A case study of student and leadership team perceptions of a metro Atlanta alternative school program: selected educational factors which impact student achievement as measured by high school completion

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ABSTRACT

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT AND LEADERSHIP TEAM PERCEPTIONS OF A
METRO ATLANTA ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM: SELECTED
EDUCATIONAL FACTORS WHICH IMPACT STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT AS MEASURED BY
HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

Advisor: Dr. Noran Moffett
Dissertation dated May 2010

The graduation rate is a significant topic for groups who have a vested interest in
education across the nation. With limited studies on the effectiveness of alternative
schools and one of their main purposes for existence, to increase the graduation rate, this
study was conducted as a qualitative descriptive case study of a Metropolitan Atlanta
Alternative High School. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of
students and members of the leadership team as it related to the independent factors,
components of the alternative school program, and the dependent factor, high school
completion. One hundred two students and three educators were participants in the
study. The students completed a survey. Five of the 102 students participated in a focus
group. The members of the leadership team were individually interviewed. Documents
were also reviewed. Although there are numerous factors that may impact student achievement, this study primarily focused on educational factors. Educational factors, as opposed to environmental or demographic factors, are subject to manipulation by stakeholders. It is expected that the findings of this study will invoke further research, interest administrators, as well as teachers, who serve students in alternative schools and traditional schools. If educational factors influence high school completion, the findings may interest policymakers who could restructure alternative schools, as well as traditional high schools, to better meet the needs of students who are at risk of contributing to the dropout rate.
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METRO ATLANTA ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM: SELECTED
EDUCATIONAL FACTORS WHICH IMPACT STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT AS MEASURED BY
HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

BY

JACINTA NATAKI TOLIVER

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2010
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It is with sincere pleasure that I thank each and every person who has endured this journey with me. I greatly appreciate the encouraging words of wisdom and the overarching support of my immediate family, friends, and the Educational Leadership Department of Clark Atlanta University.

This long awaited venture has come to an end and I thank my grandma, ma, da, and sisters for standing with and always believing in me. Their question, so when will you finish, has finally been answered. I thank my significant other for understanding and supporting my personal goals. I appreciate their patience.

I especially thank Dr. Moses Norman for his calm spirit, honesty and constant beam of encouragement. Dr. Norman recognized my potential and believed in me. I thank Dr. Noran Moffett for assisting me and providing me with the necessary tools to reach my goal. Without a doubt, I had his full support. I am thankful for the immediate support, redirection, and feedback provided by Dr. Trevor Turner. Ms. Betty Cook’s relentless assistance with every step I took is most appreciated. I love Clark Atlanta University’s Educational Leadership Department, and I am grateful for the foundation that was poured out for me to stand upon through my doctoral passage.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive case study is to explore educational factors of one metro Atlanta alternative schools that have a significant impact on the high school completion rate. This study examines the reasons why students have consistently completed a metro alternative high school over the past three years and the need for an alternative method of evaluating the success of this alternative high school. In this study, surveys completed by students were used to determine their perception of presumed educational factors by the researcher on the high school completion rate. The data collected from the focus study and interviews supported and challenged the researcher's presumptive factors. Qualitative data were collected and also analyzed through the use of interviews, documents and focus groups. The educational factors that impact the high school completion outcome of students attending the alternative school was also explored using a comparison of data from a survey completed by students, followed by a focus group interview of students, individual interviews with members of the leadership team, and review of documents. The factors explored in this study include attendance, parental involvement, school climate, teacher expectations, teacher methodology and test preparation programs.
Statement of the Problem

The problem the researcher discovered involves the dropout rate, high school completion or graduation rate, and accurate measurement of success to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as determined by the state of Georgia. Reimer and Cash (2003) explain, “Just as regular schools are being held more accountable for quantitative performance indicators such as test scores, drop out rates, and attendance rates, so are alternative schools” (2003, p. 25). Some states are using the same measurement criteria for traditional schools and alternative schools. Unfortunately, this metropolitan (metro) Atlanta alternative school may find it difficult to meet state and national standards because of the way in which Adequate Yearly Progress is measured. The graduation outcomes for students attending alternative schools are clearly important, and their achievements should not go unnoticed by the local, state and national educational system. Although this school is making strides year after year, the state department has not determined how to measure their success. There is a major problem associated with this alternative school. Although over 100 students are graduating each year from an alternative school, there are still students who are not completing high school after enrolling in the alternative school. Also, some of the students are recognized as high school graduates and are counted in the graduation rate. Others are considered high school completers who are counted in the dropout rate. All students who complete high school and earn a high school diploma are not recognized as a high school graduate.

An issue across the nation for years has been an inconsistent increase in the graduation outcome of all students in high school, whether considered a traditional or
alternative setting. However, alternative schools have been noted for increasing the graduation outcome of students who attend them. Although this metro Atlanta alternative school graduates an increasing number of students each year, there are still students who continue to drop out of school and fail to earn the high school diploma. Bangser (2008) argues numerous high school students do not finish high school with a diploma prepared to step into a postsecondary institution or the workforces. Today, there are students graduating from high school with dreams and aspirations of living the “American Dream;” however, those goals are not met. Without a high school diploma, the possibility of gaining access to employment or post secondary institutions is not an option. In order for our nation to move forward, the graduation rate has to increase.

With the current state of the economy and the need to decrease poverty rates and dependence on government, it is extremely important for students to graduate from high school with practical post secondary options and preparation for success. Although the high school drop out has limited opportunities, there are numerous options for high school graduates to enroll in four year or two institutions of higher learning, technical schools, as well as enter the military workforce upon high school graduation. The consequences of students not earning at least a high school degree is detrimental to their well-being.

As a result of not attaining a high school diploma, some young adults are continuing cycles of poverty, living unproductive lives, searching for direction and making senseless decisions. Dropping out of school negatively impacts the social, emotional and financial status of individuals. According to Murray and Naranjo (2008):
The detrimental effects of high school drop out in an increasingly global, knowledge-based economy are devastating. At the individual level, the costs can include unemployment, lower quality occupations, limited opportunities for postsecondary education, and disrupted family life (Sitzlington & Frank, 1993; Wagner et al., 2005; Werner, 1993). Costs to communities include an increased likelihood of deviant and criminal behavior in schools and neighborhoods that contain higher proportions of individuals who did not complete high school (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Practical costs to the broader society include increased dependence on social programs, increased costs associated with incarceration as well as loss of potential contributions to the economy. Approximately half of the prison population the United States are school dropouts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003), and median yearly income for high school dropouts who are employed is substantially lower ($19,225) than the average yearly earnings of high school graduates ($26,399; U.S. Department of Labor, 2003). (p.145)

Graduating from high school is the only choice for all students, including those with disabilities and those who are at-risk, who want to improve their quality of life. With the increasing number of crime, unprofessional or inappropriate behavior and unemployment rates, people may wonder what role education plays in preparing students to become successful, contributing citizens of society. The metro Atlanta alternative school has proven and shown its place in the educational arena. Students who are attending this
alternative school are continuously making tremendous strides, while confronting their personal obstacles, to graduate from high school.

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent does attendance of students in a metro Atlanta alternative school impact high school completion?

RQ2: To what extent does parental involvement in a metro Atlanta alternative school impact the high school completion?

RQ3: To what extent does school climate of the metro Atlanta alternative school impact high school completion?

RQ4: To what extent do teacher expectations impact the high school completion?

RQ5: To what extent does teacher methodology impact high school completion?

RQ6: To what extent do test preparation programs impact high school completion?

RQ7: Based on the students and leadership team’s interviews, how is the metro Atlanta alternative school meeting the needs of students in the district?

The motive for this descriptive qualitative case study is to better understand the research problem by identifying presumed factors from the students and select members of the leadership team’s perspective and demonstrate the necessity for alternative schools. The study also shows the components this school offer to students who do not succeed in the traditional high school setting and the value this alternative school offers the district. This study further explains the implications for creating programs that better prepare and
encourage students to graduate from high school. Furthermore, it shows that the state needs to incorporate a method of effectively measuring and celebrating the success of alternative schools.

Significance of the Study

Examining the educational factors which have a direct impact on the graduation outcome of students attending one alternative school is significant for several groups of stakeholders. These stakeholders include students, parents, principals, district leaders and state leaders. According to Roy and Mishel (2008): “A number of recent studies have asserted that only two-thirds of all students in the U.S. graduate and that blacks and Hispanics have only a 50% chance of graduating with a regular high school diploma” (p. 23). Therefore, factors perceived by students have a direct impact on high school graduation outcome is significant for several reasons. The findings from this study are of value to others and can be used for school improvement as it relates to increasing the graduation rate of students who are at-risk of dropping out of school.

Students who are struggling to complete high school in the traditional and alternative setting will have an opportunity to hear the voices and witness the increasing number of students graduating from the alternative school. The students’ perceptions of the factors which have played a significant role in reaching their goals are important to other students. Most at-risk students have shared the same experiences or obstacles that have negatively impacted their educational career. Furthermore, many of the students are first generation high school graduates and to see them graduate is definitely an inspiration to other students in the same predicament.
Parents, as well as students, will understand the options their children have in pursuing their high school diploma. Traditional schools do not always meet the needs of all students, especially students who are at-risk of failing. Students are often sent to punitive educational systems, such as alternative school which focus on behavior modification, in-school suspension programs, out of school suspension programs or other institutions. Alternative high schools, such as this one metro alternative school, which focus on academics as well as emotional or social issues, are viable options for parents. Giving parents a choice is a move towards making connections and building parent participation in their child’s education.

For many years, district policy makers and educational leaders have struggled with providing equitable opportunities for all students to become productive citizens in an ever-changing environment. A productive citizen includes students who are equipped with overall skills ready for work or college, as well as other postsecondary options available and use these skills to independently make contributions to the ever changing diverse, technological and global society. It is vital to gain an understanding and highlight variables students and educational leaders perceive as influential to the graduation outcome. This understanding and recognition of school related variables will simultaneously enrich the current processes and assist those students who are dropping out of the alternative school. Principals struggle with fluctuating graduation rates due to current students falling behind on their credits and/or moving in and out of the district. The alternative high school offers principals in the district an avenue for their current students to recover credits at a faster rate as opposed to remaining in the traditional
setting. As students recover failed classes in a timely manner, they have a better chance of graduating with their class. When students graduate with their class, the graduation rates of schools improve. This study is significant to principals and district leaders.

This study also provides evidence of the school’s ability to confront challenges at-risk students face by focusing on the school related factors that meet the needs of students. The alternative school educators will have an opportunity to hear students, parents and their very own voices through research. Parents will understand their power in schools and how parental involvement influences the graduation outcome of students. Furthermore, this study will enlighten reasons students succeed and provide hope to other students who are on the drop out path. It demonstrates the necessity of alternative schools and, hopefully, dispel the stigma alternative schools have had in previous years. This study will impact students, teachers, district and local administrators, and businesses of a metro Atlanta alternative school.

Completing high school is extremely important and beneficial to all students. This study is also vital to all stakeholders involved in educating students. The findings will foster the belief that alternative schools are making a difference in the lives of students in metro Atlanta. Students are completing high school because of the aspects alternative schools offer students. Alternative schools are necessary in taking steps to ensure an increasing number of students are completing high school each year.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

History and Policy of Alternative Schools

"Alternative schools were prolific in the late 1960s and in the 1970s across the United States. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, educational priorities were shifted back to the progressive education movement by people who were dissatisfied with the traditional" (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207).

In the 1960s, parents and community leaders organized alternative schools because of dissatisfaction with public schools. According to Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke (2008): "Alternative education is one of the possible solutions that many states and local school districts have embraced to address the issue of students who are not meeting desired educational outcomes and standards in traditional education settings" (p.1). The term alternative school applies to several types of schools and there is not a comprehensible definition accepted by educational stakeholders. The U.S. Department of Education (2002) defines an alternative education school as "a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs" (p. 1).
Currently, alternative schools have changed from their 1960 humble beginnings. Alternative schools vary in their structure, students served and program offerings. Alternative schools are different across the state, as well as the nation. Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Landers (2004) state: “Some of the available educational learning alternatives include charter schools, magnet programs, distant learning programs and private schools” (p. 3). Raywid (1994) offers three types of alternative school settings. *Type I* describes an alternative school that focuses on academics and students enroll by choice. The program is long term and gives students an opportunity to recover credit to obtain a high school diploma. It features flexible scheduling and individualized instruction. Class sizes are relatively small and students feel connected to the school. *Type II* programs are short-term programs that focus on discipline and students are typically enrolled involuntarily. *Type III* programs are short-term therapeutic programs that focus on the social and emotional well-being of the student. The student has the option of not attending (Aron, 2006). Although there are several types of alternative schools, all of these schools are essential to the educational needs of students.

According to Lehr, et al. (2004), student enrollment in nontraditional school settings are continuously on the rise. School districts are using alternative schools as a method of keeping students in school. “They have grown because they provide school systems an alternative to expelling or suspending at risk students who are not succeeding in the traditional classrooms” (Saunders & Saunders, 2001, p. 12). Students with disabilities, primarily with emotional/behavioral disabilities and learning disabilities, are included in the population of students who are being educated in these settings (Lehr, et
al. (2004). Alternative settings have become the options for many students who are not succeeding in traditional school. Students being served in these settings include students with and without exceptionalities.

The majority of students who attend the alternative school mentioned in this study are not on track to graduate with their perspective classes. However, their enrollment in the school indicates they are on a track to reach graduation. Some of the students are teen parents, homeless or have been advised by their home schools to attend the alternative school. Most of the students were not successful in traditional high school settings. The alternative school is considered the last chance for earning a high school diploma.

According to the Georgia Department of Education (2009), an alternative program, known as CrossRaods Alternative Education Program, was instituted with grant funds in 1994. This program was in place for chronically disruptive students who had been removed from their home school. Due to the A+ Education Reform of 2000, these alternative programs were eliminated. However, some school districts in the state of Georgia were able to sustain their programs with Quality Basic Education funds. The CrossRoads Alternative program that was eliminated in other districts remained in the metro Atlanta school district where the alternative school in this study is located.

The alternative school in this study, which is known to many people as Open Campus, is not your typical alternative school as described for chronically disruptive students.

Georgia policy for alternative schools states that local school districts are able to use alternative settings, which include alternative education programs, community-based alternative education programs, CrossRoads Alternative Education Programs, in-school
suspension, and school-community guidance centers, to meet the educational needs of students. Although as previously stated, alternative schools may take on various characteristics and definitions. As described by Georgia Legislative Code 160-4-8-.12, the alternative school being studied takes on the following definition: “A type of alternative education program that creates small, supportive, caring communities of support, while emphasizing high expectations for excellence and educational achievement” (p. 2). This school prides itself in increasing the number of graduates year after year.

Several studies, which include school related independent factors, but are not limited to the graduation outcome as an dependent factor of students, have been completed on alternative schools. Some of these studies have revealed the following:

*Mulch, Hoops, and Homemade Pie*, A Report to the Kentucky State Board of Education on A5 and A6 Programs in the Commonwealth submitted by the Kentucky Youth Advocates (2007) expressed the following: (a) “There is a lack of state administrative infrastructure to support A5/A6 programs in areas such as student tracking, program classification, teacher quality and fiscal equity and adequacy” (p. 6). A5 programs are characterized as programs focusing on academics and students attend by choice. A6 programs focuses on discipline, behavior modification and students are sent to these schools. (b) “If every student in alternative programming is to reach proficiency by 2014, significant changes in locus and scope of accountability are required” (p. 9). (c) “Many alternative school students are in a school culture characterized by neither relationships nor rigor nor relevance, which are standards for which the State Board of
Education advocates for all secondary students. This report also found that transition process, learning delivery and assessment, and culture is vital to the success of students. Although this report highlighted the changes alternative schools should make, it also provided “promising practices” of alternative schools (p. 32). The promising practices of these schools are characterized by positive relationships among students and teachers, teaching strategies that emphasize rigor and relevance, exposure to high academic standards aligned to the curriculum, highly qualified teachers, and communication among schools and families.

*Alternative Schools: Findings from the National Survey of the States* by Lehr, Moreau, Lange, and Landers (2004) revealed “nineteen states (53%) reported having a system in place for collecting data and documenting outcomes for students attending alternative school (n = 36 states reporting)” (p. 16). Out of 25 states that reported their graduation outcome, ten states indicated that many and almost all of their students who enroll graduate from alternative school.

Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke (2009) examined two major sources to gain valuable information and insight on aspects and state level policy of alternative schools across the nation. The sources were state department of education websites that were reviewed from January to September of 2002, and resulted in a study known as the Alternative Schools Research Project (ASRP), conducted through the University of Minnesota in June of 2002. “The comprehensiveness of the alternative education policy/legislation varies among states” (p. 4). This study revealed the following: (a) Alternative schools are serving an increasing number of at-risk students; (b) There are states with clear, in-depth
descriptions of their policy; however, other states report vague and brief descriptions. Out of 48 states reporting policy, 86% of indicated enrollment criteria, 71% has a definition, 71% provides funding, 69% includes a curriculum, 60% focuses on staffing regulations and 38% includes language focused on students with disabilities; (c) More than half of the respondents reported that students in their states were served in schools of choice and placement schools; (d) Certain states encourage their teachers to become certified, possess leadership and mentoring skills, and demonstrate the ability to work with challenging students in alternative schools; (e) Many students must meet standards and graduation requirements. Nineteen of 36 states indicated that they collect data on student outcomes, and 16 of the 19 reported that many of their students return to their home school; (f) The students with disabilities are served in alternative schools; however, there is an increasing concern for transitioning in and out of the alternative school, the quality of services provided and the availability and quality of staff.

De La Ossa (2005) conducted a qualitative study of student perceptions of their alternative school experience and implications for change. In the beginning of the study, he research question for this study centered on how alternative schools meet the needs of their students. She used an “appreciative approach to investigate students’ perceptions about learning, knowing and their school experiences” (p. 25). A total of 78 students from eight public alternative choice schools in Washington State participated in a focus group. Four themes emerged from the study, which included school size, class size, personal attention and relations, and negative public perception.
The students revealed that the smaller the school, the more they were able to communicate with their teachers and peers. Also, the smaller teacher to student ratio made it easier for teachers to answer student questions and provide one-on-one assistance. This one-on-one assistance allowed teachers and students to build effective relationships among one another. “The personal relationships with teachers definitely had a positive influence in the student’s educational experience” (De La Ossa, 2005, p. 37). Students felt a sense of comfort and support for their efforts. However, while attending the alternative school, students experienced an impression of being less than those who attended regular high schools. Public constituents, educators and school board members looked down upon the alternative school (De La Ossa, 2005).

Other themes emerged from the focus group, which included the structure of the school day and teacher methodology. The students felt as though their teachers were boring and provided busy work. Students want more hands-on activities, purposeful and meaningful assignments. Although the students expressed their needs, the study revealed that these students feel more supported in an alternative setting. Furthermore, De La Ossa (2005) demonstrated the effectiveness and need for alternative schools through the voices of students.

Saunders and Saunders (2001) conducted a quantitative study of students’ perceptions of their past traditional high school and their current alternative school. The students in this study completed two surveys at two distinct times throughout the school year. The first survey administered focused on the traditional high school, and the second focused on the alternative school. In the Summary and Discussion section, Saunders and
Saunders (2001) described that their hypotheses was true. Students reported having more positive experiences in the alternative school and they rated the overall climate and culture of the school higher. “Clearly the caseworkers, teachers and administrators at Walnut Creek created an atmosphere of academic and psychosocial support that met the needs of these students who had previously dropped out or were at-risk for doing so” (p. 15). “The information which students shared about their personal history in a self-report questionnaire clearly documents the many educational and social risk factors they faced” (p. 13). Educational factors are necessary to meet the individual needs of students who attend alternative schools. Saunders and Saunders (2001) state, “Consequently, programs like Walnut Creek will serve a very important role within the community to ensure that all students are able to achieve academic success” (p. 15). Alternative schools are significant, and they assist districts’ efforts to address the issues of at-risk students.

Using a critical theory framework, Kim and Taylor (2008) conducted a qualitative case study to determine the benefits of alternative schools and break the cycle of inequality. Kim and Taylor conducted classroom observations, interviews, and analyzed curriculum documents. The participants included students, teachers and administrators. The results were divided into two themes, positive and negative. Kim and Taylor discovered that the alternative school provided a caring environment; however, it did not offer an equitable education due to a non-rigorous curriculum.

With the pressing demands of No Child Left Behind and changing rules and regulations in Georgia schools, the successful implementation of effective programs to ensure that students graduate from high school prepared to enter a post secondary
institution is vital to their well-being, as well as, the economy. Therefore, by offering students who have not acquired success in the traditional setting another chance is one of the key roles of the alternative school. Effective programs, led by educational stakeholders in a concerted effort, are necessary to create a foundation for the ultimate achievement of students. Although the aforementioned studies did not discuss how school related factors impact the graduation outcome of students, they did focus on the positive aspects of alternative schools. These positive aspects, which some were school related, influences the success of students alternative school.

"It is now common knowledge that reasons surrounding the drop-out problem is inextricably linked to issues affecting our demographic, social, political, and economic way of life. Child abuse, poverty, family instability, unemployment and discrimination are embedded in the reasons our youth quit school" (Collier & Hoyle, 2006, p. 73). Although educators may not directly solve all the issues students come to school with on a daily basis, educators do have the ability to increase students' chances of overcoming their barriers through an effective educational system that prepares students for success. This success, which involves graduating from high school equipped with the knowledge, skills and disposition to participate in a valuable postsecondary option of their choice, is necessary for students to live a productive life. Unfortunately, some students struggle with identifying and accepting extrinsic motivation which may assist them in their pursuit of their high school diploma. These students eventually leave school and the graduation outcome remains a concern.
Dropouts are not productive to society or their families. This fruitless act of teenagers and young adults aids in the cycle of poverty. In the study conducted by Lehr, et al. (2004) the researchers expressed:

It is in the best interest of alternative schools that are doing a good job to document outcomes for their students to secure funding and enhance their reputation. Progress indicators in areas beyond academic performance, may be necessary to capture the impact of alternative schools on student outcomes. (p. 23)

Evaluating and exploring the factors students perceive will reveal the contributions alternative schools offer them and increase the awareness of the positive aspects of these schools.

Summary

In retrospect, the aforementioned researchers have found that alternative schools have significantly impacted the lives of students. The characteristics of these schools bring value to alternative programs. Certain factors influence the graduation outcome of students attending an alternative school. Some of the factors are directly related to the experiences students have in school, at home or within the community. Schools, as well as parents, have a level of controlling or shaping students’ preferences. This study may present factors beyond the school system’s control. However, exploration of these factors, including those educators are accountable for, may prove beneficial to the study. For example, attendance, parental involvement, teacher expectations, teacher methodology and test preparation programs are presumed school related factors that may
impact the graduation outcome of students attending alternative schools. A 2009 publication by the National Alternative Education Association suggested that indicators of a successful alternative program includes the following exemplary practices: mission and purpose, leadership, climate and culture, staffing and professional development, curriculum and instruction, student assessment, transitional planning and support, parent/guardian involvement, collaboration, and program evaluation. Other variables may present themselves as the study progresses.

Review of Presumptive Dependent and Independent Factors

High School Completion

The graduation outcome for at-risk students or students attending alternative school is classified as a high school graduate or a high school completer. Both the graduate and the high school completer earn a high school diploma with a regular high school diploma, and a completer with a special education diploma or completer with a certificate of attendance or the most detrimental outcome to society, a high school dropout. A graduate is a student who completed all of his or her high school requirements including five sections of the Georgia High School Graduation Test within a maximum of four years. Completers are students who have been counted in the dropout rate at his or her home school at some point in time. These students do not graduate within fours years of starting ninth grade. However, they complete all requirements for a regular high school diploma. Students who earn a certificate of attendance complete course requirements; however, they have not passed all five sections of the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Students receiving the Special Education Diploma are generally
students who have not passed any or all sections the Georgia High School Graduation Test; however, they have met all goals and objectives of their Individual Education Plan and/or passed all course requirements. Most students attending alternative schools are considered at risk and have already been counted in the dropout rate. The majority of these students are never counted as graduates because they did not graduate with their perspective classes.

Is it possible to calculate an accurate graduation, completion or dropout rate for students attending alternative school? Graduation, completion, and dropout rates have been measured yearly and reported to the United States Department of Education by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Swanson, 2005). Roy and Mishel (2008) state:

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in understanding the levels and trends in high school graduation in the U.S. In particular, a big and influential literature has argued that the true high school graduation rate in the U.S. remains at an unsatisfactory level and that the graduation rate for minorities (blacks and Hispanics) is alarmingly low. (p. 2)

Roy and Mishel confront the notion that there are inconsistencies with calculating the graduation rate among states. These rate calculations differ across the United States. According to No Child Left Behind, states can use either of four calculations to measure the graduation rate which is currently used as a second indicator to measure the success of alternative schools that offer a high school diploma. The four calculations include the cohort rate, leaver rate, persistence rate and the composite rate. In 2008, 17 states used
the cohort rate, which accounts for the number of ninth graders who enter high school and graduate within four years with a standard diploma. Thirty-two states used the leaver rate, including the state of Georgia, which measures the percent of students who leave high school with a regular diploma divided by the total number of students who receive any type of diploma and/or completion credential. One state used the persistence rate which is a percentage of students who remain in school from 9th to 12th grade. The final accepted rate is the composite rate used by only one school. The composite rate measures a “proportion of students estimated to remain in high school from ninth to twelfth grade and receive a high school diploma” (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2008, p. 6). States have a choice of which rate calculation to use.

Furthermore, alternative schools in Georgia that do not offer a high school diploma are now using the dropout rate to measure their success as opposed to using the graduation rate (U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008). Are other alternative schools using the same measurement? If the answer is no, how can local, state and federal educational agencies measure and compare graduation outcomes? In an effort to use a more standard measure of success as it relates to second indicator to meet the requirement of Adequate Yearly Progress, several states, including Georgia, have agreed to use an Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate. This rate will measure the number of first time ninth graders who enter high school, accounting for students who transfer in or out, deceased, or repeat a grade who graduate within four years.
What does measurement mean for alternative schools? Most alternative schools are used as an initiative to decrease the dropout rate, and the majority of students have been counted in the dropout rate. These students have been labeled at-risk, and some at-risk students do not graduate within four years. There is definitely a need for alternative measurements for calculating the success of students who are striving and completing high school.

States have various means for obtaining a high school diploma. Requirements may include, but are not limited to high stakes exit exam, number of credits earned, and/or portfolios. Also, the definition for graduates, completers and drop out vary from state to state. A graduate in one state may be considered a completer in another state. It is difficult to compare the success of states when requirements are extremely different. Furthermore, it is challenging to calculate consistent graduation, completion and dropout rates over a period of time for schools when the requirements change. According to Burton (2009), it is challenging to solve the issue of dropout rates if we do not have answers and data to measure them accurately. Burton also states:

The ultimate goal should be to get students through to graduation and to create incentives for schools to accomplish this. What is not needed is an incentive for schools to shuffle struggling students out of the door and off their plate of responsibility. (p.23)

Alternative schools have been known for accepting and pushing students toward an outcome of high school completion.
Figure 1 shows the progress made in graduation rates over a period of five years. Despite these gains, the metro alternative school has not made AYP in the area of graduation rate.

![Graduation Rates of Alternative School by Year](image)

**Figure 1.** Graduation Rates of Alternative School by Year

**Discussion of Independent Variables**

This study aims to find the impact of these predetermined independent factors presented. Through student surveys, focus group interviews, and individual interviews, other variables may become apparent. A further discussion will appear in the findings section of this study.
Attendance

Excellent, as well as satisfactory attendance, has been known to increase student achievement and the possibility of completing high school. Students attending alternative schools have issues with attending school regularly. Since the majority of students are beyond the legal age to quit school, reinforcement is almost obsolete in schools. Charging a student with truancy is null and void. As a result, students quit school or are withdrawn by the administration of the alternative school. Consistent attendance is problematic and has always been problematic for many students who attend alternative schools.

Attendance is a key component to high school completion and schools have a responsibility to increase the attendance of students who are at risk for not graduating from high school. Allensworth and Easton (2007) suggest that “attendance is clearly a vital part of graduating from high school” (p. 6). Although Allensworth and Easton express that high attendance rates in the ninth grade year is crucial to graduating, it also noted that students who have low attendance often experience health issues, family instability, and economic circumstances. There are other factors beyond the school’s control that impacts student attendance. However, districts have initiatives in place to address attendance.

There are several reform initiatives in place to increase the attendance rate of at-risk students. One of the initiatives in place for middle and high schools in Georgia is the Graduation Coach. One of the outstanding responsibilities for coaches is to improve the attendance rate, which may also result in another goal known as increasing graduation
rate. State government realizes the importance of attendance and has made an effort to support schools in their efforts of improving attendance opportunities for students. As state departments are encouraging improved school attendance, it is necessary for local school districts to continue the road to attendance recovery of students.

Attendance improvement will increase the high school completion rate of students at-risk of dropping out of school and who attend alternative school. Improving attendance is daily task for schools across the nation and most importantly is a necessity for ensuring the success of students. Students who attend alternative school have poor attendance records and require assistance in meeting the goal of daily attendance. Withdrawing students due to attendance can be decreased or alleviated with initiative in place to counteract the problem faced by alternative schools. Once this issue is addressed properly, the high school completion rate may improve even more for alternative schools.

Parent Participation

Parental involvement has various interpretations for educators, as well as, other researchers. Epstein's (2002) framework of six types of parental involvement includes, but is not limited to, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Although all parts in the framework are vital, some of them play an important role at a certain time in a student’s life. Educators tend to make remarks that suggest parents are not as involved in high school or middle schools as they were at the elementary level. This observation may prove true if their references are based on whether the parent is visible or has a high rate of invisibility in the school setting. For high schools, parents are deemed as highly involved when they
are actually participating in decision making and communicating with their child in regards to present and post educational options.

Parent involvement for high schools entail parents participating in meetings with counselors or graduation coaches, communicating with their children in regards to state mandated tests and college or career choices, as well as, financial aid. Noeth and Wimberly (2004) state: “Parents can play an integral role in postsecondary planning and schools can engage in practices and behaviors that facilitate parent involvement by providing students and parents with information and resources” (p. 7). This method supports goals mandated by the federal government. Goals 2000 and the No Child Left behind act calls for schools to place programs in place to increase and monitor parental involvement. These programs are necessary to assist parents in gaining knowledge and understanding as it relates to their students choosing post secondary options. According to Noeth and Wimberly:

While survey results supported the strong influence parents had on future planning, focus group results indicated that parents often lacked the tools and resources necessary to help students through the postsecondary planning process. The primary contributions of parents were their motivation, good intentions, and encouragement. Although highly motivated and well intentioned, parents were not always able to provide useful information and direction to their children. (p vii.)

Brown and Beckett (2007) describe a case indicating that parents of students in grades four through twelve believe extraordinary parental involvement is limited to attending entrance orientation, progress meetings, and exit meetings. Since parents,
especially those with low levels of educational attainment, lack necessary information as opposed to educational leaders, such as counselors, teachers and administrators, it is important for alternative school to support parents and implement strategies to increase parental involvement. Researchers, Noeth and Wimberly (2004) suggest that:

Many parents, particularly those who have not attended college, may not have the necessary tools, information, and resources to assist their children with college planning (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2001). For example, African American and Hispanic students who are the first in their families to consider college often do not receive timely college planning information, might not take the necessary courses, and may struggle with cultural conflicts between their new college-oriented world and the worlds of their friends, families, and communities. (p. 13)

Schools have the responsibility of making parents aware of opportunities by sending literature home via mail or by calling post. Also, by motivating parents and providing information that document that their student is capable of accomplishing more than they can imagine assists in facilitating dreams. In 2001, the U.S. Department of Education reports that in the 1990s, over 75% of parents expected their child to attend college which was up from 50% in the 1970s. Noeth and Wimberly express the fact that having high expectations is the first step, then motivating and encouraging students comes next regardless of the student academic abilities. At the end of the day, most parents want the best for their children and a successful future.
School Climate

“Students’ perceptions of school life and their reactions toward the school environment are crucial for understanding school climate and designing a positive learning environment” (De La Ossa, 2005, p. 26) School climate and culture is vital to the success of students attending alternative school. School climate deals with the feeling the school carries when a person walks through the door. It is either warm and fuzzy or cold and frigid. The attitudes displayed by the faculty and staff produces the school climate. On the other hand, the school culture is determined by the rituals or routines of the school. The school climate and culture plays a significant role in students’ sense of belonging and support in schools.

The school climate and culture is positive for certain schools. As a result of this positive atmosphere, schools are succeeding in increasing the number of students who graduating with a high school diploma. In a study entitled, “California High Schools That Beat the Odds in High School Graduation by Socias, Dunn, Parrish, Muraki, and Woods (2007), several schools were emulated due to increasing the high school completion rate of their students. These schools highlighted the following aspects of their school which attributed to success: connecting with students, engaging parents and community members, to support school efforts, providing interventions and supports to students who are at risk of dropping out and creating a culture of accountability and high expectations. The programs in place foster a culture of succeeding, and sets a positive climate when there faculty and staff buy into initiatives. Socias, et al. (2007) suggest
“creating a personalized school climate where staff provides support for students’ academic and personal growth is crucial for student achievement” (p. 21).

Teacher Expectations

According to Saunders and Saunders (2001):

Past researchers have found that students in alternative schools benefit from teachers and staff providing positive personal interaction that includes personal and social counseling, individualized learning plans using a variety teaching and learning techniques, social skills development, and communication from teachers and staff of their genuine concern for student’s well-being and academic progress. (p. 13)

Saunders and Saunders found De La Rosa’s (1998) research suggests it is important for teachers to exemplify a compassionate disposition for student success, and students in the alternative schools feel as though their teachers care about them.

“Teachers play an integral role in the nation’s alternative schools and programs. Research suggests that better outcomes are obtained when teachers are well-trained, caring, demanding, highly motivated, and responsive to the special needs of at-risk students” (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002, p. 25).

Lehr et al. (2009) state:

Alternative schools appear to be serving students with multiple needs who are not successful in traditional schools. To serve the population well, dedicated and well trained staff are essential. In addition, a desire to work with students at risk as well as a belief in their ability to be successful appears critical. (p. 2)
Teacher expectations, as well as methodology, in classroom are sometimes nonexistent and may have a tremendous impact on student success. According to Tauber (1998), “the idea that one’s expectations about a person can eventually lead that person to behave and achieve in ways that conform to those expectations” is happening in schools across the nation (p. 2). Teacher expectations play a major role as it relates to maximizing the potential of student achievement. Tauber also states that “teacher expectations can predict changes in student achievement and behavior” (p. 7). Student achievement is defined primarily by test scores on standardized tests, classroom grades or progress made from the present level of performance to the level of expectancy. According to No Child Left Behind, schools are judged by the level of student success as measured by their Average Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP is a nationwide measurement determined by the federal government. The focus on teacher expectations and the effect on student achievement is vital to making sure schools surpass the overpowering demands of No Child Left Behind.

Many educators have differing levels of high expectations. For instance, some teachers have higher expectations for students who are academically successful while other teachers display higher expectations for those students who are well disciplined but may not have the academic ability. Most importantly to students aspiring to graduate from high school, there are also teachers who have high expectations for all students. Each level has an impact on how well a student will perform in class.

Some teachers fail to provide instruction to every child in the class. In these particular classes, the teacher may cater to only a certain group of students. The teachers’
instructional method and attitude may cater to only high or low achieving students. The expectations are apparent through attitudes and instructional methods displayed in the class. Teaching methods which are limited to lecture and not allowing students to ask questions pertaining to understanding is less beneficial to students. Differentiated instruction and the use of authentic assessments to meet the needs of all learners have been characterized as best practices. Classroom discussion one-sided and partial to teacher knowledge limits students’ understanding of concepts. When teachers concentrate on instructing as if all students have a clear understanding of objectives, learning does not occur for the majority of students. The attitudes, character and dispositions displayed by teachers impacts the student perception of them and effects student outcomes. According to Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006), staff members share responsibility for and attempt to model acceptable traits. Students respond positively to teachers who actively engage them in the learning process.

There are also teachers who cater to well behaved students and students who have potential to perform better than those who behavior impedes learning. Students who display behavior problems are more likely to receive negative feedback from the teacher, and some teachers will eventually give up on the student by ignoring the behaviors. In some cases ignoring the behavior may prove beneficial; however, ignoring the behaviors to the point where teaching and learning is not taking place is detrimental to the students’ educational experiences. Although it is frustrating having to teach and control behaviors, it is necessary to have classroom management skills, a creative disposition and consistency.
Other teachers believe that all children can learn, succeed and graduate, and it is apparent in the class. The teacher has high expectations and clear and concise norms for the class. He or she does not count any students out from the mass. Best practices are used, as well as, Bloom’s Taxonomy, which consists of several skills that range from low level thinking skills to higher order thinking skills (Maer, 2002). There are six levels of thinking skills in the Bloom’s Taxonomy Model which includes the following: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Each level builds upon the next or the previous skill. The model provides educators with a structure which can be used to build curriculum materials that take learners more deeply into any area of study. The teacher understands how to use his or her knowledge and skills to make sure the students are actively engaged from bell to bell. Differentiated instruction takes place to meet the needs of all learners. Resistance to change is absent and the teacher does not complain about what students can not do, but concentrates on building from their skills they already possess. These teachers never give up on any of his or her students.

There are numerous factors that effect student achievement and teacher expectation of students is one factor at the top of the list. “Focusing on academic achievement means certain things for teachers and students, more specifically, in a classroom where the teacher focuses on academic achievement” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 60). Ladson-Billings explains the following characteristics of teachers that focus on academic achievement: the teacher sets comprehensible goals for student learning and achievement, a greater part of class time is dedicated to teaching and learning, the teacher
uses a variety authentic assessments and the teacher is knowledgeable and skillful. Educational leaders have the responsibility of encouraging all staff, which includes every single individual in the school building, to have high expectations for all students involved in the educational process. Students have the right to a free appropriate public education and appropriate, includes but is definitely not limited to, ensuring students are given the best from everyone who comes in contact with them from the time they step foot in the building until they step foot out of lives of the people who impact their education. Leaders are also responsible for making sure teachers gain and retain the level of high expectations for all students by allowing for professional development opportunities or participating on valuable mentorship programs. Numerous at-risk students are not given a chance to become successful because they are not expected to achieve high standards due to certain reasons beyond their control.

*Teacher Methodology*

The teaching methods used for students at-risk vary for each student in alternative schools. Alternative schools tend to meet the educational needs of each student similar to individual education plans for students with exceptionalities. Some students may require more hands-on instruction while others will need short lectures and independent assignments. It is imperative that teachers assess and acknowledge students’ learning styles, differentiate instruction and incorporate rigor and relevance to meet the educational needs of each student.

Gardner’s (as cited in Gardner, Kornhaber & Moran, 2006) concept of multiple intelligences suggests that students learn through various approaches. These approaches
include linguistic, logical mathematics, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic. When teachers approach individual learning styles, they meet the educational needs of each student. By giving attention to learning styles teachers are also able to differentiate their instruction.

Differentiating instruction involves dispelling the idea that education is a one-size-fits all. Again, students require individualized instructional methods after teaching to a whole group. Some students require more attention than others. Many students need an extra push to meet their full potential, while at the same time others may need the force exhibited on other students. Differentiating instruction makes it easier for all students to achieve mandated standards at the level necessary for improvement.

Rigor and relevance gives all students an opportunity to perform in certain quadrants and is based on using higher order thinking skills. The rigor and relevance framework includes levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. In quadrant A, teachers instruct and students gain knowledge in one area and discipline where they use awareness, comprehension and application skills. In quadrant B, teachers instruct and students are able apply knowledge across disciplines, to real world predictable and unpredictable situations using awareness, comprehension and application skills. Quadrant C teachers instruct students on a higher level of Bloom’s Taxonomy; however students are on the lower end of the application model. For example, the teacher wants the student to be able to analyze, synthesize and evaluate; however, these actions occur only in one discipline. Quadrant D is where the teacher uses methods that require students to analyze, synthesize and evaluate across disciplines while applying knowledge to predictable and
unpredictable real world situations. In this quadrant, students are using stage four of their developmental stage. In quadrant D, students are challenged and tend to meet standards. Rigor and relevance takes students where they may never go.

When teachers use several methods of instructing, students' needs are met academically. In the classroom or during test preparation programs, individualized instructional practices which incorporate various techniques will indeed improve student's academic performance. One size does not fit all because students are not all the same. Unconventional procedures are necessary to link knowledge and ability for students who are at-risk.

*Test Prep Programs*

High stakes testing is becoming a common component of educational reform. When the stakes are high for students, there is always concern about the potential for unintended consequences, such as increased rates of students dropping out of school. There are increased concerns when students have disabilities. (Johnston & Thurlow, 2000, p. 305)

The No Child Left behind Act of 2001 calls for more school accountability, and as a result, high stakes testing is the measurement for the performance indicator of schools across the United States. “The use of exit exams to determine whether a student earns a high school diploma, for example, has lifelong consequences and directly affects an individual’s economic self-sufficiency and well-being as an adult” (p. 307). The consequences of failing high-stakes tests impact all students, especially students with disabilities. Without a regular high-school diploma, students may find it difficult to enter
a post secondary institution or the military. They also demonstrate frustration in accessing the workforce. “Receiving less than a standard high school diploma may limit an individual’s future opportunity to access postsecondary education and employment” (p. 313).

Studies on high stakes testing show varying results. For example, a study completed by Hanushck and Raymond (2003) declares “a campaign against accountability has brought forth a tide of negative anecdotes and deeply flawed research” (p. 48). Hanushck and Raymond show that other studies reveal negative connotations of accountability. The No Child Left behind Act calls for increased accountability for individual schools. Accountability is measured by test results or most importantly how students perform on standardized test. Hanushck and Raymond critique three studies on high-stakes testing. The first study was completed by Arizona State University researchers, Audrey Amrein and David Berliner. These researchers study the impact high-stakes testing and find “high-stakes tests may inhibit the academic achievement of students and does not foster their academic growth” (p. 51). Testing does not improve individual academic achievement and growth for students. Raymond and Hanushek do not agree with Amrein and Berliner. They believe that the study contains flaws due unscientific study methods. A study by Carnoy and Loeb (2002) reports positive effects of accountability. Carnoy and Loeb find “performance increased in states with high-stakes systems compared with states that has not yet attached consequences to schools’ test scores” (p. 55). States that depend on test results for promotions, graduations or school overall scores have improved scores over time as compared to states that do not
have accountability or stakes for testing. Furthermore, Marchant and Paulson (2005) suggest that high stakes testing may push students towards dropping out of school and encourage teachers to teach to the test ignoring critical thinking skills. However, they also suggest that high stakes testing inspire students to rise to standardized challenges and prepares students for other high stakes testing such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

Although studies by various researchers suggests positive and negative results of high stakes testing, Johnson and Thurlow (2000) recommend:

Tests should be considered as high stakes for students with disabilities when the results are used to make critical decisions about the individual’s access to educational opportunity, grade level retention or promotion, graduation from high school or receipt of a standard diploma versus and an alternative diploma (e.g. special education diploma, certificate of completion). (p. 307)

The concern for a student’s future is heightened when the results of a test determines their fate.

The decisions have immediate and long-range implications for the student. The use of exit exams to determine whether a student earns a high school diploma, for example has lifelong consequences and directly affects an individual’s economic self-sufficiency and well-being as an adult (p. 307).

High stakes testing impacts students, with and without disabilities, high school graduation outcome and their lives after high school graduation. High stakes testing has an impact on high school and post secondary outcomes for all students.
Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick (2002) cite “Critics of state High School Exit Exams (HSEE) policies contend that these policies reduce rates of high school completion, particularly for racial and ethnic minorities and for economically disadvantaged students” (p. 132). Warren et al. also found that in areas where students were not graduating from high school, the poverty rates were increasing at the same time.

The No Child Left behind Act requires repeatedly failing schools to dedicate a portion of their Title I federal assistance funds, which are allocated to schools with a significant number of low-income students, to the cost of providing tutoring or test prep sessions (Schroeder, 2006). Many schools across the nation are using Title I funds to provide extra preparation outside of the school day or within the school day in Math, Reading, and Language Arts for students who have been identified as below grade level based on the results of their standardized test. However, if the alternative school is a high school, it will not receive these funds despite the majority of the students receive or have received free or reduced lunch. Alternative schools lack funding and depend on creative methods of establishing test preparation programs to assist students in meeting the demands of high stakes tests.

Improving the educational outcomes for students who are at risk for academic failure is an important issue for educators and policymakers (Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001). As many principals and school districts attempt to provide supplemental education assistance, such as test prep programs, they strive to ensure that their program will be effective.
Prior to implementing test preparation programs, school officials should make certain that the program is designed effectively. The following components are required to effectively design the program: (a) a needs assessment, (b) a definition of the population, (c) a list of identification procedures, (d) a list of programming goals and objective, (e) the organization and format of the program, and (f) the selection and training of staff (Berger, 1991). In the book, *Nothing's Impossible: Leadership Lessons from Inside and Outside the Classroom*, by Monroe (1999), the author describes her philosophies and methodologies better known as the Monroe Doctrine. Her doctrine supports the aforementioned components of designing programs. Monroe stated that she aims to develop an environment committed to creating a system of high expectation for all students. She also suggests that expectations are not dependent upon a student's race, socioeconomic status, or their daily surroundings. Teachers must use the same enthusiasm for all students.

High expectations and a level of excellence were not foreign to Monroe. One of Monroe's Doctrines on leadership explains that it is important to gain knowledge, skills, and an effective disposition by following those who are able to demonstrate successful leadership qualities before standing in front of others in a leadership role. School districts and principals are teaching educators how to use student assessment data to improve instruction. Teachers and administrators from the Boston Public School System and students from the Harvard Graduate School of Education are participating in a workshop that teaches them how to analyze assessment data. There are four key elements of their course design: (a) organizing around a clear purpose, (b) teaching about three kinds of
tools, (c) assigning projects that use real school data, and (d) supporting collaborative work (Boudett, 2005). The workshop is an excellent way to teach educators how to use assessment data to improve instruction and student achievement. Analyzing student assessment data allows school districts, principals, educators, and parents to identify strengths and weaknesses of a student or group of students. This method of following good examples and plans that are working for others is one way to support leadership.

In order to create an effective program, there must also be a definition of the population that is being served. Coordinators should monitor the progress of all students during the first few weeks of school (Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, & Paulsen, 2005). The process of monitoring students will assist in identifying students who require additional assistance in math and language arts. In addition to observing their academic progress, students may also take a teacher made assessment to determine their ability level. For example, teachers could administer a 25-item test sampling the universe of computation skills addressed in their grade level (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hamlett, 1990).

The coordinators should also create a list of identification procedures for the program. Identification procedures are beneficial for tutors, as well as, tutees. Teachers who will assist students, as well as, students who receive preps should be provided with information regarding program outcomes and requirements (Chapman, 1998). It is imperative that students are correctly identified for math or reading prep classes and the teaching staff is correctly identified based on their knowledge of the content in which they are teaching. The following is a general list of job requirements that should be
provided to tutors: knowledge of subject area, effective communication skills, accountable, punctual, and able to understand program goals (Coenen, 2002). Consistent communication of program goals and objectives are important factors that contribute to the overall success of any program. Knowledge of all programs and objectives are necessary for educators to work effectively with students and make certain that the program is beneficial (Coenen, 2002). The primary goal of preparation programs is to increase the academic performance of students in the areas in which they need to improve. After-school tutoring programs have been identified as having the potential to turn academic failure into academic success (Hock, Pulver, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001). Since the alternative program offers flexibility, the after-school tutoring program was worked into the daily schedule for students needing more instructional time in particular academic areas.

Prior to designing the program, coordinators should consider the type of organization and format of the program that will best meet the needs of the defined population. The review of the literature states that tutoring programs should maintain a schedule of two to three days a week for at least one hour. Rather than start immediately after classes are over, all students should be given ten minutes to socialize with friends, collect necessary supplies and work, and walk to the location of their tutorial session (Berger, 1991). Some school officials may disagree with giving the students a ten minute break between the end of their school day and after school tutoring or if the prep session is imbedded in the course schedule in between classes. Research in the area of tutor-tutee matching is mixed; however, when the main goal is to improve academic performance of
the tutee (student), the tutor (teacher) should be matched based on superior knowledge or by his or her ability to master material (Cohen, 1986). In order to eliminate behavior issues, it is important that the students are aware of the program expectations. Program coordinators should be present at all prep sessions to assign seats, remind participants of session rules, and ensure proper procedures are being followed (Coenen, 2002).

Staff selection and training is one of the most important factors in designing and implementing a test prep program that works. The No Child Left Behind Act mandates that children receive an education from Highly Qualified teachers; therefore, the staff should be certified educators. During prep sessions, the supervising educators should be able to answer difficult questions, communicate with parents, guardians, educators, and administrators; supervise and assess students, and deal with behavioral issues (Coenen, 2002). Often times, there are only a small percentage of teachers who are willing to stay after school and teach in the after school program, which makes it difficult to select the most qualified teachers for after school positions. However, if the sessions are a part of the school schedule, it decreases the chance of having unqualified teachers and students who do not report for the session. These components are most important to the success of the prep session.

Research has shown that novice teachers do not automatically engage in the instructional methods that make one-to-one tutoring instructional and effective with a variety of students in a variety of educational contexts (Kohler & Greenwood, 1990). Additionally, research has shown that veteran teachers do not actively engage the student in the prep session, model thinking processes, diagnose errors, anchor learning, provide
corrective feedback, or use sophisticated teaching strategies, all of which are advocated in some form by individuals who have written about effective preparation practices (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1985). As a result, training should be provided for those teachers who do volunteer their services. Some teachers use practices that may be detrimental to the success and achievement of the student. For example, some may be unable to assist students with a class work or homework assignment, thus giving them the answer or doing the work for them. Teaching educators how to prep effectively may be an important component of an effective program (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1985).

Although education is forever changing, unfavorable test scores are becoming more and more prevalent in various school districts. Parents, educators, and policymakers are all searching for ways to increase academic and social competence in students (Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001). With the availability of funds to provide supplemental education to students at-risk, organizational leaders are attempting to increase the number of students graduating from high school. Paying greater attention to methods to increase attendance, improve parental involvement, enhance school climate, mend teacher expectations, and enrich test preparation programs to advance students to high school completion and further to the world of work or a post secondary institution.

In conclusion, designing and implementing academic programs such as alternative schools that cater to the whole child and meet individual needs of students will have a greater impact on the graduation outcome if the program is effective.
CHAPTER III
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The aforementioned factors of an alternative school influencing the graduation outcome of students are vital to educators. Although there are factors many people may feel that are out of the control of the school system, such as demographics, personality, family related and ability factors; school related factors can be manipulated. Those factors previously mentioned, attendance, parental involvement, school climate, teacher expectations, teacher methodology and test preparation programs are controlled by the school. These factors are known as educational factors.

The major problems of this study can be explained using several theories. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006) suggest that the most meaningful sources of problems come from theories. Theories of learning and behavior stimulate countless issues that are researched. This study is viewed through the lens of four theories. Various aspects of these four theories, which are borrowed from, will create a new model for explaining this phenomenon related to the reasons why students attending a metro Atlanta alternative school are completing high school. The four theories are Jean Piaget’s (1983) Theory of Cognitive Development, Clayton Alderfer’s (1969) Existence, Relatedness and Growth (ERG) Theory, Vincent Tinto’s (1975) Attrition Theory, and Bernard Weiner’s (2005) Attribution Theory. Jean Piaget published the first theory of cognitive development in
1952 (Figure 2). The theory of cognitive development is composed of four stages. The fourth stage is where students attending alternative schools fit. In this last stage of cognitive development is where you find the formal operational stage. In the final stage, children have moved from the concrete way of thinking to the abstract level of thinking. Depending upon your background and experiences, children are able to think critically beyond the right now and think about consequences of their actions. They also dwell on alternative school lack the formal operational stage of development and they begin to feel as though they do not fit in with traditional settings.

Figure 2. Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development

Clayton Alderfer’s ERG Theory (Figure 3) is based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory (Figure 4). These theories have similarities and differences. The similarities include a hierarchy of needs and the type of needs. However, the ERG Theory does not support confinements to specific levels before reaching another level.
Figure 3: Alderfer’s ERG Theory

Figure 4: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
Also, the number of levels is different. The ERG is composed of 3 levels which are pursued at the same time if necessary. For the purpose of this study, the importance of initiating the debate is to propose the notion that in order for students to feel as though they belong, their individual needs, such as, social, emotional and educational must be met.

Vincent Tinto’s Theory of Attrition or Persistence also supports the phenomenon of factors reviewed in this study. This theory suggests that there are five factors related to student retention. These five factors are school and family background, personal student aspirations, school experiences with academics, as well as faculty and peer relations, external commitments, and feeling a sense of belonging academically and socially. For the purpose of this study, borrowing two factors, school experiences and the sense of belonging is relevant. The attrition supports this work as it relates to high school completion.

*Figure 5.* Tinto’s Theory of Attrition
Bernard Weiner's Attribution Theory of Achievement is based on the original Attribution Theory developed by Fritz Header. Attribution theory is concerned with an interpretation of thinking and behavior of students or people who are actually experiencing an event. Attribution theory deals with the causes of behavior or an outcome. People sometimes attribute their successes and failures to internal or external factors. Another theory, the attribution theory, is important to gaining insight as to why students feel as though they succeed or fail. The attribution theory suggests that students attribute their successes to their own motivation and their failures due to bad luck or other people. This study actually challenges or supports the attribution theory. By surveying, using focus groups and interviewing key players as a data collection method, the theories referenced in this study reveal or explain the behaviors and thought processes of the subjects.

Educators must revert to the idea of catering to the whole child. It is vital to the students' wellbeing, as well as the future of the economy for mankind. The theory of catering to the whole child is imperative to increasing the high school completion outcome. Students who voluntarily or involuntarily choose to enroll are seeking a different educational experience that was missing in their perspective traditional school setting. These students' needs may not have been fully met. Although there are extenuating circumstances beyond the school's control; there are factors directly related to school. Meeting the needs of students is crucial to their graduation outcome. If students' individual educational needs are not met, their chance of graduating with a high school diploma is jeopardized. Some of the needs may include, but are limited to regular
school attendance, parental involvement, high teacher expectations, student-centered teacher methodology and effective test preparation programs. These educational factors, along with others, are needed for students to experience high graduation completion and may impact the high school graduation outcome of students who attend the alternative school. By using three methods of data collection methods, which include surveys, focus group interviews and individual interviews, this study will demonstrate the educational factors impacting the high school completion rate of students attending alternative school.

Figure 6. Relationship among Variables
Figure 7. Summary of Theories
Definition of Factors and Other Terms

*At-risk students* include those who have been chronically academically unsuccessful, suspended from, expelled or dropped out of their community school, abused, neglected, exploited, abducted, runaway and homeless youth, migrant youth, victims of crimes, offenders, and those who abuse drug and alcohol (Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). At-risk students may have educational, social, emotional and/or behavioral concerns. At-risk students are students comprised of the alternative school. These students rarely succeed in traditional high school settings.

*Attendance* is defined as coming to school or being present from the time first period begins until the last period ends for the day. Attendance issues may result in withdrawal of school until the next semester begins.

*High-stakes testing* is a concept that uses test scores to determine major decisions as it relates to a student’s progression. For example, in the state of Georgia third graders are required to pass the Reading section of the Criterion Reference Competency Test (CRCT) to move to the fourth grade. All fifth and eighth graders must pass the Reading and Math sections of the Criterion Referenced Competency Test to progress to the next grade. Most importantly, it is essential for high school students to pass five sections of the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) to receive a high school diploma. The high school level is the only level where a stakeholder, parent or educator, cannot appeal retention. However, if students do not pass a section of the Georgia High School Graduation Test, they can apply for a waiver or variance. The variance requires that the student pass a secondary high stakes test called the End-of-Course-Test. These tests have
been said to place more accountability for learning on the student and teaching on the teacher, as well as the leader of the school. These tests are considered high-stakes because the results determine the outcome of students.

*Parent involvement* is described in Epstein's (2002) Framework of Six Types of Involvement. The six types of involvement include, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002). Parental involvement includes parents and educators communicating about the students' educational experiences whether positive or negative. This communication is not necessarily face to face. It also involves a level of volunteerism, which may include a parent volunteering to assist several other students or the school. Parents, who are major decision makers, on behalf of their child are displaying parental involvement. Parental involvement is more than showing up to the school for parent teacher conferences.

*Teacher expectations* are characterized by the feelings a teacher has about a students' ability. Low expectations result in low performance and high expectations has been reported as producing higher performance.

*Teacher methodology* is the teaching style used the most in the classroom. For example, there are teachers who primarily lecture. Lecturing involves the teacher speaking to the class as a whole for an extended period of time. It is not student focused. Other methodology includes, but is not limited to packets, hands-on activities and student oriented assignments.
Test prep programs are reform methods of programs in place to assist students with strategies to pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test. These programs include but are not limited to subject based read-ins sponsored by the department and media specialist, subject based marathons, which entails students being inundated with one subject a week or two before the test with a particular subject area, for a full day, and a mandatory test prep course. These programs are designated as a type of remediation.

High school completion is not the same as the graduation rate. Graduation rates are measured differently in states and have been reported as inconsistent and varied from state to state. For this study, high school completion is defined by any student who enrolls in the alternative school and graduates from the alternative school at any given time.

Graduation rates in Georgia are determined by the number of students who graduate on time, which is the number of students who graduate within four years of enrolling in ninth grade divided by the total number of students who were in the ninth grade class plus special education diploma recipients, plus the number of 12th, 11th, 10th, and 9th grade dropouts.

A high school graduate is a student who graduates within 4 years of enrolling in ninth grade. The student has to graduate with his or her ninth grade class to count as an on-time graduate.

A high school dropout is defined by a student who does not graduate on time meaning four years after enrolling in ninth grade. Students who receive a Certificate of
Attendance, General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or a Special Education diploma are also counted as high school dropouts.

*High School Dropouts* who return to school and complete requirements for a high school diploma are not considered an on-time graduate. They are considered a student who completed high school.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations to this study involve researching one alternative school of several in the surrounding area, as well as the entire state. The process of obtaining valuable information from multiple sources is required to make a generalized judgment as it relates to improving graduation and post secondary outcomes for students who are at risk and who have several barriers to overcome. The drawback to this study includes, but is not limited to, the research of one school. This research may not lend itself or make a generalization for all students who attend an alternative school. However, it will provide insight as to factors that contribute to students attaining their high school diploma and how schools can use alternative schools to increase their graduation rates. Additional limitations include the instruments. Some of the items on the survey could have been eliminated; however, the elimination of the items caused the Cronbach Alpha to drop below .70. The original survey yielded a .74, which is not the strongest Cronbach Alpha. Also, the interview questions for student focus group and leadership team individual interviews did not all coincide. However, the researcher was able to gain valuable insight into the problem. The limitations of the study did not deter the researcher from obtaining answers to the problem and research questions.
CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study carries an overarching descriptive case study approach. Using qualitative characteristics to gain a better understanding of the research, is used throughout the process. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative is “an approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural settings, uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subject’s point of view” (p. 274). Qualitative research is known to study why a particular group or person behaves in a certain manner or makes certain choices. Gaining direct access to participants and taking hands-on approach is more in line with a qualitative approach. The researcher has the ability to retrieve first-hand information. According to Hoepfl (1997), utilizing qualitative methods, as opposed to quantitative, when there is a need to establish predetermined variables could prove beneficial to the research process. Furthermore, qualitative methods may offer direct access into the minds and hearts of study participants. The reader draws closer into the environment of the participant, which fosters a greater understanding.

Observations in the environment in which the participants function on a daily basis provide the researcher with closeness to experiences.
This research requires triangulation. Triangulating the data ensures that information is taken from at least three sources (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). More specifically, the foundation of this study rests upon surveys, focus groups and document reviews. The instruments and materials used to collect data include surveys, interview protocols, and analysis of reports. By triangulating the data, maintenance for sources of error is controlled. Using various methods of inquiry provides a certain level of control for validity and reliability.

Qualitative research methods provide a tremendous and rich source of authentic information to the study, while quantitative research attempts to validate findings numerically. "Quantitative research is a means for testing objectives theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Quantitative research involves numerical statistics to explain the relationship between independent and dependent variables. However, for the purpose of this study, a descriptive qualitative method is used to present an examination of the impact the independent factors have on the dependent factor. The data collected on the surveys provided a more descriptive narrative of the student’s perspectives.

Description of the Setting

The school population totaled three hundred forty-six students during the school year. This number varies throughout the year due student open enrollments and withdrawals on any given day. Students attending the metro Atlanta alternative school come for several reasons. These reasons include, but are not limited to, by student
choice, recommendation of home school to catch up on credits or change environment to improve behavior, graduate on time or increase chance of becoming a high school graduate. There are students who also move during the middle of the semester and students choose the alternative school due to the semester organization. Each student's day differs. Although the semester may start on a certain day; the individual students’ semester starts the day of enrollment. Students are able to earn credits in a shorter period of time as opposed to the traditional high school.

The students who were a part of the study were considered prospective because some of them had not completed their requirements to earn a high school diploma. Many were completing coursework, and others were awaiting their results of a high stakes test, also known as the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Students, who were the essence of this research, are the first and foremost vital stakeholders, impacted by several factors. Their perspectives on the education they receive through alternative education are the central pieces to this work. The researcher interviewed the principal, graduation coach, and the head counselor to gain information as it pertains to school processes which assists students in obtaining their high school diploma and measurements of an effective program. These three individuals have direct contact with students on a daily basis and were able to provide qualitative data to coincide, as well as support the quantitative data.

Sampling Procedures

"The concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. This type of sampling means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central
phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The metro Atlanta alternative school was comprised of a total of one hundred two prospective graduating seniors in May of 2009. All students who were prospective graduates were selected to participate in the study. Prospective graduates included students who could possibly complete required Carnegie Units and pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) by the end of the 2008-2009 school year. The other participants, from the leadership team were purposefully selected based on the contact they would have with prospective graduates.

Working with Human Subjects

The school in this study was selected by the researcher due to accessibility to participants and a genuine concern for the graduation outcome of students attending the school. Permission to conduct the study was obtained by the principal of the alternative school as directed by school district policy and the district’s department of assessment and accountability. A formal letter to grant permission was written to and signed by the principal. Confidentiality letters were written and signed by all participants of the study. Participants were assured anonymity and each student participant was given a number to represent them. The researcher was able to maintain confidentiality and preserve each individual’s responses. Table 1 includes demographic information, which was taken from the survey and interview protocol, for each participant.
Table 1

Demographic Information for Each Student Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Diploma Earned</th>
<th>Grad Status</th>
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In the state of Georgia, high school students could fall into two categories, which data is collected and provided to the local, state and federal department of education. For the purpose of this study a third category is developed. The three categories include the following: High School Graduate, High School Dropout and High School Completer. The alternative school highlighted in this study focuses on high school completion. High school completion is the major goal of this metro Atlanta alternative school. Table 2 includes data related to type of graduates who participated in the study. Student achievement is measured by high school completion on the local school level. However, the local district, state and federal department of education recognize the graduation rate as second indicator to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Table 2

Demographics of Leadership Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number of Years As an Educator</th>
<th>Years at the Alternative School</th>
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<tr>
<td>LT3</td>
<td>Graduation Coach</td>
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</table>

Location of the Research

The location of the proposed research took place on a metro Atlanta alternative school’s campus. Surveys were given to students during the prospective graduate check out session and the day of graduation practice. The graduation coach and the head
counselor administered, collected and returned the surveys to the researcher. Focus
group and individual interviews occurred after the 2008–2009 school year ended.
Students were invited to the local library to participate in the focus group study. The
individual interviews took place at the alternative school. These locations were
convenient for all participants.

Instrumentation

The researcher explained the problem and the research questions to support the
study. The instrument, a survey, used to gather participants’ perspectives on factors that
impact their graduation outcome was developed by the researcher and reviewed by
faculty members of the university. Suggestions were offered, considered and used by the
researcher. In collaboration with faculty members, the researcher decided to eliminate
items from the survey for analysis. After speaking with one of the committee members,
the researcher decided to use the survey’s open ended responses for qualitative purposes.
The survey consisted of thirty items composed of a five point Likert scale and seven
demographic items. The scale indicated the following perspective: 5 = strongly agree,
4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree. The demographic
information was used to describe the participants. The open ended question on the
survey was used to offer answer research question seven.

The pilot survey, which was field-tested by currently enrolled 11th graders who
could potentially gain status to complete the survey for research analysis, yielded a .74
alpha coefficient. The researcher utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
(SPSS) computing program. The items on the survey pertained to the presumed factors,
attendance, parent participation, school climate, teacher expectations, teacher methodology, and test preparation programs, of an alternative school, which may impact graduation outcome. The items originally constructed by the researcher and considered by the participants were as follows:

Attendance:

1. Attendance is important to me.
2. I attended school the majority of days I have been enrolled.
3. Good attendance helps me achieve my goal of graduating.
4. Poor attendance impacts the time it takes me to complete work.
5. Attendance is important in regards to graduating.

Parent Participation

6. My parent/guardian talks to me regularly about school.
7. My parent/guardian volunteers at the school.
8. My parent/guardian communicates with school employees.
9. I talk to my parents/guardian about graduation
10. My parent/guardian cares about my education.

School Climate

11. I believe this alternative school is safe.
12. Administrators and teachers treat me with respect.
13. I maintain a positive relationship with educators in the school.
14. There is someone in the building that I can talk to at anytime.
15. I believe this alternative school is a caring environment.
Teacher Expectations

16. Teachers expected the best from me.
17. Teachers in this school motivated me to want to succeed.
18. Teachers help me reach my goals.
19. Teachers expected C's in my classes as long as I passed.
20. Teachers easily gave up on me when I did not want to work.

Teacher Methodology

21. I prefer teacher taught classes.
22. I prefer working at my own pace.
23. I learn best from the teacher lecturing in front of the class.
24. I learn best from hands-on assignments.
25. I learn best in interactive classes where students are involved.

Test Preparation Programs

26. The mandatory prep class was beneficial.
27. The marathon helped me.
28. I attended the prep class regularly.
29. The school should discontinue the prep class.
30. I can learn the same material in my other classes.

Participants were asked to rate their perception of the educational factors which may impact their graduation outcome using Likert Scale as an item response system. The participants chose the either of the following for each item: Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Undecided (3), Disagree (2), or Strongly Disagree (1).
Other instruments used included a set of interview questions for the students and selected members of the leadership team. These interview questions were constructed by the researcher and reviewed by faculty members. These instruments were used to support the results of the survey. The instruments included the following questions:

*Student Participants*

1. Do you think your Georgia High School Graduation Test scores encouraged you to stay in school?
2. How did you feel when you received your scores?
3. Was the test prep class and marathon beneficial to you?
4. How do you define parent participation?
5. How important is your parents' or guardian participation as it relates to your success in high school?
6. Do you feel as though the people who work here care about you? Is your relationship with school employees important to you? Why?
7. Describe your teachers' methods of instruction and attitude towards you?
8. What characteristics of this school that has helped you attain success?
9. Have you discussed your plans after high school with anyone at school?
10. What did you discuss and did these discussions motivate you to want to graduate from high school?
11. What does the alternative school offer that your other previous schools did not?
12. Is there anything you all would like to share with me in regards to attending this alternative school?

13. Would you recommend or encourage other students to attend? Why?

Leadership Team Participants

14. Describe the current method of measuring success as determined by the state to meet Adequate Yearly Progress.

15. Dropout rates and graduation rates are reported to the U.S. Department of Education each year. Are those measures accurate measurements for this alternative school? Why or why not?

16. What other measures do you believe will paint a clear picture of the results you would like to show?

17. Approximately, how many students have completed high school in the last three years?

18. What educational factors have attributed to their success?

19. What evidence can you show to convey the success of this alternative school?

20. How has your leadership improved this school since you have been here?

21. Was there any resistance to change?

22. If so, how did you address resistance to change?

23. What other improvements would you make to increase the number of students who graduate from this alternative school?
These aforementioned questions were also used to generate additional themes that the researcher did not presume. In an effort to gain better insight into the students and leadership team's perspectives, the qualitative data collected from the focus group study and interviews was utilized to also answer the following question:

RQ 7: Based on the students and leadership team’s interviews, how is the metro Atlanta alternative school meeting the needs of students in the district?

Methods of Data Collection

The survey was given to one hundred two prospective graduates, which some of them had been cleared for graduation, and other students were awaiting clearance due to coursework. Students who had been cleared to complete high school and participate in the second graduation ceremony held for the current school year received the survey. The students received the survey from the counselor and the graduation coach to complete before graduation practice. Other students received their survey via US Mail. Each survey had a number which corresponded to a specific student. All students participating in the graduation ceremony had to meet with the counselor and graduation coach; therefore there was a greater return rate given the survey in person as opposed to the mail. Thirty nine surveys were returned and all students were purposely invited to participate in a focus group interview with hopes of receiving a response from at least twelve students. Two focus group interviews took place with a total of five student participants. Individual interviews also took place and a purposeful sample included the building principal, the graduation coach and the head counselor.
An attempt to collect data at the same time decreased the time it took to compile the data. This type of data collection is known as a concurrent embedded strategy. "The concurrent embedded strategy of mixed methods can be identified by its use of one data collection phase, during which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously" (Creswell, 2009, p. 214).

Methods for Establishing Data Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability is significant as it relates to the focal point and purpose of the study. It is also crucial to the findings of the research. In order to establish data validity, there are a few methods to accomplish success. By triangulating data and comparing the literature or documents, reviewing information from the interviews and surveys, validity is not compromised. To determine content validity of the survey, it was piloted to a group of students who attended the alternative but were not near completion of high school. Also several trained reviewers associated with the university made suggestions and the survey was revised. Techniques used to ensure reliability involve listening to recordings of interviews multiple times, as well as, allowing someone else to transcribe the recorded information. Conducting member checks and contacting the participants and leadership team members after their interview for clarification increased reliability.
CHAPTER V
ANALYSIS OF DATA

Findings

An examination of multilevels took place. Creswell (2009) describes multilevel as surveying a large sample and interviewing a smaller sample of the large sample. Of the 39 students who returned the survey, 12 of those students agreed to participate in a focus group interview. Five students actually reported to the interview session. Three leadership team members participated in the individual interview sessions. In this study, a matrix was created to analyze the qualitative data. A cross-reference chart was used to compare the qualitative from the interviews and the surveys. The following research questions and responses reflect study participants as documented in this descriptive qualitative case study of students and leadership team member’s perceptions of the alternative school program and high school completion.

RQ1: To what extent does attendance impact high school completion?

In order to retrieve data from research question 1, the researcher obtained attendance documents and reviewed the actual percentage of days participants attended school for the entire day (Table 3) and compared it to the students' perception of attendance.
Table 3

Participants' Attendance: Percent for an Entire Day and Their Graduation Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Actual Attendance %</th>
<th>High School Graduation Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>GED Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Special Education Diploma/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Actual Attendance %</th>
<th>High School Graduation Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Certificate of Attendance/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Special Education Diploma/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Completer/Dropout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In reviewing the actual attendance data to determine whether or not it had a direct impact on the high school completion of students attending the alternative school, it was determined that attendance is not a indication of high school completion. Actual attendance was coded in the following manner: 5 indicated 100% – 90% extremely high attendance, 4 indicated 89%-70% high attendance, 3 indicated 69%-50% average attendance, 2 indicated 49%-30% low attendance and 1 indicated 29%–0% extremely low attendance. Data showed 13% of students who had extremely high to high attendance graduated on time and 16% of students who had low to extremely low attendance graduated late. There was only a 3% difference: 89% of the participants completed high school. Considering all participants, who completed high school, including graduates and completers, 63% had average to extremely low attendance. It was concluded by the researcher that attendance is not considered as having an impact on high school completion. Furthermore, according to students’ perceptions of attendance as indicated by the survey, frequency data showed an average of 34.2 respondents answered strongly agree or agree to items 1–5 of the survey (Table 4). The findings from the survey conflict with the actual attendance records. Despite the label of an on time high school graduate or a late high school completer, attendance is not crucial to high school completion for students attending the metro Atlanta alternative school.
Table 4

Frequency of Students' Perception of Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Attendance</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Item 1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Item 2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>76.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Item 3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Item 4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Item 5</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>97.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N of Valid Cases = 38

RQ2: To what extent does parental involvement impact high school completion?

In reviewing responses of the participants, it was noted that participants' views differed. Out of the five students who participated in the focus group study, one of the students definitely did not have a parent who was involved in his education while he attended the alternative school. Responses from students are indicated in Table.

Table 5

Participants' Parent Participation Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Parent participation doesn’t necessarily have to mean that the parent has to come to the school; it could mean that a parent talks to the child at home. I mean parent participation is very important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and at the same time some students who don't have parent participation, it pushes them a lot more because they have to do it on their own. I didn't have any parent participation but at the same time I still came out on top by myself.

Parent participation means a lot to me because I think that if my mother didn't encourage me, I would not have tried to do something with my life.

My mom and dad coming to the school. I would say if mom did not wake me up for school I would still be sleep today.

Well parent participation to me is your parent is involved in helping you in trying to reach your final goals, which is graduating and passing all parts of the Georgia High School Graduation test. With your parents involvement it is someone giving you an extra step up saying you can do it; even if you fail, don't give up keep trying. Your parent participation is very beneficial also. My parent's participation is really; I would have to say they have helped me through a whole lot during my high school years; even though I felt like I couldn't do it any more they still pushed me and motivated me to get what I needed to get to graduate from high
school so that I could have a better life and a better education for me and my little girl.

From the responses received, the researcher determined that parent participation does impact high school completion. It was noted that parent participation does not always mean a parent coming to the school. Parent participation takes on many forms as noted in the literature review. The survey revealed a fluctuation of student’s perceptions. According to the students, parent participation certainly does not involve parents volunteering in the school. Only 13.1% of the responses indicated strongly agree or agree to parents actually volunteering at the school. However, during the focus group study, participants revealed the extent of parent involvement in their personal lives as it relates to high school completion. Also on items six, nine and ten, a high percentage of students perceived (Table 6).

Table 6

*Frequency of Students’ Perception of Parent Participation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Parental Participation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Participation Item 6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Participation Item 7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Participation Item 8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Parental Participation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent Participation Item 9</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Participation Item 10</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N of Valid Cases = 38

RQ3: To what extent does school climate impact high school completion?

In reviewing the open ended responses (Table 7) on the survey, which requested students to provide additional comments in regards to educational factors impacting their graduation outcome, many of the responses were geared towards assistance received by caring staff members. School climate holds a significant weight when it comes to students completing high school. School climate involves the closeness one feels to the school. A sense of belonging and high expectations is characteristics of positive school climate. Some of the responses are included in Table 7.

School climate in the Metro Atlanta Alternative School appeared as a vital component to the program in regards to motivating students to want to do better and to give them an outlet. A caring atmosphere provides opportunity to progress in a nurturing environment. The student’s perspective on the survey, as well as the focus group, showed that the Alternative School is a caring environment. 92.1% of participants responded that administrators and teachers treat them respect, 89.5% maintained positive relationships with staff and 89.9% viewed the school as a caring environment (Table 8).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>The alternative school has helped me a lot even when I was having hard times. I have made a lot of friends and the teachers have been with me since the beginning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>I haven’t graduated yet! I’m still in the process. I love the alternative school. It helped me become the person I am today. The staff there helps you no matter what your problem is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>Attending alternative school made me understand that there is somebody out there to help you, not discontinuing your education, and for that matter I graduated with my class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I do believe that because the staff at the Alternative cared really cared because they made it seem that it wasn’t and alternative school. It really made you forget that you were in an alternative school. I did forget that I was in an alternative school and I do like the fact that teachers made the atmosphere seem better than it actually was.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

Frequency of Students’ Perception of School Climate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of School Climate</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Climate Item 11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>86.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate Item 12</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate Item 13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate Item 14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>86.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Climate Item 15</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N of Valid Cases = 38

RQ4: To what extent do teacher expectations impact the high school completion?

In a review of the open responses on the survey and the focus group interview, it was revealed that teachers encouraged students and pushed them to do their best. Table 9 shows the comments that students made during the focus group interview.
Table 9

*Student Comments Made During the Focus Group Interview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The staff at the alternative school cared really cared because they made it seem that it wasn’t an alternative school. It really made you forget that you were in an alternative school. I did forget that I was in an alternative school and I do like the fact that teachers made the atmosphere seem better than it actually was.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>I like to interact with everyone and do stuff join clubs and just speak to everybody from the front office to the back; like the janitors, everyone. Especially the principal, I like talking to the principal because she gave me good advice and she helped me when I was in trouble and needed her advice on certain things. The relationship with all the employees at the alternative school was very important because each person in their own way shared a certain part of them to me as in like my teachers; my teachers gave me things that I needed when it came down to education. If I didn’t understand I always went to my teachers and they didn’t treat me like oh well you don’t know you are dumb they actually gave me like hands activities to try to explain things to me. The staff members that are in the front office, the counselor’s office I would go to them if I didn’t understand something or if I needed help.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 9 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>always came to them and said hey, spoke to them. I always like to maintain a good healthy relationship with everyone inside of the office as well as the janitors and the lunch lady, it is very important to me. They gave very much encouragement. One particular teacher I didn’t have her as a teacher but I believe she’s the reason why I was accepted in Atlanta Tech so I mean it’s real they encouraged you to do a lot and they asked a lot of questions like she was saying. They, you know, wanted you to do well. They would come to you before you would go to them. So I did like it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ5: To what extent does teacher methodology impact high school completion?

In review of the responses from the focus group study, teacher methodology has no impact on high school completion. Although the survey revealed the method of choice for the student, the focus group revealed that some teachers lectured or gave packets, while others used hands-on assignments (Table 10).
Table 10

*Responses to Teacher Methodology*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Okay. Well when I was high school most teachers or some teachers did just stand up, talk, then go sit down and you just do your work. And some teachers more than others would give us a little exercise, like a hands on exercise or they would stand up there and continue talk about the subject until everybody got it before they handed you your class work. I would say a lot of the teachers were hands on but some would just stand up in front of the class and talk and then go sit down and expect you to know what to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The teachers that I had gave us packets. It was a packet class so most of the things that were in the packets were really commonsense but if we had any problems with anything in the packet, the teacher would take time out of her schedule and go over it with the whole class, not just one student. Just in case another student had the same particular question and we would have. So I do believe that the method of that teaching were ok and on point.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ6: To what extent does the test preparation program have on high school completion?

The survey revealed that at least half of the participants thought the mandatory preparation class was beneficial or helped them. Also, only half of the students actually attended. Although 21.1% believed that the school should discontinue the program, 57.9% could learn the same material in their class. The survey results are located in Table 11.

Table 11

*Frequency of Students' Perception of Test Preparation Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Test Preparation</th>
<th>Strongly Agree/Agree</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test Preparation Item 26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Preparation Item 27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Preparation Item 28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Preparation Item 29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Preparation Item 30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N of Valid Cases = 38

Georgia requires that all students pass the Georgia High School Graduation test in order to graduate from high school. Focus group responses to the test preparation program are located in Table 12.
**Table 12**

*Focus Group Responses to the Test Preparation Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Oh yeah, yeah, especially for science. The test prep class at first I was like that was the waste of a credit because we could be taking another class to hurry up and graduate but if we didn’t take that test prep class I don’t think that I would have passed the science part. The marathon helped us because we got to play different games, we got to define words, and find little ways to remember these scientific words and remember how to solve problems so I think it was very beneficial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I also believe it was beneficial because I didn’t pass science until I took the test prep so I do think it did help so those extra two or three classes did help.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was concluded by the researcher that the test preparation program is not an indicator or beneficial to high school completion. The responses from the five focus group participants do not support the survey results. Students could learn or gain the same information in their content area courses.

RQ7: Based on the leadership team’s interviews, how is the metro Atlanta alternative school meeting the needs of students in the district?
The qualitative data collected addressed the final question. The final question stated, based on the student and leadership team’s interviews, how is the metro Atlanta alternative school meeting the needs of students in the district? Table 13 displays the responses of the interview questions presented to the student participants. These questions were specific to the presumed factors which may impact the graduation outcome of students attending alternative school.

Table 13

*Participants' Responses to the Open-Ended Questions on the Survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Even though I did not participate in the marathon my teachers and the prep class prepared me to succeed my goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The educators really cared about my education and they pushed me to succeed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The alternative school helped me out to overcome many tasks in my life. I feel that any student that is not passing at their home school should come.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>The alternative school helped me graduate on time!!!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Before coming to the alternative school, I attended a traditional high school. If I would have stayed there, I would not have been able to graduate on time. By me coming here this was the best</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>decision for me in order to succeed in life. I am so happy to be</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduating with the class of 2009.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The alternative school has helped me a lot even when I was having</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard times. I have made a lot of friends and the teachers have been</td>
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<td>with me since the beginning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel that my teachers were always pushing me to do my work</td>
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<td>because they wanted me to succeed, especially Mrs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I haven’t graduated yet! I’m still in the process. I love the</td>
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<tr>
<td>alternative school. It helped me become the person I am today. The</td>
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<tr>
<td>staff there helps you no matter what your problem is.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prep classes did not help at all, but the marathon is what helped me</td>
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<tr>
<td>succeed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>They helped me study for Math.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attending alternative school made me understand that there is</td>
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<td>somebody out there to help you, not discontinuing your education,</td>
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<tr>
<td>and for that matter I graduated with my class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Head Counselor: Well I think that the students come to us, they seem to be more</td>
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<tr>
<td>focused they realize that in these economic times that they do have</td>
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<tr>
<td>to have a high school diploma. And also the faculty and staff and</td>
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Table 13 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Head Counselor:</strong></td>
<td>I just want to say that as the head counselor for the very first year it has been the most rewarding experience for me in working with the students that come to the alternative school. One of the most touching stories was a young man came to me, he will be 20 in August the first graduate in his entire family from high school. And to me those types of stories and to seeing the teen moms get off the train every morning and come to us on Marta shows the dedication that they have in turns the faculty and staff with their hearts into it and what I see here is a heart thing.</td>
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</table>
Summary

In retrospect, there are educational factors of a metro Atlanta alternative that have a direct impact on the high school completion. Those nontraditional students, who did not fit the norms of a traditional high school or the traditional high school did not meet their needs, found success through school climate and teacher expectations.
CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

Based on the data collected through surveys and interviews from students and members of the leadership team, the alternative school offers positive relationships which impact student achievement as measured by high school completion of nontraditional students. This study found that surveys revealed through frequency data, supported by teacher and leadership interviews, the need to establish a caring environment. School climate and teacher expectations were the main components of the alternative school that consistently occurred the most. One emerging theme was the concept of a small learning community. Small learning communities are known for their positive school climate. Students mentioned that the alternative school was smaller than their former schools and they were able to build relationships with faculty and staff. In the smaller environment students, teachers and other faculty members operate in family oriented structure. Students feel open to have conversations with any faculty member, and they have someone to share their concerns with throughout their entire enrollment.

Conclusions

The results of this study demonstrated practices that are in total control of educators. Despite demographic or environmental factors and lack of student motivation,
while acknowledging existence, educators have an obligation to the betterment of students. Students provided the core information for this study and their perceptions were highly regarded in the findings. Students understood their needs and were able to express them. School climate and teacher expectations were key components of the alternative school which impacted the graduation outcome of the students.

School climate in this metro alternative school involved a small, caring environment where students were not afraid to communicate with adults. Students were well respected and experienced a sense of accomplishment. A welcoming atmosphere is required to entice students. Educators should consistently exhibit attitudes of concern and care for students. The students’ initial encounter with alternative school faculty and staff should leave a positive impression on the student, as well as the parent. School climate is essential to graduation outcome of students attending alternative school.

Teacher expectation of students is another component of the alternative school that emerged throughout the study. Students revealed that their teachers did not give up on them and expected them to do their best. Not only did teachers push for a high school diploma, they were concerned about the students post secondary plans. When teachers expect the best, the best is received. Students were held accountable for their actions. It takes a committed team of faculty and staff to implement the same expectation.

The primary focus of this study was to examine perspectives of an alternative school educational factors which impact high school completion. The perspective of the students and the head counselor revealed a link between school climate and teacher expectations. This study was designed to highlight the achievements of the alternative
school in consistently graduating students and assist administrators in increasing their own graduation rates. One of the goals of secondary education is to increase the graduation rate. This study provides an avenue for traditional, as well as alternative schools.

Implications

The implication of this study suggests that students have valuable information to share. Students’ voices were the primary source of data. They understand the characteristics of schools and the benefits of attending alternative school. However, there is still the group that does not complete high school after attempting to receive an education in the regular school and an alternative school.

What happens to these students? Were there experiences different from those who managed to graduate? Do educators exercise equity? Where was the disconnect? Did educators do all that they could do to keep the students in school? The alternative school is sometimes the last chance for some students. The implications of the findings of this study in relation to the proposed theories reveal that educators may not have understood the needs of the students. They may not have gained a relationship with the students. The students did not feel as sense of belonging to the school. Alternative schools must allow all students to voice their opinion. If a student so chooses to leave, he or she should know someone cared, be able to articulate a positive experience was encountered while attending the alternative school, and hold a disposition which demonstrates that they can always return because it is expected. Educators have an obligation to show a caring attitude and expect the best from kids.
Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions related to educational factors of the alternative school, specifically school climate and teacher expectations and high school graduation outcome, the researcher recommends the following:

Recommendations for Administrators

1. It is recommended that all students are exposed to or encounter positive people in the school. Documentation proved that over a hundred students left high school without a high school diploma for various reasons. Meaningful relationships are vital to keeping students in school. Faculty should understand their role as an educator. It is not only to teach, but to nurture. Ongoing, embedded professional development on sustaining relationships with students, as well increasing teacher expectations is vital to students achieving a high school diploma.

2. It is recommended that an advisory period is in place so that the opportunity to develop relationships is present.

3. It is recommended that the administrator develop admission processes to accept students who are obviously having difficulty in the traditional high school setting at earlier stages. Many students, who are seventeen or eighteen, are in traditional schools trying to earn enough credits to attend the alternative school. It is evident that the traditional school is not working for them. The smaller environment could prove beneficial, while also improving the graduation rate of the traditional school and the overall district.
Recommendation for Teachers

1. It is recommended that teachers communicate with their students. It is important for teachers to exemplify high expectations for all students and provide immediate feedback. It is the goal of teachers to prepare students to become high school graduates. It takes more than assigning a lesson and expecting the student to complete work.

2. It is recommended that teachers know enough about the student to teach the student. It is strongly recommended that teachers participate in professional development to expand their knowledge on building relationships with students.

3. It is recommended that teachers use various methodologies and use formative, as well as summative assessments, to determine students’ strengths and weaknesses. Differentiated lessons and frequent assessments should drive instructional practices. Therefore, the teacher does not need to rely on test preparation programs to prepare students for high stakes testing.

Recommendation for Further Research

1. It is recommended that further research is conducted on alternative schools in Georgia and across the nation. Research should focus on the evaluation of alternative schools and a common structure across counties. It should also focus on a comparison of schools that focus on changing behavior and schools that push academic achievement. Research should examine the impact of alternative schools on graduation rates in Georgia and across the nation.
2. It is recommended that gender specific research is done to compare males and females. Females are outnumbering males in secondary and higher education.

3. It is recommended that research is conducted to monitor students throughout their enrollment to assess why students are leaving, returning or remaining in the alternative school setting. A comparison of the three groups over a period of time is necessary to gain a better understanding of their experience.

4. It is recommended that further research is conducted to examine the post secondary outcome of students who attend alternative school.

5. It is recommended that research is conducted to compare nontraditional schools which focus on behavior and nontraditional schools which focus on academic achievement.

 Recommendation for Policy and Practice

1. It is strongly recommended to develop a policy for evaluating alternative schools as it relates to No Child Left Behind. The alternative school is serving students who have already been counted in the dropout rate. The school will never make Adequate Yearly Progress when students enroll off track for graduation and have not attempted to take the Georgia High School Graduation Test. The alternative school should have alternate evaluation steps in place to receive recognition for their efforts in graduating students.
2. It is strongly recommended that alternative schools are used primarily to focus on high school completion rather than the graduation rate. Examine which is more important to constituents and stakeholders who have vested interest.

3. It is strongly recommended to change attendance policies to reflect student needs. There are many schools that have nontraditional modes of attendance, such as distance learning avenues, which does not require face-to-face instruction and students are persisting through graduation. It was determined in this study that attendance does not necessarily determine graduation outcomes. Students attending alternative school should not have to adhere to the same attendance policy of the traditional high school.

Summary

All schools are faced with the goal of increasing their graduation rates in order to meet No Child Left Behind mandates. High school principals in traditional and alternative high schools are accountable for meeting the challenge. The findings of this research reveal that principals and teachers, as well as other leaders in the building are capable of helping students reach the finish line called high school completion by providing high expectations and building relationships. However, their achievements are overshadowed by current policy.

In retrospect, this study provides an outlook of how educators can increase the number of students who earn high school diplomas. The aforementioned theories focused on common characteristics, such as their experiences, situation and needs being met. The alternative school delivers a whole child approach to meeting the needs of
students. Teaching and learning goes beyond the teacher, textbook, chalkboard, student and work. It is also more than a graduation rate. Only with strong bonds and deliberate expectations will schools meet and or exceed the challenge of increasing graduation outcomes for students. It is noted that school climate and teacher expectations, as well as small learning communities, provide access for student to reach the status of becoming high school completers.
APPENDIX A

Student Perception of Educational Factors Survey

Survey of Students' Perceptions of Educational Factors Which Impact Their Graduation Outcome

Only students who are potential May 2009 graduates, which include students who may receive a regular high school diploma, certificate of attendance, Special Education Diploma or a General Equivalency (GED), will voluntarily participate in this survey. This survey will yield results that may show a significant relationship between variables that impact the graduation outcome of students attending an alternative school.

Demographic Information

Gender: _____ Male _____ Female

Ethnicity: 

Birth Month/Year: / 

Age at first GHSGT Administration: ______

Age at last GHSGT Administration: ______

Directions: Place an X in the box to indicate how you feel for each statement.

**Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Attendance</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attendance is important to me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. I attended school the majority of days I have been enrolled.</td>
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<td>3. Good attendance helps me achieve my goal of graduating.</td>
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<td>4. Poor attendance impacts the time it takes me to complete work.</td>
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<td>5. Attendance is important in regards to graduating.</td>
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Appendix A (continued)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Parent Participation</th>
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<tr>
<td>6. My parent/guardian talks to me regularly about school.</td>
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<td>7. My parent/guardian volunteers at the school.</td>
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<td>8. My parent/guardian communicates with school employees.</td>
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<td>9. I talk to my parent/guardian about graduation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. My parent/guardian cares about my education.</td>
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<tr>
<th>C. School Climate</th>
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<tr>
<td>11. I believe this alternative school is safe.</td>
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<td>12. Administrators and teachers treat me with respect.</td>
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<td>13. I maintain a positive relationship with educators in the school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. There is someone in the building that I can talk to at any time.</td>
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<td>15. I believe this alternative school is a caring environment.</td>
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<tr>
<th>D. Teacher Expectations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. Teachers expected the best from me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Teachers in this school motivated me to want to succeed.</td>
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<td>18. Teachers helped me reach my goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Teachers accepted C’s in my classes as long as I passed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Teachers easily gave up on me when I did not want to work.</td>
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<tr>
<th>E. Teacher Methodology</th>
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<tr>
<td>21. I prefer teacher taught classes.</td>
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Appendix A (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E. Teacher Methodology</th>
<th>SA</th>
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<tr>
<td>22. I prefer working at my own pace.</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. I learn best from the teacher lecturing in front of the class.</td>
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<td>24. I learn best from hands-on assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. I learn best in interactive classes where students are involved.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>F. Test Preparation Programs</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26. The mandatory prep class was beneficial.</td>
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<tr>
<td>27. The marathon helped me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>28. I attended the prep class regularly.</td>
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<td>29. The school should discontinue the prep class.</td>
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<tr>
<td>30. I can learn the same material in my other classes.</td>
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Please provide additional comments on the lines provided below in regards to educational factors you feel have impacted your graduation outcome.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Completer Type
On-Time Graduate ___________ Late Graduate ___________

Diploma Type
Regular _______ GED _______ Certificate _______ SEC _______
APPENDIX B

Student Interview Questions

1. Do you think your Georgia High School Graduation Test scores encouraged you to stay in school?

2. How did you feel when you received your scores?

3. Was the test prep class and marathon beneficial to you?

4. How do you define parent participation?

5. How important is your parents’ or guardian participation as it relates to your success in high school?

6. Do you feel as though the people who work here care about you? Is your relationship with school employees important to you? Why?

7. Describe your teachers’ methods of instruction and attitude towards you?

8. What characteristics of this school that has helped you attain success?

9. Have you discussed your plans after high school with anyone at school? What did you discuss and did these discussions motivate you to want to graduate from high school?

10. What does the alternative school offer that your other previous schools did not?

11. Is there anything you all would like to share with me in regards to attending this alternative school?

12. Would you recommend or encourage other students to attend? Why?
APPENDIX C

Responses to Student Interview Questions

Session 1

Lead Speaker: Do you think your Georgia High School Graduation Test scores encouraged you to stay in school?

Participant #59: At first, no. My science test I had to keep taking like two times. I was like man forget it I didn’t care any more and one of my teachers said keep going, keep trying for it and you will pass it - I finally passed it and I graduated.

Lead Speaker: Do you think your Georgia High School Graduation Test scores encouraged you to stay in school?

Participant #1: I want to say yes because I also took it about five to six times (inaudible).

Lead Speaker: How did you feel when you received your scores? It could have been the first time the second time or the last time; how did you feel when you received your scores?

Participant #50: The first time I received them, I passed everything but social studies and science because I was out; I had just had my baby so I didn’t pass it. The second time I actually passed my social studies and still failed science. Receiving my scores for social studies it made me feel a lot better because it was like okay at least I had one more part down. Then I had to keep taking the science part.

Participant #1: I passed all my on the first try except for science so it was… what was the question…?

Lead Speaker: How did you feel when you received your scores?

Participant #1: I was happy that I passed all of them except for one; the fact that it took me five to six tries you know that was a personal thing I was kind of upset.
Lead Speaker: Was the test prep class and marathon beneficial to you?

Participant #50: Oh yeah, yeah, especially for science. The test prep class at first I was like that was the waste of a credit because we could be taking another class to hurry up and graduate but if we didn’t take that test prep class I don’t think that I would have passed the science part. The marathon helped us because we got to play different games, we got to define words, and find little ways to remember these scientific words and remember how to solve problems so I think it was very beneficial.

Participant #1: I also believe it was beneficial because I didn’t pass science until I took the test prep so I do think it did help so those extra two or three classes did help.

Lead Speaker: How do you define parent participation? What does parent participation mean to you?

Participant #50: Well parent participation to me is your parent is involved in helping you in trying to reach your final goals, which is graduating and passing all parts of the Georgia High School Graduation test. With your parents involvement it is someone giving you an extra step up saying you can do it; even if you fail, don’t give up keep trying. Your parent participation is very beneficial also.

Participant #1: Parent participation doesn’t necessarily have to mean that the parent has to come to the school; it could mean that a parent talks to the child at home. I mean parent participation is very important and at the same time some students who don’t have parent participation it pushes them a lot more because they have to do it on their own.

Lead Speaker: How important is your parent or guardian participation as it relates to your success in high school?

Participant #50: My parent’s participation is really; I would have to say they have helped me through a whole lot during my high school years; even though I felt like I couldn’t do it any more they still pushed me and motivated me to get what I needed to get to graduate from high school so that I could have a better life and a better education for me and my little girl.
Appendix C (continued)

1:      I didn’t have any parent participation but at the same time I still came out on top by myself.

Lead Speaker: Do you believe that peer pressure exists? If so how have your peers influenced you as it relates to your success or regress in high school?

50:     I think that yes peer pressure really does exist. Sometimes when you are at a new school you kind of want to fit it and be with the kids who you think are cool and they kind of say, like hey come on come skip class with me or lets go to the store and being that McLaren is an alternative school there are ways for you to walk out and go to the store when you should be in the class learning but instead of being in class learning yes I think peer pressure really does exist it is just up to us to choose whether we want to be friends with people or we want to get our education.

1:      Yes, that sums it up.

50:     Same answer, he gave the same answer.

Lead Speaker: Okay than you. Do you feel as though the people who work here at the alternative school care about you? Is your relationship with school employees important to you? Why?

50:     Yes I did because I am very – I like to interact with everyone and do stuff join clubs and just speak to everybody from the front office to the back; like the janitors, everyone. – Especially the principal, I like talking to the principal because she gave me good advice and she helped me when I was in trouble and needed her advice on certain things. The relationship with all the employees at Frank McLaren was very important because each person in their own way shared a certain part of them to me as in like my teachers; my teachers gave me things that I needed when it came down to education. If I didn’t understand I always went to my teachers and they didn’t treat me like oh well you don’t know you are dumb they actually gave me like hands on activities to try to explain things to me. The staff members that are in the front office, the counselor’s office I always came to them and said hey, spoke to them. I always like to maintain a good healthy relationship with everyone inside of the office as well as the janitors and the lunch lady, it is very important to me.
Appendix C (continued)

1: I do believe that because the staff at the Alternative cared really cared because they made it seem that it wasn’t and alternative school. It really made you forget that you were in an alternative school. I did forget that I was in an alternative school and I do like the fact that teachers made the atmosphere seem better than it actually was.

Lead Speaker: Describe your teacher’s methods of instruction and attitude toward you. What I mean by method of instruction is was it hands on, did she just stand and lecture, did she interact with the class room. So describe the teacher’s method of instruction and their attitude toward you and refrain from using names, just say one of the teachers.

50: Okay. Well when I was high school most teachers or some teachers did just stand up, talk, then go sit down and you just do your work down and some teachers more than others would give us a little exercise, like hands on exercise or they would stand up there and continue talk about the subject until everybody got it before they handed you your class work. I would say a lot of the teachers were hands on but some would just stand up in front of the class and talk and then go sit down and expect you to know what to do.

1: The teachers that I had gave us packets. It was a packet class so most of the things that were in the packets were really commonsense but if we had any problems with anything in the packet, the teacher would take time out of her schedule and go over it with the whole class, not just one student. Just in case another student had the same particular question and we would have. So I do believe that the method of that teaching were ok and on point.

Lead Speaker: So how did you feel about their attitude toward you?

50: Some teachers their attitudes were as if you need me and I don’t need you and if you fail it’s because you failed on your own, not because I helped you but in reality it’s because of the lack of teaching that they were doing. And some teachers their attitude was I’m not going to give up on you and I am going to keep pushing you and pushing you because I know that you are not stupid, I know that you can do it. And if you don’t do it I am going to call your parents.
Appendix C (continued)

1: It was a calm attitude. Neither one of the teachers that I had had a bad attitude. So it seemed like they cared.

Lead Speaker: What characteristics of this school that has helped you attain success? What was it about this alternative school that helped you?

Female Speaker: I think because even though it was an alternative school and it wasn’t as big as other schools I think personally that because it was a smaller school and it wasn’t so many people there it kind of helped you to like stay focused. It kind of was like well you know why you are over here; you are over here so let’s get it and let’s go. Don’t play around and don’t mess around with everybody else, and it’s not a lot of people here, there are not a lot of people in your class room so it was more hands on activity and more one on one time with your teachers. It kind of helps you in the end because you will be successful.

Male Speaker: What I believe is that it’s not really the school, it’s the kids and how they react to the work and how they react to being around other people. I only had three classes but while I was there it was how you reacted to them. So if you felt like you were in a bad environment then you are going to act like you are in a bad environment, if you felt like you were in a good environment then you would act like you were in a good environment. So it all depends on the student.

Lead Speaker: Have you discussed your plans after high school with anyone at school? What did you discuss and did these discussions motivate you to want to graduate from high school?

Female Speaker: Yes, I discussed a lot of things with my counselor. Every now and then the principal would be like so what are you going to do; you know graduation is coming up how are your plans going? I would discuss it with the principal. And you do have staff members that would ask you, you know like the people in the office, your teachers, they would be like so what are your plans, graduation is coming up what school are you going to go to? And they would ask do you need help with your application; do you need me to write a letter of recommendation? And they would help you to get whatever you needed to get to follow your dreams. That is what they were there for, so they helped you.
Participant 1: They gave very much encouragement. One particular teacher I didn’t have her as a teacher but I believe she’s the reason why I was accepted in Atlanta Tech so I mean it’s real they encouraged you to do a lot and they asked a lot of questions like she was saying. They, you know, wanted you to do well. They would come to you before you would go to them. So I did like it.

Lead Speaker: Okay. What is the difference between the previous school that you attended and the alternative school?

Participant 50: Well McLaren is way different, I mean way different from West Lake. The difference is West Lake had a whole whole lot of people; sometimes there isn’t even enough books for everybody to have a book. The lunch lines that they served special food that you could buy and regular food you have to give so that is what they had in common. The only difference is, I would say, is the population, and by population I mean the students. Because McLaren has good teachers just like West Lake has good teachers but the only difference is that it is a smaller school and it has a lot less people there. So that was the difference in my opinion.

Participant 1: Truthfully the only difference that I see is the method of teaching. But as far as the children, the students are concerned it’s the same. But the teaching is different, like the teachers at McLaren cared more than other high schools.

Lead Speaker: Is there anything you all would like to share with me in regards to attending this alternative school? Is there anything else that we haven’t discussed that you want to share, you have the chance.

Female Speaker: I don’t have any bad experiences. When I first got there I really didn’t like the principal because she was so hard on me. But as time went on and I started maturing and I started listening to her, I was like okay you know she makes sense. She knows what she is talking about but other than that I was very active in the school. I did everything and I knew everybody. So, I had a good time at McLaren high school. And I graduated.

Male Speaker: I had a good time because I only had two classes. But as far as like discipline I didn’t really need it because of my previous years of discipline. So this was like the only school that I can say came to that (inaudible 8:31) that I went to and did not get suspended not one time.
Lead Speaker: Would you recommend or encourage other students to attend? Why or why not?

Female Speaker: Yes, I actually would because even though when people say alternative school they just automatically think that oh that’s the bad school. People go to that school for their own reasons, it’s not because you got kicked out or you can’t get into another school; some people just want to go to that kind of school. So I just say like if you really want to get your work done get down to it get out of high school graduate have people, teachers and staff members behind you that will help you even when you get out of high school they are still there for you. I say go to the alternative school.

Participant 1: I say it’s not really an alternative school.

Participant 50: It’s really not. It’s really not.

Participant 1: I don’t know why people call it an alternative school. To me it’s really more like an Open Campus. Like she stated it’s not like everybody got sent there. I went there on my own will just because another student told me how the system works and it’s a really good school. It’s a way to catch up and get out of school on time, if not early. Depending on your skills and how you work. I believe if I would have went to ……earlier, I would have graduated on time.

Participant 50: Yep

Session 2

Lead Speaker: Today is Wednesday November 4th, 2009; Interview with #50, #39 #46.

Okay question number one do you think your Georgia High School Graduation Test scores encouraged you to stay in school?

Male Speaker: Yes.

Female Speaker: Yes.

Female Speaker: Yes.

Lead Speaker: Why? What makes you say yes?
Male Speaker: If I had failed it the first time I probably wouldn’t even be going back to school.

Lead Speaker: Anyone want to add anything; why did they say yes? Did your score encourage you to stay in school?

Female Speaker: I would say yes because just knowing that I failed something is not a good feeling, I wanted to know that I passed.

Lead Speaker: How did you feel when you received your scores?

Male Speaker: Good

Female Speaker: Sad.

Female Speaker: I was excited.

Lead Speaker: Was the test prep class and marathon beneficial to you?

Male Speaker: No.

Female Speaker: Yes.

Lead Speaker: Okay yes. I want you to tell me why you said yes and then you are going to tell me why you said no.

Male Speaker: Right now?

Lead Speaker: Right now.

Male Speaker: I said no because I really didn’t learn anything because I wasn’t listening, that’s why I said no.

Lead Speaker: Okay, and what about you?

Female Speaker: I mean they put it into games and made it better instead if reading off paper.

Female Speaker: I never did the marathon but I enjoyed the classes.
Appendix C (continued)

Lead Speaker: How do you define parent participation? What does parent participation mean to you?

Male Speaker: My mom and dad coming to the school (inaudible 2:26)

Lead Speaker: How important is your parent or guardian participation as it relates to your success in high school?

Female Speaker: It means a lot to me because I think that if my mother didn’t encourage me, I wouldn’t have tried to do something (inaudible 2:54)

Lead Speaker: Does anyone else want to answer the question, how important is your parent or guardian participation as it relates to your success in high school.

Male Speaker: I would say if my mom didn’t wake me up for school I would still be asleep.

Lead Speaker: Do you believe that peer pressure exists? If so how have your peers influenced you in relation to your success in high school?

Male Speaker: I would say it do because when I first started going to McClarin my partner was like don’t go in there playing because you want get out. I went up there playing for a little bit...

Female Speaker: In some people but not in me.

Lead Speaker: Do you feel as though the people who work here at the alternative school care about you? Is your relationship with school employees important to you? Why?

Female Speaker: I would say yes.

Female Speaker: I would say yes.

Male Speaker: I would say yes.

Lead Speaker: Was that relationship that you had with the employees important?

Male Speaker: Yes.

Lead Speaker: Why was it important?
Appendix C (continued)

Male Speaker: Because when you have people on your side at the school (inaudible 5:02)

Lead Speaker: Describe your teachers’ methods of instruction and attitude towards you?

Female Speaker: My teacher never gave up.

Lead Speaker: And how did they instruct you, did they stand in front of the class and lecture or were they hands on assignment?

Female Speaker: It was pretty much both.

Lead Speaker: Are you going to pass on this question?

Male Speaker: Yes.

Lead Speaker: What about you?

Female Speaker: I think I am too.

Lead Speaker: What characteristics of this alternative school helped you attain success? What was it about the school that helped you?

Female Speaker: (inaudible 6:04)

Lead Speaker: Did you discuss your plans after high school with anyone at school? What did you discuss and did these discussions motivate you to want to graduate from high school? So did you discuss your plans with anybody at the school?

Female Speaker: Yes

Lead Speaker: And did those discussions motivate you to hurry up and graduate?

Male Speaker: Yes.

Lead Speaker: Why do you all say yes?

Male Speaker: I already want to go to college; that is what everybody says that they are going in to college; I want to go to college even though I don’t like school.
Appendix C (continued)

Lead Speaker: What is the different between the schools you previously attended before the alternative school? What’s the difference in those two schools?

Female Speaker: The school that I attended before the alternative school, some of the teachers at my first school didn’t really sit down and talk to me and tell me, to make me better understand how to work. The teachers at the alternative school really sat me down and talked to me and you know helped me and told me how it works and told me what you were suppose to do.

Female Speaker: My classes were too long and then I never really had a communication with the teacher; that is another thing better at an alternative school.

Male Speaker: I just didn’t like the school where I was; I got suspended for every little thing so when I went to McClarin it started to change.

Lead Speaker: Is there anything you all would like to share with me in regards to your experience attending the alternative school that I did not ask you? Something that you want to share off the top of your head or something that you want to get off your chest.

Female Speaker: No.

Male Speaker: Well once every body got to know me...everybody was pretty nice to me.

Lead Speaker: Who is everyone?

Male Speaker: I thought we were not supposed to say a name.

Female Speaker: I mean you can mention their profession to say (inaudible 8:41-9:08)

Lead Speaker: Would you recommend or encourage other students to attend the alternative school and Why? Yes why, why would you recommend them?

Female Speaker: I would say no because the alternative school is not really where you are suppose to be. You’re supposed to be in regular high school, so if you go to an alternative school that means you weren’t doing something in your regular high school. But it is a
good school I am not going to say that it was a bad school. But when you go there you have to be on top of your work.

Lead Speaker: Why did you say yes that you would encourage someone to go?

Female Speaker: Because some people go to alternative schools for different reasons, I went because they had good day care and I guess that’s why I because you have no other school.

Lead Speaker: #50 would you recommend or encourage other students to attend the alternative school and Why?

Male Speaker: It pretty much puts you on the right track and that’s why I came; Because I wasn’t on track. Well I was on track but it was my last year and my mother didn’t think that I was going to graduate.

Lead Speaker: So what was the result?

Male Speaker: I graduated.

Lead Speaker: With your class?

Male Speaker: Yes with my class

Lead Speaker: Okay. Do you have anything else to say? No? Alright that concludes our focus group interview.
APPENDIX D

Leadership Team Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Jacinta N. Tolliver

Interviewees: Building Principal, Graduation Coach and Head Counselor

Length of Service to the School: BP________, GC________, HC________

* * * * *

1. Describe the current method of measuring success of alternative high schools as determined by the state to meet Adequate Yearly Progress.

2. Dropout rates and graduation rates are reported to the U.S. Department of Education each year. Are those measures accurate measurements of the success of the alternative school? Why or why not?

3. What other measures do you believe will paint a clear picture of the results you would like to show?

4. Approximately, how many students have completed high school in the last three years?

5. What educational factors have attributed to their success?

6. What evidence can you demonstrate to convey the successes of the alternative school?

7. How has your leadership improved the alternative school?

8. Has there been any resistance to change?

9. If so, how did you address resistance to change?

10. What other improvements would you make to increase the number of students who graduate from this alternative school?
APPENDIX E

Responses to Leadership Team Interview Questions

Session 1

Head Counselor: Thank you Ms. Toliver for choosing me to interview for your research.

Lead Speaker: Describe the current method of measuring success of alternative high schools as determined by the state to meet Adequate Yearly Progress.

Head Counselor: Well it is my understanding that the State mainly looks at is our graduation rate for the alternative school. Because here at McLaren we don’t have any sub groups. So, basically look at the graduation rate and GHSGT scores for first time test takers.

Lead Speaker: Dropout rates and graduation rates are reported to the U.S. Department of Education each year. Are those measures accurate measurements of the success of the alternative school? Why or why not?

Head Counselor: They pull up the data to look at the graduation rate. When they look at the graduation rate, they pull the number of students

Lead Speaker: Okay dropout rates and graduation rates are reported to the U.S. Department of Education are those accurate measurements of the alternative school, when those rates are used to determine if the alternative school is doing well?

Female speaker: Well I think that you have to look at the pure facts and not forget what is important because it’s my understanding that the state looks at the total enrollment of seniors that enrolled for that year and then look at the percentage of those that are finished. If we look at our data of this year we had a total number of three hundred and thirty nine students enrolled as seniors, however out of that three hundred and thirty nine we had one hundred and ten to withdraw. So out of that number some of them went to other
schools, some went to private schools and so forth and so on; so actually we have a total number of two hundred and twenty nine students that actually stayed with us, stayed on the roll and out of that two hundred and twenty nine we had one hundred and forty three to graduate which is 52%, we can look at that number. So it’s a success if you look at it that way. However the state pulls the data and they are going to look at the total of three hundred and thirty nine and looks at the number out of those. But our graduation rate is increasing at McLaren because for 2005 we had a 13.5 percent graduate rate and it is now up to 2008 and 09 we have 42%. So that it an increase and I think that McLaren is successful because of the students an alternative setting to complete high school and the requirements which we actually look at and are using.

Lead Speaker: What other measures do you believe will paint a clear picture of the results you would like to show?

Head Counselor: I would like to just look at the pure numbers of those that have actually stayed with us, not those that come to school (inaudible 4:26) so the students are in and out, in and out. And if you look at those numbers, if you look at the students that come to us and actually stay with us we have in December graduation we graduated over 60 students and in May we had over 80 so to me that is an accomplishment. And it is showing that the teachers, faculty and staff at McLaren are dedicated to the students. Because if not then the otherwise the students would probably drop out.

Lead Speaker: Approximately, how many students have completed this Alternative school in the last three years?

Head Counselor: In the last three years, this is my first time here at McLaren so from the 2006 school year to the 2008 school year we have had about a 19 point percentage increase of those numbers of students to graduate. So that is outstanding.

Lead Speaker: What educational factors have attributed to the success of the students?

Head Counselor: Well I think that the students come to us, they seem to be more focused they realize that in these economic times that they do have to have a high school diploma. And also the faculty and staff and administration at McLaren, we put our hearts into the work that we
do here along with the graduation coach we put our hearts into the educational practice because we know that these students are here for a purpose. The other thing is that in order to get a high school diploma you must pass our Georgia High School Graduation test. At which time a completion of a mandatory prep class. That has helped in helping these students as well in passing the graduation test requirement.

Lead Speaker: What evidence can you demonstrate to convey the successes of the Alternative school?

Head Counselor: I think that you can just look at the graduation rate and how it is increasing. And the number of students that are coming to us shows us clearly that it is a success and maybe it is a sign that the program in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution where they always are having articles about the Atlanta dropout rate and on the flip side we are here serving that need.

Lead Speaker: How has your leadership improved the alternative school?

Head Counselor: I think that has to do with a positive attitude and a willingness to work, a willingness to take the students where they are and to be nonjudgmental. Because we do have students that come with a lot of life situations, which they could very well have given up but I think that the positive attitude, the leadership working with the students showing that they really care, working with the faculty and staff has really made a difference.

Lead Speaker: Has there been any resistance to change? If so, how did you address resistance to change?

Head Counselor: No. I think that the facility here and the students here are open minded and are willing to embrace change if it would benefit the needs of the students.

Lead Speaker: What other improvements would you make to increase the number of students who graduate from this alternative school?

Head Counselor: I think that we have to do a better job of publicizing what we do and marketing our program right now I do go visit the high schools two or three times a year to talk to the parents and the students, I think that the high schools need to do more marketing and let the
community know what we do. I think that that would improve our turn over.

Lead Speaker: Thank you very much for your time and I do appreciate your comments. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Head Counselor: I just want to say that as the head counselor at McLaren for the very first year it has been the most rewarding experience for me in working with the students that come to McLaren. One of the most touching stories was a young man came to me, he will be 20 in August the first graduate in his entire family from high school. And to me those types of stories and to seeing the teen moms get off the train every morning and come to us on Marta shows the dedication that they have in turns the faculty and staff with their hearts into it and what I see here is a heart thing.

Session 2

Lead Speaker: Describe the current method of measuring success of alternative high schools as determined by the state to meet Adequate Yearly Progress.

Graduation Coach The State right now looks at senior students that enter at the same time, do four years and a summer they are considered on track graduation. Then we look at past failure rate; graduation test. All of that goes into your current graduates. AYP means, in order to meet AYP you have to have students who are first time test taker take the graduation test, past the graduation test at the right time and the right test. The other thing they look at is withdrawal or drop out rate; those students that leave and don’t show up anywhere else are considered drop outs, those students that leave and go to a GED program are considered drop outs, those students that are incarcerated rated but do not show up in the penal systems educational program are considered drop outs. All of those come back to meet our drop out rate, oh, and Special Ed; all of the students that receive a Special Ed diploma are also considered drop outs, those students that receive certificate of attendance are also considered drop outs and they get AYP, adequate yearly progress.

Lead Speaker: Dropout rates and graduation rates are reported to the U.S. Department of Education each year. Are those measures accurate measurements of the success of the alternative school? Why or why not?
Appendix E (continued)

Graduation Coach: No, they are not. In an alternative school such as ours, we are considered opened campus primarily credit recovery. By the time the student gets to this school they are already beyond the four years in the summer, most of them have failed the graduation test one or more times so that automatically puts us in the category of not being AYP, oh and GED, we have older students; if you get a student that’s nineteen, twenty years old and have less than 15 credits you are at high risk of dropping out, so we look at GED as being a viable alternative for that age group. The way the statues are right now that child is being considered a drop out. What I would like to do is look at for an alternative school such as our, an open campus such as ours look at those that come in, those that successfully complete a program our program or GED and they are well on their way to work. That could be GED or that could be a high school diploma. That is what I would like to see happen.

Lead Speaker: What other measures do you believe will paint a clear picture of the results you would like to show?

Graduation Coach: Pretty much what I said now lets look at the GED component lets look at those kids that have already dinged somebody else’s, Creekside or Banneker’s AYP which works against us; my fifth year seniors we need to count those. Go retroactively and count those students as they graduate from here also those students that receive a certificate of attendance come back to the school and either finally past the graduation test or we get a variance for them, variance or waiver for them because ultimately they get a high school diploma but nobody is tracking those numbers.

Lead Speaker: Approximately, how many students have completed high school in the last three years? This high school.

Graduation Coach: Approximately say give or take 120 each year so say about 360.

Lead Speaker: What educational factors have attributed to their success?

Graduation Coach: Let’s look at for us the smaller classrooms, the individualized attention and that highly subjective component of a caring adult somebody actually taking an interest in students whereabouts, the students performance just that component, that human component, that is our strongest element.
Appendix E (continued)

Lead Speaker: What evidence can you demonstrate to convey the successes of the Alternative school?

Graduation Coach: We can look at the numbers, the retention of those students that come in. At the beginning of the year we may start off with 350 kids, of those 350 lets look at those kids that have senior status or obtain senior status within that time, they are coming in with ten credits at the end of the year how many of those kids have earned 7-1/2 meaning they stayed the entire year, how many have gone on to earn a high school diploma or GED those are the things that we need to look at.

Lead Speaker: How has your leadership improved the alternative school?

Graduation Coach: I wouldn’t exactly say my leadership. I have always been a good worker bee; I am a good little Indian. Most times I am good at jumping in and doing what needs to be done, I am good at accessing the situation and truly sensing what is going on and trying to put my finger in the dam and stop the leak.

Lead Speaker: Has there been any resistance to change? If so, how did you address resistance to change?

Graduation Coach: I have gotten some push back on some things and it’s primarily teachers perceiving extra work that they have to do. One case in particular was the winning word, we would have a word of the day that was defined and I wanted the teachers to kind of incorporate it through the day, give some credit and it kind of fell flat; it didn’t get one hundred percent buy on. The other component, we do it every year but I am still disappointed with the response. When we do the college fair I get a student in to survey the students so they can come down to the college fair. I ask the teacher to give credit and kind of push this as college week and I don’t get the kind of buy in that I would like.

Lead Speaker: [Inaudible]

Graduation Coach: I try to do what we do in the school, personally touch. Go and talk to the teachers, go and plead my case passively as opposed to aggressively. Has it been successful, probably not; but I also see the aggressive touch hasn’t really helped either. I haven’t been able to find a solution.
Appendix E (continued)

Lead Speaker: What other improvements would you make to increase the number of students who graduate from this alternative school?

Graduation Coach: I would reestablish the GED program making it more of a true classroom environment, true learning environment the other thing that I would do is to look at when and why we remove students from schools making sure that all of – we have holes – we have a lot of holes in our school system I would like to bridge the holes, seal up the holes that is I think our schools have capabilities to graduate a lot more than we do but because of the holes that we have a lot of kids are falling through the cracks.

Lead Speaker: Thank you very much. Is there anything else that you would like to say?

Graduation Coach: No.

Session 3

1. Describe the current method of measuring success as determined by the state to meet Adequate Yearly Progress. Graduation rate, Percentage of 1st Time Test Takers who take the GHSGT, Percentage of Students enrolled in 9th grade who take the GHSGT, pass it, percentage of advance scores, honors, and the number of students who take & pass the writing test.

2. Dropout rates and graduation rates are reported to the U.S. Department of Education each year. Are those measures accurate measurements for this alternative school? No! Why or why not? Students who attend high school for more than four years and one summer are considered fifth year seniors. These students count against the school because they are not contributing to the financial gains of FTE. Each child is given four years and one summer to complete high school. Therefore, any students who is credit deficient and does not have enough earned credits to be classified as a senior and has exceeded the four years and one summer counts against the graduation rate. Many students who are older than 17 and have not earned credits over 10-16 credits do not wish to attend high school. They realize that they need to advance themselves at this point and will elect to attend a GED or Job Corp Program. This decision creates a drop-out situation and instantly counts negatively against the school and the school system. It is counterproductve to not offer students an alternative option to a high school diploma in an Alternative School setting. The big picture should consist of students earning an education even if it is in a non-traditional manner.
Appendix E (continued)

3. What other measures do you believe will paint a clear picture of the results you would like to show? The number of students who successfully complete a diploma program, GED, Job Corp, and or Youth Challenge. I would also like to see students with the option of taking their classes online via the Alternative School. This would help those students who have the responsibility of families, babies, and or caring for elderly grandparents. Additionally, it would help those students who can not afford to pay the high rates for transportation to and from school. This would allow a student with a computer the option to work from home and meet possibly monthly or weekly with a counselor to ensure that they are on task. Students enrolled in an Alternative Program should be allowed to be enrolled in a program in lieu of being considered a student in a school. For the sake of non-traditional options and waivers from the State this would allow the schools flexibility to offer students differentiated options to graduation.

4. Approximately, how many students have completed high school in the last three years?

5. What educational factors have attributed to their success?

6. What evidence can you show to convey the success of this Alternative school?

7. How has your leadership improved this school since you have been here?
   a. Increased the number of graduates
   b. Increased the number of students attending post-secondary
   c. Added teacher taught classes, maintained the independent modules for students who can work independently.
   d. Added Plato for credit accrual & credit recovery
   e. Added Chemistry and Spanish so students could continue to work on the College Prep Track for graduation
   f. Added SAT Prep
   g. Introduced and added the GHSGT PREP class and incorporated it into the regular school day by adding ninety minutes onto the regular school day
   h. Made GHSGT PREP mandatory for all students who have not passed the GHSGT
Appendix E (continued)

i. Introduced and added the GHSGT Marathon for all students who have not passed the test. This takes place the week before the test and all departments are involved teaching and working with students to assist with any last minute questions or concerns about specific content areas.

j. Incorporated the Principals Book Club. We read meaningful and relevant information that will help students make sound choices throughout their lives. We teach not only to make a living but to make a life.

8. Was there any resistance to change? Yes!

9. If so, how did you address resistance to change? Continued to work with those who were resistant and show them that progress was and will always be a part of the school. I sent teachers to workshops, provided training, developed a Leadership Team, held meetings with departments, set expectations, engaged the staff, and allowed them to grow.

10. What other improvements would you make to increase the number of students who graduate from this alternative school? I would establish housing for needy students, expand the child care center, increase the number of computer generated classes for our students, provide resources for transportation and make students accountable for the finances given to them; having them involved in mandatory community service projects. Students would not have to pay for the classes they need to graduate if they turned 21 years old before they finished their course work. I would have an evening program set up just like the day program with staff working swing shifts. Instead of LSAC (Local School Advisory) I would have a student advisory. Students would be engaged, involved, and their work requirements would consist of gaining entrance and acceptance to a two or four year program, project based portfolios, presentations, interview skills, dress for success, social decorum, and a lot of emphasis placed on social and emotional stability and support.
APPENDIX F

Consent Letter

May 19, 2009

Ms. Principal
Metro Atlanta Alternative School
100 Excellence Lane
Atlanta GA 30000

Dear ________________:

I am interested in conducting a mixed methods case study which evaluates the educational factors that have a significant impact on the graduation outcome of students attending an alternative school. The participation of students, principal, graduation coach and assistant superintendent of support services is key and required in this study. Their contributions will be strictly voluntary. I will obtain written permission from students and their parents or guardians prior to surveying and interviewing them. I will keep the identity of individual students confidential. I am most willing to sign a confidentiality agreement agreeing not to disclose personally identifiable information about students.

As the primary researcher, I will collect and analyze all data. You will receive a final report setting out the findings and conclusions of the study within six months of the study. I believe my study is beneficial and appropriate to the school system and students who find it challenging to obtain a high school diploma. Your support in my effort to conduct this study is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Chair of my committee, Dr. Noran Moffett, Clark Atlanta University Educational Leadership Professor at 404.880.6015. Please do not hesitate to contact me if necessary.

Thank you kindly,

Jacinta NaTaki Toliver
Graduate Student
Clark Atlanta University
404.593.6899

Principal’s Signature and Date of Approval

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