did their human sexuality unit and I think that – like now they've got answers to

what's going on with them. And they realize that now, hey, I'm growing up. And I'm being more – I'm becoming an adult. So now they're playing that role.

My groups – and they bunked together. So my kids were still – they acted like fourth or fifth graders. They acted like they had when I had them, but when they were in the cafeteria or they were doing activities and there were kids from middle schools, the other kids were definitely acting more mature, more like they ran the show. You know more confident in themselves, and my kids quickly had to start mimicking their behaviors.

They were afraid of being made fun of or looked down upon, so they quickly tried to mimic the social behaviors they saw.

Well, one of the things I do constantly when they travel in the halls when they're near other classrooms is I tell them that they are the model. They're what the other kids are looking up to and they didn't realize that at first. I don't think they – they thought I was just – you know you're just saying that until we pass the younger kids. We pass the kindergarteners the first graders and they stop whatever they're doing and they stare. And whatever the behavior is that the sixth graders are doing, the other kids start to try and do that behavior as well.

#### **Teacher 5**

The first thing I try to do is have an activity where they get to know each other. I call it “find someone who” I have them interview each other and I have them walk around because I want them to get to know their classmates. I find that that is a great activity, an ice breaker for them. I try to have a democratic classroom. I want them to know that this is their classroom, and that they have a say so. For those that think that they can try to come in and run things, that's fine. I like to make them leaders. I like to create an atmosphere where they all feel safe.

#### **Teacher 6**

Initially, we must go through a system similar to the “First Six Weeks” in order to establish rituals and routines both inside the classroom and outside of the classroom. It is also important for me to be accommodating of the elementary school behavior by both the students and the parents. I take a tremendous amount to establish communication lines with parent via “ClassDojo” in order to head off some of the typical students

behaviors that we see out of most students. It is critical to make the students feel comfortable as you are learning their social-emotional and academic abilities. In addition, you, the teacher, are adjusting to the “new”. New policies, new students, new staff and therefore a tremendous amount of patience is need to create systems in which students can survive and flourish.

c) Can you recall a time that you observed a sixth grader having difficulty?

**Teacher 1**

Yeah, I can call the student Mask, just because I'm looking at a mask. Mask came to me – this was about the third day of school. A young male student, I think, age ten. Came to me and asked, "Mr. Good, I don't know where Spanish is?" Well, I'm new to the building too, so I don't know where Spanish is either. So we kind of took a journey together. He was really upset about it, because he was going to be late and they – we stressed the importance of being on time and responsibility and respect.

So I eased that by writing them a pass, so that covered him. And then we took – we explored the building, which was good for me too as a new teacher. Because I got to learn the school and he learned the rooms and we bonded. So it was a good experience.

**Teacher 2**

Just, I remember one student just pulling out a piece of paper for that one specific class. And turning back in homework and class work and different things like that, the stuff would be there. They just don't remember it's there. They can't find it in their notebook. And they're flipping through a whole bunch of papers. And then I remember this one kid, he had all this stuff ready to turn in. He just never turned it in. And it was sitting in his notebook the whole first quarter

**Teacher 3**

So she tends to struggle. She tries to fit in. She's friendly. She's very, very friendly. She's the tallest thing in sixth grade. But she's not accepted. I'll laugh with you in class, but I'm not going to sit with you at lunch. I'm not going to hang out with you in my neighborhood. I'm just not going to – the buck stops here if you will. So it's difficult for her. I'm sure it's difficult for my African student, my two Caribbean boys. They want to fit in, because they're the minority. They're the minority. And they see Juan and Carlos talking about football while my African boys or my Caribbean boys they play football. I mean soccer. You know but there are rivalries. There are rivalries, so they'll talk about it, but then they're done. It's never let's go outside and let's play a game

**Teacher 4**

I have one student, a male student who is extraordinarily short. And a lot of the other kids have hit puberty. He hit puberty over the summer or through the course of this year. And some of them are exceedingly tall. And he is very, very insecure about it. So he is reacting. It's a negative way. He's trying to be more smart-alecky and more insulting to try and make his presence felt. And I'm trying to redirect that kind of energy to something more productive or more constructive.

**Teacher 5**

There was one student; he had an issue with the guys picking on him. He had feminine ways and they called him names. I saw it affecting his grades, his work in my class definitely. I found it necessary to put him under my wing. So we would meet once a week after school to talk about things, we would go over homework together and if he had some issues in class. Me being there for him relieved the pressure he was feeling, and to know that someone was there for him other than the school counselor. To know that he had the support from a classroom teacher was good for his self-esteem.

**Teacher 6**

Everyday! For 180 days a school year, for one reason or another, sixth graders have difficulty because the majority of them define themselves based on the opinions of their peers. This hyper sensitivity creates an environment of constant conflict between self and social identity. In this environment students tend to navigate towards students who are like them and in some cases they are unable to locate their mirrored peer. While I do spend time helping them navigate their social-emotional challenges my main focus is building a love and respect for lifetime learning. I find the major difficulty is that most students do not value education and believe that they are in school, "Because my mother makes me come". The main difficulty I observe is that inability for students to see their future and to understand that their education can unlock the opportunity to own a store like Wal-Mart or their mis-education can create an opportunity for them to have a job pushing carts at a store like Wal-Mart.

d) Explain. What were the observed behaviors?

**Teacher 1**

I see a whole range. I'm dealing with a 110 students. So I don't know how to answer that to be honest. I mean I've seen sadness,



happiness, anger fur fury, understanding, enlightenment. It's a whole realm when you really look at 110 kids. If I've seen anything directly related to the move, yeah, that one time where child was crying. I've seen a few – I've seen a set of students square off with each other over and argument about an A, B day transition thing.

Okay. Fear, you know at least for the first two weeks fear is – you can smell it off the students. I mean it really, it drips off them for about two weeks. And that was not something I saw at my old school unless it was a new kid to the school, because you have 110 new students, at least that I deal with daily. And they are a little clueless. And as human beings we don't like to be clueless.

#### **Teacher 2**

Confused

#### **Teacher 3**

So she tends to struggle. She tries to fit in.

#### **Teacher 4**

He's really good at art. So I try to focus on his positives whereas – and I have pulled him aside – I have pulled him aside to have just one-on-one, because if I do it in a group he'll have to react negative to it. So I pulled him aside on pretenses of other things so then I can actually talk to him. And it has worked out enough that he feels confident enough that he comes to me if he has an issue. If he's feeling something is not right or he's uncomfortable he will ask me to see me alone and talk to me about it.

Yes. And it's still an ongoing issue. He's still really insecure about it. And if anyone – he gets immediately defensive and immediately starts leaning towards aggressive behavior if someone mentions it or points it out that he's shorter than everybody else.

#### **Teacher 5**

I saw it affecting his grades, his work in my class definitely

#### **Teacher 6**

The observed difficulties include and inability to keep up with homework and assignments for each class. New sixth graders lack study skills so when a teacher announces a test they don't understand or know how to study for the event to come. They are extremely talkative because they

aren't given down time. They are rushed to class and at times given quiet lunches. The need to communicate has them, at times, bursting at the seams. We have even allowed them to have 5 minutes of recess and they run as if they were prisoners just let out of solitary confinement. The talkative nature, the social needs and the inability to quietly focus is a year-long struggle that we have to managed when lesson planning because the structure of middle school sometimes work against helping the students focus in the classroom.

2. What observable behaviors are displayed throughout the year for the sixth graders?

**Teacher 1**

I mean that's not unusual. They'll argue over the floor is green. It looked blue, no it's green. No it's blue. I mean they're at that anal where emotions are really high. This generation for some reason has a hard time opening their mind a little bit and accepting other people's point of views. They want to dig in and start swinging before they even hear everything out, which I've noticed is – this generation last three years I saw that both at my other school and here. So I don't know if that's related to the transition or not.

**Teacher 2**

But it's like all of them. It was an adjustment for the whole sixth grade. You have parent/teacher conferences and the parents are saying the same thing. And it's like the same thing with the kids. It's not that they can't do the work. It's that they're just so disorganized they forget to do this thing or they think this thing is more important than the other thing.

**Teacher 3**

They were uncomfortable because of the reputation of Miss Dugerdien. That she has no cut cards for you when she tells you to jump you better ask her how high. She's going to give you homework every single night. You have to read. There's a litany of things that they know are coming when they come here.

However she's going to put you on the cheer leading squad. She's going to put you in SGA. She's got an etiquette club going on. She's got all this other stuff going on. So you know you got to do this in order to do this with her. So you know the first grading period, they were a little iffy with me. They didn't understand the workload, because it was – we didn't have to do this last year. We didn't have to do this last year.

We finished out the third quarter. We've gone to North Bay. We've bonded. We've done all of this stuff. We had career day yesterday. And I use my sixth graders as escorts. They were all dressed up. They were handsome and beautiful. We're fine. We're in the fourth quarter and these are some things that we have to do. And they'll only get you out of here and you're going to go in that new world. They're ready. They have matured. They have matured.

They're test scores have just totally gone up. I'm impressed with that. They're not too happy, because of the rigor. You have to do this. You have to. You have to. You have to. And I can't cut you any slack. I just can't. I can't.

#### **Teacher 4**

So it's something that once I started pointing it out, they started noticing it on their own. And I think that kind of puffed them up a little bit. Oh, yeah, we are the big kids. We're the top dogs in the school now. That kind of attitude.

There's definitely the awkwardness with – and it's primarily it's with the girls. They're trying their – no matter what the temperature in the room is, no matter what the temperature is outside they want to wear sweatshirts. They want to wear baggy concealing clothing. They're uncomfortable with the changes they're going through. The boys I have – the one who sprouted up and I have a couple who have now real deep voices, and they're very conscious of that and when someone mentions it they get uncomfortable. They blush. They're not comfortable in their own bodies at this point. It's a lot of physical change that's kind of affecting where their head is at.

Absolutely. Yeah, they – whereas in the beginning of the year they still had the mentality of more of a fifth grader. So they were more focused on work. Once we got back from North Bay which was that second marking period it's kind of slid down hill, because now they're noticing the other gender. And they're more concerned about their standing in the class and they're more concerned about well, does she like me. Do I like this girl? And that sort of thing. And that's definitely taken their primary focus.

**Teacher 5**

The young ladies start noticing the boys, and the boys start noticing the girls. The girls want to be cuter so they start wearing makeup whereas they weren't before. Their uniform pants begin to get tighter, the shirts are becoming tighter. The boys are becoming more disrespectful, to the point where I would have to escort them out of the classroom. I see a change in 55% of them. They start thinking they are older or wanting to be older. That really concerns me because I need them to act their age. They're not in eighth grade, but a lot of them of modeling some of the things they see from the eighth graders.

**Teacher 6**

To put a series of blank statements on all sixth graders, here, may be difficult, as by the end of the sixth grade most students have assimilated to the middle school culture. It is a fact, though, that some are still stuck in what I call, "fifth Grade Mode". The closest blanket behaviors that run counter to the culture of middle school sixth grade is the fact that their social emotional needs are not met by the middle school structure at all. So they are always talkative and right on the brink of playtime, at all times. If given a down moment they will try to take 3 down moments. If given a chance to turn and talk, some will start talking about something social once the teacher moves from their area. Some students still love arts and craft and will engage in those types of activities given the opportunity of any downtime.

3. What are some observable environmental factors that affect sixth graders in the K-6 or 6-8 grade span configuration?

**Teacher 1**

One is they have any given student could have up to five, seven, nine teachers in a two day period. Since we have an A day, B day five mods, yeah, nine – up to nine teachers. They have to be – because of safety concerns we don't allow them free access to their lockers to they have to remember things and especially for our special ed population and memory is not always their strong suit, it can become a challenge.

We try to make accommodations for it. Even that sometimes the communication between my – what I'm asking and what the teacher in the hallway, the kid gets jacked up and it's really not the kid's fault. You're dealing with kids still. And then you have eighth graders which are full grown adults. Even though I've never witnessed any interactions – inappropriate interactions I'm sure they're out there. I'm positive they're out there. I've never personally witnessed it, but I bet they are. I would imagine eighth graders – to an eighth grader they're little kids. And you treat kids as kids.

### **Teacher 2**

I like the K-5, 6-8, 9-12. I just think the sixth grade they're too old – not too old, but if they know in fifth grade that they're going to sixth and they kind of get them used to it a little bit it's an easier transition. And then I just feel as though age – those three age groups are fine to be together. Kind of the same majority level, the hormones all that stuff. I just feel like they're a little too old for the elementary school kids.

I mean it's just the normal middle school of peers and trying to fit in. They're coming into it as an adjustment as it is and then they're not – you know they weren't like I said the biggest kids on campus as the older group. I think it's just that adjustment of middle school trying to fit in and not be picked on and all that stuff. A lot of times they're so concerned with their peers in the social aspect of everything.

It will give them a sense of – we're separated. We're not in the mix. We're always in the mix in the building. You know we have to listen to the music. We have to listen to Johnny scream all day long from kindergarten. We have to listen to the teachers that are yelling. There's noise. And I did say this at the beginning of the year, if you're going to move us again, move us at the end of the hallway and then allows kids to transition out that side door to go out on the black top.

There's just too much traffic. And we're just not a part of you. We're not a part. I can't hang middle school stuff and kindergarten is right across the hall from me. And that's the way it was a couple years ago. I couldn't put things out there. But then I had to listen to the A B C's all day long and I think just strategically placing us somewhere and leaving it alone, would be an asset. But you shake up the building and you move every year. And what's the purpose of that?

### **Teacher 3**

If fifth is departmentalized, but if it were not and kids were transitioning from fifth into a middle school building, that's a rude awakening for them. So having sixth grade in a middle school, I'm okay with it, because I think they're just not mature enough to handle that middle school environment. They're just not. But in the same breath when I'm trying to function as a middle school entity in this building, I can't display. I can't showcase them in the

manner they would be showcased in a middle school.

They just don't get it. So you know there's pros and cons. There's good and bad. But what do you do? And then what do you do when your administrator says, "Gee, I want you guys are going to be in another building this year." How am I supposed to feel about that? You know when a statement like that is made. "Gee, you know you guys are again. I thought you would be – hey, come on."

Sixth graders do a lot. We're just trying to set the tone if you will. But we don't get – I don't get the support. We sit in meetings and everything is geared for K-5 in the meetings. And then you got your two adopted teachers back here. Oh, you know that's right. Oh, sixth grade we keep forgetting about sixth grade.

#### **Teacher 4**

They kind of throw their weight around if a teacher does not have really good classroom management skills or it's a substitute. They will definitely take advantage at the drop of a hat without a moment's notice. A lot of – and it's kind of upsetting me, but some of them will even go to the point of just straight lying to these teachers just to try to pull one over on them. And get an advantage.

Some of them are – if somebody pulls one of the students aside for something, an award or something separate, "Why did they get that? Why can't I have that?" And so there's a lot of more nitpicking and things like that. And they want every teacher to pick them and I should be the favorite. I should be the favorite. That kind of thing.

#### **Teacher 5**

Them being with friends with eighth graders and them thinking that they are their age; and then you may have some eighth graders who hang around high school aged children. So I often find myself having to remind them that they are only in the sixth grade.

At the beginning, it is hard. The first three weeks of school there are some tears because they feel overwhelmed. It is an issue for at least the first month as far as the scholars getting adjusted, and getting used to those teachers. But they eventually get it.

#### **Teacher 6**

I cannot speak to the K-6 environment because I have only worked in a K-

5 environment. However, I can firmly state that there is a world of difference between an eighth grader and a sixth grader much like the gap between a kindergarten student and a fifth grader. The big difference is middle school students have much more to juggle and less assistance in doing so. They may go from being 1 out of 200 to being 1 out of 700. They go from an environment where everyone knows their name to one where most people don't care what your name is if you're not in their class or grade.

4. What are some observable psycho-social factors that affect sixth graders in the K-6 or 6-8 grade span configurations?

**Teacher 1**

Well, you have some – judging from 14 years of being in an elementary setting where I didn't have a transition to a middle school I really didn't notice a transition to the middle school impact them in negative ways. I mean, yeah, you have some confusion with any change. You know the deal with lockers. They have to deal with teacher switches, but that wasn't tend to be their fears. Their fears are more peer related fears.

They tend to be more afraid of I'm going to get jumped in the bathroom and those types of things. And once they realize that the environment is safe, that disappears within a week or so.

And I think from what I hear from other professionals they had that – the seventh graders – the sixth graders to seventh grade had that as well. I mean it's natural. And I think the eighth graders going to high schools have it. And when you get out of high school, if you join the military. I mean I think we as humans just don't like – most of us, because some do, most of us don't like a lot of change. We don't like to be out of control unless we're paying for it to go to an amusement park or something. We tend to want to be in control and we're not. It's scary.

Another anxiety – especially for young ladies with their body changes at this age and having to go through menstruation for the first time there's a lot of anxiety about that. And when you're dealing with 30 kids you don't see it as much. When you're dealing with 110 kids there are more instances of that and cause and emotional distress with my young ladies.

Confusion, if that's an emotion. They're confused. Especially having to deal with so many teachers and even still to this day there's still confusion about homework. Typically that's more with my special ed population. General population, although I do teach about 32 special ed kids, so out of those 32 special ed kids I've had

20 of them get constantly confused when homework is due. If you try to hand me other teacher's papers, things like that. It's a lot. Nine teachers is a lot to deal with.

### **Teacher 2**

Yeah, and it gets them – I know they're very still immature, but it helps a little bit, I think, because they're out of that elementary school mentality. Because they're in – actually you are a middle schooler. So it's not, oh, we're just the sixth grade at the elementary school. It's – you know they still kind of feed off of that behavior a little bit, I think, when they're still in that environment. But to push them here makes them – you know you grow up a little bit. You know they're still immature. They're still sixth graders, but I think okay, there's eighth and seventh graders here.

### **Teacher 3**

I'm not going to let my kids feel that way. They already feel, "Gee, you know, she's smiled at me last year. And she \_\_\_\_\_ this year. You know. That was my favorite teacher last." "Yeah, but you guys are sixth graders. Now you're in middle school. They've totally divorced you out of your – you're in the way. And there's nothing we can do about it except when we're in the hallway get on that second tile, be seen and not heard. That's all I need you to do. Let's transition. Let's get the specials and then let's get back into the room." And it's almost like we have to sneak.

And teachers will pass them, "Your shirt is not tucked in."  
"Excuse me, Miss Johnson. They're with me. I got this." And I'll look at my kid and just simply wink. And I don't – I'm not going to dehumanize my kids in the hallway. I'm going to get you in here behind closed doors. But nitpick, pick, "Oh, he's not on the second tile."

### **Teacher 4**

If the sixth graders are on point and they're doing what they need to do, I think it's a definite positive, because again the other grades look up to them. Especially the younger you go, the more they admire and look up to their older classmates.

For the sixth graders themselves, I'm starting to lean towards maybe more of a negative impact, because they don't understand what's going to happen next year. And as much as my colleague and I try and prepare them for that, they still are on an elementary mentality of if I don't do my homework well, they're going to come after me. They're going to help me get it done. And I can slack off a little bit, because I can make it up later. And they don't realize the level that they're going to be at next year and the requirements and



what's expected of them. And we try to prepare them for it, but it's – the environment is still of an elementary school. So they kind of – I don't think they believe us.

Yep, absolutely right. Yeah, that's – the transition, because again they started as more younger kids and then half way through the year they started hitting like the majority of them were in puberty at that point. So in a middle school model, they already have role models to look to. Okay, well, I can see that these older classmen, this is how they behave, so they could already adjust. And I think it would be less of an issue but, yeah, they're not going to get the academic support in a middle school that they get here. I don't feel.

There were still some that were trying to cling to the "I want to be a little kid." But there was a lot of them that were – and I think part of it was their accomplishment of I was a week out in the woods by myself with my peer group. I wasn't at home. I didn't have mom. I didn't have dad. And so I think that was part of it. And I think the other part was yeah, they had visual models of these are what middle school kids look like. And this is how they act. And this is how they talk.

#### **Teacher 5**

Some of the students, I find who once came in innocent are now more defensive. Trying to fit in, trying to prove that they're tough, and trying to prove that they're not the ones to get picked on. They don't want to have this image of being weak. The sixth grade is a big struggle because they are still trying to find themselves.

#### **Teacher 6**

(Refer to previous response)

5. What support is needed to better prepare sixth graders for the K-6 or 6-8 grade span configuration?

#### **Teacher 1**

One, I think that teachers from the other configurations from K-5 schools that are sending their kids to here need to come over and see it. They should be given time to come over and walk the building, know what we do, when they're asked questions in fifth grade they can answer honestly and truthfully. And I wish I would have had that now that I'm here, because I would hear things from my students coming back. And telling me – so I would relay that information. I found out a lot of that is false. It's through the eyes of a student not through an adult. It would have been really helpful so that way – as I'm getting the questions in fifth grade I'm preparing them better to be here in sixth grade.

Second, the things need to come over. We used to do that in PG county and then it kind of slacked off, because of busses and they need to come back. They need to be allowed to come over, see the building, take a tour, even spend a half day. I know Melwood came over I think it was last week for our program. I think that's awesome. I think it takes a lot of the fear out of it. It gives them ownership, so they can say, "I've been there. It's not that scary. Those eighth graders were cool. They're not going to jack me up. They're there to help me." Things like that, I think are really needed to build a better community or communication or community with the two schools. And not just two schools. I guess we have six schools that feed into us. So seven schools.

### **Teacher 2**

I think they're just not ready for it. So I don't know if there's some type of communication that or something that can be installed in the fifth grade to where if they are – you know if they do move more towards this model of the K-5, 6-8 that they are prepared for maybe transitioning to more teachers. Maybe getting used to having or you know maybe some type of organizational skills or some type of I don't know reinforcement that way that maybe they can start in that grade that we can pick up one maybe the first part of the year with the sixth graders. Piggybacking on that to get them organized from the beginning. Because, yes, they have everything. You know mom gets them all the color coordinated stuff, but it's one thing to have, it's another thing to be able to use it.

I think – and I know it's tough, but I think it would be beneficial to have some type of dialogue between the teachers – the fifth grade teachers and the sixth grade teachers. Just to kind of know what you're getting. And not like a kid bashing way, but just to kind of know the different types – different issues that may have been occurring in fifth grade to watch out for in sixth grade.

And I know they kind of change, but just as far as okay this kid is really disorganized. We know we need to help him with this, and it's going to be an adjustment period for him next year. You know keep an eye out for this kid. Just different things along that line. Not like behavior issues, but just kind of academic things and supports that they know might be needed.

I don't know. They could be like a small – like study skills, organizational skills type class or maybe they do – like I know here we do enrichment stuff on Wednesdays. So maybe some type of enrichment towards the end of the year with different activities to

get them prepared for middle school and we as the sixth grade team could even help to prepare those activities with the fifth grade team, because we know what's expected when they make this transition. And it might even be simple stuff as giving them small locks to work on the combination locks so that they – you know they might forget it over the summer. But they had it in their hand – it might be a refresher for some. And so it's in the like when they get here wasting all that time with that.

### **Teacher 3**

Some are a little nervous. Some are very excited. And some say – and most of these kids in here I've had their siblings. So they'll say, "You know my sister said that you said if I did everything this year that the middle school was going to be easy." "Yes, if you do your book reports and I edit your book reports, when you go to middle school just change the cover and write it over again, turn it in. I'm giving you all the work that you're going to need for next year. Your presentations, all your essays." I diligently edit it every, save everything. They're not allowed to throw trash away in this classroom. You can't do it, because you're hurting my feelings. You're hurting my feelings. My babies are fine. My babies are fine. My babies are fine.

It's probably moving the 6 to 8. I just don't think that they're ready. But I lost two of my students and they went to middle school. And within – this is their second week there. One of them got beat up. So I just don't think – half of me feels that they're not mature enough to be in that building with seventh and eighth graders. I just think it is a maturity thing. I really think sixth grade needs to stay for another year and transition them. This is what's going to happen – maybe fifth grade can do that. I don't know. I don't know. But to know that one of my babies got beat up his second week, he just you know – the mother said he was talking too much. And I don't know.

### **Teacher 4**

I think academically in a K-6 model is better, because again there's the support. I have two classes, so I can give students more attention than they would in a dedicated middle school where one math teachers see six groups. So I can definitely give these students more help as needed.

Emotionally, maturity wise, no, this is not the environment for them. They don't have other students going through puberty that they can model after or yet, I think that because of the puberty

issue they should really be in a middle school. It's kind of a weird situation to have – they're the only maturing students in this building with little kids.

That cross is not just with their being uncomfortable with their own bodies, but it's even the lessons, the academic stuff, we can't really share a lot of the stuff we do in here with health or anything like that with the younger grades. And this is beyond the kids' part. This is for myself a lot of the stuff that goes on, well we need teachers to do this or we need teachers to do that. It's based on elementary. It's not – we're kind of left in the cold for a lot of the meetings and a lot of the requirement and things like that. So we're either expected to do elementary stuff with a middle school group or we're just ignored entirely.

One of the things that we try to do here is a lot of PBIS. A lot of positive behavioral stuff, but the sixth graders don't – they think it's kind of Hokey. They don't really like it. It's not geared towards them. It's definitely because the little kids love it to death. But the middle school kids they're – it's not meeting their needs. They don't have an encouragement for positive behavior, because the rewards are not something that a middle school wants.

I think one of the biggest changes between fifth and sixth and it was nice, because I've done both. So the academic requirements what it is is that is expected of them academically, like so for science for example last year in science they had to read a passage and pick out the important part. Then fill in the blanks on a piece of paper.

Sixth grade ignores that entirely and instead you read a case study and then you have to you yourself decide what's important and then restate it in your own words, which is a world of difference in skill. Rather than just searching through the text and pulling out what fits in the blank, now I have to actually have to comprehend it and regurgitate it and they're not ready for that. They're just – it's so much more – they're asking so much more from then that they're just – they're kind of folding on it. Especially beginning of the year. They're really having a hard time with it.

#### **Teacher 5**

Personally, I don't see anything wrong with them having an extra year in the elementary school setting. Then again, they probably need to be with other students who are developing just like they are. However I can't say

that I am sticking to one certain spot. I think that it's good in elementary school; their self-esteem is through the roof because they are the cream of the crop, but in middle school, I always wonder if they are mentally ready because I think that elementary school teachers baby a lot.

I think transitions. If the elementary school counselors can encourage the middle school counselors to come in and speak to the kids that would be great. If current sixth graders could come in and speak to the fifth graders who are moving up, that would be great. Parental involvement. Parents who should their kids that they have their full support and encourage their child; I think parental involvement is key.

#### **Teacher 6**

I believe there is a need for both. There are certain students who frankly are not ready for the autonomy that middle school provides and therefore their grades and learning suffer. They are often already coming to middle school with gaps in their learning and the year it takes for these students to adjust will only create more of a gap that needs to be closed. As an educational community we need to start to identify the students who will thrive in each environment based on their social-emotional abilities. Immature students who need constant nurturing may not be a good fit for middle school. On the other hand students who can handle change and a constantly changing environment and who thrive off of independent environments can find success in middle school.

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