

From Social Experiment to Structured Support: The High School Readiness Program

Author: Charles Martin III

Middle School, as we all know, is a critical period for child development. After six years of elementary school with the same exact routine, teachers, and schedules, it's time to adjust to a new environment. Middle school students face some of the most challenging and complicated times as they mature both physically and academically due to having multiple teachers, going to different classrooms daily, and interacting with a whole new body of students.

During these three pivotal years of development, students are told a cycle of these seemingly contradictory statements:

- *You are too old to be acting like a kid*
- *You are too young to act like an adult*
- *You need to be more independent*
- *Don't make big decisions without asking an adult*

Further, middle school 6th-grade teachers constantly remind students throughout the year, *You are no longer in elementary school*. Then, just two short years later, 8th-grade teachers are reminding students that *you are about to be in High School, act like it!*

Just when things seem the bleakest, there is a light of hope. Middle school teachers try their hardest to help middle school students figure out many things that impact their lives. For example, they help students to understand where and who they are, what they have control over, what academic path they want to pursue. Overall, they try to help students prepare for the outside world as best as they can.

Ironically, we take these students that only have three years to figure all that out, and we throw them all at once into a larger school where your grades increasingly matter, social mistakes start following you, your mental health really impacts your life, discipline is more permanent, and teachers are providing students with more independence than they were used to used to. A recurring problem is that an estimate of half of high school students do not even know what GPA stands for or why it matters. Yet they are now trying to figure out what their long term image or goals are. Doesn't that all sound fast? Within a brief span of four years, students have transitioned several times. First, from elementary to middle school and then middle school to high school. Considering the ages involved and the number of transitions, it all feels like one big social experiment. Students are not failing the transition to high school, the transition is failing our students.

I am so grateful for being able to attend school with the same people my whole life. Union County Public Schools have schools in clusters. Essentially most schools are named the same through elementary, middle, and high school. For example, in Union County, there is a Porter Ridge Elementary, Porter Ridge Middle, and Porter Ridge High School. Also, most middle and high schools are on the same road and located within walking distance to each other.

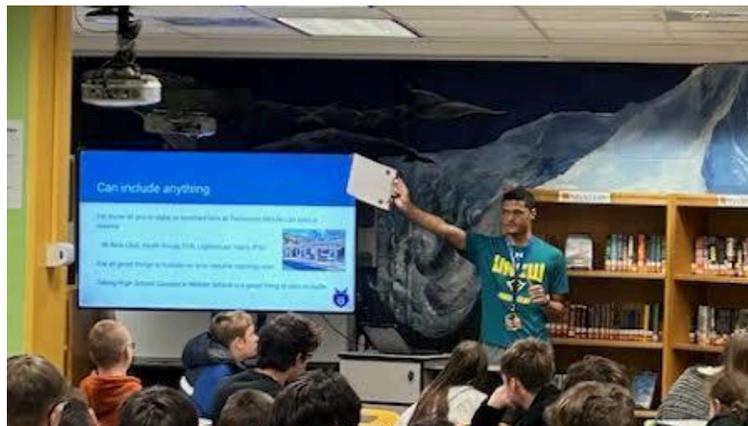
I am currently attending Parkwood High School and have spent my academic career in the parkwood school cluster. Many of my classmates/friends have been in my classes since I was five years old. Once I transitioned to high school, I began tutoring students at Parkwood Middle School. My goal in tutoring is that I want to help younger students and see my former teachers on a regular basis.

However in my time tutoring, I have seen the same cycle continuing to happen: Students who had attended school together their whole lives still figuring out who they are and, at the end of middle school, switch gears and directions for freshman year of high school. I feel I have a deeper calling. I want to be more than a resource for 8th grade students who just have questions about high school as, half the time, I was just figuring it out too. This seemingly simple challenge was actually pretty complex, and I felt the call to respond to it and take initiative for the better of the next generations.

Some of my achievements by the end of my sophomore year included putting together a slide show about basic rule changes when entering high school, such as:

- phone use policies during classes,
- attendance and tardy changes,
- bathroom pass system, and
- the difference between Honors and College Prep.

Further, I would show these changes to small groups of 8th graders in the last few weeks of school. I did not have the opportunity to present to the entire grade level but I am confident that I helped students with these transitions. However, while attending the 8th grade graduation ceremony my sophomore year, I realized that many 8th graders still had no idea what was awaiting them across the road at the high school. I knew more had to be done. There is more we could be doing in our schools to help this social experiment turn into a smooth comfortable process.



Starting the High School Readiness Program

At the start of this school year 2025-2026, and a Junior in high school, I knew I had a passion for the education field and education. I knew I liked the feeling that

comes from making a positive impact upon others. Some of my service activities have included:

- Assisting my former 8th Grade teachers with open house.
- Helping parents set up new school apps

- Answering questions for parents and students
- Distributing chromebooks.

Then, one of my former 8th grade teachers became the media coordinator and she allowed me to claim my own office in the media center. With the help of the principal, curriculum facilitator, media center coordinator, the 8th Grade team, and some other experts and professors in the education field, I have been able to develop and deliver *The High School Readiness Program*.

Central to *The High School Readiness Program* is a curriculum I created that includes every detail that is involved with the transition to high school and everything a student should be prepared for. The 11 modules cover a host of different topics from those that are more sensitive in nature to basic daily school operations. Within each module are, on average, 5-6 lessons. Each lesson is broken down into specific parts that include time for activities and discussion.

I present every other morning in the middle school media center in front of the entire 8th grade before walking across the street to get to my own class on time. We cover the following topics:

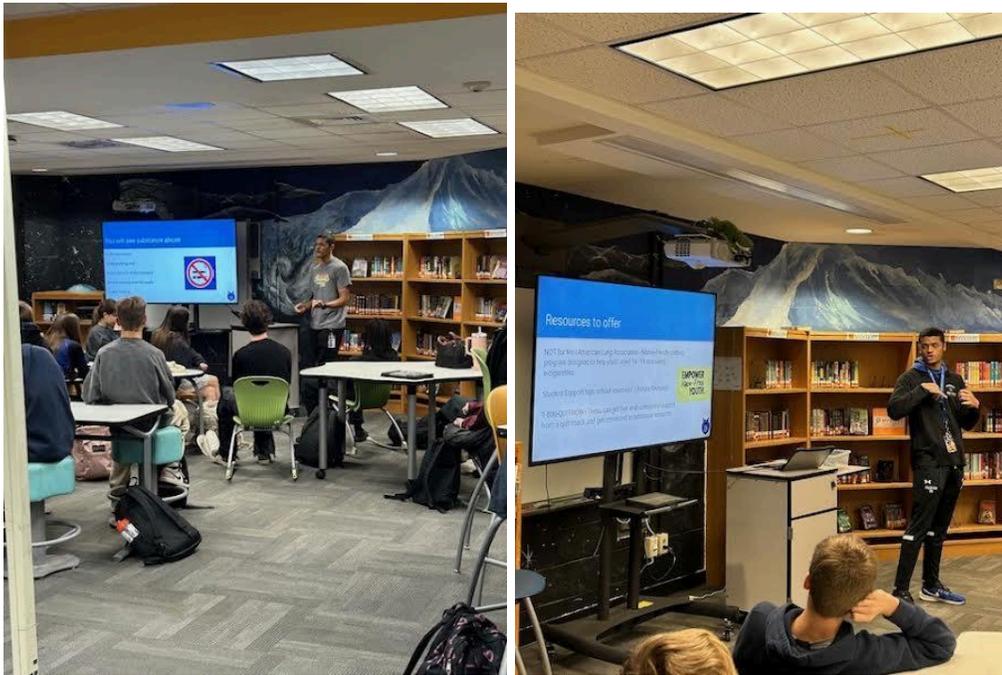
- Academics / Extracurriculars
- Social Media and how to use it
- Bullying prevention
- Drug, alcohol and vape prevention
- Mental Health
- Scheduling classes
- Resumes
- High School Life
- Social Norms/Changes
- College, Trades, After High School

My favorite module currently is Social Media. Social Media is a topic whose effects are far reaching. When I transitioned to high school, I experienced the vast ways people use social media, from connecting with peers and finding a community of friends, to

the less positive instances of advertising “crazy” parties, or selling vapes. I explained to my 8th graders that social media can actually HELP you get into a great university or get a great scholarship for any sports, as long as you post about those achievements and highlights or share what you do in your community.

It is something that is so simple but middle school students seem conditioned to think social media is bad and should not be on it. To further explore this idea, I included a sticky note question and asked students to write which app they use the most and what they see on it. We then talked about how to use it positively. In the *Social Media and How to Use It* module, there are six lessons. One focuses on how to be safe on social media and the dangers of it, and another reinforces how important it is to not overshare information. Others include dealing with strangers/identifying strangers, building a positive digital citizen profile, Union County Public School’s consequences of misuse of social media where students take turns reading each sentence of the school board policy and we do a deep analysis. This is a frequent activity translating a board policy to where students understand it on their own levels. And another lesson on how to advertise yourself for jobs, schools, and any other opportunities.

There is a lot of ground to cover within these topics as there are many concepts to understand. The curriculum is designed to be year round, and I occasionally add to or take away lessons as I go on to teach basing this upon my audiences needs. In addition, I incorporate interactive activities to be used for an entire grade level. For example, I use a smart board to show presentations and examples of the material that is covered and discussed. Sticky notes, index cards, and small groups are used to track data.



The Importance of a Peer Lead Program

Leading this “peer-led” program is very important to not only me but to the students I am working with. A strength I have is that the students are only a few years younger than me. I have the ability to relate them in much easier ways than any other staff member in the building can. It was natural as they gave me their full attention and cared about what I was sharing and they would ask questions frequently with no hesitation. One concern I would have is that if this was not a peer-led program, students might not engage or relate to the speaker or subjects as much. A further advantage is that the students understand that once I am done teaching the daily lesson, I go back to being a student across the street. I get to share high school stories as they happen and give so much perspective.

Developing a curriculum for this program and navigating how to teach 170+ students at one time was challenging. I started emailing and contacting professors

and education leaders for advice and just sharing what I was doing. I wanted to ensure what I was teaching was connected with research-based principles. For example, I was able to contact a professor from UNC Chapel Hill’s School of Education where she teaches Human Development. I shared my scope for this program and we met on a zoom call. I shared that I wanted to teach a lesson about social changes in high school. She shared with me a lesson she teaches at the University level about Social Development in Adolescence. We talked about ways I could use this research-based university level lesson and translate it at the middle school level while I can continue to share first-hand modern scenarios I have encountered. Then, I followed up with a curriculum specialist about the lesson I created with the professor to come up with activities and discussions to implement and how to deliver it.

Getting support from university levels, support locally and at the state level, and further, the support from classroom

teachers and my middle school team and administration has been invaluable and immeasurable. I am excited about the future, and my goal for the 2026-2027 school year is to expand this program to at least one other middle school in Union County Public Schools. Being that I am a junior this year, I really want to see this program in other schools. With each lesson I teach, I know it is making that transition to high school less of a social experiment. Other schools in North Carolina should look into facilitating a similar program to have a high school student discuss the details in-depth with 8th grade students, sharing the various aspects that are impacted by the transition to high school.

I plan on coordinating at the district level about being a facilitator for this program and curriculum while communicating to other high school administrators and students about what I am doing and so that they can teach the same material. Fortunately, Union County Public Schools have plenty of elementary, middle, and high schools on the same campuses, and there definitely is an advantage to work as a cluster! For any readers who would be interested in implementing something similar to this program please reach out to me. I would love to share my curriculum and data with you! Same goes for any researchers or professors!



Comments from the Community

"I've personally witnessed C.M. leading his Ambassador program for eighth graders, and it's clear how much effort he has put into making these sessions meaningful. He speaks from experience and provides guidance on areas that truly matter—academic planning, resume building, safety, and life balance with school. Seeing him take the initiative to revive and improve a program that once helped him is a powerful example of paying it forward. The students benefit greatly from his dedication."

Michael Boyes, M.Ed.
Systems Engineer

Union County Public Schools

“When you first meet Charles, you realize there's something special about him. He's smart, he's witty, he's charismatic, and most of all, he wholeheartedly wants these students to enter high school more prepared than he felt when he was their age. The success of this program comes down to the fact that he's invested. He's been exactly where these students are: eighth graders, high school just within their reach but not quite real yet. The implications of a four-year plan, GPA, extracurriculars, resume, and so on are all either completely foreign or feel far off. Charles, having been there, knows it really isn't. That starting strong and having a good freshman year makes a difference. That getting involved early sets you up for potential leadership positions. That those leadership positions can teach you as much as the classes they're sitting in. This program is successful because these words are coming from Charles's mouth. It's not from a parent, teacher, or counselor, who could share this exact same information, but eighth graders are used to tuning those voices out. Charles makes it real and relevant and dare I say it... cool to think about resumes, electives, and even proper social media etiquette.”

Kristina Passi, M.Ed.
Curriculum Facilitator
Union County Public Schools

“I think this program is valuable, especially because you created this program out of a critical need you've experienced first hand. I imagine when you are presenting each lesson to your middle school audience you share first-hand stories, cautionary tales and that sort of thing. This is what will make your program a success for your students, because you are giving them a very necessary preview of what they need to know to survive and thrive in high school. Reaching out to perfect strangers who are in the field of education for coaching and support speaks volumes about your work ethic. I wish more educators, especially early career educators, would reach out for coaching and support because being a classroom teacher is hard work and there usually isn't much mentoring or coaching available.”

Dr. Nadine O'Garro
Curriculum & Instruction Specialist
Instructional Transformation Coach

"Charles' program reflects an impressive combination of insight, creativity, and responsiveness to the real challenges adolescents face as they transition from middle to high school. The curriculum thoughtfully integrates content on biological, social, and academic transitions in accessible and engaging ways that help ensure teens are well prepared for the demands of high school. I am especially excited about how Charles' work could inform my own efforts to develop digital tools that support teens as they navigate adolescence, as his close engagement with middle school students provides invaluable real-world insight into what matters most to today's youth and how information can be shared in ways that capture their interests. I see tremendous promise in Charles' future as a professional dedicated to supporting youth, and I look forward to our continued collaboration."

Casey D. Calhoun, PhD
Assistant Professor - School Psychology
UNC Chapel Hill School of Education

“Charles has identified a key ingredient missing in many public schools: authentic supports for students as they transition to ninth grade. No one understands the worries and fears of an eighth grader like a high school student, and Charles's sessions get right to the heart of these young adults' concerns, allowing them to learn from a trusted peer.”

Catherine Truitt

Former North Carolina Superintendent of Public Instruction



Charles Martin III photographed with Dr. Andrew Houlihan, Superintendent of Union County Public Schools and Dr. Tracy Strickland, Principal of Parkwood High School.

About the Author: As a junior in high school, I continue to run Track and Field holding conference and regional titles for both indoor and outdoor as well as going to states every season! I have a 4.1+ GPA, having been enrolled in all the AP classes my school has to offer while being dually enrolled with South Piedmont Community College pursuing my associates in arts. I have been a president in a couple clubs, and hold president/officers positions in all the other clubs that are offered. Clubs like National Honors Society, BETA, Key, FBLA, DECA, S.A.V.E, and Student council. I also tutor 6th and 8th grade students, which requires coordinating with 6th grade teachers and calling parents! I love what I do and have no intention of doing any less. All with having perfect attendance. I am so grateful for the life I live being an only child raised by 2 loving single parents. Words can not express how grateful I am for my parents and the adults who have supported me with this program.