

Evaluation of Student Attrition in an Alternative School Setting

by  
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An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Fischler School of Education and Human Services  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Nova Southeastern University  
2007

## Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Janel L. Johnson under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to Fischler School of Education and Human Services and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, none of this would have been possible without my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Through this journey, I have been so blessed to meet some very, loving, kind and God-fearing people (and for that I am grateful). However, completing this dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of my family. To my husband, Lynn, “I love you” and am grateful that we had the same vision! Also, to my babies; Joshua, Jalen, and Jalea, “Mommy loves you and I hope that you all understand anything is possible if you pray and keep your eyes on the prize!”

To my brother, Robert, and sister, Phelica; “Thanks for allowing me to vent when the days were longer than I chose for them to be; you never let me down.” Mom and Dad, I appreciate the encouragement. And, to my brother, Specialist Charles E. Odums, II, (R.I.P.), there is not a day, hour, or second, that I don’t think of you, “I love you always and I do know that you were with me during those long nights, when I was missing you so much!”

To my support team, my dissertation chair, Dr. Bevan; thank you for all of your constant positive guidance and feedback, I am not sure if I could have done this without you! Also, thank you to Dr. Nicole Pollino; I am very grateful to you for your feedback and the quick turnaround time that you practiced with reviewing my papers. Dr. Davis and his staff at the study site, this would be a lost cause without you; I want to thank you for giving me the “welcome mat” and for allowing me to call you three times a day and probably at least three times a week or more. You are a true godsend and a great means of support.

## Abstract

Evaluation of Student Attrition in an Alternative School Setting. Johnson, Janel L., 2007: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Fischler School of Education and Human Services. Student Attrition/Alternative Schools/Attendance/School Dropouts/Parent Involvement

This applied dissertation was designed to help reduce student attrition in the alternative school setting. In the past few school years, dropout rates for students in this setting have revealed an increase in student attrition at the identified school. The selected school had a graduation rate below that of the state and district averages.

There were 5 research questions that guided this study:

1. What factors directly contribute to student attrition in this alternative setting?
2. Why did previous students drop out and what are their regrets, if any, for leaving school?
3. Are students that dropped out of school pursuing or have they obtained a General Education Diploma or their type of education currently, and why; and what factors would they attribute to their overall success?
4. What recommendations can be made to reduce student attrition in the alternative setting?
5. How can the school increase parent involvement to assist in decreasing the overall dropout rate?

A goal of this study was to identify causal factors of student attrition and to examine the rationale of students who are dropping out of the alternative school. Several national studies concerning student attrition have been conducted and, as a result of these studies, a lack of community concern was highlighted as well as the low education of many parents. Poor school attendance; lack of support, and guidance from the family; little or no interpersonal relationships between youth and their peers, teachers, adults, and family members; and involvement in negative activities hinder students' decision to drop out of school. Thus, such an environment promotes a poorly educated community that opens the door for many criminal elements to evolve.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

A lack of graduating seniors and unproductive youth is affecting a small, rural alternative school in southwest Georgia. The alternative school is experiencing increasing dropout rates and nonexistent graduating seniors as well. According to Powell (2003), programs were often designed to address disruptive and school-avoidant behaviors with the goal of reducing the dropout rate.

Alternative schools exist to educate, mentor, and provide behavior modification programs for those youth in the community that have been otherwise unsuccessful in traditional school settings. Sekayi (2001) suggested,

The term *alternative education* evokes a variety of responses from different perspectives. This variety implies that there is a belief in more than one effective way to educate children. Alternative suggests an approach different from the "norm." The term is often connected with delinquent children. (p. 414)

Foley and Pang (2006) wrote that "the student population appears to be mostly high school students with a large portion of students identified as disabled" (p. 10). However, students with and without disabilities are dropping out of school at high numbers.

Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) stated that "the decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student, particularly in a postindustrial and technological age in which workers need at least a high school diploma to compete in the workforce" (p. i). It is also known that dropouts are more likely than other students who graduate to be unemployed, impoverished, receiving public assistance, in prison, in poor health, divorced and single parents with children who merely repeat the cycle. Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2004) explained,

Dropouts are defined as students leaving school for the first time prior to receiving high school certification. They are further classified as temporary if by age 22 they had received a high school diploma or GED [General Education Diploma]; otherwise, they are classified as permanent. Most dropouts (77%) first

left school before the end of the Year 12 (Age 18), but another 15% dropped out in Year 13 (Age 19), another 7% in Year 14 (Age 20), and another 1% after that. (p. 1187)

The desire to reduce high school dropout rates has been an ongoing issue for school administrators over the years. Kemp (as cited in Thompson-Hoffman & Hayward, 1990) stated that dropout rates for students with disabilities was not seriously addressed until 1990 when the Office of Special Education Programs required states to report on how many of these students were leaving school prior to graduation. It is evident that students with disabilities are at a much higher risk of dropping out of school than students without disabilities and every effort must be made school wide to increase school completion rates.

The consequences of early school dropouts reverberate throughout the community and, ultimately, students who drop out suffer, as does their future, families, and tax-paying individuals. Early school departure has been a prominent national issue for the last 2 decades (Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

#### *Description of the Organization*

The school selected for this research is an alternative school located in rural southwest Georgia. Currently, this school has approximately 230 students with a total of six programs that meet the needs of students from the local area. Students attending school in this alternative setting are from culturally diverse neighborhoods. From a socioeconomic standpoint, the individuals in this area range from primarily low- to middle-income-class families. The alternative program serves a small, but diverse population of students ranging from kindergarten to Grade 5 through high school-aged students. Staff at the school consists of a total of 12 regular education teachers, 2 certified special education teachers, 3 paraprofessionals, 1 secretary and office manager, 1 school



counselor, 1 in-school suspension coordinator, 1 school principal and, 2 school resource officers. It is the goal of the school to address both behavioral and academic issues, while creating student growth.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The dropout rate has become a major source of concern for administration and staff at the school. According to the school's principal, the average daily attendance was approximately 79%. In addition, data obtained from the alternative school indicates that dropout rate for the 2005-2006 school year, was 35%; at least 13% of these students were identified as special education students. In the previous school year, the dropout rate was 53%. During the 2003-2004 school year, it was reported at 49%. Graduation rates were not much better. In the 2005-2006 school year, only 19 students graduated, including 1 student who was identified as a special education student. The school was perplexed as to how to best address this issue and has not had much direction as to how to decrease the overall dropout rate. A study of students at the school was designed to assist the school in designing a program to maintaining good student attendance and, ultimately, preparing students for graduation.

### *Background and Significance*

The significance of the problem was that this school suffers from a large number of dropouts and data indicated that there was a growing problem. The dropout rates over the past few years suggested that the school has been ineffective in its mission to provide students with an alternative route to graduation. On the state level, data provided by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement indicated for the 2005-2006 school year, 4.7% of the state's students in Grades 9 through 12 failed to complete school. However, federal data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that in

2004, there was a total 10.3% of the high school students between the ages of 16 year and 24 years failed to remain in school until graduation. The goal of this study was to assist the school by providing information and recommendations that could be used to develop a plan that would help students achieve the goal of graduation.

### *Purpose of the Project*

The purpose of this project was to identify causal factors of student attrition and to assist the district with recommendations that can be used to develop programs to reduce the dropout rates in the school. The study also looked at ways the school could increase parent participation at the school and develop a home-school link among students, parents and the school itself.

### *Research Questions*

This research will seek to answer the five research questions:

1. What factors directly contribute to student attrition in this alternative setting?
2. Why did previous students drop out and what are their regrets, if any, for leaving school?
3. Are students who dropped out of school pursuing, or have they obtained a General Education Diploma (GED) or their type of education currently, and why? What factors would they attribute to their overall success?
4. What recommendations can be made to reduce student attrition in the alternative setting?
5. How can the school increase parent involvement to assist in decreasing the overall dropout rate?

### *Outcomes*

Four outcomes were anticipated through this research. The first was to determine

the average number of students truant from school on a daily basis and why. The next was to determine how school administrators could better address the issue of attrition. The third was to develop recommendations the school and district could use to design an intensive plan to address attrition rates at the school. The last was to determine the best way to increase and then maintain parental support. This information provided the foundation the school and district needed to develop a comprehensive plan to decrease the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate for this alternative school.

### *Definition of Terms*

The following terms are defined for clarity in this study.

*Alternative schools* are schools set up by states or school districts to serve a population of students who are not succeeding in the traditional public school environment and offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities (LD) or behavioral problems an opportunity to achieve in a different setting. These schools are often characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher:student ratios, and modified curricula ("Online Glossary of Terms," 2007).

*Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)* is a statewide accountability system mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 which requires each state to ensure that all schools and districts make positive strides and gains throughout the school year as outlined by the state superintendent's office.

*At-risk* is a general set of presumed cause and effect dynamics that place the child or adolescent in danger of negative future events (Mc Whirter, Mc Whirter, Mc Whirter, & Mc Whirter, 1998).

*Dropouts* is a term that refers to students who leave school for the first time prior to receiving high school certification.

*Exceptional student education* is a form of designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.

*Family empowerment* refers to families increasing their knowledge about resources needed to achieve desired outcomes (Hwa-Kim & Morningstar, 2005).

*Grade retention* is the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that level for a subsequent school year.

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP)* is a plan developed for special education students related to the students' strengths and needs; in need areas, their present levels of performance, goals and objectives relative to performance standards and the general curriculum, and the extent of participation in and accommodations within the natural environment (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

*Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)* is a federal law enacted in 1990 and reauthorized in 1997. It is designed to protect the rights of students with disabilities by ensuring that everyone receives a free appropriate public education, regardless of ability. Furthermore, IDEA strives not only to grant equal access to students with disabilities, but also to provide additional special education services and procedural safeguards (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

*Marginalization* is the practice of excluding a social group from the mainstream of the society, placing that group--legally or socially--on the margins of the society (Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, & Powers, 2007).

The *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001*. NCLB is a landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of America's schools. The Act contained four basic educational reform principals: (a) stronger accountability for results, (b) increased flexibility and local control, (c) expanded

opportunity for parents, and (d) an emphasis on using teaching methods with a record of success. Under NCLB, each state must measure every public school student's progress in reading and math in each of Grades 3 through 8 and at least once during Grades 10 through 12 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). NCLB also addressed preventive and intervention programs for children and youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk and proposed to improve educational programs that promoted preventing these children from dropping out of school (NCLB, 2001).

*Out-of-School Time (OST)* refers to the hours in which school-aged children are not in school. OST does not imply a specific time, schedule, or duration; but it does mean that during those hours, children are doing something other than activities mandated by school attendance (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2003).

*School dropout* refers to a process of disengagement in which students become more and more alienated from school and withdraw to the point of dropping out.

*School engagement* is an important factor in keeping many at-risk students enrolled in school.

*Social promotion* refers to another practice that is intended to assist low-achieving students, but it also affects students negatively.

*Student attrition* is the process in which a student is actively enrolled in an organization, university, school or programs and then dropping out unexpectedly.

*Transition* involves councils or teams who are representative groups of persons at the local level and who organize to promote, develop, maintain, and improve secondary special education, transition planning, transition services, and adult services for individuals with disabilities who move from school settings to adult living. The councils or teams consist of persons with disabilities, their families, school personnel, adult

service agency personnel, and members of the community who can contribute to the mission of the council (Stillington & Clark, 2006).

## Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

### *Introduction to the Literature Review*

A comprehensive review of literature based on current empirical research, theory, meta-analyses, and other peer-reviewed publications, has been conducted for purposes of this study. This study of literature, with a particular focus on theoretical perspectives, provided a new outlook on student attrition in America, more specifically southwest Georgia.

A primary purpose of this review of literature was to approach the dropout problem from a perspective that has not been much considered in past studies. In addition, this literature review has been developed to assist the researcher in framing the appropriate models of the selected interventions and to understand to what factors directly correlate to past students deciding to drop out of school. The high costs of student attrition are not just affecting students anymore, but the entire community as a whole. The review of literature revealed that dropping out of school is a long process of disengagement. Given the significant dropout epidemic and one that is crippling southwest Georgia, nine areas of focus are included: What is student attrition; NCLB; student achievement and AYP; special education, state assessments, and IDEA; the at-risk population; at-risk students and the alternative school setting; possible causes of student attrition; parental involvement and student attrition; and test scores, attendance, and dropout rates.

### *What Is Student Attrition?*

Student attrition or student retention as it is also referred, describes a student being actively enrolled in an organization, university, school, or programs, who then drops out unexpectedly. Bridgeland et al. (2006) suggested that schools need to develop

district-wide or even state-wide early warning systems to help them identify students who they anticipate are less likely to succeed in school where they are.

*NCLB, Student Achievement, and AYP*

A continuous effort to produce greater accountability and educational equity for all children is the driving force of the latest Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization. Nagle, Yunker, and Malmgren (2006) wrote that in 2002, “NCLB created measures to increase student achievement, improve schools, provide parents and the community with better information, and—once again—close those long-lasting and troubling achievement gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers” (p. 2).

Consequently, NCLB has changed the way states address accountability and has subsequently made federal government more involved in state educational policy. This was accomplished by requiring states to implement statewide accountability systems that ensure students are meeting state-based assessments guidelines. Of key importance were changes to Title I, which required that schools meet AYP goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

As a part of the NCLB, schools must make AYP. AYP is achieved when three objectives are met:

1. Ninety-five percent of students in each subgroup must participate in state assessments.
2. Students in each subgroup must meet or exceed proficiency.
3. High school graduation rates must show progress.

Schools systems who fail to make AYP over a long period are subject to being placed on a needs improvement list and, ultimately, can lose federal funding. In contrast, schools that meet or exceed AYP objectives are eligible to receive achievement awards.



However, in complying with AYP, school accountability systems that rely solely on test scores provide an incomplete indication of school performance (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Schools that failed to meet their target for 2 consecutive years would be identified as in need for improvement, opening the door for public school choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Rumberger and Palardy surmised,

High schools that are effective in promoting student learning are not necessarily more effective in reducing dropout rates or attrition rates. That is, the characteristics that promote learning may not be the ones that promote lower dropout or transfer rates. As a result, schools that are effective in raising test scores may not be effective in retaining students. (p. 9)

The legislation of NCLB reinforces the belief that states, districts, and schools are responsible for the achievement of all students. Schools held accountable for improving academic performance of all students, including those with disabilities. Reactions to accountability provisions outlined by NCLB suggested the most difficult task in increasing school performance is raising achievement for students with disabilities (Nagle et al., 2006).

#### *Special Education, State Assessments, and IDEA*

The original special education legislation law was also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The purpose of the act was protect the rights of toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities in an attempt to improve federal, state, and local resources for these individuals. The Individuals with Disabilities Act informed stated that, students with disabilities are entitled to several basic services under the law: Screening, identification, and referral are the beginning of the process. Also, a full evaluation is necessary to ensure the disability is properly diagnosed and, thus, an IEP is formulated. An IEP is an education plan for a student that is customized by academic staff members where the parent and child are included as well. Prior to this law's

existence, the educational needs of exceptional needs students went unmet. Among a series of reauthorizations, congress amended this law in 1990 and renamed it IDEA. IDEA was set to ensure that all students receive a free appropriate education and to increase learning outcomes for all students. In 1997, this law was again reauthorized and mandated access to general education curriculum for children with disabilities (NCTM, 2000).

This law was most recently reauthorized in 2004 and renamed, Individuals with Disabilities Reauthorization Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004). Wrightslaw (2006) wrote that this latest reauthorization's purpose was to

Ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them free appropriate education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living and to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protect. (p. 9)

IDEA was designed to align NCLB with IDEA 1997. Both laws put in place measures that require students with disabilities to participate in state assessments.

This mandate was imposed, in part, because assessments increase states' accountability. Moreover, these assessments provide information as to how students with disabilities perform on state assessments. Until recently, this requirement was not state mandated. The absence of this data, however, made it relatively impossible for state or federal officials to understand how students with disabilities were performing in relation to other students. Lehr and Thurlow (2003) identified several implications for the absence of exceptional needs students' participation in state assessments:

1. Lack of participation results in inaccurate pictures of the success of educational programs.
2. Increased referrals to special education.

3. Low expectations for students with disabilities.
4. Programmatic decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information.

Many issues surface with the participation of students with special needs in state assessments (Gronna, Ameilia, & Chin-Chance, 1998). Currently, educational reform emphasizes higher academic standards and consistent expectations for all students. These higher standards and expectations display significant discrepancies in the achievement of students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers.

### *The At-Risk Population*

Who are the students who may be most often at-risk of school failure? The first group of students who are identified in the literature as having a traditional pattern of poor school performance: (a) are members of minority groups, (b) are poor, (c) with disabilities and (d) who speak a language other than English (NCLB, 2001). Vanderslice (2004) surmised "dropout rates vary significantly by socioeconomic factors and racial background. Students from the lowest income families were approximately eight times more likely to be dropouts than those from the highest income families" (p. 16).

According to Vanderslice (2004),

Males, particularly, those from urban communities with large schools and low-income homes and who are racial minorities, predominate dropout populations. Some other students that fall in this at-risk category include those with high rates of absenteeism, students who are retained, and those with disabilities. (p. 16)

Somers and Piliawsky (2004) have shown that youth exposed to several risk factors simultaneously tend to experience learning or behavioral problems. According to Somers and Piliawsky, "These risk factors in this area include (a) living in poverty, (b) larger family size, (c) low levels of family support, (d) lower levels of maternal intelligence, (e) self-esteem, and (f) education" (p. 17).

In addition, Billingsley, Fall, and Williams (2006) reported that students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) constitute about 8% of students with disabilities, and federal child count data indicate that 472,932 students aged 6 years to 21 years were identified with EBD as the primary disability in 2000-2001. Dropout rates reported for students with disabilities vary widely in the literature; however, students with LD or EBD are consistently found to have the highest dropout incidence among special education students and students in general (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). The recent passage of the NCLB Act of 2001, advises that schools must be responsible for the completion rates of all students.

#### *At-Risk Students and the Alternative School Setting*

According to Foley and Pang (2006),

Within the past decade, a rise in the number of alternative education programs serving youth at-risk for education failure has been observed. However, when the definition of alternative education for at-risk youth is expanded to include public alternative schools, charter schools for at-risk youth, programs within juvenile detention centers, community-based schools or programs operated by districts, and alternative schools with evening and weekend formats, the number of programs increased substantially. (p. 10)

McCall (2003) wrote some characteristics of students who are often placed in alternative settings: (a) low self-esteem, (b) low or no consequences for behaviors, (c) no boundaries, (d) negative peer affiliations, (e) single-parent households, (f) promiscuous, (g) dysfunction within the family, and (h) substance abuse. Raywid (1994) suggested alternative schools and programs can be grouped into the following three types: Type I: Schools of choice, sometimes resembling magnet schools, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students, Type II: "Last chance" (p. 28) schools where students are placed as a last step before expulsion (emphasis is typically on behavior modification or remediation), Type III: Schools designed with a

remedial focus on academic issues, social-emotional issues, or both (these schools ascribe to more of a nonpunitive, therapeutic approach). Even though these three types of schools provide a foundation for alternative settings, it is uncertain whether they resemble the complexity of today's alternative schools.

#### *Possible Causes of Student Attrition*

Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) used logistic regression analyses and data from the Beginning School Study to identify predictors of dropouts involving family context measures, including stressful family changes, parent's attitudes, and socialization practices; children's personal resources, including attitudes and behaviors; and school experiences, including test scores, marks, and track placements. The study followed the educational progress of 790 Baltimore school students from 1982, when they were in first grade, to 1996. Dropout status was determined from self-reports from the students in the ninth grade and annually until the students had 2 years of high school. Other data were obtained from school records, including grades, retention, and special education; interviews with pupils in the first and second grades; and parent and teacher questionnaires from the first grade. Alexander et al. noted "a variety of considerations around the time of the beginning of school transitions are apparently linked to later dropout and to the sociodemographic profile of dropouts" (pp. 97-98). Parent's attitudes and values, family stresses, children's behavior and academic adjustments, and school structures, such as tracking, were all found to be relevant in predicting later dropout status.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) confirm that a higher percentage of students in the southern United States drop out than in any other region of the country. According to a recent study by Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland et al.

(2006) wrote that there is no single reason why students drop out of high school, but circumstances in students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from the four schools led to dropping out. Dropout rates reported for students with disabilities vary widely in the literature; however, students with LD or EBD are consistently found to have the highest dropout incidence among special education students and students, in general (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). The passage of the NCLB Act of 2001 mandated that schools must be responsible for the completion rates of all students. The school serves approximately 36 special education students on site whose instructors assist them in numerous capacities within their classrooms. In addition, these students are placed in inclusion settings with and without disabilities.

Research conducted by Civic Enterprises and P. D. Hart Research Associates (Bridgeland et al., 2006) has indicated that many factors contribute to students dropping out of school, some of which are absenteeism; grade retention; dropping out previously in school; poor behavior, including skipping class, truancy, substance and alcohol abuse; and criminal activities. In addition, school dropout has been described as a process of disengagement in which students become more and more distant from school and, ultimately, drop out of school.

Conrath (2001) reported,

Alternative schools must insist on being part of a systemic intervention that involves changing the system in which students operate (including teaching students internal control, developing their participatory academic skills and knowledge through genuine effort, and changing the odds of success in school and life) and keeping the students in the new system until they graduate from high school. (p. 585)

Likewise, Darling-Hammond (1998) suggested four strategies to improve teaching and learning as alternatives to retention:

1. Improve teacher professional development to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to teach students with diverse needs.
2. Make organizational changes within schools to support more intensive learning.
3. Ensure that targeted supports and services are available for struggling students.
4. Conduct classroom assessments that better inform teaching.

Picklo and Christenson (2005) reported that grade retention has been defined as “the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that level for a subsequent school year,” whereas social promotion is another practice that is intended to assist low-achieving students, but it also affects students negatively (p. 258). Moreover, grade retention has been associated with a substantial increase in high school dropout rates.

There is growing interest in factors that predict and prevent student underachievement and that often result in students avoiding or actually dropping out of school (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). One such approach is that of *academic tutoring*; this approach assists at-risk students to improve their academic skills. The concept of academic tutoring has been applied to all ages, ranging from elementary school to postbaccalaureate education (Somers & Piliawsky). There is no single reason why students drop out of high school.

According to Bridgeland et al. (2006), some other very pertinent reasons for finalizing their decision to drop out were also based on the following:

- (a) Classes were not interesting,
- (b) missed too many days and could not catch up,
- (c) spent time with people who were not interested in school,
- (d) had too much freedom and not enough rules in their life, and
- (e) was failing in school. (p. 3)

Thus, having reviewed some factors directly correlated to student attrition, general reasons can be grouped into two areas: academic failure and disengagement from the

educational environment.

### *Parental Involvement and Student Attrition*

In addition to understanding the reasons behind student attrition, one must also understand where parents were in this process. In addition, findings from a study completed by Rumberger and Palardy (2005) reported that parental involvement had a positive effect on achievement growth, a negative effect on dropout rates, and no effect on transfer and attrition rates. Class disruptions and students' perceptions of fair discipline were associated with lower transfer and attrition rates but had no significant effects on achievement growth or dropout rates (Rumberger & Palardy). Respondents of the survey conducted by Civic Enterprises and P. D. Hart Research Associates (Bridgeland et al., 2006) indicated that their parents work schedules kept them from keeping up with what was happening at school, and others indicated that their parents got more involved when they became aware their child was on the verge of leaving school. Overall, for those students who choose to drop out, the level of proactive parental involvement in their education was low. The communication links between parents and schools are critical if such involvement is to work effectively to monitor such activities, exchange information about school performance and problems, and ensure that such problems are addressed early and quickly (Bridgeland et al.).

Barr and Parrett (2001) described students at-risk as disengaged or disconnected youth. They suggested that any young person may become at-risk given the parameters of modern life, such as alcohol, drugs, sexually transmitted disease, and adolescent depression. According to this analysis, Barr and Parrett found, "it is obvious that at-risk students cut across all social classes and occur in every ethnic group" (p. 70). Literature also suggested that dropping out of school is a slow process for students and



disengagement is a big factor. Bridgeland et al. (2006) wrote that the decision to drop out is a personal one and often reflects a “life situation” that a student may be experiencing (p. 2). The dropout epidemic in the United States merits immediate, large-scale attention from policymakers, educators, the nonprofit and business communities, and the public (Bridgeland et al.).

*Test Scores, Attendance, and Dropout Rates*

Rumberger and Palardy (2005) wrote that

The first and most widely held perspective is what society characterizes as *common* view of the school process of according to which all aspects of school performance—test scores, attendance and dropout—are influenced by a variety of school characteristics in similar ways. . . . That is, the factors that influence student learning, such as a rigorous curriculum, high teacher expectations, and a strong academic climate, are also the ones that influence whether students stay in school. . . . Schools that are effective in promoting student learning (growth in achievement) are not necessarily effective in reducing dropout or transfer rates. Promoting student social engagement may require different resources (e.g., counselors) and different policies (e.g., discipline policies) than those required to promote academic engagement and student learning. Given limited resources and expertise, schools that are effective in improving student academic engagement and learning are may not necessarily be effective in promoting student social engagement and completion. (p. 5)

Rumberger and Palardy (2005) reported that studies have shown that the social composition of schools predicts school engagement, achievement, and dropout rates even after control for the effects of individual background characteristics of students.

Ultimately, the results of a study conducted by Gewertz (2000) found that small high schools were neither more effective in promoting student achievement nor more effective in reducing dropout and transfer rates than midsized high schools.

*Student Retention and Standards-Based Reforms*

Standards-based reform has been at the forefront of education since the passage of NCLB; it is for this reason that professionals and the nation’s school districts have taken

a closer look at their curriculums, in general. Volz and Fore (2006) advised there has been a strong concept in conjunction with the NCLB Act. Also, this movement is often referred to as the standards and accountability movement. Decisions about student placement are typically based on standardized test scores. Students who move from school to school become difficult to track. Transient students, especially those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, tend to have gaps in their learning. When making placement decisions, educators often overlook potential and place poor and minority children at lower levels. Frequently, this practice puts at-risk students in classrooms with the most unqualified teachers delivering their instruction (Danielson, 2002). For children to elevate themselves from poverty level to middle class, they need to earn a high school diploma. Students from poverty often lack positive role models and the motivation necessary to graduate from high school. Educators need to intervene and encourage students to achieve this goal (Danielson).

In defining *standards-based reform*, it can be best described as (a) various ways that states responded to changes for higher standards, or (b) schools becoming more accountable for the curriculums in which they implement. The need for improving America's schools as well as raising the bar for American students became the focus of standards-based reform. There are many advocates for standards-based reform and some advocates have indicated that expectations typically have been too low for students in the past.

According to Leckrone and Griffith (2006), grade retention as an educational intervention is practiced in an effort to improve student achievement and addresses developmental immaturity. For some, this is a means of accountability. Educators have identified students who are low achievers for various reasons; however, retaining a

student may be more detriment than good. Thus, in communities that use grade retention in the name of accountability while holding on to standardized testing, many students, especially the most vulnerable, lose more than they gain from any standards-based reforms (Leckrone & Griffith). Tuck (as cited in Leckrone & Griffith) wrote children who are retained often become easily bored and discouraged with school as a whole. It does not take long for these students to become disengaged and frustrated while they prepare to repeat the same grade. Many of these students have been known to be socially incompetent, be alienated from their peers, and have experienced difficulty to relate to what is going on in the classroom.

Janosz et al. (as cited in Leckrone & Griffith, 2006) believed although students who quit school may share other common characteristics, grade retention has been the most powerful predictor of dropping out of school. Children perceive it as a strong message the teacher and the school do not consider the student to be capable (Leckrone & Griffith). Jimmerson, Anderson, and Whipple (as cited in Leckrone & Griffith) reported self-esteem, emotional functioning, and peer relations decline while school disengagement, absenteeism, and truancy increase. Therefore, Leckrone and Griffith suggested educators, administrators, and family members are encouraged to examine available research and their beliefs related to the practice of retention. Another very important consideration should be working with the community to understand the consequences of rising retention rates and student attrition.

*Student Attrition: Insight From a Practitioner's Perspective*

For practitioners (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002), the most effective way to help reduce student attrition in their schools is to take a

. . . hands-on [approach in many cases. Martin et al. found that] to improve one's

understanding of these and other factors related to dropping out of school, practical interventions that, when combined, may constitute a framework for developing exemplary dropout prevention programs at the middle and high school levels. (p. 14)

Thus, a wide range of strategies were found, including universal interventions for all students in a school or class; selected interventions targeted to those students considered at risk on the basis of general background factors; and indicated interventions for individuals clearly in danger of leaving school early (Martin et al., 2002). Simeonsson and Covington (as cited in Martin et al.) and Walker and Eaton-Walker et.al. (as cited in Martin et al.) reported that prevention interventions can be organized into three levels: universal, selected, and indicated interventions.

According to Martin et al. (2002), the universal interventions are those that help maintain a child's behavior and learning strategies: (a) extracurricular activities, (b) school-to-work programs (c) student advisory programs and, (d) system-level changes. In contrast, extracurricular activities encourage the development of conventional social support networks and also help students develop personal goals and interests. The school-to-work programs developed by transition teams improved participating students' chances of being successful in school. Martin et al. further stated,

Systems-level change requires administrators' support and leadership because they have the capacity and authority to make essential decisions (e.g., funding, scheduling, personnel roles and assignments). Their active participation helps to foster the collaborative efforts of other team members, whose contributions help administrators achieve their long-term goals. (p. 12)

There were also some additional interventions mentioned by practitioners on the issue of student attrition. Some of the following were suggestions suggested by practitioners:

1. Successful students as mentors for freshman that links older successful students

to new students.

2. Outreach to homeless youth with alternate education for homeless students in collaboration with public school staff to facilitate the transition back to public school.

3. Basic skills to enhance employability so youth with special needs, including erratic school attendance, academic problems, or behavior problems, were offered training in a community program serving youth and adult.

4. In-school credit recovery that involves small learning groups, including teachers, counselors and administrators, where learning occurs in small group sessions.

5. Hands-on experience and project-based opportunities, including an alternative school that offers job incentives, small classes, and hands-on experiences.

6. Paid work experience in area of interest which provides 10 hours per week of paid work experience contingent on student's attendance and academic performance in school.

*Student Attrition: Insight From a Community Perspective*

Sanders (2006) wrote,

The notion that the community has a role to play in the education of youth is long standing in the United States. From Dewey's concept of community schools at the turn of the 20th century to calls for community control from parents and community activists in the late 1960s, community involvement has taken on renewed significance in configurations and discussions of school improvement. (p. 1)

Sanders further stated that high-stakes testing, accountability, and shrinking educational budgets demand that schools seek bold and innovative ways to improve learning for all students. Sanders pointed out that community involvement is a powerful method for generating resources that are necessary to support the continuous improvement of schools.

Nielsen (as cited in Van Dorn, Bowen, & Blau, 2006) stated research into dropping out can be categorized into one of three areas: drop out, pull out, or push out. Pushout theories . . . focus on school and community contexts (Van Dorn et al.). According to Van Dorn et al., additional factors often enhance or influence the risk of dropout or seem to ameliorate this possibility: individual demographics, family background, school grade point average, school risk, and school size.

*Criminalizing School Behavior and Increased Dropout Rates*

In an effort to increase safety in America's schools, the so-called undesirables have been forced into alternative education. Van Acker (2007) advised

. . . placement of these children within the alternative school setting is thought to (a) protect the majority of the students from the dangerous behavior of the few and (b) provide a more intensive and meaningful educational program to these at-risk and targeted children and youth. (p. 6)

Van Acker stated the "tendency to criminalize school behavior is associated with increased school dropout, higher levels of incarceration, and minority overrepresentation in juvenile detention" (p. 5). Today's incarcerated youth have various levels of disabilities and overall needs and being properly assessed by professional staff and educators is necessary. Many committed and detained youth have moderate to severe LD. However, some do perform at average or above average grade levels. Krezmien, Leone, Mason, and Miesel (2005) wrote, "Youth with emotional, behavioral, learning, and cognitive disabilities are at substantially higher risk for arrest and incarceration than their nondisabled peers" (p. 90). The need for transition planning services is not always obvious upon entering a youth detention center. Oftentimes, youth complete their sentences and are released to family members.

Regardless of the reason, many students placed in the alternative school setting

are often cited to be antisocial. For the most part, antisocial behavior in the alternative school setting is considered dangerous to the student who displays it and to others around that student. According to Foley and Pang (2006),

Alternative education programs attempt to collaborate with a number of community services to support the educational needs of their students. Unfortunately, Foley and Pang surmised the most frequent community agency working with alternative school youth is juvenile justice with 82% ( $n=41$ ) of the programs collaborating with probation officers. (p. 16)

Krezmien et al. (2005) wrote,

Juveniles that are confined in youth detention centers are disproportionately below grade level in basic skills and are eligible for special education services. Thus, the incarcerated youth is usually considered at risk for school failure and that in itself puts a youth at risk for delinquent behaviors. In typical cases, these youths are placed in regular education classes without any provisions. The overall purpose of correctional education is to engage youth in positive educational experiences and prepare them for successful reentry to their schools and communities. (p. 89)

Simchafagan, Gersten, and Langner (as cited in Van Acker, 2007) contended that antisocial behavior can be expressed as any behavior that becomes socially inappropriate, involves threatening acts of aggression, ignores those in authority, and violates typical student-to-student roles as well as student-and-teacher relationships. Van Acker stated,

Children and youth who display antisocial behavior are at serious risk for negative outcomes, including school dropout, vocational maladjustment, drug and alcohol abuse, increased rates of arrest and incarceration, relationship problems, and higher hospitalization and mortality rates. (p. 6)

Often, children and youth exhibiting antisocial problems do not receive adequate social and emotional support from their parents or their teachers. As a result, at-risk students are unable to function in social and academic settings, including school. According to the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (2002), "Youth with learning and behavioral problems, who are pushed out or otherwise, do not complete high school are most likely to develop delinquent behaviors and be arrested" (p. 1). The

research of the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice also reported that the arrest rate among high school dropouts with disabilities was 56%, compared with 16% among graduates and 10% among those who were over 21 years of age. Among dropouts with Special Education Disorders, the arrest rate was 73% for 3 to 5 years after secondary school (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice). Statistics imply that it is best to pay close attention to children and youth who are at high risk for developing emotional disorders as early as possible in order to avoid future social adjustment problems and the emergence of delinquent tendencies.

#### *Self-Determination Theory, Student Attrition, and Youth With a Criminal Future*

The self-determination theory posited that for youth who engage in school because it is perceived as meaningful and enjoyable will record better grades than youth who do not find school meaningful and enjoyable; their motivation is internal as opposed to external. The youth that are entering juvenile correctional facilities are primarily poor, minorities, and have difficulty in basic reading and math. It is estimated in the United States that approximately 134,000 youth are confined in juvenile detention centers and correctional facilities annually (Sickmund, 2002). Unfortunately, these problems have not just begun, but have only escalated from the juvenile's time in elementary school up until now. The student enters the correctional environment bolstered by a lifetime, albeit a short one, of reinforced failure (Sheridan & Steele-Dadzie, 2005).

#### *Beginning of the Transition Initiative*

The IDEA mandated transition services for students with disabilities in its 1990 and subsequent reauthorizations. deFur, Todd-Allen, and Getzel (as cited in Zhang et al., 2007) stated that in these legislative mandates, parental involvement has been recognized as an integral aspect of the transition process and has become part of the foundation of



the IDEA. Following the onset of transition services for students with disabilities, federal mandates have allowed for tremendous strides in education and overall transition practices. IDEA mandated transition services for students with disabilities in the early 1990s and has since reauthorized new and improved mandates. Thus, when transition services are initiated for students, schools maintain that parental involvement in this process is a plus. In the most recent reauthorization of IDEA (2004), Landmark et al. (2007) wrote,

The law makes it clear that local education agencies must proactively solicit parent participation in a student's transition planning by notifying the parents early enough of the scheduled meeting, scheduling meetings at mutually agreed times and places, providing interpreters for parents who are deaf or whose native language is not English, conducting IEP meetings via telephone conference calls when necessary, and providing parents copies of the student's IEP. (p. 68)

#### *Transition Initiative*

This initiative was implemented by the Federal Office of Special Education and began in the early 1980's. Its goal was to improve the experiences of students with disabilities transitioning from school into the workforce. Halpern (as cited in Landmark et al., 2007) indicated from a strict focus on employment instruction and outcomes, the transition effort expanded to include a more broad-based emphasis on community adjustment of which employment was but one of several possible goals and outcomes.

#### *Best Practices for Transition Planning*

Grigal and Neubert (as cited in Landmark et al., 2007) stated research in transition has identified family involvement as a key component of transition planning. Halpern and Zhang (as cited in Landmark et al.) further advised family involvement has been recognized as essential in ensuring desired transition outcomes for students with disabilities.

Again, Köhler (Landmark et al., 2007) reviewed the literature on best practices in transition and noted that parental involvement was one of three practices cited in more than 50% of the 49 documents analyzed. Köhler (Landmark et al.) further developed the taxonomy for transition programming based on empirical and validation concepts and on outcomes from federally funded transition projects. In the taxonomy, five practices are identified as strategies for transition programming; one of the five is family involvement.

Field and Hoffman (as cited in Landmark et al., 2007) and Lee and Wehmeyer (as cited in Landmark et al.) informed us parental involvement is critical because parents serve as role models for their children in setting and working toward transition goals. Salembier and Furney (as cited in Landmark et al.) reported that such involvement facilitates the development of positive relationships with professionals and positive educational outcomes for students. Wehmeyer, Morningstar, and Husted (as cited in Landmark et al.) reported other benefits of parental involvement include better school attendance, reduced dropout rates, higher education assessment scores, and improved student attitude and self-confidence.

Cummings, Maddux, and Casey (2000) compiled a list of 16 most frequently mentioned characteristics that has been devised for transition planning. Some of these characteristics are

(a) annual goals and short-term objectives, (b) appropriate vocational options, (c) residential options, (d) leisure opportunities, (e) case management services, (f) a program to establish eligibility for services, (g) a program to monitor eligibility services, (h) long-term support, (i) names of person who will provide services, (j) names of agency or persons who will have major responsibility for initiating and following through on the plan, (k) transportation to and from work, (l) money management, (m) social skills training, (n) time line for activities, (o) concrete outcomes of transition services, and (p) evaluation of activities. (p. 16)

In the future, Trainor (2005) suggested five plans for individualized transition:

Researchers (1) engage students in the ITP process-designated school personnel should meet with students regularly and explain the ITP process, (2) align curricular plan with student goals-student's curriculum should be compatible to their interests as indicated on their ITP, (3) individualize ITPs-it is crucial that transition plans address the needs of that student and is not generalized for a group, (4) maintain multidisciplinary ITP teams-professionals need to be able to identify barriers in communication and discuss their concerns about student ITPs, and (5) increase parent and family involvement-students should feel comfortable enough to encourage parent's participation at ITP meetings. (p. 244)

### *Career Educational Movement*

The career education movement, however, was considered as an alternative to the job preparation approach of vocational education and the vocational education movement. In a speech to school administrators, Marland (as cited in Stillington & Clark, 2006) first presented the concept of career education in 1971. The concept of career education is best described by Stillington and Clark as,

. . . not only as preparation to earn a living but also as a way to learn about living itself. . . . [It was also determined early on that career education centered its focus on those students in a K-12 curriculum. The definition for *career education* has transitioned quite a bit. Stillington and Clark defined *career education* as] the totality of experiences through which one learns about and prepares to engage in work as part of her or his way of living. (p. 11)

Later on in 1977, Hoyt (1975) defined *career education* as “an effort at refocusing American education and the actions of the broader community in ways that will help individuals acquire and utilize the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for each to make work a meaningful, productive, and satisfying part of his or her way of living” (p. 11).

### *Summary*

The literature review revealed that the issue of student attrition is a growing trend in America's schools. It is also a reality that many students are now falling into the at-risk category, including special education students with disabilities, EBD students, antisocial

students, and school bullies. According to Kochhar-Bryant and Vreeburg Izzo (2006),

The point of transition from high school to the postschool world is challenging crossroads for all young people. . . . [Kochhar-Bryant and Vreeburg Izzo continued.] Youth with disabilities have the same choice to make as their nondisabled peers, but they have the heavy yoke of additional considerations that add to their uncertainty. As a group, young people with disabilities lag behind their peers without disabilities on every measure of transition success, including graduation rates, acquisition of a general education high school diploma, entry into employment, postsecondary education participation and completion, and independent living. (p. 74)

Thus, literature documented that students, disabled or not, often find remaining in high school a challenge, especially when there is limited support. Schools dealing with student attrition have to be equipped with the tools to assist students who are most at risk. A myriad of research throughout this literature review identified those populations of students who may simply not remain in school until graduation. Therefore, schools are tasked with being responsible for students who may not succeed in school and being supportive with their families through this transition process. When parents and school collaborate, there is a better and brighter future for this at-risk population. They are able to successfully identify other options as well.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

Student attrition is a reality that the schools must deal with. Professionals in the field of education must play an important role in first understanding the root of the issue. Therefore, in accessing a problem that is afflicting the schools, communities, and future, one must deal directly with the source for answers. This is accomplished when the school has the appropriate resources and tools to assess student attrition and understand research-based strategies that will decrease student attrition among in the alternative setting.

To assist the school in lowering their student attrition rate, evaluation methodology was utilized. The researcher's goal was to gain a better understanding of why past students dropped out of school. Also, information gained in this process was thoroughly reviewed and used as to develop a comprehensive plan to assist the alternative school in maintaining students until graduation. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) stated,

Evaluation research in education is particularly important to policy makers (e.g., school board members), program managers (e.g., school superintendents and university administrators), and curriculum developers (e.g., teachers and research and development specialists). Many school districts have established departments of evaluation, and a large number of educational researchers have moved into the field of evaluation research because of the widespread demand for evaluation services. (pp. 558-559)

In addition, Gall et al. (2007) stated that there are several reasons for conducting an evaluation study as evaluation studies are usually initiated by someone's need for a decision to be made concerning upper management or a policy. Research and evaluation differ in the extent to which the findings are generalized. Gall et al. wrote, "Researchers recruit a particular group of educators or students to participate in their study" (p. 560). The literature review conducted provided a roadmap in proceeding with this study; however, researching and collecting data was conducive in making decisions regarding

developing a comprehensive plan for the future of the school and its students.

Withdrawal records and attendance data from the school was utilized to determine what factors contributed to the students dropping out, and show any trend for certain students that were absent on a regular basis. Snowball sampling was employed because of the difficulty in making contact with the population of students who previously dropped out of school. Snowball sampling is a special nonprobability method used when the desired sample characteristic is rare. Gall et al. (2007) continued,

Snowball sampling involves asking well-situated people to recommend cases to study. During the process of researching participants, the researcher may find an increasing number of well-situated recommended cases, all or some of which, can be included in the sample as well. (p. 185)

#### *Research Instruments and Procedures*

The researcher conducted a literature review to examine the extent and significance of the problem. The literature review set the foundation for this applied dissertation and outlined the theoretical underpinnings for the stated problem, selected methodology, and the recommended interventions based on the data collected. Specifically, the literature review focused on student attrition and federal legislation that encouraged the participation of students with disabilities to receive a free appropriate public education. Prior to implementation, permission to conduct the study at the alternative school had been requested from the superintendent of schools. The superintendent had been informed about the scope and time line of the project. Criteria for student selection were shared with district and administrative staff.

To ensure that reliability and validity were present in this research, two colleagues that work in the alternative school setting were enlisted to provide peer debriefing on questions that were used for the focus group (see Appendix A). Mills (2003) wrote that

peer debriefing “provides researchers with the opportunity to test their growing insights through interaction with other professionals. This is generally someone that will be able to help reflect in situations by listening, prompting, and providing insights throughout the process” (p. 77).

The researcher met with peer-debriefing participants two times. The first meeting was to discuss the reliability and validity of data collection instruments. The next meeting was to discuss content, validity, and implementation of the plan.

The following procedures were employed to carry out the functions of this research. A formal proposal and application was submitted to the Internal Review Board of Nova Southeastern University. Once permission to conduct the study was received from the university and the dissertation committee, consent for participation forms were disseminated to targeted participants. Based on the participant's age, that individual received either an adolescent consent form or an adult consent form. In some cases, parents needed to be supplied with the forms acknowledging that they consented to having their child participate in this project. Parental consent forms were then distributed. Parental consent was necessary for students under the legal age of 18 years. The researcher served as the primary data collector for the study and all data collected was done through survey research. A survey created by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2006) was the primary research instrument. In addition, a focus group was conducted with the school advisory committee that included parents, school faculty members, juvenile probation officials and community leaders to discuss future plans for addressing student attrition in the school setting.

Also a series of tables were included to depict the data as it was reported and it also detailed key findings in this study. The Statistical Package of the Social Sciences,

Version 14.0, software was used for statistical purposes after data was collected and surveys were completed.

### *Participants*

Data collection for this research involved a total of 50 participants in the target population. The research participants included 25 student dropouts, 5 parents, 1 school principal, 1 special education teacher, 1 regular education teacher, 3 school resource officers, 1 chief juvenile court judge, 1 associate juvenile court judge, 5 juvenile probation officers, 2 juvenile sheriff's deputies, and 5 community leaders. Surveys were administered to student dropouts and both face-to-face interviews and focus groups were conducted with the remainder of the participants. By enlisting the support of these individuals, the researcher was able to assess the impact of student attrition on the community. After all data was collected and analyzed, the researcher conducted a focus group with the School Advisory Committee and parents to discuss recommendations for a plan of action that all were comfortable in utilizing for the future.

### *Rationale for Research Questions*

The study was guided by five research questions. These research questions were developed as a means to understand student attrition in the alternative setting and ways to effectively engage the students' level of learning, performance, and understanding. Additionally, these questions were developed as a means of examining parent involvement in the alternative school setting and to develop ideas for the school to decrease its overall attrition rate.

The research questions and the rationale for each follow:

1. What factors directly contribute to student attrition in this alternative setting?

To answer this question, the researcher utilized accounting data received from the



alternative school on attendance and withdrawals, and the survey data that was collected from the student participants in this study (see Appendix B). Questions 11, 15, and 16 on the survey were pertinent to this question.

2. Why did previous students drop out and what are their regrets, if any, for leaving school? This question was answered after surveying the student dropouts to assess their thoughts and beliefs as to why they decided to leave school. Responses to Questions 17, 18, 20, and 21 addressed this issue.

3. Are students who dropped out of school pursuing, or have they obtained a GED or other type of education currently, and why? And what factors would they attribute to their overall success? To determine whether student dropouts were successful in careers or regretted leaving school, the researcher surveyed those students to find out what they were doing at the time of the study. Question 25 on the survey helped the researcher better understand whether former student dropouts had completed their education.

4. What recommendations can be made to reduce student attrition in the alternative setting? To answer this question, a focus group was conducted with school personnel, community leaders, and juvenile court staff. The researcher also met with school administrators to determine if recommendations from this study were representative of those recommended by school staff. A list of the questions that guided the discussion of the focus group is provided in Appendix C and a series of open-ended questions for particular individuals who were interviewed face-to-face is provided in Appendix D. The summary of respondents' comments, concerns, and conclusions from the focus group session is included in Appendix E.

5. How can the school increase parent involvement to assist in decreasing the overall dropout rate? To answer to this question, a focus group was facilitated by the

researcher and school principal with parents to enlist their support and gather opinions as to how the school could increase parental involvement both now and in the future. A list of the questions that guided the focus group's discussion is in Appendix A.

#### *Data Analysis Plan*

The final data was analyzed and compared with that of current researchers and the review of literature by experts in the field of alternative education. Data was gathered from surveys and focus groups. The Statistical Package of the Social Sciences, Version 14.0, software was used to help analyze data to produce figures and percentages and to provide data summarizations based on coded student responses to specific survey questions. The results were shown in both qualitative and quantitative forms; any deviations from the norm were noted.

#### *Time Line*

The time frame for the completion of the study was approximately 6 months, beginning upon Institutional Review Board approval. This included the completing of surveys, conducting interviews, collecting data, analyzing the data, and developing the final report that was shared with the school and the district.

#### *Recommendations*

Results of this study were shared with administrators of the alternative school. All data collected was reviewed and used to assist in developing a plan for the school. In addition, any recommendations were discussed with the school's administrators to determine the best options to address student attrition.

#### *Assumptions*

The data provided by the alternative school was used in identifying the problem of student attrition and was assumed free of bias and errors. The researcher also

conducted a simultaneous data search throughout the school district, the state Department of Education, and the Governor's Office of Student Achievement to confirm existence of the problem. Moreover, it was assumed that participants were open and honest in their responses to the survey and in the focus group session. Additionally, the researcher assumed that the literature review was comprehensive, accurate, and representative of factual accounts of the problem.

#### *Limitations and Delimitations*

This study may have been limited in its findings due to the fact that student participants represented a combined population of area schools in the district and were placed in this alternative setting for various reasons. In addition, student dropouts varied in their reasoning for leaving the school. Thus, end results of this study should not be generalized across other schools or alternative settings outside of this school district.

#### *Outcomes*

The outcomes for this project provided the data to assist school administrators in developing a comprehensive plan to help motivate students to remain in school until graduation and to decrease student attrition in the alternative school. Another goal of the study was to identify ways of increasing parental involvement at the school, which could also increase students' motivation to attend on a regular basis, remain in school, and receive a diploma upon graduation.

## Chapter 4: Results

Results, analyses, and interpretation of data are presented in this chapter. This research investigated the effects of student attrition in the alternative school setting. In this chapter, each research question is outlined as it was addressed during the evaluation of student attrition as it relates to the alternative school. The program was evaluated to determine what factors directly contributed to student attrition in the alternative school setting.

### *Overview of Results*

A total of 50 participants were involved in sharing their histories, ideals, beliefs, and philosophies regarding student attrition in the alternative school setting. According to the data compiled from the research participants, student attrition was a major concern of theirs as well as that of the alternative school. This research collected data about each student with respect to their age when they left school, the last grade attended before leaving school, and race and gender of those student dropouts. A table detailing the specifics of each student respondent can be found in Appendix F of this applied dissertation.

This research survey was adapted from a survey by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. (2006) and also specific open-ended face-to-face interview questions (see Appendix D) and a set of open-ended focus group questions (see Appendix A). These questions helped produce a framework that assisted the study and yielded substantial responses in answering the five research questions. In essence, the study sought to better understand the issue of student attrition at the alternative school and to make recommendations to the alternative school in an effort to decrease student attrition there. The belief was that each one of the participants who were affiliated with this research all

contributed to recommendations that would ultimately reduce student attrition in this setting.

### *Characteristics of the Population and Sample*

Data were collected from the alternative school and residences of additional participants and their parents. In addition, numerous face-to-face interviews were conducted as well. Data collection for this research involved a total of 50 participants in the target population. The research participants included 25 student dropouts, 5 parents, 1 school principal, 1 special education teacher, 1 regular education teacher, 3 school resource officers, 1 chief juvenile court judge and 1 associate juvenile court judge, 5 juvenile probation officers, 2 juvenile sheriff's deputies, and 5 community leaders.

### *Demographic Data*

Demographic data were collected for the purpose of better understanding the student dropouts who were selected to participate in informal semistructured interviews. The participants were asked to answer questions about their age and gender as well. This data is located in Appendix F of this applied dissertation.

### *Research Question 1*

In addressing Research Question 1 (What factors directly contribute to student attrition in this alternative setting?), the study focused primarily on attendance and withdrawal data provided by the alternative school. This research also collected data from students who had attended the alternative school and were student dropouts of this setting. These students took part in a semistructured interview where they served as participants in responding to a series of open-ended questions. The survey itself was created by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bridgeland et al., 2006) and was the primary research instrument. For this

question, 25 student dropouts were interviewed and their responses are reflected in a table (see Appendix G). The open-ended questions used in the survey instrument that assisted with answering Research Question 1.

*Open-Ended Question 11.* In answering this question, (When you would miss school, did anyone from the school regularly contact you or your parents or guardians to find out where you were or why you missed school?), responses supplied by this survey instrument required a “Yes, would be contacted by school; no, would not be contacted by school; did not miss school; depends; or not sure.” Of student respondents, 58% indicated, “No, would not be contacted by school,” 31% of student dropouts responded, “depends”; and 11% stated, “not sure.”

*Open-Ended Question 15.* This question asked students, Do you feel that your school did enough or did not do enough to keep students from skipping, maintain discipline in the classroom, make school interesting, help students feel safe from violence, help students with problems outside the classroom that affected their schoolwork, and help students when they had trouble learning or understanding the material being taught in their classes? Of student respondents who answered this portion of the question, 49% indicated, “No, school did not do enough” to keep students from skipping; 33% reported “Yes, school did enough”; and 18% stated, “Not sure.” For the second item listed on the survey, 52% of student respondents indicated, “No, school did not do enough” to maintain discipline in the classroom; 35% “Yes, school did enough”; and 13% stated, “Not sure.” A total of 67% of students responded, “No, school did not do enough” to make school interesting, 23% responded, “Yes, school did enough”; and 10% responded, “Not sure” to this item. The fourth item asked if the school did enough or did not do enough to help students feel safe from violence, 59% stated, “No, school did not

do enough"; 41% stated, "Yes, school did enough." The fifth item asked students if the school did or did not do enough to help students with problems outside the classroom that affected their schoolwork, 92% stated, "No, school did not do enough" and 8% responded, "Not sure." The last item on the survey asked students if they thought the school did enough or did not do enough to help students when they had trouble learning or understanding the material being taught in their classes, 87% responded, "No, school did not do enough"; 8% responded, "Yes, school did enough"; and 5% responded, "Not sure."

*Open-Ended Question 16.* The 16th open-ended question read, I'm going to read you some statements about some people's high school experiences, and for each one, please tell me whether it applied to you or did not apply to you when you were in high school. There were six items on the survey that students had an option to respond to with "applied to me, did not apply to me, or not sure." The first item asked students whether there was at least one teacher or staff member at school who personally cared about their success, 41% responded, "Applied to me"; 20% responded, "Did not apply to me," and 39% indicated, "Not sure." A second item on the survey indicated if there was at least one teacher or staff member at school whom students believed they could talk to about their school problems, the responses were 46% said, "Applied to me"; 19% indicated, "Did not apply to me"; 35% responded, "Not sure." A third item on the survey asked students if there was at least one teacher or staff member at school whom they could talk to about their personal problems, 12% responded, "Applied to me"; 29% responded, "Did not apply to me; and 59% said, "Not sure." A fourth item on the survey asked if students believed that there was at least one family member or guardian whom they could confide in and talk to about things, the responses from respondents were 54% stated, "Applied to

me"; 24% indicated, "Did not apply to me"; and 22% responded, "Not sure." A fifth item asked student respondents if there was at least one family member or guardian who encouraged them to go to school and graduate, student responses for this item were 61% stated, "Applied to me"; and 39% responded, "Did not apply to me." The last item for this question asked students if their parents' or guardians' work schedule prevented them from being knowledgeable about what was happening at school, 31% responded, "Applied to me"; 60% responded, "Did not apply to me," and 9% stated, "Not sure."

In addition, withdrawal records provided by the alternative school indicated that 48% of students who dropped out of school were often absent because of school suspensions cited by behavior problems, including bullying, fighting, or disrespecting those in authority. Thus, these students chose not to return to school and, ultimately, withdrew. In addition, another 30% of students who dropped out for other reasons, including uncaring school personnel, lack of qualified teachers, and low parental involvement. Additional data provided by the alternative school revealed another 22% of students left school because of unexpected pregnancies (see Appendix G).

Throughout the literature, a myriad of causes were identified as reasons for student attrition and becoming at-risk for dropping out of school. Thus, there were many factors cited as contributing to the issue of student attrition i.e. being economically disadvantaged, teen pregnancy, juvenile arrests, retention, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation to name a few.

Bost and Riccomini (2006) stated commonly identified reasons for dropping out included boring and irrelevant content, poor relationships with teachers and peers, lack of a sense of belonging, lack of personal effort, and attendance and discipline policies and practices that contributed to frequent discipline referrals and suspensions. Furthermore,



students reported fear of personal safety, need to work to provide family support, and poor academic performance as other reasons for dropping out. Bost and Riccomini stated, "Clearly, many of these variables directly contribute to a student's feelings of disengagement; therefore, these variables provided insight into students' perceptions of school and the factors leading to a student's total disengagement from the school system" (p. 304). The findings from this research concurred with that of Bost and Riccomini. This study also identified that students dropped out of school because high incidences of absences, discipline referrals, uncaring teachers, or poor relationships with teachers.

Finally, Van Acker (2007) identified antisocial behavior as a major cause of contributing to student attrition. In addition,

Students displaying antisocial behavior also are at serious risk for negative outcomes, including school dropout, vocational maladjustment, drug and alcohol abuse, increased rates of arrest and incarceration, relationship problems, and higher hospitalization and mortality rates. . . . These children often engage in behavior that seriously endangers others or otherwise disrupts the educational setting in a manner that impedes the education of other students. (p. 6)

### *Research Question 2*

To assist the researcher in answering Research Question 2 (Why did previous students drop out and what are their regrets if any for leaving school?), a survey instrument created by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bridgeland et al., 2006) was the primary research instrument. For this question, 25 student dropouts were interviewed and their responses are reflected in a table format in Appendix G. There were also some open-ended questions used in the survey instrument that assisted with answering Research Question 2.

*Open-Ended Question 17.* The 17th open-ended question asked, Let's talk about your decision to leave high school. In your own words, why did you leave school?

Thirty-four percent of students responded, "The teachers really did not try to help me"; 18% stated, "I did not understand all of the material"; 13% indicated, "I seem to get into a lot of fights"; 11% responded, "I did not have anyone to help me with my school work"; and 24% stated that they did not know why they left school exactly.

*Open-Ended Question 18.* This question was structured to gather possible responses from the students for leaving high school. Students were asked to respond whether the reason was a major factor in your decision to leave, a minor factor, or not a factor at all in your decision to leave high school. For this research question, 38% of student dropouts responded that they had become parents and this was a primary reason for them leaving school. Some other answers that ranked high included 18% had problems with the law; 23% indicated that they were failing in school; and 11% stated they had to get a job to make money and could not attend school at the same time.

*Open-Ended Question 20.* Open-Ended Question 20 asked, "When you left school, did you think that you would go back and graduate at that time or were you not planning to go back and graduate?" Student dropout responses were that 28% said, "No, they did not plan to go back and graduate"; 52% responded, "Yes, they planned to go back and graduate or pursue a GED"; and 20% of the student dropouts responded that they were "Not sure" if they would go back and graduate or remain out of school to explore other options.

*Open-Ended Question 21.* Responses to Open-Ended Question 12 (Looking back on it, how important do you feel that graduating from high school is to succeeding in life?) included "very important, fairly important, somewhat important, or not important at all." Of the student dropouts who responded to this question, 57% responded they believed that graduating from high school and succeeding in life is "very important or

fairly important," but 29% indicated that it was "fairly important" to graduate and succeed in life. Only 14% believed school was "somewhat important." There were no responses in the category of "not important at all."

### *Research Question 3*

Research Question 3 asked, Are students who dropped out of school pursuing, or have they obtained a GED or other type of education currently, and why? And what factors would they attribute to their overall success? After interviewing past student dropouts, data obtained during semistructured interviews indicated that some respondents were actively pursuing a GED, job or career, or something else. The percentages of students who fell into these categories are listed in a chart in Appendix H.

The responses from the semistructured interviews conducted with student dropouts and the survey instrument (Bridgeland et al., 2006) were utilized to gather data. In particular, one of the questions derived from these instruments was essential in assisting the researcher in answering Research Question 3.

*Open-Ended Question 25.* This open-ended question (Are you currently employed? If "yes," what type of work do you do?" If "no," are you unemployed and looking for work or are you unemployed because you are taking classes?) included the following response options: "unemployed, looking for work, unemployed, taking classes, unemployed, other, or not sure." Of the students surveyed, 38% stated, "Yes, they were employed" and working in fast food restaurants as well as local business (doing office work). Out of this percentage, 43% indicated that they were working in fast food restaurants, 25% indicated that they are working in clerical settings, 19% were working retail positions, and 13% indicated that they were doing janitorial work. Another 24% indicated that they were "Unemployed, looking for work," and 16% responded they were

"Unemployed, taking classes" at a technical school where they were pursuing valuable skills.

*Research Question 4*

There were varied responses to Research Question 4 (What recommendations can be made to reduce student attrition in the alternative setting?). Individual interviews were conducted with parents, community leaders, and juvenile court staff that included five open-ended questions (see Appendix D). After all the data from the individual interview sessions were compiled, the researcher met and shared those results and recommendations with school administrators at the alternative school. Some open-ended questions that assisted with answering Research Question 4 follow.

*Open-Ended Interview Question 1.* Participants acknowledged for this question (How significant of a problem is student attrition in this community to you?) that the issue of student attrition is severe at the alternative school. Many participants indicated that there are numerous reasons why this could be the case. Some general responses from participants who answered this question were that

Student attrition is a problem that may never get better in that setting.

It is a problem that the school district needs to take a closer look at.

This is a big problem; students get pregnant and do not return back to school.

A very large problem in the alternative setting is that administrators do not seem to care about the kids anymore.

Knowing that there is a significant problem and no one wants to be held accountable bothers me.

*Open-Ended Interview Question 2,* The second open-ended interview question read, What does mentoring a child mean to you? Participant responses to this question included,

Mentoring a child is very important, especially in the early stages of their education.

A child should always know that they have someone they can depend on. Mentoring a child is something that they never forget and is ultimately life- altering . . . if it's done in the right way!

Sometimes mentoring does not work for a child who has never had anyone show that they care.

*Open-Ended Interview Question 3.* With respect to this question (How can the community serve as an example to encourage students to remain in school until graduation?), participants made it clear that the community is not doing enough in the area of student attrition. Respondents stated the following:

Internships at local business would be crucial to encouraging students to remain in school until graduation because students would have careers to look forward to.

The community could stop stereotyping the students at the alternative school and try to volunteer their time to serve as an example to these kids instead.

The community could invest more money into the alternative school and make the students and staff feel important.

*Open-Ended Interview Question 4.* Participants' responses to this question (What advice would you give a student who you knew was contemplating leaving school?), included,

Leaving school would be like a death sentence, if a student leaves school . . . their future is a fast food restaurant.

I would try to get to the root of the problem and help them define what their long-term goals are.

I think assessing what is going on at home is key, some of these kids find it difficult to manage school, homework, family and their own personal issues . . . I would allow them to vent some of their concerns to me.

My advice would be to tell them not to do it!

*Open-Ended Interview Question 5.* Responses from various individuals in the face-to-face interview process to this question (What recommendations could you make for decreasing student attrition in the alternative setting?) included the following:

Students' attendance should be monitored on a daily basis.

There should be more severe consequences from those students who repeatedly are tardy or miss school regularly.

Parents should be required to come into the school after a student has

missed 3 consecutive days of school.

The school needs to employ transition specialist that visit the homes of severely absent students.

Weekly meetings should be held with school administrators and teachers to determine students who have been identified as at-risk for failing and/or not completing school.

I would like to recommend that the school district spends more money at the alternative school and remodel the entire school; this would make students have a sense of pride.

The implementation of extracurricular activities would be nice.

Highly qualified teachers need to be employed as well as teachers trained with cognitive behavior skills, I feel that parental involvement would be a plus too!

Remove those kids with extensive behavior problems, those that are not there to learn, but want to bully others.

It would be great if these kids were exposed to successful community leaders and school assemblies were held where speakers visit the school to address these students.

Having dedicated staff and administrators, ensure that the kids are being challenged. It would also be nice if more tutoring was taking place and homevisits were being made to the homes of students who have missed school for extended periods of time.

A change in curriculum would help and bringing Probation Officers into the schools may help.

Providing more one on one attention.

Schools should provide an adequate amount of School Resource Officers to help reduce student attrition in the alternative school setting.

Students should have access to more community resources.

Participants in the focus group also indicated that planning ahead for students' futures would encourage them to become more career orientated. One idea mentioned in particular from a focus group participant was that of having a transition specialist in the school and having assemblies that incorporate special guest speakers or mentors to talk to and discuss career goals with upcoming graduates.

#### *Research Question 5*

Research Question 5 asked, How can the school increase parent involvement to assist in decreasing the overall dropout rate? A focus group facilitated by the researcher was conducted at the alternative school and included 6 school staff members, 2 parents,

and 3 community leaders. All of the open-ended questions utilized to guide the focus group discussions were designed to allow the researcher to receive more detailed feedback versus “yes” or “no” answers. Questions that were utilized specifically for the focus group session can be found in Appendix D of this applied dissertation. After all data from the focus group were compiled, the researcher met and shared those results and recommendations with school administrators at the alternative school. Some open-ended focus group questions that assisted with answering Research Question 5 follow:

*Open-Ended Focus Group Question 1.* In response to the first focus group question (How can you become involved as a parent of a student in this setting?), 100% of the parents who participated in this focus group session agreed that they could all become more active in their child’s school. A total of 42% of parents indicated that they could volunteer at the school more and also serve as hall monitors to ensure that students are going to class. Likewise, 19% of the respondents stated that they could assist with after-school programs . . . even if it was only making copies of papers and literature for teachers, and 39% of parent respondents indicated that they would be willing to participate in a school beautification project and that maybe students would feel better about their school and want to remain until graduation.

*Open-Ended Focus Group Question 2.* The group consisted of 6 school staff members, 2 parents, and 3 community leaders. Focus group participants’ responses to this question (What do you feel the School Advisory Committee could do to incorporate more parental feedback and support?) included, “The School Advisory Committee could have a night where parents are invited to the school (an open house).” All (100%) group members agreed with this recommendation, including school staff members. The school principal identified that as of the 2007-2008 school year, the school had already hosted an

open house for parents to become better acquainted with their child's school, the administrators, and policies and procedures of the alternative school.

However, a recommendation made by all (100%) of the parents in this group and 99% of community leaders stated, "School administrators should have an open-door policy where parents can meet with school administrators if they are there at the time of the visit." School staff members did not give an opinion to implementing an open-door policy as their recommendation would not have been private but acknowledged before other focus group members as well. There were additional recommendations made that suggested, "The alternative school could sponsor a breakfast for parents where teachers and administrators could spend more time discussing their child's progress face-to-face." This was a recommendation that was suggested and supported by 80% of focus group members, but was not supported by some school staff as they would be required to spend additional time at the school volunteering. The school principal supported this idea as well, but cited that time constraints may pose an issue with students arriving in the mornings between certain hours and that this may involve asking teachers to volunteer for extra morning duty before school begins. This recommendation was made in part by parents in the focus group and by some community leaders.

*Open-Ended Focus Group Question 3.* In answering this question (What suggestions would you have to assist the alternative school in decreasing the number of student dropouts?), some focus group participants responded,

Students need mentors and someone that can relate to their problems.

It is important to assess the whole ecology when dealing with at-risk kids, what kinds of things are they dealing with at home?

Placing a transition specialist in the school would be the greatest gift because he/she would work closely with the school counselor and make home visits, when necessary. Review with the child what their goals are.

Allow the child to have easy access to administrators when they need help



resolving an issue.

### *Summary of Results*

This study reflected that student attrition was still a major contributor to the overall success of students in the community. The results of the study were consistent in that two of the three outcomes were met, based on the fact that there were recommendations made to the alternative school to assist them in decreasing student attrition in the alternative school setting. Also, the study identified ways to increase parent involvement in the school that will ultimately encourage students to remain in school until graduation.

## Chapter 5: Discussion of Results

### *Introduction of Dissertation*

Student attrition is a concern nationally and has come to the forefront in the past few decades, but the dropout rate is a problem that has a negative effect on the students involved and on society as a whole. According to Eisenman (2007),

At this juncture, both students' intentions to complete school and external requirements for compulsory school attendance may weaken. . . . the same students had lower scores on their relationship with teachers, perceptions at school, motivation in schoolwork, and participation in school activities. (p. 5)

Thus, a school dropout is less likely to be able to support themselves and their families. This places a burden on federal and state governments, and, ultimately, the taxpayers to support them by providing services and financial support. A review of existing literature and research revealed that a great deal of these students would not graduate. The major sections of this chapter summarize the results and discuss their implications.

### *Overview of Applied Dissertation*

The goal of this applied dissertation was to assist the school with reducing student attrition while making recommendations for the school to become more proactive with students and their parents in an effort to decrease student attrition in the future. Moreover, it was also the goal of this study to identify and document how the School Advisory Committee responded to the selected interventions and to understand their beliefs in regards to the selected interventions.

The problem addressed in this study was that of student attrition in the alternative school setting and why students did not remain in school until graduation. The problem that had been persistent in the alternative school setting was that of lack of attendance, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, and gang affiliation.

The purpose of this evaluation study was to identify causal factors of student attrition and to assist the district with recommendations that can be used to develop programs to reduce the dropout rates in the school. This existing problem was increasing in the rate of students dropping out of the alternative school. The study also looked at ways the school could increase parent participation at the school and develop a home-school link including students, parents, and school. Until late July 2007, no formal evaluation had taken place to address this problem. Therefore, an evaluation research methodology was utilized to investigate how to best address this issue and make recommendations based on the evaluation.

*Key findings for Research Question 1.* What factors directly contribute to student attrition in this alternative setting? In this study factors that contributed to student attrition in this alternative setting included low attendance, teen pregnancy, lack of qualified teachers, uncaring teachers, and low parental involvement. The use of a series of open-ended questions adapted a survey instrument created by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bridgeland et al., 2006) assisted the researcher in deriving data to answer this question.

Student respondents indicated that when they would miss school; in many situations, no one would call them from the school to ever inquire why they were not present. Data revealed that 58% of student respondents indicated, "No, would not be contacted by school"; 31% of student dropouts responded, "Depends"; and 11% stated, "Not sure." Other data obtained from respondents on this question indicated clearly that students believed that the school did not do enough to keep them from doing a lot of different things, including skipping.

Campbell (2003) advised that

In order to engage students, teachers, and parents in the action research to address the issue of high dropouts, one needs to begin with a critical analysis of why and how this problem exists. . . . In looking at the context of this issue, one begins by exploring how the problem is defined. . . . The Central Office defines, or more aptly, covers up the real statistic by the way they categorize the problem. . . . For instance, students move out of district; transfer to other schools; change schools within district; arrange to get their GED credential elsewhere; leave the United States; are expelled; go to mental institutions, reform schools, or youth homes; drop out, and there are the unknowns. (p. 5)

In addressing this question, withdrawal records indicated that attendance was a major factor for the increase in student attrition for the alternative school. According to research conducted at the school and by the administrators' accounts, attendance has been recognized as an ongoing issue among student dropouts. Withdrawal records provided by the alternative school indicated that 48% of students who dropped out of school were often absent because of school suspensions cited by behavior problems, including bullying, fighting, or disrespecting those in authority. Thus, these students chose not to return to school and, ultimately, withdrew. Likewise, research conducted by (Suh, 2007) affirmed that students with behavioral problems, including suspension from school, have nine factors influencing the decision to drop out, more than the other two groups. Suh believed,

Five are shared with other groups, while the remaining four are unique to the behavioral group . . . indicated the five shared factors are (a) students' expectations to stay in school, (b) absenteeism, (c) association with college-bound peers, (d) limited educational enrichment resources, and (e) unhealthy community and family environment. The four factors unique to this group are (a) the possible impact of living with a nonbiological parent, (b) the effects of living in a metropolitan area, (c) participation in fights at school, and (d) whether the student had been threatened with harm at school. (p. 303)

A research study conducted by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. (Bridgeland et al., 2006) for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation affirmed the existence of this problem and found very similar causes for student attrition in schools across the nation.

This research conducted also cited attendance to be a major contributing factor for the increase in student attrition. Fifty-nine percent to 65% of respondents missed class often the year before dropping out.

Scanlon and Mellard (as cited in Vanderslice, 2004) found that students frequently attributed their academic difficulties to attendance problems. Most students drop out in high school, but evidence suggested that problems begin much earlier than that. The finding is consistent with research conducted in this study and revealed that there is a correlation between student attrition and in-school attendance factors.

A study conducted by Franklin, Streeter, Kim, and Tripodi (2007) evaluated the effectiveness of a solution-focused, alternative school in preventing students from dropping out of high school. In a comparison of two schools in a large urban area, results indicated that students who had dropped out of school were not dropouts because of their lack of attendance but, because upon entering the alternative program, already had not earned enough credits to be promoted. All students in the solution-focused alternative school group had either left school or were in danger of failing out of their traditional high school when they first enrolled in the solution-focused alternative school. This finding has implications for performance-based school outcomes currently prevalent in public education (Franklin et al.).

Franklin et al. (2007) also surmised that what is perhaps more importantly in educational practice is that high-risk youths who are dropout prone can catch up over time, graduate, and enroll in postsecondary education programs. The larger question is when youths with high-risk characteristics should be considered dropouts rather than successful high school graduates if they are enrolled in an alternative educational program (Franklin et al.). Findings documented from the aforementioned study are very

different in the findings derived from data documented in this applied dissertation.

Franklin et al. indicated that the solution-building alternative high school in this study appeared to be successfully fulfilling its mission as an effective dropout retrieval and prevention program.

*Key findings for Research Question 2.* Why did previous students drop out and what are their regrets if any for leaving school? A series of open-ended questions (Bridgeland et al., 2006) assisted the researcher in deriving data to answer this question effectively. Findings for this question indicated that student dropouts were struggling academically and perceived the teachers had let them down. Student dropout participants admitted to getting into fights more with other students. After leaving school, 11% of student dropouts indicated that they had left because there was no one to assist them in completing homework once they got home. The current findings of this study concurred with that of the findings of Campbell (2003) which suggested

Teachers fail to forge meaningful connections with their students; students are alienated from their teachers, and are often, especially between groups of first-generation immigrants and U.S.-born, hostile toward one another; administrators routinely disregard even the most basic needs of both students and staff. The feeling that "no one cares" is pervasive and corrosive. Real learning is difficult to sustain in an atmosphere rife with mistrust. (p. 5)

In addition, other student dropout responses suggested they missed too many days of school and could not catch up; classes were not interesting, they had changed schools and did not like the new one, or they had become parents. In response to this research question, 38% of student dropouts stated that becoming parents was a primary reason for them leaving school. Some other answers that ranked high were 18% of the dropouts stated they had problems with the law, 23% indicated that they were failing in school, and 11% stated they had to get a job, make money, and could not attend school at the

same time.

Cross, Darby, and D'Alonzo (as cited in Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004) affirmed the findings of this study in that there are many probable causes and possible solutions to the dropout problem facing the United States. There were numerous similarities in variables between the findings in this applied dissertation and those of the study conducted by Cross et al. A number of variables that predict whether students will drop out of school emerged from this research, including socioeconomic status of the family, lack of books and other reading materials in the home, level of schooling of the parent of the same gender; low grades in school; teen pregnancy; prior academic failure; and prior use of cigarettes, marijuana, or other illicit drugs.

In a study conducted by Kortering and Braziel, 1999 (as cited Dunn et al., 2004), the importance of investigating students' perceptions of key factors that would likely influence their decision to drop out of school or stay in school was highlighted. In their study, Kortering and Braziel asked the youths if they would consider returning to school, what changes in school would have helped them stay in school, and whether they had general recommendations for schools. The results of the study indicated that 64% of the respondents would have considered returning to school. Those results were higher than the ones found in the current study, which indicated that 52% of the students who had dropped out planned to go back and graduate or pursue a GED. Data revealed in chapter 4 of this applied dissertation indicated 57% of student dropouts responded favorably and believed that graduating from high school and succeeding in life is very important. Twenty-nine percent of the former students indicated that it was fairly important to graduate and succeed in life, whereas only 14% believed school was somewhat important. There were no responses in the category of not important at all.

*Key findings for Research Question 3.* Are students who dropped out of school pursuing, or have they obtained, a GED or other type of education currently, and why? And what factors would they attribute to their overall success? Student dropouts' responses indicated that only 18% of the respondents interviewed are currently enrolled in GED programs and 27% of respondents interviewed are currently employed in their community. However, only 7% of respondents interviewed are either seeking to enroll in a GED program or looking for stable employment. The remaining 48% of student dropouts were not actively pursuing any type of formal education or job or career.

Rachal and Bingham (2004) researched this issue and concurred that "it is likely that many GED teachers have long regarded much adult education theory focusing on voluntary, motivated, and mature learners with a good degree of skepticism as applicable perhaps to 30- or 40-year olds" (p. 41). It is not believed to be applicable to teenagers or even young adults in their 20s. With that being said, many student dropouts do not even value obtaining a GED. According to Eisenman (2007), "the likelihood of students staying in school increases when they have the tools to respond to school requirements and are involved in relevant instruction and extracurricular activities" (p. 4).

Another study conducted by Tyler (2003) suggested that reviewing the economic benefits of the GED suggests that the program may induce some students to drop out of high school who would otherwise graduate. Secondly, Tyler stated that there are substantial economic gains associated with the GED acquisition for dropouts who left school with weak skills, but no benefits for dropouts who left school with stronger skills. Third, evidence indicated that it takes some time for the economic benefits of the GED to accrue. As a result, research that only looks at the short-term returns of a GED may miss a substantial portion of the impact of the credential on labor market outcomes (Tyler).



Tyler further indicated,

. . . acquisition of a GED can indirectly affect labor market outcomes by increasing the amount of postsecondary education and training accumulated by dropouts, which in turn leads to increased employment and earnings. The research indicated that the payoffs on these human-capital-enhancing activities are as high for GED holders as they are for regular high school graduates. However, it is also true that, on an average, GED holders obtain very little postsecondary education or company-sponsored training. As a result, these indirect routes are not important avenues through which the GED affects the outcomes of dropouts. (p. 371)

*Research Question 3.* The third research question asked, in part, What factors would they (students) attribute to their overall success? Students indicated throughout this study that a caring individual at the school would have been conducive to their overall success. In addition, some dropouts revealed that if someone at the school had more assistance from family or someone who checked on them periodically, they might have remained in school until graduation. According to Schussler and Collins (2006), recognizing the importance of caring relationships within schools is not new. Researchers who study students at risk of dropping out of school have shown that one of the main reasons that students drop out is the low quality of interactions they have with other people at school. Schussler and Collins wrote that

Although research documented that lack of care creates a negative school environment that contributes to students' decisions to drop out, research systematically exploring the effects of the presence of care is needed. . . . [This study's findings concurred with research conducted by Schussler and Collins for this question in that they suggested care is also addressed indirectly in research indicating that relationships exist between affect and cognition. In addition, Schussler and Collins] asserted that emotion, cognition, and action are integrally connected, yet Hargreaves concluded that the high school makes emotional connection with students difficult. (p. 1462)

Osterman (as cited in Schussler & Collins, 2006) concluded that positive affect enhances learning: There is a much higher level of interest and motivation and commitment for those students who believe that they are accepted within their school.

Schussler and Collins wrote that in contrast to exhibiting a sense of care to students who may be at-risk for leaving school, "evidence that care operates as an important piece of the dropout-prevention puzzle and that affect and cognition work in synergy, the myopia of current educational policy focuses primarily on test scores" (p. 1462). Thus, they suggested because the goal is accountability, the stakes for teachers and schools are tremendous. Darling-Hammond et al. (as cited in Schussler & Collins) stated external accountability often supersedes everything else, including a school's mission and values. Within current educational policy, two major barriers inhibit care in schools. The first is that care and academic achievement are viewed as mutually exclusive and, second, even when care and academics are acknowledged, the assumption is that teachers and schools know how to be caring (Schussler & Collins).

*Key findings for Research Question 4.* What recommendations can be made to reduce student attrition in the alternative setting? According to the responses from personal interviews conducted with parents, community leaders, and juvenile court staff, that included a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix D), as well as the literature review, indicated that the issue of student attrition is on the rise, and aspects or components of educational programs must be defined.

For this question, the researcher met with respondents who indicated that parents needed to become directly involved when their child missed school after 3 consecutive days. Other responses indicated that implementing extracurricular activities would be nice, that administrators could meet weekly to discuss those students who are deemed at risk for failing or dropping out, and that the school should seek to employ a transition specialist who would make random visits to the homes of those students who had not been coming to school, dropped out temporarily, or needed assistance with additional

resources in the community.

Data obtained from respondents in this study's findings concurred with that of the research conducted by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. (Bridgeland et al., 2006) as they indicated schools need to provide a wide range of supplemental services or intensive assistance strategies for struggling students in schools literacy programs, attendance monitoring, school and peer counseling, mentoring, tutoring, double class periods, internships, service learning, and summer school programs to provide adult advocates in the school who can help students find the support they need. Schools also need to provide appropriate supports to students with special needs, including pregnant students and students with disabilities, and to enhance their coordination with community-based institutions and government agencies (P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc).

Martin et al. (2002), research findings suggested extracurricular activities encourage the development of conventional social support networks and also help students develop personal goals and interests. Thus, findings from this study concurred with that of Cairns' in that extracurricular activities were identified as an important aspect of social interventions for students in school. Martin et al. stated, "The extracurricular activities most closely associated with reduced dropout rates were athletic and vocational activities (e.g. Automobile Club, Career Club, Future Business Leaders, Future Farmers, Future Home-makers, and Vocational Industrial Club)" (p. 12).

Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, and Christenson (2003) indicated programs designed to prevent dropout have been implemented in schools across the country for decades. Such programs emphasize the importance of ensuring that those students who may not remain in school until graduation at least have an identified plan for the future. Eisenman (2007) stated that "Theory, research, and practice have suggested that to keep youth in school,

educators must encourage students' perceived competence and self-determination" (p. 3).

A transition plan designed by schools always includes that of transition services for students with and without disabilities and to include this proponent of transition planning within the daily curriculum. Of those students who are deemed at risk for dropping out of school, transition planning will allow these students to have a sense of worthwhile being able to obtain employment and care for their families.

Research conducted by Luft, Brown, and Sutherin (2007) suggested one way to be sure that the instruction is relevant to students' lives is by incorporating their transition needs and adult-living issues into the classroom teaching. McPartland (as cited in Eisenman, 2007) revealed scrutiny of successful dropout prevention programs suggested that four elements support students' engagement in school: experiencing academic success, perceiving that adults in school care about them, receiving support to manage immediate personal concerns, and then connecting what they do in school to important personal goals.

*Key findings for Research Question 5.* How can the school increase parent involvement to assist in decreasing the overall dropout rate? Findings from this study indicated that 100% of parents admitted that they could become involved more in their child's education. Some findings from the focus group concurred with research conducted by P. D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. (Bridgeland et al., 2006) which there is a low level or perhaps no positive parental involvement in the student dropouts' lives. In addition, this report stated that former students describe differing levels of parental involvement, different reasons for their involvement, and different levels of awareness that their child was about to drop out of school. According to their results (Bridgeland et al.), 59% of parents or guardians were involved in their children's schooling but only

20% were very involved. More than half of those parents were involved with their child at the school for disciplinary reasons.

Foley and Pang (2006) affirmed “efforts to increase the school involvement of parents of alternative school youth appear to be limited to approximately one third of the reporting programs” (p. 17). Dettmer, Thurston, and Dyck, (2005) stated, “The absence of such efforts may be linked to perceptions that students do not want their parents involved in their education.”

In contrast to the findings for this research question, May and Copeland (1998) indicated,

More than one quarter (27.8%) of youth who attended alternative schools reported their persistence in school was related, in part, to supportive family and peer relationships. Thus, program administrators may need to utilize innovative strategies to involve parents and other family members in the program’s educational activities and to support students’ successful completion of secondary school. . . . previous research has suggested parental involvement is one of the key factors in alternative education students persisting in school and achieving either their high school diploma or GED certificate. (pp. 202-205)

### *Implications of Findings*

This study also reviewed the limited amount of information available on parent perceptions as to why students drop out of school and what the school district should be doing more of in an effort to support these students. Literature suggested that student attrition is something that will always be a concern throughout this nation, but transition, by definition, addresses the interests, needs, and preferences of the students--it is about them so it is likely that the students will be engaged in these topics. In addition, Loveless (2003) indicated,

The consequences of not attending to the transition needs of minority youth with disabilities are clear from a review of disparities associated with postschool outcomes for this population. For example, minority youth with disabilities are much more likely to drop out of school, are less likely to receive postsecondary

degrees, and are less likely to find jobs that pay good wages.

Of the student dropouts interviewed in this study, most believed that life after school has been difficult without a quality education. Thus, through their insight and the insight from community leaders, juvenile probation officers, and a whole host of individuals who all participated in this study, the alternative school and the school district are still in dire straits. Research in this area must be ongoing and implications of the findings should prove valuable in addressing this problem in greater detail in the future.

### *Recommendations*

In an effort to assist the alternative school in reducing student attrition in their setting, the following recommendations are being made based on the findings of this study. These items have been carefully considered and shared with the alternative school as well.

The researcher determined, based on the findings of this study and from individual interviews with participants, that it would be valuable if the alternative school considered establishing practices that will accurately identify those students who may be at-risk for dropping out of school. This administrator and parent-teacher council should review the progress of identified at-risk students every 6 to 9 weeks, share the results of the student's progress with the parent (formally with the school counselor), and make recommendations to parents in terms of tutoring, advancing a student to more challenging courses, or accessing outside resources when there are additional concerns for the student. The main reason for this recommendation was that it appears the alternative school has not been consistent in assisting students in the past to encourage them to be a candidate for graduation versus dropping out of school.

Next, the school district should consider employing a transition specialist in this

setting who would serve as liaison between the school and home of students who are struggling with other issues, such as unexpected pregnancies, severe absences, and truancy issues; and transitioning from youth detention facilities back into the schools and communities. This would enable the alternative school to address the issue of student attrition and insure that students are not lost in this process of transition. In this sense, transition refers to a variety of things. Many students in this district drop out due to pregnancy, high absenteeism, and youth detention facilities due to a criminal past, and do not know how to recover. It is with this purpose in mind that the research showed that it is necessary to introduce a transition specialist. This could be a critical intervention for many at risk students in this alternative school setting.

As in dealing with behaviors and students who bully others, further research may need to be conducted by the district or perhaps by state board members to introduce wraparound services that work primarily with students and their families. These services could address basic needs that are not being met and may assist those students who display antisocial behaviors, gang violence, and other troublesome behaviors. This is highly recommended; it was suggested in the literature that many at-risk students who fall into this category are often stereotyped and ignored by school personnel and faculty members alike which frustrates the students further.

Findings from this research indicated that student dropouts believed there were a lack of uncaring adults in this school setting. Therefore, it is recommended that each student spend at least 30 minutes with their counselor at school to discuss their progress academically. It would also be important for the student and counselor complete a private needs assessment that would examine many facets of that child's life that they may not feel comfortable discussing with someone that they deem potentially uncaring.

Mentorship would also serve as a cornerstone in changing the lives of at-risk students in this setting. The school should seek out community-based organizations and businesses that would encourage employees to volunteer their time. These mentors could help to mold a student and serve as a role model for these students to set goals, aspire to achieve those goals, and become motivated to remain in school until graduation.

### *Limitations*

There were many limitations that were experienced throughout the course of this research. Therefore, limitations of the study include those normally associated with using correlational designs and survey instruments. The first thing noted was the ability to generalize the findings to other alternative programs is not known. Cause and effect cannot be ascribed to the variables, and student's self-reporting may not adequately reflect their actual experiences. The literature review identified low-income youth as at risk because of various factors, including economic conditions, racial or ethnic group designation, or a combination of the two. This research attempted to provide strategies and interventions for helping those youth identified as at-risk to improve their academic outcomes and remain in school until graduation.

Secondly, this study did not take into consideration participants' home environment, drug use, criminal activity, involvement in counseling, or other variables that may have affected their self-esteem. Also, the student dropouts' maturation between the time they dropped out of school and the time of this study was not taken into account.

Third, the process in which clients were selected was tedious as participation letters were mailed out after random selection; however, many clients made contact with the school secretary indicating their desire to participate. However, many of these past student dropouts who expressed a desire to participate did not provide correct addresses



to be contacted later and many telephone numbers were disconnected.

A fourth limitation of the study was the reliance on data from the alternative school database. Although this may have been one of the best ways to obtain data on student dropouts, data were missing from the alternative school database, and it was impossible to verify the reliability and validity of the data.

Lastly, the findings of this research cannot be applied to alternative schools in other settings. The participating school is a unique program, and the ability of other schools to replicate the participating school could be called into question.

### *Conclusions*

The findings from this study suggested that there are many reasons for student attrition in the alternative school setting. More research needs to be conducted to determine the best ways to reduce student attrition at the local, state and national levels. According to Vanderslice (2004), the additional time and energy spent on keeping at-risk students in school will decrease dropout rates leading to better employment opportunities, higher pay, and fewer incarcerated adults. The advantages seem apparent for educators and society, as a whole.

This study has assisted in dispelling the myth that students who drop out of school have no hope, need, or desire to make a better future for themselves. Benz et al. (as cited in Eisenman, 2007); Dunn et al. (as cited in Eisenman); Kotering and Braziel (as cited in Eisenman); Rossi, Sinclair, Christenson, and Evlo (as cited in Eisenman); and Hurley (as cited in Eisenman) all showed that students must learn personally helpful strategic skills and they must know that adults are monitoring their success and are ready to step in with support at any point when the student is experiencing difficulties.

There is a recognized need to keep students in school; those needs draw closer

and closer to home every day. It is every educator's responsibility to step up to the plate, and the district's and school's responsibility to insure they are trained to be able to be effective coaches and mentors to students at risk of dropping out of school.

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Appendix A  
Focus Group Questions



## Focus Group Questions

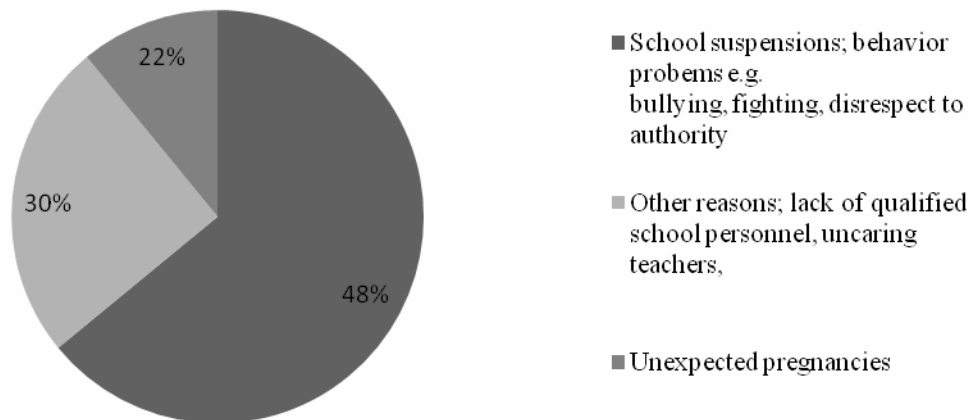
The following questions were utilized to guide the discussion during the planned focus group session with the targeted participants that will include; 6 school staff members, 2 parents, and 3 community leaders.

1. How can you become involved as a parent of a student in this setting?
2. What do you feel the School Advisory Committee could do to incorporate more parental feedback & support?
3. What suggestions would you have to assist the alternative school in decreasing the number of student dropouts?

Appendix B

Factors Contributing to Student Attrition in the Alternative School Setting

## Factors contributing to student attrition in the alternative school setting



Appendix C  
Summary of Respondents' Comments, Concerns, and Conclusions  
of Individual Interview Sessions

## Summary of Respondents' Comments, Concerns, and Conclusions of Individual Interview Sessions

1. Student attrition is an increasing problem at the alternative school, and according to respondents the school has not been supported enough to effectively address this issue. According to respondents, student attrition is getting so out of control, businesses and industries will not even consider expanding here. Thus, causing a decrease in employment opportunities for student dropouts and up and coming graduates. In addition, respondents indicated for this question that not completing school is like assigning yourself to a death sentence. Some advice for student dropouts was to stay in school until graduation and to prepare early for a promising career. However, to do this, school must be a part of your future.

2. Mentoring according to most respondents involves dedication, commitment, and a lot of time and effort. Mentoring a student (according to respondents) is not just important, but often times worthwhile the effort. It was also suggested that sometimes it changes the life of a student, and sometimes it does not. However, respondents also indicated that mentoring an at-risk child...has made a difference in their lives as well.

3. Respondents indicated that the community could overall serve as an example in decreasing student attrition. The fact of the matter is that the community is not giving back to the students who are the future. This fact alone served as a concern for many respondents because the community has demonstrated a lack of support to students in the alternative setting. Most of these respondents indicated that the students have been let down by the community and thus students may have felt as if their community was not giving them a chance. Some of the community leaders that were interviewed in this study strongly suggested that the community could come into the school to assess the needs of at-risk students contemplating dropping out of school. This would involve spending time at the school and/or scheduling speaking engagements (school assemblies) to speak to students who are most at-risk for dropping out. Also, respondents included that the community and its community leaders could also employ student dropouts to help increase their skills in the workplace and make these students more employable.

4. Advice provided by respondents to this question included any student who is contemplating leaving school should know that their future will be very limited. Also, to review and reassess their long-term career goals as well. Respondents also stressed that this is where mentoring comes into play; students who are contemplating leaving school should know that there is a caring adult there to aid them.

5. The matter of decreasing student attrition in the alternative school setting is complex at best, but respondents to this questions indicated that there needs to be an individual employed by the district who would follow-up on students that were chronically absent from school. In addition, students needed to be able to have access to resources outside of the school also. Respondents indicated as well that the alternative school could look to maintain a regular "open house" for parents to meet school administrators and to find out a bit more about the school's curriculum too.

Appendix D

Individual Interview Questions

### Individual Interview Questions

The following questions were utilized to guide the discussion during the face-to-face interview sessions with the targeted participants that will include; 3 parents, 2 community leaders, 9 Juvenile court staff.

1. How significant of a problem is student attrition in this community to you?
2. What does mentoring a child mean to you?
3. How can the community serve as an example to encourage students to remain in school until graduation?
4. What advice would you give a student who you knew was contemplating leaving school?
5. What recommendations could you make for decreasing student attrition in the alternative setting?

Appendix E

Summary of Respondents' Comments, Concerns, and Conclusions

From Focus Group Session



Summary of Respondents' Comments, Concerns, and Conclusions  
From Focus Group Session

1. Parent respondents indicated that they could become more involved in the school by assisting teachers who are often overwhelmed. Parents indicated that it would be important to support the school by means of volunteering more and that assisting the school with the simple things e.g. monitoring the halls, making copies of class work for after-school programs. However, the most important idea came from respondents who indicated that would be willing to volunteer time to invest in a school beautification project.

2. Parents responded very clearly to this question that the school could sponsor a breakfast for parents specifically that would include school staff members and would involve a meet & greet between parents and staff and this would provide a more casual atmosphere for collaboration to take place. Parents suggested that with this type of atmosphere...it would prove more beneficial for parents who have never received the opportunity to meet administrators of the school and/or were not available during the time for the yearly scheduled open house. Another very important recommendation for the school advisory committee was that of administrators having an "open door" policy so that parents could voice their concerns more readily versus waiting to meet with a whole host of individuals to schedule long drawn out and often boring school meetings.

3. The overall recommendation for decreasing student attrition in the alternative school setting is to include the student more in the academic process. It was suggested in this focus group that students feel vested in their education. Also, it was recommended that students have someone that they could feel comfortable talking to about personal issues e.g. a mentor, a school counselor and/or a teacher with whom the student felt cared about them. Also, it was strongly recommended that the school employ an individual who would assist students and families outside of the school if necessary with very urgent personal concerns, issues that may be weighing heavy on a student's decision to stay in school until graduation or to merely opt to drop out.

## Appendix F

### Characteristics of Student Dropout Respondents

## Characteristics of Student Dropout Respondents

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Age of Student</i>	<i>Last Grade Completed</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Gender</i>
<i>Respondent 1</i>	16	9 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 2</i>	17	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 3</i>	19	12 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 4</i>	23	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 5</i>	17	9 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 6</i>	19	10 <sup>th</sup>	Caucasian	Female
<i>Respondent 7</i>	22	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 8</i>	16	9 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 9</i>	17	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 10</i>	24	12 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 11</i>	21	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 12</i>	25	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 13</i>	23	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 14</i>	23	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 15</i>	19	9 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 16</i>	21	12 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 17</i>	18	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 18</i>	17	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 19</i>	16	9 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Female
<i>Respondent 20</i>	20	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 21</i>	17	11 <sup>th</sup>	Caucasian	Female
<i>Respondent 22</i>	17	11 <sup>th</sup>	Caucasian	Male
<i>Respondent 23</i>	24	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 24</i>	22	11 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male
<i>Respondent 25</i>	16	10 <sup>th</sup>	African American	Male

## Appendix G

### Summary of Student Responses to Open-Ended Survey Questions

## Summary of Student Responses to Open-Ended Survey Questions

Open-ended survey Question	No. of responses per student	Brief Summary of student responses
When you would miss school, did anyone from the school regularly contact you or your parents or guardians to find out where you were or why you missed school?	25 students responded to this question	Students responded that when they would miss school, no one would call from the school nor would they feel as if anyone cared.
Do you feel that your school did enough to (READ ITEM), or do you feel that your school did not do enough to (READ ITEM)?	25 students responded to this question	Students indicated in their responses that they felt as if the school did not do enough when students would skip classes, failed to do enough to make them feel safe (while at school), and even assist them when they struggled academically, etc.
I'm going to read you some statements about some people's high school experiences, and for each one, please tell me whether it applied to you or did not apply to you when you were in high school.	25 students responded to this question	Responses for this question indicated that students felt that there was a lack of caring adults at the alternative school. Some of the areas that were identified on the survey included a lack of school personnel who they could confide in as well as not feeling supported by family members. In addition, there was a deficiency in the area of having supporting individuals to encourage them to continue with school and graduate.
Let's talk about your decision to leave high school. In your own words, why did you leave school?	25 students responded to this question	Students indicated overall in their responses that they left because they often had discipline problems in school and suffered from numerous suspensions. Also, student respondents identified that staff members were not supportive and that some of their parents had other priorities.
Now I'm going to mention some reasons that other people have given for leaving high school. For each one I read, please tell me whether it was a major factor in your decision	25 students responded to this question	Responses for this question concluded that students admitted they left high school for many reasons, but some of the major reasons included; absenteeism,

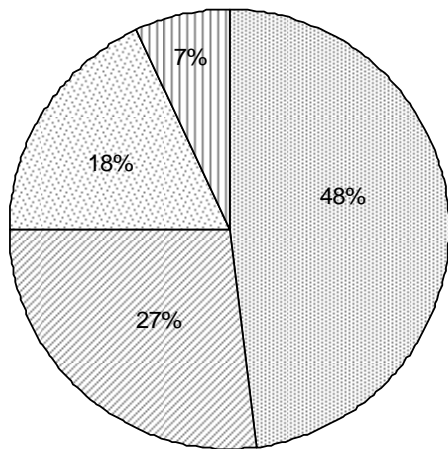
to leave, a minor factor, or not a factor at all in your decision to leave high school.		problems with the law & poor academics, low grades, and obtaining a job to care for family members and unplanned family members.
When you left school, did you think that you would go back and graduate at that time or were you not planning to go back and graduate?	25 students responded to this question	Responses to this question were interesting, many student felt that they would return to school and had good intentions of doing so...however, never did return to school to graduate.
Looking back on it, how important do you feel that graduating from high school is to succeeding in life...?	25 students responded to this question	In answering this question, students indicated that it was clearly important to finish school. However, again many reasons kept some students from achieving that goal and also students had other things that prevented them from doing so.
Are you currently employed? If yes, what type of work do you do? If no, are you unemployed and looking for work or are you unemployed because you are taking classes?	25 students responded to this question	Most students responded that they were gainfully employed and other students sated that they were actively seeking employment also. There was a small number of students who were neither employed or actively seeking employment.

*Note.* Survey was adapted with permission from S. Streicker of Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., Jr., & Morison, K. (2006, March). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. A report by Civic Enterprises with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Washington, DC. Retrieved November 6, 2006 from <http://www.civicerprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf>

## Appendix H

Responses From Students who are Actively Pursuing a GED or Alternative

### Responses from students who are actively pursuing a GED or alternative



- Student dropouts who were not actively pursuing any type of formal education and/or job or career.
- Student dropouts who were not currently employed in their community.
- Student dropouts who were not currently enrolled in G.E.D. programs.
- Student dropouts who were not seeking to enroll in a G.E.D. program or looking for stable employment.



### Biographical Sketch of Janel L. Johnson

Janel L. Johnson is currently a doctoral candidate at Nova Southeastern University where she concentrated in Special Education & minored in Curriculum Development at the Fischler School of Education and Human Services. In addition, Mrs. Johnson is married with three children ages 13 years old, 7 years old, and 2 ½ years old. She is also a longtime professional in the field of Juvenile Justice and is actively employed with a private agency serving at-risk juvenile probationers. Mrs. Johnson has worked with at-risk youth throughout the community for the past 7 years in many different capacities. Since that time, she has found her passion and acquired a love for the area of Special Education. She has committed herself both now and upon completion of this program to assist at-risk children and those who have exceptional needs to set goals and see them through the achievement of those goals. Most important, she would like to serve as a mentor and inspire at-risk students to remain in school until graduation.