Preventing High School Dropouts: What Do Students Believe Caused Them to Leave the Comprehensive High School?

by

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Preventing High School Dropouts: What Do Students Believe

Caused Them to Leave the Comprehensive High School?

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the many students who find their way by going down a different path, and to the dedicated educators who support them. This is also dedicated to my family, who supported me during the dissertation process.
ABSTRACT

More than 7,000 students in our nation become dropouts every school day. One in three high school students do not graduate, and a higher proportion of African American and Hispanic youth do not earn a diploma. This study examined perceived reasons students reported for leaving the comprehensive high school. Further, it examined why students chose to continue at a continuation campus toward high school completion. The population consisted of students between the ages of 15-19 who are currently enrolled in a continuation high school in a large, diverse community located in Southern California. Participants included 32 continuation high school students who had left the comprehensive high school setting. This study utilized qualitative research methodology with semi-structured interviews, as well as three one-on-one individual interviews. Three research questions were explored: Why do students leave comprehensive high schools? What supports do students believe teachers and school leaders should provide to increase the likelihood that they will become motivated to stay at their comprehensive high school? What do students identify as factors that support their continuing educational experiences in an alternative setting? Responses were transcribed and coded to determine common themes and areas for further exploration. Significant findings of the interviews included: (a) relationships are extremely important to students who have a lack of trust in how the educational system supports them; (b) there is a need for both students and adults to develop better human relations skills; and (c) there is a need to develop trusting school environments that support close monitoring of student progress toward relevant student goals. The study’s findings may assist educators in creating more supportive learning environments that provide
meaningful curriculum and programs to improve student learning. This study may also provide the research community with a more detailed understanding of student motivation and engagement, and may be used to more clearly understand factors that impede high school completion. Information gathered in this study could also be used to create structures within comprehensive high schools to better support struggling students before they decide to leave.
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CHAPTER 1—INTRODUCTION

More than 7,000 students in our nation become dropouts every school day. One in three high school students do not graduate, and a higher proportion of African American and Hispanic youth do not earn a diploma. The rate at which teenagers drop out has remained about the same for the last 30 years, despite an increase in funding allocated for education.

The dropout rate has been referred to as a silent epidemic and of late has been recognized as a national crisis. Dropouts imperil not only their futures but also negatively impact our communities and nation due to the loss of productive workers; billions of dollars in lost tax revenues; and the higher costs associated with social services, health care, crime-prevention programs, and increased incarceration.

Dropping out is not a sudden act but a gradual process of disengagement. There is no single reason why students drop out of high school, and there is no single solution to retain all students in the educational system. However, our teenagers are qualified key stakeholders who can address the dropout crisis. They are the experts on what it is like to be a student.

I was especially interested to hear firsthand from students who left a comprehensive high school and enrolled in an alternative school or program to earn a diploma. What safety net was in place that caught these students before they became another dropout statistic as they precariously traversed the tightrope between unsuccessful experiences at a comprehensive high school and success in an alternative setting?

The first chapter of this dissertation presents the background and the statement of the problem, delineates the study questions, describes the significance of the problem and
presents an overview of the methodology to be used. The chapter concludes by noting the
delimitations of the study and defining special terms.

**Statement of the Problem**

Education reform has been at the forefront of federal legislation for the past few
decades. Despite the academic gains made since the enactment of the No Child Left
Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary
Education Act first enacted in 1965 and reauthorized in 1994), nearly one-third of all high
school students leave the public school system before graduating (C. Swanson, 2004), and
the problem is particularly severe among students of color and students with disabilities
(Greene & Winters, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The dropout rate in this
country disproportionately affects students who are low-income, minority, living in a
single-parent home and attending a large, urban public high school; one-third of these
students do not graduate from high school.

Once a world leader in high-school completion, the United States now ranks 17th
in high school graduation rates among developed nations. Among industrialized nations,
the United States is the only country in which today’s young people are less likely than
their parents to have earned a high school diploma (Organisation for Economic
Co-Operation and Development, 2007).

The more than 13 million students who will drop out over the next decade will be
a loss to the nation of $3 trillion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Dropouts from
the Class of 2008 alone will cost the nation more than $319 billion in lost wages over the
course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Had the number of
students in the Class of 2009 who dropped out graduated (approximately 1,286,915
according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006), the nation’s economy would have
benefitted from nearly $335 billion in additional income over the lifetimes of these
dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Students see dropping out as a viable
option, whether or not they understand the consequences in terms of personal costs
(Levin, Belfield, Muenning, & Rouse, 2007).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 stipulates that states must have assessment
systems and accountability plans in place, including a system to monitor the dropout rate,
if they are to receive federal funding. As local, state, and national concern about the
dropout epidemic has increased, policymakers became aware that methods to compute
the dropout rate and criteria used to define a dropout varied from state to state. Because
states and school districts calculate dropout rates using varying definitions, it is often
impossible to determine if the same criteria are being compared. State or federal
oversight to verify the accuracy of graduation reports is limited or nonexistent, therefore
these reports are flawed, misleading, and obscure the reality that too few students
complete high school. There are too many ways to calculate graduation and dropout rates
that disguise the problem. The consequence is that no state can report precisely the
percentage of students who start high school as freshmen and graduate with a regular
diploma 4 years later (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). Schools and communities cannot
adequately address the dropout problem without an accurate account of it (Heckman &
LaFontaine, 2007). In 2005, governors from all 50 states agreed to adopt a uniform, more
accurate definition for calculating the graduation rate. However, as of October 2008, only
16 states had done so. Deciding where to begin to address the dropout crisis is an
enormous challenge.
Purpose of the Study

Utilizing responses from students who were unsuccessful in a comprehensive high school setting, this study culled information to learn why they left a more traditional learning environment to pursue a diploma in an alternative setting. Focus group interviews, as well as follow-up one-on-one interviews, were held to engage students in a discussion of what impeded them on their path toward graduation. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to understand students’ perceptions of school support as well as to determine possible structures or reasons the comprehensive high schools did not meet their needs. Further, it examined why students who chose to leave a comprehensive high school opted to continue along an alternative path toward high school completion.

Research Questions

The following three questions guided this study:

1. Why do students leave comprehensive high schools?
2. What supports do students believe teachers and school leaders should provide to increase the likelihood that they will become motivated to stay at their comprehensive high school?
3. What do students identify as factors that support their continuing educational experiences in an alternative setting?

Overview of Methodology

Multiple methodologies were examined when reviewing literature related to dropouts. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies have been utilized to address this multifaceted crisis. In addition to empirical studies, a review of literature on
student engagement and motivation was examined to deepen the understanding of this multifaceted problem. Most dropout research analyzes student grades, course completion, and test scores; attendance and behavior/discipline data; family dynamics; and socioeconomic status. Despite numerous studies and the abundance of literature that cites the personal and financial limitations of dropouts, the problem persists.

This study solicited input from qualified key stakeholders who addressed the dropout crisis—teenagers who are experts on what it is like to be a high school student—in order to disclose experiences at traditional comprehensive high schools that foster dropping out. Asking students to share their motivation and rationale for choosing an alternative educational setting contributed to the pool of information that could potentially influence best practices within our high schools.

Research in the area of prevention, and studying the factors that precipitate dropping out, will help educators design policy to better meet the educational and social needs of students. Green and Winters (2005) state that qualitative methodologies provide creative ways to come up with solutions. Creswell (2003) states that qualitative methodologies “encourage us to probe the underlying issues assumed” (p. 24). He states that qualitative approaches in a single study prove results with greater breadth and depth. He further states that it is important to “combine the what with a possible why” (p. 25).

This qualitative study took place within the context of a continuation high school in a large urban pre-K–12 school district in Southern California. The continuation school, Henry Thoreau High School, has a main campus in addition to two satellites. Southern California School District (SCSD), a large urban school district in California, is comprised of over 200 educational facilities and provides educational programs to over
100,000 students in grades pre-K–12. Categorical funds provide support services for 43,938 English Language Learners (ELL), 17,732 Special Education Students, and 22,674 Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) students. The student population is quite diverse, with more than 15 ethnic groups represented and over 60 languages and dialects spoken. Seventy-four percent of students in SCSD are non-White. The breakdown by specific ethnic group is as follows: 48% Hispanic, 26% White, 14% African American, 3% Asian, and 9% other. The population of SCSD is economically diverse, ranging from substantially wealthy, to middle class, to below the poverty level. Approximately 53% of district students qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program, and 47% of the students are living below the poverty level.

Thoreau High provides a unique opportunity for students whose educational needs have not been met at a traditional comprehensive high school. Continuation schools in the SCSD offer smaller class sizes, individualized programs, intensive guidance services, and a safe atmosphere that enable credit-deficient students to catch up with their peers and either return to their comprehensive school or graduate with a high school diploma. Thoreau High opened in 1978 and has advanced from a school that relied on packets of worksheets for students to academic standards-based instruction. Teachers work collaboratively to create common teaching units.

Thoreau High School is one of two continuation high schools in the SCSD. Continuation education had its beginning in California in 1919, and its function was broadened in 1929 to include students who were not successful in a traditional school program for a number of reasons. Large school districts, such as SCSD, with 30 comprehensive high schools (including 18 small schools converted from four
comprehensive campuses), are required to provide continuation programs for students aged 16 to 18 who are “adjustment” students or are employed. Students are referred to Thoreau from their resident schools for a variety of reasons, such as:

- Credit deficiencies
- Low GPA
- Behavioral modifications
- Ramifications of abusive and dysfunctional family settings
- To escape anonymity, peer pressure, or harassment issues at large campuses
- Frequent/excessive tardies and absences
- To voluntarily access prenatal/pregnancy and parenting programs, including on-site child care.

Thoreau High School functions as one school: the main campus is centrally located in the city; one satellite is located on a high school campus in the southeast part of the city, and the other is on a high school campus in the northwest part of the city. A large program within the school is the independent study program. Students in Thoreau’s independent study program, Scholastic Opportunities using Alternative Resources (SOAR), meet with a teacher once a week at the main campus, one of the satellites, or at various libraries throughout the city, and are required to spend a minimum of 6 hours daily on coursework. This program is well-suited for students who need to work to support their family, students who are mothers and have infants, students who have difficulty attending school daily, and students who want to earn credits at an accelerated rate. Scholastic Opportunities Using Alternative Resources staff and students are part of
the regular Thoreau program, and every effort is made to maintain a cohesive and collaborative environment at all of the sites.

Thoreau students come from 24 high school neighborhoods throughout the Southern California County. These students were asked what factors contributed to their decision to leave their comprehensive school or to temporarily drop out. Class visits were made to the main campus and the two satellite campuses, and students were given an opportunity to volunteer to participate. Using the three guiding research questions to inform students of the topic, students were asked to voluntarily participate in focus-group interviews to explain their experiences. Students interested were given a parent consent form and a child assent form. Three questions were selected to ask the focus group. Eight to 10 students were selected from volunteers at each of the Thoreau sites, and 30-45 minutes was allotted for each session. Prompts taken from America’s Promise Youth Engagement Survey (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009) were used to further develop the topics during the focus group. The focus-group responses were recorded and transcribed to provide written reference for coding and analysis.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study include the following:

1. The sample population does not include students who have dropped out of high school and not returned. Future studies to find those who have not persevered would be helpful to compare to those who have chosen to complete requirements to earn their diploma.
2. The sample consisted of students who were in attendance on the day the focus group interviews were administered and may not be representative of the entire continuation school population.

3. Data obtained from the interviews revealed student perceptions that are subjective by definition.

4. The study was limited to respondents at one continuation program in one school district in Southern California.

5. These limitations could be assisted with further qualitative and quantitative study. Focusing on at-risk students may also be a limitation because of the possibility the students are not engaged in their class activities and may remain disengaged in any environment. The positive side is that when interviewed, these at-risk students revealed much about their thoughts and feelings of engagement and disengagement in the learning environment. The results may be used to provide school leaders and central office administrators with insights about learning environments as they develop school facilities and a vision to improve academic achievement for all students.

Significance of the Study

This research is important to central office administrators and school leaders who must increase the graduation rate; NCLB specifies that starting in the 2012–13 school year, all high schools’ Adequate Yearly Progress status will be determined by the graduation rate. If input from students in alternative programs enables districts to develop supports and programs that eliminate stumbling blocks on the path to high school graduation, then the dropout rate should decrease.
Students who continued their high school education but left the comprehensive high school to enter an alternative setting provide an unusual dichotomy. They have opted to stay in school but have left the more traditional comprehensive setting. They enrolled in a continuation school to make up credits and catch up academically with their peers. These students have persevered in pursuit of their education despite obstacles.

The 2006 *High School Survey of Student Engagement* (Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy [CEEP], 2006) found that students who enroll in continuation schools say they had problems being respected by their classmates at their traditional school. They found that students and staff at continuation schools practice respect and acceptance.

The researcher is optimistic that having listened to the voices of those who have struggled and conveyed the perceptions of their high school experience will assist educators in creating supportive learning environments that provide meaningful curriculum and programs to improve student learning, participation, engagement, and outcomes. Once they have left the comprehensive high school setting, this subgroup of students rarely interacts with the original school or the school’s leadership. It is important for school leaders to engage in dialogue that leads them to a better understanding of the school climate, why students left, and what factors led to their success in a continuation school after leaving.

In addition, this study examined how students perceived the supports offered that enabled them to continue their education at a continuation school. Further, it examined why students chose to continue along an alternative path toward high school completion. Utilizing student focus-group interviews, followed by one-on-one interviews for a more
in depth conversation, the researcher sought to better understand student perceptions of school support, as well as possible structures or reasons their original schools did not meet their needs.

Qualities that students have in common do not necessarily predetermine success or failure. Students from similar backgrounds may end up following different paths toward graduation. Students who possess qualities linked with dropping out do not necessarily drop out (Greene & Winters, 2005). Listening to the voices of those who are directly affected by current practices and have temporarily left our schools or diverted from the traditional path to earn a diploma may provide some eye-opening answers and shed more light on this complex problem.

**Definition of Terms**

In the Southern California Unified School District, the following descriptions are used to identify students at risk, alternative schools and continuation schools.

*At-risk student:* A student who may not graduate from high school because of an insufficient number of required course credits, a grade point average below 2.0, and/or excessive absences. K–12 students who experience difficulty in meeting grade-level standards in literacy and/or mathematics may be identified as at risk within the first 10 weeks of enrollment, and site staff must develop learning contracts within 4 weeks following the end of the 9- or 12-week grading period that document each student’s strengths and needs and delineates interventions to support improvement.

*Alternative school:* An educational setting designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of students that cannot be adequately addressed in a traditional school environment. Curriculum elements focus on self-motivation,
improving self-esteem, fostering growth of individuality, and enhancing social skills at the student’s own pace.

*Continuation school:* An educational environment that provides individualized programs, smaller class sizes, college and career pathways, and intensive guidance services with flexible schedules to accommodate students who need to work or who are pregnant or teenage parents. Infant centers, special education classes, and independent study courses are offered.

**Summary**

This chapter provided the context for the study and the rationale for including student input when addressing the multi-faceted approach to the dropout crisis. It also presented data on the financial and social effects that dropouts have on themselves and on our communities, state, and nation. In addition, this chapter explained the inaccuracy of national high school dropout reports due to the inconsistent definition of a dropout from state to state and the contradictory criteria used to determine dropouts.

This chapter also justified why a qualitative approach in this case study was appropriate. Methodologies of this study included focus-group interviews, one-on-one follow-up interviews implied in methodology. Limitations of the study were outlined in this chapter to identify factors that could have potentially influenced data collection and the outcome.

Chapter 2 reviewed factors that influence dropouts, student engagement, motivation of students, programs that address dropout prevention, and the use of student voice to provide insight on the dropout crisis. A complex question calls for a variety of investigative strategies. Chapter 3 addresses the methodology of using a qualitative
methods approach for this research study. Chapter 4 focuses on the data collected from focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews with students. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of this study and makes recommendations based on the results.
CHAPTER 2—LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature examined research concerning the issues of student dropouts. The review is organized under four major categories of research studies. First, the factors that influence student dropout decisions were investigated. Next, research pertaining to findings regarding issues of student engagement and motivation was reviewed. Then, a summary of the research on programs that have been implemented and successfully followed was reviewed. Finally, the issue of student voice as a methodological approach was addressed.

Factors That Influence Students to Drop Out

A review of research studies conducted in the field of dropout prevention yielded a complex array of findings. Both quantitative and qualitative studies reinforced the need for individual assessment and targeted intervention. While practical strategies and multidimensional approaches to prevent dropouts have resulted from the numerous studies on the subject, the complexity of the problem demands further investigation. The following review addresses dropout research and methodologies that have been successful in shedding light on the topic.

The research team of Wells, Bechard, and Hambly (1989) categorized factors that influence dropout decisions into the following four broad categories: school-related, student-related, community-related, and family-related. Wells et al. (1989) found that a combination of these factors greatly increased the likelihood of a student dropping out. This framework was the lens through which the research on dropout rates in this section was viewed. The four factors are generally summarized as follows:
1. Student-related factors are qualities students possess independent of demographics such as drug abuse, trouble with the law, and pregnancy.

2. School-related factors are those in the control of the school or school district.

3. Family-related factors include socio-economic status, parental support, or whether one or both parents live in the home.

4. Community-related factors include societal pressure, the impact of poverty, as well as environmental influences.

Each of these areas was addressed by investigating the research connected with each factor.

**Student-Related Factors**

Student-related factors are defined as those the student engages in outside of the school setting. Most often they are associated with negative student behaviors such as drug abuse or violent actions. Research has found a direct correlation between student behaviors and an increase in the dropout rate. Studies point to early childhood development and aggressive behavior as the strongest determinant of dropping out of high school. In a longitudinal study following 248 girls and 227 boys from 7th grade until 12th grade, Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1986) examined behavioral, cognitive, and demographic factors relating to dropping out of high school. He found that students who dropped out were earlier noted to have exhibited high levels of aggressiveness and lower academic performance.

A study by Brindis and Philleben (1998) noted three distinct indicators of dropouts. Brindis and Philleben stated that students who “associated” with other dropouts had a higher incidence of dropping out. Other noted factors included low
socio-economic status and early parenthood. These three factors point to the negative cultural influences of peer groups and poverty. While early parenthood is present as a common factor in all socio-economic levels, it is also linked to early dropouts.

Cairns, Cairns, and Neckerman (1989) conducted a longitudinal study that analyzed the relationship between behavioral, cognitive, and demographic factors and early school dropout. He assessed a sample of girls \( n = 248 \) and boys \( n = 247 \) and monitored them from seventh grade to either school dropout or completion. Interviews were conducted individually to assess the 14% who had dropped out prior to 11th grade. Results of these interviews found that 82% of the males and 4% of the females with high levels of aggressiveness coupled with poor academic performance in seventh grade had dropped out. The primary outcomes were supported by convergent variable-oriented and person-oriented analyses.

Rumberger and Larson (1998) conducted a hierarchical regression analysis to examine indicators of dropout. They found multiple factors of drop out could emanate from a single predictive trait such as low socio-economic status or gender. When combined, they increased the likelihood of the indicators’ predictive value. For example, high socio-economic status and high student performance were indicators of high future income. They also found few indicators that crossed all domains. Indicators they did find, which were linked to the domains studied, included parental involvement, academic achievement by age 14, and a juvenile arrest.

The California Dropout Research Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara determined that 30,000 juvenile crimes in the state would be prevented and $550 million would be saved every year if the dropout rate were cut in half. This project
previously studied the economic effect of not finishing high school and concluded that the state loses $46.4 billion for each group of 20-year-olds that fails to complete high school (approximately 120,000 annually). By 2020, when approximately 43 million baby-boomers with at least some college education will be retired or approaching retirement age, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the nation will face a shortage of nearly 12 million workers with at least some college education.

**School-Related Factors**

Wells et al. (1989) define school-related factors as structures and activities within the school day that may contribute or fail to deter disengaging behaviors. These factors constitute actions that occur during the school day and are related to interaction with the school system. Chronic absenteeism, tardiness to class, and other disciplinary problems are considered school-related factors. Retention and poor academic achievement are also factors that have been studied to determine a correlation with dropout issues. Research on the early warning signs of dropping out indicates that the over-age student is at great risk of dropping out across all three grade levels—elementary, middle, and high school (Wells et al., 1989).

One of the earliest longitudinal studies on academic success and behavior while in school and the corollary effect on dropping out was conducted by Roderick (1993). Roderick analyzed a cohort of students in Fall River, Massachusetts. She looked at three drop out factors for students starting in 4th grade through high school graduation. This longitudinal study provided great insight in determining causality of factors in dropping out. Roderick looked at the three areas including academic performance, student engagement, and social background. Two of the factors are directly influenced by the
school. Her analysis compared dropouts with nondropouts. She used event history analysis to look at academic records including grades and attendance as measurements for engagement and performance. She discovered that the data were skewed by two subgroups. The average 4th grade academic performance was pulled down by the lowest third that eventually dropped out prior to entering 10th grade. Secondly, she found the average was raised by a subgroup of high performers who would graduate at the top of their high school class. Roderick also found a pattern showing two distinct types of dropouts: the early dropouts who dropped out between 7th and 9th grade, and the later dropouts who dropped out between 10th and 12th grade. She found these two groups had very different educational careers. The early dropouts showed lower performance as early as 4th grade. The later dropouts had similar performance in 4th grade and showed great declines in the transition years into middle and high school. During the transition to middle school, Roderick found that academic performance dropped for nearly all students. She determined that those who fell behind in the transitions experienced a greater dip in performance and never recovered.

Students have been found to not only be at risk when they transition to a new grade level but also when retained at any grade. Retaining students at any point in their K–12 path increased the likelihood of dropping out of high school regardless of the reason for the retention (Alexander & Entwisle, 2001). Alexander and Entwisle (2001) found that the highest predicting factor of dropout was if a student had repeated a grade in elementary or middle school. This has implications for policy on K–8 retention and could inform both school boards and school leaders when making these critical decisions.
Structures and systems that comprise a school’s design (administration, staffing, budgets, resources, schedules, curriculum, instruction, assessments), how they support or deter struggling students, and how they serve at-risk subgroups, are also predictive of dropout rates. Absenteeism repeatedly leads the list of predictors of dropout behaviors (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Bryk and Thum (1989) studied how a school’s organizational structure affects dropout behaviors. They used linear analysis to investigate what leads to absenteeism, and found structures with clear norms in place held the most promise for students at risk of absenteeism and as a corollary dropout rate.

Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that attendance was a strong predictor of success in high school. The number of absences a student accumulates is an easy-to-obtain measurement and one proven to be a strong indicator of high school success. Allensworth and Easton found that absence rates were particularly significant in transition years from elementary to middle school and middle to high school. Absenteeism was also seen as a primary indicator to measure student engagement. Other researchers found correlating behaviors including truancy, coming to school unprepared, and not completing homework to be indications of academic disengagement (Bonikowske, 1987).

Cairns et al. (1989) also addressed the issue of absenteeism. They found that schools defined as heterogeneous and highly normative were deemed the most supportive for keeping students on track. They noted that schools where subgroups felt disenfranchised and did not have a clearly defined normative school culture had a higher frequency of absenteeism. Structures that had clearly defined normative cultures were more likely to have fewer absences. A climate characterized by “safety and orderliness in
a location that is accessible and not-threatening can make a powerful contribution to dropout prevention” (Bonikowske, 1987, p. 75).

Additional effects of school structure on the dropout rate have been studied. Schools within schools, or small learning communities, have been found to have a positive influence on counteracting the dropout rate particularly at large high schools (Baker & Sansone, 1990). The movement known as “small schools” was created with financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. These schools continue to follow and track their students to determine their cohort graduation rate. Preliminary results are mixed as some schools are succeeding and others have shown moderate or no change (Gates, 2008).

A school’s vision and interaction with students plays a significant role in curbing the dropout rate. Fine (1991) conducted an ethnographic case study of dropout in an urban school. She described a culture where student-teacher interactions, school discipline procedures, curricula, and district policy contributed to a 40% dropout rate. Fine found that this large urban campus would transfer unsuccessful students to alternative schools. Teachers were asked to select students they felt were at risk of dropping out. Unstructured interviews with students, counselors, teachers, and administrators were recorded and transcribed. Fine found that the site did not have a dropout prevention plan, and the graduation rate was secondary to the site’s goals of increasing academic standards and student achievement. The principal stated that her goal was to develop a mastery approach to the standards within the courses. Students indicated that teachers who helped them persevere shared a common characteristic.
These teachers sought to understand students’ world views and counteract their feelings of powerlessness.

Determining the focus of a school is usually the decision of the principal and district leadership. District leadership can also play an important role in the development of learning strategies that support the goal of preventing dropouts. School leaders shoulder significant responsibility and accountability in reversing the dropout rate. Therefore school boards, superintendents, central office administrators, and school administrators must engage in collaborative partnerships and strive for a cohesive improvement agenda. Purposeful district-level support in providing school leaders with research-based training, technical support, ongoing student data to guide instruction, and adequate resources is crucial to monitor intervention efforts.

School leaders need encouragement and political support from their school board so they can implement innovative organizational structures, school schedules, and partnerships with employers and postsecondary institutions. Educational leaders at all levels struggle to put into effect proactive measures that have the greatest impact on averting dropouts and increasing the number of students who graduate prepared for postsecondary education and careers.

Bottoms and Fry (2009), in the report *The District Leadership Challenge: Empowering Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning*, concluded that school districts must improve working conditions and support for high school principals or the nation will continue to be plagued by troubling dropout rates and high school graduates who are ill-prepared for college-level work. After interviewing principals of high- and low-performing schools, the report found that relationships between central office leaders
and high school principals can increase or reduce the principal’s capacity to effectively lead a school to higher levels of achievement.

The report also found that principals at the most-improved high schools felt they had a collaborative working relationship with the district; the district had loose control over decisions about school improvement. Conversely, principals at the least-improved high schools experienced that most reform initiatives were centralized in the district office; they were constricted by tight district control.

Successful school districts provide school leaders with proven reform strategies such as new ways of using school time and organizing staff so teachers can collaborate on instructional issues, additional teachers and personnel with expertise in instruction, a range of extra-help strategies for students, and an adequate supply of up-to-date materials.

In conclusion, the report states that, “The research is clear and overwhelming: If school districts want high-achieving high schools, they must empower principals to be leaders of change” (Bottoms & Fry, 2009, p. 12).

Understanding the problem of dropouts must include an analysis of the school’s role in the problem as well as examining student characteristics. Educating the “Net” Generation requires an understanding of their learning preferences. Students in this generation were born in or after 1982 and live in a technological, speed-dominated, instant-gratification environment. For the most part, they are visual and kinesthetic and prefer working in teams or peer-to-peer utilizing curriculum that is interactive and relevant (Oblinger, 2005).

A high school diploma should be the standard product of our educational system for every student. Manufacturers in all industries anticipate the changing needs and
desires of consumers (Von Hippel, 2005). Successful businesses conquered stumbling blocks by placing more of an emphasis on consumer input rather than rethinking the redesign of the product. “It’s hard to do the wrong thing if you’re talking to enough people and listening to what the masses are telling you” (Tapscott, 1999, p. 352). The Net Generation of students has grown accustomed to an environment where businesses respond to consumers’ desires; their experiences outside of school teach them to expect response and change. Unfortunately, K–12 “manufacturers” are still operating in the rethinking-the-redesign mode. While earning a high school diploma (the “product”) continues to be the goal of most students, the “product” itself is not a motivating factor to learn on a daily basis for many student consumers of K–12 education.

**Family-Related Factors**

Family environment can encompass qualities such as family composition, poverty level, and substance abuse in the home. Wells et al. (1989) found that family factors contributed to the likelihood of dropping out or remaining in school. Family factors can include parental support, parenthood, or other factors related to the home life of a student. Students cited parental support as a factor that helped them stay in school (Wells et al., 1989). Lack of parental involvement in an abusive home is connected with a higher incidence of dropping out (Wells et al., 1989). Factors such as living in a violent or dysfunctional home environment, a home where drug or alcohol abuse is prevalent, single-parent households, a language other than the language used at school, and a lack of education of the parents have been linked to student dropout (Wells et al., 1989).

Rumberger (2003) found that single-parent homes and large families resulted in the students having less time with an adult and fewer resources available to support them
in their schoolwork. He also found a connection between the level of education completed by the parents and the likelihood of dropping out. Parents who dropped out were more likely to have a child who dropped out.

Ginsberg and Miller-Cribbs (2000) found that having a language spoken in the home other than the primary language of the school was connected to a higher rate of dropout. Ginsberg and Miller-Cribbs also found students who live in a home with drug or alcohol abuse are more likely to drop out. These factors are also connected to parents with criminal records or who are incarcerated (Metzer, 1997).

Family stability was a factor found to positively influence and support students on their way toward graduation. Rumberger and Larson (1998) used data from a sample of 1,500 students in a California longitudinal study. They identified a set of predictors of high school completion, future employment, future income, and adult crime. They analyzed data on individual students, demographics, family information, and school experiences from birth to either high school completion or dropout. Their research included an analysis of test scores comparing nonmobile and highly mobile students. They found that students who moved frequently suffered psychologically, socially, and academically and that students who changed high schools, even once, were twice as likely to drop out.

Support from home affects many other arenas. Rumberger (2003) studied a large sample of 14,249 students to determine whether participation in specific extracurricular activities (athletics and fine arts) significantly reduced a student’s likelihood of dropping out. He found that, when all activities were examined, only athletic participation remained significantly related to dropping out. Mahoney (1997) examined the role
extracurricular activities played in student engagement and dropout prevention. Using longitudinal assessments, Mahoney analyzed interviews of a cohort of 392 students from 7th to 12th grade. The study consisted of 206 girls and 186 boys. A cluster analysis based on interpersonal competence scale ratings from their middle school teachers identified clusters of social competence in the cohort. Mahoney analyzed school dropouts and defined them as students who failed to complete 11th grade. He then looked for a causal relationship to those who participated in extracurricular activities within the school. Mahoney found that students who had a low interpersonal competence score, combined with a lack of participation in extracurricular school-related activity, had a higher incidence of dropping out of school prior to 11th grade.

Carpenter and Ramirez (2007) investigated other home support issues. They found that common predictors of dropout shared within the White and Hispanic student subgroup included gender, time doing homework, and family composition. In addition, males from single-family households were found more likely to drop out than others within the White and Hispanic subgroups. They also found that achievement gaps within ethnicities seemed more profound than gaps across ethnicities. They emphasized the need for school leaders to look for predictors and to weigh the complexity of each situation individually. They also cautioned against looking at factors that merely identify students, rather than understanding their individual needs in an effort to better understand the dropout problem.

**Community-Related Factors**

Wells et al. (1989) found that community factors played a role in whether students dropped out. They define community-related factors as those that are supported by the
current environment or the community supports the student may have available. Poverty is a community-related factor that has a strong correlation with the likelihood of dropping out (Wells et al., 1989). Poverty is often connected with activities that compete with time spent in school. For example, students who work more than 20 hours a week have been found to have a higher likelihood of dropping out.

Davalos, Chavez, and Guardiola (1999) found that minority students are more likely to possess qualities that provide the greatest correlation with dropping out. These include a higher incidence of poverty, a lower incidence of academic success, and a greater likelihood to live in urban communities. Supporting this research, Ginsberg and Miller-Cribbs (2000) found that communities in the southern and southwestern part of the United States, as well as urban areas, produced more dropouts.

Many community efforts and state initiatives to support at-risk youth and to study factors leading to dropout have supported the educational system in making a difference in the dropout epidemic. Steinberg and Almeida (2008), in their white paper for Achieve and Jobs for the Future, describe six factors to help us focus on the best practices of schools that beat the odds in rescuing dropouts and engaging unsuccessful high school students. The first recommendation of the review was to focus on the transition to high school. The ninth grade is often considered a critical make-it or break-it year when students get on or off track to succeed in high school. More students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out (Herlihy, 2007). Second, districts that beat the odds have early warning systems to identify students who have exhibited early behaviors that correlate with dropping out. As a result, campuses are also able to connect students
and families with community agencies that can extend the support past the schoolhouse. Third, they found a way to restructure the campus to better meet the needs of students. The school day was extended, centers for credit recovery were created, and the school year was reorganized to provide increased access and ability to catch up once behind. Fourth, they increased access and challenging curriculum for all. Fifth, they aligned high school success with skills necessary for the job market and college. Successful schools aim for entry to college and career, rather than the minimum graduation requirements. Districts beat the odds by using data to improve curriculum and ensure relevance. And sixth, they provide support for transition to college including internships, dual high school and college enrollment, as well as support in acquiring skills necessary to succeed once enrolled in college.

Understanding the complexity of the dropout crisis must include an analysis of the community’s role in the problem, as well as looking at student and school characteristics. Attention should be given to the interplay of the dropout factors and the support services a community can provide. An isolated look at schools or community structures will not fully address this multifaceted issue. Educators must also examine the motivations behind student success in order to increase the likelihood of graduation.

**Motivation Theory**

Theorists in the field of psychology have studied the subject of motivation in order to understand human behavior, encourage positive behavior, and diminish negative behaviors. Educational psychology has identified two basic classifications of motivation— intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is a desire to learn a subject for its inherent interest, self-fulfillment, and to master it. Extrinsic motivation is motivation
to perform and succeed for a specific outcome or incentive. Educators seeking to improve student conditions and performance have sought answers in the field of psychology specifically in the field of student engagement and student motivation. Understanding how to motivate potential dropouts is assisted with a review of human motivation theory. One of the most difficult challenges is to motivate students who are not intrinsically motivated to learn. How do you motivate a student who simply does not care or has given up? In the educational setting, the lack of motivation to learn has been central to arguments that support external rewards. Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) argue that extrinsic rewards may have a special relevance from the perspective of the academically unmotivated. As these students do not typically find their academic tasks interesting, a combination of carefully administered external rewards and situationally interesting activities may be one of the most realistic approaches to educational intervention (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000).

Glasser (1998) stated that most behaviors are chosen, and we are driven to satisfy five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. These needs form the core for motivation and behavior. People have pictures stored in their heads that comprise their “quality world,” and their needs can be satisfied only by satisfying those quality-world pictures, choosing to act in ways that they believe, at the time, will satisfy their needs as shaped by these pictures.

Glasser (1998) identified a group of middle school students who had “removed learning, teachers, reading, and schoolwork” (p. 40) from the pictures they stored in their heads. These students had begun to lose or leave the few well-behaved, on-track friends they still have who like school. They developed friendships with students who shared
their common interest in disruption and nonacademic values. They frequently skipped classes and eventually lost ground academically. At the end of middle school, many were less prepared for high school than when they entered. These students regularly demonstrated disciplinary problems throughout their middle school careers.

**Motivation Theory Applied**

After looking at motivation theory, studies were also reviewed that analyzed how to best motivate students toward graduation. Research conducted by Amrein and Berliner (2002) in 18 states concluded that high-stakes tests do not lead to higher student achievement. In addition, such tests can decrease student motivation to learn and lead to higher student retention and dropout rates. When they passed No Child Left Behind, legislators believed that high-stakes tests would “motivate the unmotivated.” The unmotivated are disproportionately minority students in urban schools. Amrein and Berliner (2002) have found that when rewards and sanctions are tied to tests, students become less intrinsically motivated and are less likely to engage in critical thinking. They also found that when the stakes are high, teachers are less likely to encourage student-directed exploration of topics and instead are more likely to create teacher-driven lessons. The researchers stated, “Test-driven classrooms exacerbate boredom, fear, and lethargy, promoting all manner of mechanical behaviors on the part of teachers, students, and schools, and bleed schoolchildren of their natural love of learning” (p. 33). The assumption that high-stakes tests increase motivation is flawed, and there is evidence that it increases the likelihood of dropout and retention. Amrein and Berliner found that the dropout rate was 4% to 6% higher in states that had an exam requirement for graduation. Another study by the same authors (Amrein & Berliner, 2003), found that there was a
25% higher chance of dropping out for those in the bottom quartile when compared to comparable states. Amrein and Berliner (2002) also found that in states with high-stakes tests, students with otherwise good academic records who did not pass were more likely to drop out of school. They also found that in states that had a high school exit exam, 88% of them had higher drop out rates than states without the tests. In 62% of the states, dropout rates increased relative to the nation’s dropout rate after the state implemented the exit exam. In addition to dropping out or being retained, students who lived in states who had an exit exam were more likely to take the General Education Equivalency test. Additionally, Amrein and Berliner’s research indicated that 63% of the states with exit exams reported a decrease in the age of students taking the test that allows them to opt out of high school. They also noted that the 10 states with the lowest continuation rate from 9th to 12th grade all had exit exams.

When analyzing student motivation and results, Amrein and Berliner (2002) found that practices such as test prep and narrowing the curriculum did show improved results on the state tests. When extrapolating that result to normed national tests, they found that the increase in achievement did not transfer. When looking at results from the SAT, ACT, Advanced Placement exams, and the NAEP, they did not see an increase in achievement in states that used high-stakes tests. The researchers suggested that educators risk reducing students’ motivation to learn, may drive students and teachers away from our public education system, and may ultimately produce a less educated populace if we continue to “placate” the politicians. They contend that scores will rise, but students may be harmed in the process.
Dweck (1986), a psychologist, postulated that rewarding everyone does harm in the long run. The author further stated “many believe that (1) praising students’ intelligence builds their confidence and motivation to learn, and (2) students’ inherent intelligence is the major cause of their achievement in school” (p. 34). She went on to say that the first belief is false and the second is harmful. Dweck believes there is research that helps us know how to praise in order to build motivation and resilience. Students who believe that their intelligence is a fixed trait tend to seek activities that confirm this, and this can interfere with learning. Students who believe that they can develop their intelligence focus on doing that, not worrying about how smart they will appear. They take on challenges and stick with those challenges because they believe effort can lead to success. Dweck maintained that there is a “fixed” and “growth” mindset. Students who believe in the “fixed” mindset reject opportunities to learn if they might make mistakes. They fear judgment or “not being smart.” When they do make mistakes, they try to cover them up.

Dweck (1986) described students as “afraid of effort because effort makes them feel dumb” (p. 34). They believe that if you have the ability, you should not need the effort. This is one of the worst beliefs a student can have, as it can cause many bright students to stop working when the curriculum becomes challenging. Dweck postulated, “students in the fixed mindset don’t recover well from setbacks” (p. 35). They decrease their efforts, and some may resort to cheating or state they do not care. Conversely, students operating under the “growth” model accelerate their effort in the face of a challenge. They see it as something positive that encourages them to grow. Dweck contends that students who believe in a growth model outperform their equivalent peers.
She found that praising academics “gives them a short burst of pride followed by a long string of negative consequences” (p. 1041).

To test her theory, Dweck (1986) had teachers praise some students for their intelligence and others for their effort. She found that teachers helped shape the mindset of the student. Students who were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of questions were greatly influenced by the way the teacher used praise. When given a challenge, the growth mindset students remained “confident and eager” (p. 314), while the fixed mindset students lost their confidence and enjoyment of the task. Dweck’s research results helped created interventions to teach growth mindsets to students.

Students were taught about their brain and how to increase their intelligence. Explicit instruction on how learning takes place led students to understand and change mindsets. This class was said to “unleash their motivation” (p. 1042). Dweck noted that confidence cannot be handed to students. Instead, she suggested that educators can guide students toward the growth model and encourage effort in all tasks.

Teachers influence their students’ motivational level. Each student has a certain degree of motivation, but the teacher’s behavior, body language, and teaching style; the relevance of assignments; and informal interactions with students greatly affect student motivation.

**Student Engagement**

In reviewing the literature for factors related to dropouts, student engagement emerged as a recurring theme that contributes to the prevention of dropout-related issues and to students’ success in school. However, engagement is not a solo activity; it is about interactive relationships. Student engagement involves active participation in learning
Behavioral Engagement

Hammond (2001) found that descriptions of the domains of behavioral engagement are interrelated and dependent on each other. Behavioral disengagement was strongly correlated with discipline problems in both middle and high school (Alexander & Entwisle, 2001; Hammond, 2001). As early as first grade, aggression and behavior problems were correlated with dropping out of high school (Cairns et al., 1989).

However, Balfanz and Herzog (2005) noted that the better measure of discipline was behavioral grades rather than suspensions. Suspensions could occur at lunch and during passing periods and did not necessarily show disengagement within the classroom.
According to Balfanz and Herzog, behavior within the classroom was more highly correlated to dropouts.

Battin-Pearson, Guo, Hill, Abbott, and Hawkins (1998), in a study of elementary school student engagement, found that the size of the school and the concentration of students with multiple risk factors also correlated with a higher dropout rate. The effect of a campus with more opportunities to connect with individuals, smaller class sizes, and interventions for those at risk bears further study and analysis. Battin-Pearson et al. (1998) surmised that early interventions to connect elementary students with their schools could have positive long-term effects on later graduation rates.

**Academic Engagement**

Hammond (2001) defined academic engagement as being actively involved within the classroom. Successfully participating in class, as well as consistently attending school, correlated with academic engagement. Within academic engagement are factors that signal disinterest including dropping grades, lack of enthusiasm, and attitude toward school. Behavior within the classroom and the interaction with the subject matter and the instructor are critical. Professional development on how to recognize signals, as well as on how to engage students, can assist in deterring academic disengagement. This supports Balfanz and Herzog’s (2005) research that behavior in the classroom correlated to dropouts.

Balfanz and Herzog (2005) followed a cohort of sixth graders for 6 years in Philadelphia. They used a unique monitoring system housed at the University of Pennsylvania’s Cartographic Modeling Laboratory. This tracking system monitored this cohort in pursuit of the answer to three main questions: How many students dropped out
in a year? What percentage of students graduated from high school in 4 years? And what characteristics can help school sites identify possible dropouts? They found that over 13,000 students dropped out of Philadelphia schools in 2003-2003. They also found that approximately 54% graduated from high school in 4 years and that students who missed over 5 weeks of school in eighth grade, as well as received a failing mark in English or mathematics in eighth grade had an 80% chance of dropping out of school. They also found that ninth graders who were not on track to graduate after the completion of their ninth grade year had a 75% increased probability of dropping out. Balfanz and Herzog found predictors of dropout and determined the lack of engagement physically and mentally led to a much higher rate of dropout.

Academic engagement can be defined as either superficial or deep. Superficial engagement requires students to follow rules and participate compliantly. Deeper academic engagement is evidenced by a desire to learn and master subject matter (Battin-Pearson et al., 1998). Academic engagement could be the result of teachers who connect with students, engaging curriculum, relevant lessons that use internships, or hands-on experiences. A systematic approach to increase academic engagement will support all students and more explicitly target those who have started the process toward dropping out (Battin-Pearson et al., 1998).

**Psychological Disengagement**

Being uncertain about the future, uncertain that one will graduate, and having no plans for post high school education are indicators of possible student psychological disengagement. Students report they feel that they “do not belong” and “dislike school” (Hammond, 2001). Hammond (2001) recommended that further study on those who
succeed, despite psychological engagement, would provide insight into how school systems can intervene when student attitudes are poor or a sense of belonging is lacking.

Opara (2003) compared a suburban and an urban high school looking for factors that could lead to dropouts at both. He attempted to isolate experiences that led to choosing a particular path and to discover how students navigated their high school careers. A purposive sampling method was used to select 200 students. A deliberate effort was made to obtain representative samples by including presumably typical groups in the sample. Data were collected through participant interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. Through data analysis, four pronounced categories emerged. Opara found that a “combination of factors are responsible in creating an atmosphere of separation from a high school learning environment” (p. 72). He found that a lack of parent involvement, lack of discipline, lack of self-identity, as well as low socio-economic status all increased the likelihood of dropping out. He also found that the problem was more “rampant” in inner city urban schools.

In a more focused study, Ett (2008) studied an urban comprehensive high school in search of evidence of a link between academic and psychological engagement. She used the case study method in conjunction with a University of Southern California research group. In this case study, she first analyzed high schools in Southern California that had academically outperformed schools with similar demographics. She then selected a school that met this criterion for a detailed case study analysis. Ett studied the amount of student engagement within the campus and looked for additional measures of success. She used the conceptual model created by her research team to guide and categorize data. She also used the Indiana University instrument, the High School Survey
of Student Engagement (HSSE), to define engagement. The survey was pilot tested in the spring of 2003, with 7,200 students in four high schools. The instrument was reviewed and revised, and 90,530 students took the HSSE in the spring of 2004. The survey was also given in the spring of 2005. Ett’s research focused on two questions:

1. What perceived factors contribute to academic achievement in a high performing urban high school?

2. Is there a link between student engagement and student achievement in a high-performing urban high school?

Ett’s (2008) research included qualitative data as provided by case study, as well as quantitative data gathered from the HSSE instrument. The researcher used archival data available on the California Department of Education website to look for success on California’s Academic Performance Index rate, statewide rank, and whether the school had met targets set for them by the State of California. Ett found that John Q. Public High School beat the odds due to a shared vision, staff members’ ability to connect with students, and an emphasis on parent involvement at all levels.

Social Engagement

Social engagement refers to the involvement of students in positive relationships with other students and peers (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Social disengagement is present when students have no connections with peers, lack social skills, or their peer group is also at risk of dropping out, or one is currently a dropout (Hammond, 2001). Creating structures to encourage more positive peer influence, as well as time to interact and connect within a school culture, holds promise for further study. High school seniors who socialized with dropouts more than four times a week, and were
not connected with others on track to graduate, were much more likely to drop out (Neild et al., 2008). Wagner (1996) found this was more likely to occur with special needs high school students. She contends that schools wishing to correct this trend can promote programs like a Circle of Friends or other social clubs that explicitly connect students on campus, particularly those with disabilities.

In addition to lack of social or academic skills, student engagement in school often suffers (Neild et al., 2008). For some, the precursors of dropping out appear in the early elementary school years (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). A longitudinal study in Baltimore identified early elementary predictors including family stress, initial engagement in school, and reading group level (Alexander et al., 1997). The early transition into school influenced by family experiences in the preschool years puts some students on track for low academic achievement, acquisition of a “troublemaker” label, and disengagement from school (Neild et al., 2008). Changing this path is possible, but the negative effects appear years later with grade retention, tracking into a remedial pathway, and dropping out.

While early childhood experiences may predispose students to drop out of school, researchers have suggested that dropping out is the culmination of a long process of becoming less engaged in school (Finn, 1993; Newman, 1992). Both academic and social disengagement can potentially lead to dropping out (Neild et al., 2008).

Research (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Bryck & Thum, 1989; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998) on engagement shows that attachment to school is critical for students to have a successful educational experience. Students who feel isolated from peers, teachers, and parents lack any positive relationships. Peer groups that connect
students to school have potential for decreasing the dropout rate. Students often engage in behaviors outside of school that make it harder to learn during the day. We also see the importance of a structured school and the need to address student behavior before it leads to poor attendance and suspension. Establishing clear expectations for classroom and school behavior is imperative, as is identifying and enforcing specific consequences when expectations are violated. Finally, academic engagement is necessary to continue to build skills necessary for success in the classroom. Students who become disengaged fall behind academically and slowly disconnect from the school, leading to a higher incidence of dropout. Programs that address different kinds of student engagement and recognize the signs of disengagement are necessary to fully support students toward graduation.

Although student engagement is a critical and seemingly insurmountable issue when analyzing student dropout behaviors, some schools appear to have made gains in this arena by developing school-wide practices to cultivate student engagement beliefs, values, motivation, behavioral habits, and skills. The next section of this literature review investigated programs that have shown success with students who might otherwise have become disengaged and on the path toward dropping out.

**Successful Programs**

Many programs in and outside of schools have been designed to support students who exhibit behaviors that are consistent with disengaging from the educational system and hence potential dropouts. These programs make use of a variety of methods from moving the school to a different location to involving the National Guard in a behavior modification boot camp. Programs at schools range from the minimal tracking of achievement data to creating new schools that use different modalities for learning. This
investigation examined a program that operates from a shopping mall, a program that uses technology to reach at risk youth, programs designed to support academics, programs using early warning systems, programs focused on the transition into high school, as well as a program that engages community members to work with at risk youth.

**Shopping Mall School**

Motivating students via different teaching modalities has been studied for years. However, seeking to motivate students by changing the setting in which they learn to an appealing location is a relatively new concept. Relocating students from the environment in which they initially failed to a more interesting venue has helped unmotivated students improve. A shopping mall may be perceived as an unusual setting for a school. However, students accustomed to a consumer-based society find shopping malls an energizing atmosphere full of positive experiences and potential opportunities. In this particular example, alternative schools known as Education Resource Centers (ERCs; Chalker & Stelsel, 2009) were established as collaborations between Simon Youth Foundation (SYF), one or more public school districts, and the community. The SYF and the ERC program took shape in the 1990s when employees of Simon Property Group decided they wanted to use their talents to help at-risk students.

The SYF was established as an independent nonprofit in 1997 to accomplish the mission of assisting at-risk youth. A committee decided to use available space in Simon Malls for alternative schools. Although a shopping mall may seem like an unusual site to educate youth, the setting offers a variety of opportunities and benefits for students who have given up on school or are no longer able to succeed in the traditional setting. The
mall environment provided a location where students felt comfortable, and the mall
offered employment, internships, and mentoring opportunities.

Motivating a student to stay in school often takes an experimental and creative
approach. The goal at an ERC is not to create an educational environment that is easier
or more difficult than traditional high schools; the school merely takes a different
approach. Like traditional high schools, every ERC student must pass the required state
testing standards in order to graduate and receive a diploma. However, a few key
differences between the ERC and traditional public schools have made it possible for
ERC students to be successful. Classes at ERCs were kept small, with an average 15:1
student-to-teacher ratio. This enabled students to seek assistance when needed, and
allowed teachers and students to form close bonds. In addition, ERCs use academic
software such as NovaNET and Plato Learning. These programs enabled students to
work at their own pace, individualize their instruction, ensure that they were completely
engaged in the lesson, and offered immediate results that could be addressed by teachers
during lessons.

Disengaged students often find it difficult to stay in school for the entire day
(Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy [CEEP], 2006).

Class days at ERCs were shorter, typically half-day sessions. The shorter school day
accommodated students with children or employment responsibilities so they did not miss
critical lessons and fall behind. During class, each student was able to focus on earning
the credits he or she needed to graduate. Outside of class, ERC students participated
in service activities in the community that encouraged them to take ownership in, and
reconnect with, their communities. In many cases, ERC students were able to complete
the requirements for a high school diploma in less time than a traditional program requires. Simon Youth Foundation and public school districts combined experience and resources to provide an educational setting separated from the social distractions and barriers that may cause students to be at risk of dropping out. The school districts provided teachers, curriculum, and classroom equipment, while SYF offered space and annual funding opportunities for students in addition to professional development for staff. For ERC staff members, this included a national conference where they are able to share best practices and hear from nationally renowned educators and speakers. For students, an SYF scholarship program for ERC graduates awarded more than $2.4 million to 392 students since 2000. In total, SYF has awarded $5.9 million to 2,217 students, including ERC graduates and high school seniors across the country.

The SYF Shopping Mall Program was evaluated by CEEP (Chalker & Stelsel, 2009; Plucker, 2005). The study’s purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of ERCs in motivating at-risk youth to earn their diplomas. Information for the study was collected using a variety of methodologies including focus groups, student and teacher surveys, site visits, and archival data. In total, 240 formal interviews, including focus groups, were conducted with ERC teachers and administrators, current students, discontinued students, alumni, parents, school district personnel, community partners, and mall managers. Evaluators identified a variety of practices that contribute to the success of ERC students.

The CEEP study (Plucker, 2005) listed several reasons for the success of ERCs. ERCs provided: self-paced work in small class settings, flexible half-day schedules, individualized tutoring, caring teachers, a climate of respect that limits social distractions and disruptions, an emphasis on multicultural interaction and conflict resolution, as well
as computer-based instruction. They also used the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which is administered to students annually on a national level by a team at Indiana University (CEEP, 2006). After a sample of ERC students completed the survey, the results of the sample were compared to national results from nearly 300,000 high-school students from across 29 states. When asked whether they “cared about their school,” “put forth a great deal of effort when doing school work,” and were “excited about their classes,” ERC survey respondents strongly agreed 16.3%, 10.5%, and 19.5% more often than the national sample.

The CEEP study (Plucker, 2005) also included interviews with alumni. All of the alumni stated that their academic achievement had “markedly improved” after they enrolled in the ERC, gaining an average GPA improvement of .5. One student who had dropped out of a traditional high school prior to her enrollment at the ERC stated, “I would probably be working at McDonalds the rest of my life, definitely wouldn’t be in college, and wouldn’t be doing any of the things that I’m doing right now” (Plucker, 2005, n.p.). Another said, “The ERC is totally up to you, whether you are going to get the work done or not. It’s character building because it helps you understand the responsibility” (Plucker, 2005, n.p.).

Indiana University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy’s evaluation took parents’ voices into consideration (Plucker, 2005). Parents of ERC students interviewed by CEEP researchers were pleased with their student’s educational and vocational progress, and attributed much of the success to the ERC staff. One participant shared a story about her nephew’s struggle after his mother died, and his father turned to drugs. She said that the ERC helped in many ways with preparation for life after high school.
such as getting a good job, setting up a bank account, and applying for college funding. Other parents revealed that they saw less of the social and competitive aspects of school and believed a collaborative climate at ERC contributed to their students’ success. One mother partially attributed her son’s academic improvement to the fact that he was away from the friends with whom he had previously gotten in trouble. Parents observed a key difference between traditional schools and the ERC. They saw the social element of cliques and socializing as the major incentive for attending traditional schools, while the major incentive at the ERC was to learn and graduate. Parents viewed the ERC as a place that had “saved” their children. One of the most common findings from the small-group research literature was that all groups, no matter how temporary, were subject to group processes. One parent stated, “I truly believe that if there were more schools like this, there would be fewer dropouts” (Plucker, 2005, n.p.).

The ERC teachers interviewed by CEEP (Plucker, 2005) shared that their goal was to provide students with a more “college-like atmosphere” that permits students who are absent three to four times to make up their work, rather than allowing them to fall hopelessly behind. The results of the CEEP study (Plucker, 2005) also revealed that ERCs maintain positive relationships among administrators, superintendents, and principals in the cooperating school districts.

An interviewed public school administrator felt the ERC to be “a nice venue for kids that have been ravaged by social ills and family ills, have had their own children, had to grow up too fast, and had conflict with others” (Plucker, 2005, n.p.), and added, “they come here into this sort of family environment and prove those wrong that said, you have to be in the structured thing, this classroom with seven rows of five desks” (n.p.). Indiana
University Center for Evaluation and Education Policy’s CEEP Director, Jonathan Plucker, stated in the study’s conclusions (Plucker, 2005):

Many lessons can be learned from this model whether it is applied at a large school or at a shopping mall. Students connected with caring adults, students empowered in their own education, and alternative means of instruction are recurring themes in research. Rethinking the practice of punishing in order to increase motivation, and revisiting the need to treat students with respect despite their conditions changed their motivational pattern. Unfortunately, with the focus of holding schools accountable for assessment results and improving student achievement, the importance of the relational aspect of school and the basic needs of the student is too often overlooked. (n.p.)

Technology Focused Alternative Schools

In addition to changing the venue, a look at changing teaching and learning strategies may be another option for lowering the drop out rate. One of these teaching and learning strategies is the use of technology in the classroom. Technology is an emerging strategy that attempts to teach the hard-to-reach student. Some students who have not been successful with the traditional lecture modality have found success using technology. One school that makes technology a cornerstone of its program is the Virtual Education Academy (VEA; Smith & Lee, 1997; White, Lare, Mueller, Smeaton, & Waters, 2007). The Academy was created for homebound students who were at risk of dropping out due to extended illness, psychological problems, or serious behavioral issues, and excluded secondary students. The design team consisted of teachers and university faculty. The team developed a curriculum for students in grades 9–12 in
English, mathematics, science, social studies, and citizenship using technology as the primary mode of instruction. The team also developed a highly successful mentoring program. Subject area expert teachers in the school district developed the rest of the coursework.

Aware of the mandates in No Child Left Behind, the VEA design team linked the developed curriculum in English, mathematics, science, social studies, and citizenship to standards within each content area. This allowed the VEA program to award academic credit and sustain the citizenship curriculum within the course of study. The pilot program was used by students in a computer lab at the school site after school hours. The technology company staff taught the students how to use the system and provided ongoing technical support. The system recorded grades and assessed progress while also allowing for e-mail exchanges between the mentors and students. Some mentors reported communicating via e-mail daily, while some rarely communicated.

College students were trained in role modeling, confidentiality, and team-building activities then paired with VEA students. The mentors and students met for 2 hours each week at the nearest high school campus. One hour was spent on planned team-building activities, and the second hour on the online core curriculum. Participating school districts found that they saved money on their homebound student budget and that the VEA program was “highly effective” in helping students transition back to a traditional high school campus (White et al., 2007). Fourteen of the 37 students participating in this program returned to the traditional high school campus the next year and none dropped out.
White et al. (2007) examined the work done at the VEA. They determined that students benefitted from an online curriculum enhanced by face-to-face mentoring and that the blend of academic and social emotional support created a “rich, multidimensional product” (White et al., 2007, p. 13).

**Programs With Academic Supports**

Programs that help in creating both social and academic support systems seem to have additional success with targeted student populations. Programs that provide a look at life after high school and provide opportunities to succeed in college have assisted in curbing dropouts (Conchas & Clark, 2002). The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program targets the middle and high school low-income youth of color. The goal of AVID is to develop a support system for middle-achieving students who show promise and provide them with an opportunity to attend college (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996). It provides exposure to a rigorous curriculum, enhanced organizational and study skills, access to college student tutors, collaboration among teachers in each school, and academic progress through intensive writing efforts (M. C. Swanson, Marcus, & Elliot, 2000). As a result of the program, more than 4,000 AVID graduates enrolled in college, many of them first-generation college students (M. C. Swanson et al., 2000). In addition, between 1990 and 1997, 93% of AVID graduates enrolled in universities, and 89% were still enrolled 2 years later (M. C. Swanson et al., 2000). Program evaluators concluded that “AVID is the one secondary school reform effort that has achieved documented success preparing low-income, disadvantaged students for college” (M. C. Swanson et al., 2000, p. 37). Student
outcomes suggest that a rigorous, academically focused, programmatic intervention can powerfully transform students’ lives.

Tyner-Mullings (2008) studied a program at an alternative high school that worked to teach urban students habits of mind: constructivist pedagogy based on E. Keene and Zimmerman’s (1997) *Mosaic of Thought*. In an attempt to measure the impact that teaching students how to study had on their future careers, this longitudinal study used web-based surveys and interviews to follow 225 students 10 years after they left the alternative high school. This study found students perceived the meta cognitive lessons positively and attributed the lessons to assisting them with their future.

Extended time in school has been shown to assist students on the path to dropout. Schools that provide summer courses for students who need extra support or other enrichment activities are more successful in lowering course failures and dropout rates (Hertzog, 1996). Summer Bridge is one such program that has been implemented across the United States and provides incoming ninth-grade students with enriching summer activities that give academic support, advancement, and motivation to excel in high school through career-related field trips and other relevant activities. These and other previously mentioned programs provide continuous and varied articulation throughout the transition process with proven success.

Although many of these programs appear to be successful individually or in combination with others, few allow for adaptation to students’ specific needs. One-size-fits-all solutions are unlikely to be successful in the long term because the middle-to-high-school transition is different for each student, and students drop out of high school
for a variety of reasons. This fact calls for more flexible and targeted transition programs with a focus on early intervention.

**Programs Using Early Warning Indicators**

Research on the transition into high school is clear that ninth grade is a make-or-break year (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). More students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out (Herlihy, 2007). Although transition programs are helping to address the middle-to-high-school transition, research has suggested that readily accessible data can also be used to identify students most likely to be adversely affected by the transition and to further understand the root of their struggles. Such data in the form of an at-risk or on-track indicator is determined by performance in core academic courses, number of credits earned, grade point average (GPA), and attendance and can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of transition programs. Allensworth and Easton (2007) have shown that freshmen who fail one or two courses in their first semester of high school are less likely to graduate, and those with three or more Fs are not likely to graduate. Students with a GPA of 2.0 or less at the end of their freshman year are less likely to graduate. Attendance during the first year of high school has a direct correlation to graduating. Research suggests that missing more than 10% of instructional time is cause for concern (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). This equates to approximately 10 days, or 2 weeks, of school per semester.

These indicators, which are currently used to determine high school and college readiness in cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia, use credit accumulation, attendance, and course failure data to identify students who are at risk of dropping out or falling
behind in school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz & Herzog, 2005; Neild et al., 2008). In Chicago, where researchers use ninth grade credit accumulation and freshman course semester failures to create on-track indicators, 58.8% of schools were deemed in need of improvement. In these districts, on-track indicators provided promise for targeting and accelerating students who were falling behind before and during high school.

**Programs Addressing School Transition**

Many states, districts, and schools have addressed middle-to-high-school transition issues through various programs and interventions that involve students, parents, teachers, and administrators from middle and high schools. Often, these programs seek to address the academic, social, and logistic details of the transition to ease future effects, including high school dropout (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Although these programs are developing slowly, initial research suggests that those involving students, parents, and teachers in the transition process have the greatest effect. Many high schools partner with local middle schools to implement transition programs for all incoming students. These programs range from informational assemblies for incoming students to comprehensive monthly meetings with teachers, counselors, and administrators from both schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Other programs involve informational parent meetings, student shadowing programs, panel discussions, and high school course counseling sessions. Although most schools use some combination of these transition aides, few implement programs that wholly involve students, parents, and faculty from both schools, providing complete support. Smith and Lee (1997) suggest that full transition programs that involve complete support have the
greatest positive effect on high school retention and experiences. In contrast, programs that target only a single aspect of the transition (students, parents, staff) showed no independent effect on these outcomes. Other studies suggest specific characteristics of successful transition programs that stress academic and social support systems (Reyes, Gillock, Kokus, & Sanchez, 2000; Watson, 1999). These characteristics include long-term commitment to support during the transition process through well-developed support programs; ongoing planning to adapt these programs to changing contexts; frequent communication with students, parents, and schools; and assessment of program success through surveys and other instruments.

In addition, programs that allow students to ease into the high school experience (through shadowing or other visitations); interact with older students; and gather information on courses, facilities, and safety have proven to be particularly effective (Mizelle, 1995). Parental involvement is also key to a successful middle-to-high school transition. Schools and teachers that implicitly reach out to parents and encourage participation maintain higher levels of involvement, even though parental involvement in school tends to decrease once students reach high school. Students with involved parents tend to be higher achievers, have lower dropout rates, and be better adjusted to the changes involved in the transition to high school (Hantos & Power, 1997; Horn & West, 1992; Linver & Silverberg, 1997; Paulson, 1994). A review of the literature suggests that parents should be well informed about details of the transition process, privy to curricular and course decisions that their child makes, and part of the planning for future articulation activities (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Equally important to a successful high school transition are rigorous and challenging middle-school course work and early
intervention programs that promote academic achievement and support even before
students enter high school. These programs, often part of the regular middle school
curriculum, serve to better prepare middle-school students for higher expectations in high
school and increase their confidence about learning and working with others (Mizelle,
1995).

Community Programs

In addition to programs within schools, outside agencies have stepped in to
support our at-risk youth. Many programs outside of schools have been designed to
support students who appear to be disengaging from the educational system. The
programs reviewed include the National Guard program, the truancy program in Atlanta,
Young People Visions, and a social support program in Boston.

The National Guard Program. The National Guard (Price, 2006) runs a
program that targets 16–18 year olds who have already dropped out. This program
consists of a 22-week “quasi-military” residential phase followed by a year of mentoring.
After completing an initial screening, applicants to this program were put into a
participatory group and a control group. Nine months after joining the program, students
were surveyed to assess educational achievement, amount of time incarcerated, and
physical and mental health. The evaluators (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager,
2009) reported that after 9 months in the program, the number of students who had earned
a high school diploma or GED had increased. Forty-six percent of those in the program
completed high school or received a high school equivalency certificate compared to 10%
in the control group. Also, after 9 months, the program had increased employment rates
as well as enrollment in college, and decreased the likelihood of arrest. Researchers
indicated that if the evaluation had been done later, it may have yielded different results, particularly in the area of educational attainment (Bloom et al., 2009; Price, 2006).

**The Truancy Program in Atlanta.** Realizing that the community is adversely affected by students who are not in school, another project was developed to enlist community support in the fight against disengaged youth. The Truancy Project in Atlanta (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997) addressed truancy by matching volunteer lawyers with young people in the community. Early intervention was conducted through mentoring. Program evaluation results showed that more than 50% of students who were once failing and truant re-engaged in school and successfully completed the academic school year (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997).

**Young Peoples Vision.** Another community-based organization that worked to develop the social and leadership skills among young people most at risk of school failure was the Young Peoples Vision Program in New York (Bloom, 2009; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). The founders of the program had the vision of empowering young people by placing the responsibility of handling teen problems directly on the young people themselves (Freire, 1993). The program was based on the principle that youth should have a space to talk with other youth in their own parlance to support each other and collaborate on how to manage the challenges of school, home, and society. Program developers believed that adolescents who occupied the same social space needed the opportunity to work together and identify issues (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2008). The most effective program components included team-based collaboration and multimedia projects that addressed issues meaningful to youth.
**Social Networking.** In a Boston neighborhood, a community club organized for at-risk youth met weekly to support students in their impoverished district (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Croninger & Lee, 2001). This club, among other things, emphasized the importance of building social networks to support students toward graduation. It is well documented in the educational literature that racial minorities are far less likely to exercise the social, cultural, and informational capital that is traditionally valued by the school culture (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Recognizing this struggle, Social Networking Program staff prioritized access to role models and mentors who could create opportunities and deliver information to marginalized urban youth. In fact, program participants identified the power behind the social networks or social capital that, according to students, operated to foster a positive feeling toward school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Within the Boston program, social networks comprised of family, school, and community partnerships validated, supported, nurtured, and functioned to empower young people around a support network of healthy relationships. Leveraging and utilizing social networks was a central belief that guided the program’s initiatives and practices with the participants. For example, students had access to program alumni and older program mentors. During the after-school program, students had access to college-level tutors. While on field trips, participants developed critical connections with college students and accessed information to make college a reality (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Students also believed that Boston’s Social Networking program capitalized on peer-to-peer forms of social networking. Many of the students felt that the meaningful
relationships adults developed with the young people were positive and a trustworthy source of support. For many of the young people, caseworkers functioned as mediators to foster positive social relationships. Social networks embedded within the program provided a critical role in empowering students who attended the club to determine how to attain their personal and academic goals (Conchas & Clark, 2002).

Understanding the connection between schools and communities allows a deeper understanding of the issues young people confront. Bridging the gap between the community and the school can be an effective approach to fighting truancy and dropout, and in assisting to re-engage young people in school. Schools are not isolated from the neighboring surroundings. The programs reviewed describe projects that shared information between the school and community. Shared information and a collective sense of responsibility have helped bridge a former divide and are essential to building a safety net for students.

Studies about what is working in schools have customarily looked at programs and policies that led to a variety of school changes to facilitate student success. A methodological approach that has not been used extensively in research studies of programs that work is that of surveying or interviewing students themselves about what might be best. This type of methodology is the basis for this study. The following section is included to support this approach.

**Student Voice**

Student voice is a critical resource when studying the issue of dropouts. In this section, research studies were investigated that centered on listening to and learning from students themselves. Students provide a unique perspective about the climate of the high
school, what is happening on campus, and how the school can improve. Each student brings a distinctive set of characteristics to the classroom: different background knowledge; an individual learning style; a variety of interests, talents, strengths, and weaknesses; and varied parental support and expectations. Croninger and Lee (2001) investigated the role of the teacher in drop-out prevention. They found that schools with “highly supportive teachers” reduced the likelihood to drop out in half. Croninger and Lee used data gathered from a 10th-grade student questionnaire. Their main focus was measuring social capital at the high school and investigated whether teachers were interested in students, whether teachers valued what students said, whether the teachers were good teachers, whether they cared about students and wanted them to succeed, whether teachers recognized and praised students when they worked hard, and whether they put students down in the classroom.

Croninger and Lee (2001) sought to test the impact of social capital to see if and how it counteracted the risk of dropping out. They found that supportive relationships and guidance from teachers increased the likelihood that socially and academically at-risk students completed high school. Informal exchanges with teachers outside of class were especially beneficial to students who were struggling both socially and academically. Croninger and Lee found contacts with teachers considerably boosted their chances for graduation. These results confirm that the quality of students’ relationships with teachers is an important predictor of educational success.

In order to better define student voice, Mitra and Gross (2009) created a pyramid to illustrate a hierarchy of student input. The pyramid begins with a basic form of student voice—being heard. Research on reform efforts acknowledges that “students possess
unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate without a partnership with school personnel” (Mitra & Gross, 2009, p. 132), including a willingness to discuss topics adults are reluctant to address such as inequities in the system (Fine, 1991; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Students are witnesses to school policies that exacerbate achievement gaps and school conditions that are unsafe or unproductive (Fine, 1991).

Collaborating with adults is the next level. Students work with adults to make changes, collect data on school issues, and work to find mutually agreed upon solutions. This level of partnering can possibly remind teachers and administrators that students provide a unique perspective. Student participation in curriculum development, classroom practice, and teacher training has shown improvement in student attachment to school and, in turn, achievement (Mitra & Gross, 2009).

The final level of student voice is defined by student leadership. By providing students with the ability to significantly influence decisions that impact their lives as well as their peers’, it is believed the attachment to the school is strengthened, which in turn correlates with positive student outcomes (Mitra & Gross, 2009).

In another study focused on discovering why students leave school and why they return, R. Keene (2003) analyzed student perceptions. Students in adult-school programs in California volunteered to participate in a survey and were later interviewed about why they decided to return to school. One hundred and twenty students entered adult school after leaving a comprehensive high school setting. Nineteen of the 120 students volunteered to participate in the focus-group portion of the study. Volunteers from the remaining larger pool participated in a supplemental written questionnaire.
Five of the 19 volunteers participated in individual interviews 2 months after the first interviews. Three questions were asked in the focus groups, and then the researcher categorized the responses. The questions were:

1. Why did you decide to drop out of school originally?
2. Why did you decide to return to school?
3. What are your plans for the future?

Written responses were coded into one-line phrases to find emerging themes that described the motivation behind dropping back into high school course work (Keene, 2003). R. Keene (2003) found that students recommended an increase in engaging programs, including vocational education. Students also stated that teacher advisory programs and small class sizes would have helped them if they had stayed in a traditional setting. R. Keene found that students believed school policies closed the door to their returning. Students also reported that information about options, including community colleges, was not as accessible as it should have been. Finally, students in R. Keene’s study asked for a more flexible system that provided scheduling options at night and during the weekend as well as online courses.

In a study that sought student input to further understand a school issue, Joseph (2004) analyzed the experiences of Hispanic youth in the public school system to determine their school experiences and analyze the correlation between dropping out and lack of school integration with college students. Concept mapping was used to cluster information gathered from focus-group studies. Joseph sought answers to the following questions:
1. What were the internal and external factors that contributed to Hispanic dropouts’ decision to leave school?

2. What were Hispanic dropouts’ perceptions of the institutional factors contributing to their decision to leave school?

3. How useful and applicable was Tinto’s theory on student departure to the interactions and experiences Hispanic dropouts had within schools?

Joseph conducted individual interviews with 11 participants and held three focus-group sessions utilizing concept-mapping methodology. Her findings indicated that Hispanics came to school with the intention of getting a high school diploma; however, experiences at school from entry to departure led to a slow process of disengagement.

**Summary**

The dropout problem is complex and multifaceted, and a variety of methods must be utilized to resolve it. In order to better understand the problem, Wells et al. (1989) categorized dropout predictors into factors. These include student factors, school factors, familial factors, and community factors. The research revealed student factors that lead to dropout include drug abuse, trouble with the law, and pregnancy. Schools can either assist or deter students on their path to graduation. School factors are those in control of the school or the district. Retention policies and ineffective discipline policies are among those that deter students from graduating. Conversely, close monitoring of student progress and structures designed to connect students to school increase the likelihood of graduating. Background characteristics including socio-economic status, lack of parental support, and absence of an “intact” home have also been found to increase the dropout risk. Finally, the impact of the community was
taken into account and found that societal pressure, poverty, and environmental influences may increase the likelihood that a young person will drop out.

An analysis of the research reveals that student engagement and motivation is critical to success in school. Engagement can be categorized as: academic engagement, psychological engagement, social engagement, and behavioral engagement. This analysis found that disengagement is a gradual process that begins in the early years of school. The research found that there are many root causes of disengagement from school, and, to be adequately addressed, each requires a different approach and solution. Motivational theories support the need to create environments that promote successful behaviors. Motivational theorists can shed light on how counterproductive some educational practices could be for adolescents as well as how motivational techniques must be tailored to the audience. Educators could benefit from an understanding of how to best motivate and support students.

As a solution to the dropout problem is sought, it is helpful to analyze programs that are experiencing results. These programs have utilized a variety of methods—from moving the school to a shopping mall to involving the National Guard in a behavioral modification boot camp. Programs that take place during the school day range from minimal tracking of achievement data to creating new schools that use different modalities for learning. Both community- and school-embedded programs offer the possibility of creating a support system for students at risk of dropout. Matching students with the program that is most appropriate for them requires a deeper analysis of student perceptions.
Student voice can assist as educators work to solve this complex problem. Understanding students’ perceptions of barriers can provide valuable information to researchers as they strive to find solutions. Consulting with students who have dropped out of a traditional high school may provide essential answers. The continuation high school program enrolls students between the ages of 15–19 who have left traditional high schools. Students attending these campuses were asked why they left the traditional high school. Traditional high schools are defined as the public school students are required to attend that serve the attendance area in which they reside unless special arrangements have been made through the district’s Choice or Magnet/Integration program to attend another school within the district’s boundaries. This study examined how students perceived the supports offered that enabled them to continue their education at the continuation high school. Further, it examined why students chose to continue along an alternative path toward high school completion. These high school students are not yet dropouts. Student insight provides a unique perspective about learning, teaching, and schooling that adults cannot fully replicate, yet it is often ignored in research. The value derived from listening to students is often overlooked but should be considered to improve instructional methods and curriculum design.

Students on the continuation high school campus are enrolled because they are credit deficient and need to complete courses to meet graduation requirements. Listening to these students as they reflected on their academic learning experiences and attitudes at comprehensive high schools will better inform educators on what needs to be done in a more traditional setting to help students succeed. Students in continuation high schools
have persevered despite challenges along the way. Information from the perspective of students was sought in order to analyze possible factors that may decrease the likelihood of disengagement and dropping out. Understanding the problem of dropout must include an analysis of the school’s culture as well as examining student characteristics. Attention should be given to the interplay of student characteristics and the school environment as these are inextricably intertwined. An isolated look at student characteristics or school culture and environment leaves both sides pointing fingers rather than working to find solutions. Listening to students in these subgroups will give us added insight into their school experiences.

While we have initial research informing the dropout problem from the student’s perspective, additional research could shed further light on the dropout problem. The next chapter will use information gathered in this literature review and build upon the analysis with a description of this study.
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to analyze self-described factors attributed to high school students leaving a traditional high school setting and enrolling in a continuation high school rather than dropping out. This study examined how students perceived the supports and interventions offered that enabled them to continue their education at a continuation school. In addition, it examined why students choose to continue toward earning a diploma an at a continuation high school. The study also sought to determine the appropriate types of supports and interventions that public school districts could provide to students before they become disengaged from their traditional high school.

At high schools across our nation, campuses lose an average of 40% of their students from 9th through 12th grade (Greene & Winters, 2005). Who are they? Where do they go? Could their educational needs have been met in alternative ways? What effect do school rules, schedules, and curriculum have on students?

High school students have adult thoughts and often try to emulate adult behavior, but they are still young and need adult guidance. Too often students bring problems to school that affect their ability to learn. Subconsciously, their peers are often their fears—if they do not impress them and fit into a social clique, they are the target of teasing, bullying, and threats. Asking students where they encountered difficulty and where they experienced support could help the educational community better understand the high school experience from students’ perspective. The objective of this study is to provide the research community with a more detailed understanding of students’ motivation to continue their education, and to bring attention to factors that impede completion at a traditional comprehensive high school. The complexity of dropout problems led this
researcher to seek answers from those who are experiencing what many believe to be the beginning of the dropout process. Information from this study could be used to create structures within comprehensive high schools to better support struggling students by incorporating student voice to influence programs, policies, instructional methods, and curriculum design.

**Research Questions**

Three questions guided the discussion. Additionally, 10 prompts were used to further elicit answers to the guiding questions.

1. Why do students leave comprehensive high schools?
2. What activities or supports do students believe teachers and school leaders could provide to increase the likelihood that they will become motivated to remain at their comprehensive high school?
3. What do students identify as factors that support their continuing educational experiences in a continuation high school?

As previously stated, the goal of this study was to analyze self-described factors attributed to high school students leaving a traditional high school setting and enrolling in a continuation high school rather than dropping out. It is important to understand student perspectives of this complex problem in order to better support comprehensive high school campuses. Students who are high school dropouts and have not been successful in the traditional comprehensive high school setting are sometimes elusive and difficult to study. Therefore, this study concentrated on those students who have yet to completely give up—those who have chosen to try a different approach to obtain their high school diploma.
Research Design

It was the researcher’s goal to provide voice to students who are enrolled in Thoreau continuation high school in an urban district located in Southern California. Instead of merely studying how the school’s structure, size, and location differ from traditional high schools, this research analyzed student responses to focus-group questions. Too often, as Marshall (1985) noted, “the dominant paradigm assumes that our organizational problems come from: (a) ignorance or lack of motivation of the populace, (b) ignorance or lack of motivation of public sector professionals and bureaucrats, or (c) the lack of sufficient resources” (p. 360). This research sought information from the students to shed light on why they left the comprehensive high school campus.

Qualitative semi-structured focus groups, as well as one-on-one interviews, were used in this study to engage students in a discussion and to look for emerging themes relative to the three research questions. Qualitative research methods can provide descriptions and meaning that might remain hidden in quantitative research. Marshall and Rossman (1999) noted that “qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (p. 2). Similarly, Taylor and Bogdan (1998) noted that qualitative methodology “produces descriptive data—people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior” (p. 7). By providing what Creswell (2003) refers to as a constructivist perspective, the research study aims to provide multiple meanings of individual experiences, develop patterns, and promote advocacy. It also enables researchers to test theoretical models and to modify them based on participant feedback.
Previously, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies have been employed to solve this multifaceted problem. Semi-structured focus-group interviews and one-on-one interviews were determined to be the best methodological match for this study. Focused interviews with individuals and groups were developed in the 1940s by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956). In the focus group, group interaction is employed to generate data and as a source of data for analysis (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Gordon & Langmaid, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Group forces or dynamics become an integral part of the procedure with participants engaged in discussion with each other rather than directing their comments solely to the moderator.

Hess (1968) described the benefits of focus groups “as synergism, snowballing, stimulation, security, and spontaneity” (p. 194). Asbury (1995) stated that focus groups produce data rich in detail that are difficult to achieve with other research methods. However, Fern (1982) and Bristol and Fern (1996) suggest that there is little empirical evidence to support the view that focus groups are superior to other methods. Additionally, the same group processes that are considered to promote participant security and disclosure can also have less positive effects including fear of a breach of confidentiality (Albrecht, Johnson, & Walther, 1993; Merton et al., 1956).

Frey and Fontana (1993) stated that in focus groups the discussion is focused on a particular topic and that group dynamics assist in data generation. One of the most common findings from small-group research literature is that all groups, no matter how temporary, will be subjected to group processes. By this definition, all groups convened to generate data on a particular topic for research purposes are focus groups, even those that are formed for the convenience of interviewing eight people concurrently rather than
individually. It is important to note that group dynamics are considered an important part of the data generation process.

In this study, student focus-group interviews were used to garner perceptions about why the students left their traditional comprehensive campus. This method aimed to “extend the breadth or range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components” (Hanson, 2005, p. 4). Follow-up interviews were held with additional students to provide additional data.

Creswell (1994) describes methods addressing the issues of validity and reliability. The issue of reliability was addressed by having only one researcher (to ensure consistency) and conducting follow-up interviews with some participants. Internal validity was addressed through triangulation using focus-group interviews, students from different locations, and follow-up interviews of a separate sample of volunteers.

The leader’s role in connecting with these students before they drop out is critical. Interventions that reverse this trend are necessary from the top down and the bottom up. Measuring the interventions that have the most impact, and the leader’s role in implementation, is critical to reaching students at risk of giving up on their education and starting adulthood behind their peers.

**Research Context**

The context of this study is one continuation education high school in a large urban unified school district whose students have been unsuccessful at a traditional high school and have enrolled in an alternative setting to pursue earning a diploma. Thoreau High School is located in Southern California and is one of 200 schools in the large urban
unified school district. It is a continuation school that serves approximately 500 students in grades 9–12.

**Demographics of Southern California Unified School District**

Southern California Unified School District, a large school district in California, has 216 schools that provide educational programs to over 132,000 students in grades pre-K–12. The student population is extremely diverse, representing more than 15 ethnic groups and over 60 languages and dialects. Seventy-four percent of students are non-White, and 26% are White. The breakdown by specific ethnic group is as follows: 48% Hispanic, 26% White, 14% African American, 3% Asian, and 9% Other. The population of the school district is economically diverse, ranging from substantially wealthy through middle class to very impoverished. Approximately 63% of the district students qualify for the free and/or reduced lunch program, and 47% of the students are living below the poverty level.

**Demographics of Thoreau High School**

Thoreau High School is one of two continuation high schools in the Southern California Unified School District. Continuation education had its beginning in California in 1919, and its function was broadened in 1929 to include students who were not successful in a traditional school program for any number of reasons. Large school districts are required to provide continuation programs for students aged 16 to 18 who are adjustment students or are employed.

Thoreau High School functions as one school with the main campus located in the central part of the district; a satellite in the northwestern part of the district on the campus of Northpoint High, Northpoint Thoreau; a satellite in the southeastern part of the district
on the campus of Hillsdale High, Hillsdale Thoreau; and its independent student program, Scholastic Opportunities using Alternative Resources (SOAR), located at Thoreau sites in addition to various libraries throughout the city. Thoreau students come from 24 high schools located throughout the county.

Students referred to Thoreau from their comprehensive high school usually have significant academic challenges with a pattern of failure at their previous school. A continuation school such as Thoreau may be the last connection these highly at-risk students have to stay in school, on a path to earn a diploma, and for better opportunities in life, a post-secondary education, and careers.

Thoreau is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) which was originally established to encourage the standardization of secondary school programs. All courses required for graduation are offered at Thoreau. Because these students are often far below grade level in reading and math, teachers work hard to remediate the deficiencies by using a variety of instructional strategies. Hands-on lessons and activities are used to help demonstrate concepts, and project-based learning is used to connect specific learning outcomes to real-world applications. In addition to core classes, Thoreau has expanded its elective offerings in recent years. Currently, visual arts are offered at all three campuses, and a music class if offered at the main campus. Regional Occupational Program (ROP) classes in computer-based technologies such as web-page design, geographic information system (GIS), computer graphics, and technology repair are offered at the main campus and at Thoreau Hillsdale. Thoreau students must meet the same graduation requirements as those earning diplomas from other high schools within the district, with the exception of foreign language. Each course stresses the relevance of
class work to the immediate and future needs of the students enrolled, including career goals.

For older, seriously credit-deficient students, the *Joint Diploma* provides an important option. This diploma option was created through a partnership between SCUSD and the local Community College District that allows students to take a combination of high school and college coursework to achieve a diploma. This program has proven highly successful in helping students earn a diploma and gain access to future career opportunities through the community college district.

All three Thoreau campuses offer an extended-day class. On any given day, approximately 30 students participate in extended-day learning, which provides them an opportunity to make-up additional credits.

The Thoreau location is unique in that it serves a broad geographical area, and many are affiliated with gangs, but the school’s “zero tolerance” policy regarding physical fights keeps altercations to a minimum. The main campus hosts 50.2% of the total student population, with 25.1% at Thoreau Hillsdale, 15.6% at the independent study program SOAR, and 9% at Thoreau Northpoint. In the current year, 73.5% of Thoreau High School’s students are eligible to participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program and, thus, are identified for support from the federal Title I program, based on the district’s Food Services data in January 2009. In comparison, the average percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals in the district’s high schools in that school year was 43.8%. For the last 4 years, from 2004–2005 to 2007–2008, Thoreau had the lowest suspension rate among 34 district high schools (including three charter schools, 14 small high schools within high school complexes, and three other alternative
schools). Class size at Thoreau ranges from 17 to 29 in the four core subjects of English, math, science, and social studies.

All students who are enrolled at Thoreau, and their parents, participate in personalized orientation sessions at which time staff review Thoreau’s programs and expectations, address each student’s progress, and discuss the school’s code of conduct. Students receive counseling to help them meet personal, academic, social, and career needs. The student-to-counselor ratio at Thoreau is 90:1.

**Instrumentation**

In an effort to reduce America’s high school dropout rates, the America’s Promise Alliance introduced a Dropout Prevention Campaign in April 2008 that included summit meetings (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009). More than 35 summits have been held in the United States. These summits included more than 14,000 mayors and governors, business owners, child advocates, school administrators, students, and parents to develop workable solutions and action plans. During the summit, a survey was shared to use as a tool to engage students in the dialog. The survey was developed by the America’s Promise Alliance Dropout Prevention Initiative by Anderson Williams and Hal Cato. Anderson and Cato are affiliated with Oasis Center in Nashville, Tennessee. The Oasis Center helps young people overcome serious challenges that could easily prevent them from transitioning into a healthy adulthood, including homelessness, violence, depression and low self-esteem, and disconnection from caring adults (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009). The questions developed for the summit were used as prompts during the focus groups. The focus-group questions were administered orally to a group of 8 to 10 students and took less than an hour to complete. The prompts were aligned with the
questions from Wells et al.’s (1989) framework to connect the questions with his four factors leading to dropout. The prompts did, however, probe more often into school factors leading to possible reasons for leaving the comprehensive high school. As appropriate, questions taken from the research of what works in curbing dropout rates in high schools also helped develop prompts that were used during the taped interviews. Primarily, prompts were based on the Sample Youth Survey (2009) used by America’s Promise at their High School Dropout Prevention Summit.

Prompts:

1. I feel motivated to learn when I am at school.

2. I feel safe at my school.

3. My school is doing a good job preparing me for my future.

4. My school holds high expectations for all students.

5. My school grounds are clean and well maintained.

6. I feel like I belong at my school.

7. There is an adult at my school who I can talk to if I am having personal problems.

8. My teachers understand how to relate to students.

9. My school respects the opinions of students even when we disagree.

10. There are opportunities for students to voice their opinions on important school issues.

This study was bound by time (current students) and space (students within Thoreau High School). The data were coded to determine patterns in a search for
emerging themes. The frequency of student responses were divided into the categories as themes emerged.

The focus-group interview questions were intended to engage students in self-reflection to determine how they perceived the school support as well as to examine what an educational system can do to support the students with indicators that correlate with dropping out. These questions were linked to the data in the literature review and sought to find information to support future students who are not on track to graduate.

**Population**

The population for this study consisted of students between the ages of 15–19 and currently enrolled in a continuation high school in a large, diverse, community located in Southern California. The urban school district’s communities include risk factors such as many immigrants new to the United States, large populations of English learners, low socio-economic status, and families with a pattern of teen pregnancies and dropout. Graduation rates at many of the districts’ traditional high schools vary from 2007 Cohort graduation rates of 11% to a high rate of 94%. There is an imminent need to better understand why these students are not successful in traditional high school settings in order for comprehensive sites to be proactive in developing successful approaches to intervention.

Students at the continuation high school campuses have left a traditional setting and wish to complete their course of study in order to obtain a high school diploma. Students who attend the continuation high school campuses have not interrupted their education yet have not had success in a traditional high school. This study sought
patterns in student perception for the causes for their departure from the comprehensive setting.

**Participants**

For this study, random sampling was limited to students enrolled in Thoreau High School, a continuation school located at three sites—the main campus and two satellite campuses—in the second largest school district in California that encompasses over 200 square miles. Classes started at 7:00 a.m. and ended at 2:00 p.m. The participants were 15–19 years of age, had been credit deficient at their comprehensive high school, and were referred to Thoreau for course completion and an opportunity to earn their diploma. The majority of these students had previously attended schools that are located throughout the urban district. In addition, credit-deficient students at least 16 years of age who were enrolled in a high school in the district could concurrently enroll in adult education classes to make up failed courses required for graduation. At the time of this study, the combined population of the main campus and the two satellite campuses was 475.

To select participants, the researcher began by visiting classrooms during a noninstructional advisory period and speaking to the class about the study. A script was used in each classroom to ensure consistency (Appendix A). At the end of the description, the researcher asked for students who were willing to volunteer for focus-group interviews. Names were written down of students who were interested. Upon a second visit, parent consent forms (Appendix B) and student assent forms (Appendix C) were passed out to those who had expressed an interest in being a part of the study. Students were told that they could drop the forms off with the administrative assistant on
the way out of the school if they were interested. From the list of students who had signed permission slips, parent assent forms were mailed to parents and students were told they could bring them back to school. The return of the forms was assisted with phone calls to the homes of the students who had signed assent forms. Since 39 students had volunteered, and returned both the assent and the consents forms, it was necessary to reduce the number of participants to a more manageable number. From the original 39 students, 10 students at each site were randomly selected. One student was not on campus when interviews were scheduled. At the first visit to the school, 9 students were interviewed—6 males and 3 females. In the second focus group, 12 students were interviewed—6 males and 6 females. In the third focus group, 8 students were interviewed—5 males and 3 females. The 29 students who participated in the focus group interviews represented a cross section of students on each campus. The gender balance in each case mirrored the gender balance of the campus.

Three students were selected for one-on-one interviews to provide additional in-depth personal experiences and for data triangulation. The three students (one from each campus) were volunteers randomly selected from a group of students who had completed their permission forms after the initial focus groups were selected.

**Data Collection**

This study utilized qualitative research methodology with semi-structured interviews to seek knowledge from students about why they left their original comprehensive high school. Interview protocols were designed and standardized for the study with the vulnerability of the participating students in mind. Steps were also taken to keep interview data, and other collected documents, confidential. In reporting the data,
names of students were not disclosed. Aliases were used to identify students and others who provided information. Research took place within the context of one pre-K–12 unified school district in Southern California. The continuation high school’s principal granted permission for the study in accordance with the school district’s procedures governing research conducted by candidates pursuing advanced degrees.

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at San Diego State University, visits were made to nonacademic advisory classes of the study school. This study asked continuation high school students between the ages of 15–19 to participate in a focus-group interview. Students were informed of the purpose of the study and the focus-group activity. The researcher explained the purpose of wanting students to share their experiences prior to enrolling in a continuation program. Interested participants were offered the incentive of a nonschool lunch in exchange for helping to promote research.

Parent consent forms and child assent forms were sent home with all students who volunteered to participate in the study. The primary investigator maintained signed copies of the consent document at her home in a locked file cabinet. Three years after the completion of the study, the consent forms will be destroyed.

Students were told that they had the option to stop participating at any time during the process. Students were then interviewed using research questions and prompts. The focus groups were administered in a staff room used for teacher planning or in student centers in an empty classroom. School administrative and office personnel were asked to withhold sending passes to the classroom so as not to disrupt the discussion and to ensure the participants’ privacy. With the exception of one interview that was conducted after
school for students who had a shortened day, participants came to the classroom at the beginning of advisory class during a regular passing period. This limited any unwanted attention that might have resulted had students been called out of an academic class. Interviews were conducted during advisory class and continued into lunch, which took less than an hour of the students’ time. Study participants who missed part of a nonacademic advisory class may have been inconvenienced or missed something their peers received. To address this concern, the administration informed the teachers that students would not be in their advisory class that day. Teachers were provided with the names of students who would not be in class but had an excused absence. Students were assured that in no way would this be held against them, and they were motivated knowing that their input would further research by sharing their experiences on this complex issue.

After arriving in the interview room, the purpose of the study was once again explained to students. Due to the personal nature of some of the focus-group questions, the possibility existed for students to recall unpleasant memories while responding. Others might have felt uncomfortable speaking in a group or on an audiotape. The students were informed of these possibilities and told that if they began to feel uncomfortable, they could discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently. Students were also informed that tape recordings of their interviews would be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office located at another location, that confidentiality would be maintained to the extent allowed by law, that taped responses would be transcribed and heard solely by the researcher and the transcriptionist, and that after the study had concluded, the tapes would be destroyed. The researcher stated the location of the interview into the audio recorder and began to ask questions from the
script while the audio recorder remained on. As answers emerged, prompts were used to continue the discussion or to probe a particular theme.

Data Analysis

After the interviews had concluded, the audio-recorded student responses were professionally transcribed. The qualitative data were then analyzed using a manual coding process. Using the four categories (school-related, student-related, community-related, and family-related) from Wells et al.’s (1989) Dropout Framework as a starting point, a key was developed and responses from the transcripts were color-coded. Transcripts were highlighted as common themes emerged. Notes were then transferred to index cards, and a matrix was developed to summarize the responses. Each research question was addressed by investigating common themes and student direct responses that pertained to particular questions.

Role of Researcher

The researcher is an employee of the district in which the study took place, but did not supervise the principal of the continuation high school at the time the study took place. The researcher explained to district and site leadership that she was a doctoral student seeking student perceptions about why they left the comprehensive school setting. The researcher will share findings with fellow practitioners to inform the work of comprehensive high school leaders.

Ethical Issues

When studying human subjects, concerns arise including confidentiality, integrity, and opportunity cost. Confidentiality must be observed so as not to divulge information that could harm or prejudice future study. Individual trust should be honored and
permission granted when sharing student information. Transparency is necessary as we communicate the same message to all stakeholders regarding the purpose of the study and the use of the information provided. Clear communication is important regarding the time involved and the importance of the investigation.

Time spent answering research questions could have been time students needed to finish course work. Consequently, respect for students’ time and that of the instructors involved was imperative. Researchers must consider the most succinct method of gathering information from human subjects. As this is a program within the district in which the researcher is employed, it is important to be aware of the positionality of the researcher. The researcher had access to data and programs via her current employment, as well as years of informal relationships with employees in the district. The potential for bias related to the program studied was taken into consideration, and every effort was made to remain impartial to ensure that bias did not influence the interpretation of results. The researcher was cognizant of maintaining a professional distance from the subjects and supervisors of the program in order to uphold objectivity. It was clearly conveyed that the time and involvement of the subjects was voluntary, and no undue influence was used on those running the program. Due to their ages, it was important for participants to fully understand that taking part in the study was voluntary, and no pressure was applied to influence participation.

Finally, it is the moral and practical obligation of educators to thoroughly research the topic of dropouts and analyze the results. Finding and implementing the most effective strategies and interventions to meet the needs of all our students as they navigate our public education system is an attainable goal. It is our responsibility to ensure that we
prepare our students to have fulfilling, self-supporting lives, and that we impart the necessary skills for them to become successful, contributing members of a global society.

**Limitations**

Limitations of the study include:

1. Because a convenience sampling was used in this study, the researcher cannot say with confidence that the sample was representative of the population (Creswell, 2003).

2. In the focus group, there was a potential risk of a nonresponse error, that is, problems caused by differences between those who responded and those who did not (Dillman, 2000).

3. The results of analysis have limited generalizability to similar populations from which the participant sample was obtained (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2000).

4. Due to the nature of qualitative research, the data obtained in the study may be subject to different interpretations by different readers.

5. There was a potential for bias in the qualitative results interpretation because the researcher had previously been the supervisor of the continuation high school. The researcher had also been the principal of a comprehensive high school in the district and referred students from that campus to the continuation school. The researcher had also previously supervised all of the campuses that send students to the continuation high school, and has first-hand knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of those campuses.

However, this type of study yields valuable results due to the qualitative research design. It elicited depth and richness of responses by using qualitative approaches. This
method provided a deeper insight into the problem of students leaving the traditional high school campus; first, by listening to student perceptions on why they left the comprehensive high school campus, and then, by exploring the participants’ perceptions of why they remain in an alternative setting. The focus-group interviews were designed to investigate in the research questions. The one-on-one interviews were designed to triangulate the results of the focus-group interviews.

In summary, this chapter described the methodology that was employed to better understand why students leave comprehensive high schools. The methodology aimed to take notice of activities or supports students believed teachers and school leaders could have provided to increase the likelihood that they would have been motivated to stay in their comprehensive high school. The study’s three questions guided the discussions of the focus groups as student feedback and reflection were solicited.

Chapter 4 includes a summary of the findings of the three focus groups and the one-on-one interviews, and has four major sections: (a) an overview of responses from the focus groups, (b) a discussion of emergent themes from the focus groups, (c) a summary of findings by research question, and (d) a discussion of findings.
CHAPTER 4—RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 3 provided a detailed analysis of the research methods employed to better understand why students leave comprehensive high schools, and their perception of supports in an alternative setting that kept them on track to graduate. This study included three focus groups conducted at one main campus and two satellite campuses that are under the umbrella of a single school organizational structure. The participants included 29 students who were interviewed in focus groups and three individual student interviews. The research questions this study addressed were as follows:

1. Why do students leave comprehensive high schools?
2. What activities or supports do students believe teachers and school leaders could provide to increase the likelihood that they will become motivated to remain in their comprehensive high school?
3. What do students identify as factors that support their continuing educational experiences in continuation high school?

Prompts aligned with the three primary research questions were used to develop a deeper analysis and to encourage more discussion. Prompts were based on the Sample Youth Survey used by America’s Promise Alliance (2009) at their High School Dropout Prevention Summit. The prompts included the following statements:

1. I feel motivated to learn when I am at school.
2. I feel safe at my school.
3. My school is doing a good job preparing me for my future.
4. My school holds high expectations for all students.
5. My school grounds are clean and well maintained.
6. I feel like I belong at my school.

7. There is an adult at my school who I can talk to if I am having personal problems.

8. My teachers understand how to relate to students.

9. My school respects the opinions of students even when we disagree.

10. There are opportunities for students to voice their opinions on important school issues.

The focus group interviews were held to shed light on why students who chose to leave a comprehensive high school opted to continue along an alternative path toward high school completion. This school was selected because prior to enrolling at Thoreau, all the students had attended a comprehensive high school. The participants were students who had returned completed consent and parent assent forms to the front office at the main campus. The office was selected as a drop-off point because of its convenient accessibility to all students as they entered and exited the campus.

The study was conducted over a 12-week period during which time the researcher met with school and district personnel, visited classrooms and spoke with students, and conducted interviews at the main campus and the two satellite sites. The continuation high school’s principal granted permission for the study in accordance with the school district’s procedures governing research conducted by candidates pursuing advanced degrees. On the day of the interview, the names of students that would be participating in focus groups and would not be attending their advisory class were given to the school’s administrators. Advisory teachers were given the names of students who would not be in class that day but had an excused absence. School administrative and office personnel
agreed to refrain from sending passes to the classroom where the interviews were being conducted so as not to disrupt the discussions and to ensure the participants’ privacy. During the initial classroom visits, students were informed of the purpose of the study and the focus-group activity.

This chapter presents the data from the focus group interviews and the one-on-one interviews through two lenses. First the data were analyzed using Wells et al.’s (1989) framework on dropouts. Secondly, to allow for the emergence of concepts and themes, the data were analyzed by the research questions that guided this study.

**Wells, Bechard, and Hambly’s (1989) Framework**

Wells et al. (1989) provided four main causes of dropout that they used as an overarching frame of why students drop out of high school. In this section, data collected during the interviews are presented and summarized within Wells et al.’s (1989) dropout frames: school-related factors, student-related factors, community-related factors, and family-related factors. Although many of the findings could be presented in more than one of the Wells et al.’s frames, the researcher selected the most obvious or best fit for the factor involved. Since students did not readily speak of family related issues, for the purpose of this analysis, family and community issues are discussed under a heading of Community/Family factors. This organization assisted with a systematic, comprehensive evaluation of responses.

**School-Related Factors**

Factors that schools can control were listed by Wells et al. (1989) as one of the four main concepts leading to dropout. Findings in this area were most prevalent. School-related factors are those considered in the control of the school or school district.
Students shared that concern for schoolwide results rather than individual success, large class sizes, and poor teacher practices led to their leaving the comprehensive high school campus.

**Schoolwide success.** Students were enthusiastic and candid when answering questions about both the school they left and the school they presently attend. They stated that the comprehensive high school they left was more interested in raising the school’s standardized test scores rather than being concerned about what each student was capable of achieving. As one student mentioned, “At Vista del Pacifico it is just a big race to get test scores.” The student quoted had previously been enrolled in the school with the highest Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) results for high schools in this large urban district. He stated the school emphasized “beating” other high-achieving schools. This student said the competitive atmosphere led him to believe that staff and administrators “did not care about him,” and he felt this was confirmed when he was encouraged to attend another school.

Students reported that schools were more focused on school-wide scores rather than helping individual students. One young man noted that the size of the comprehensive high school, the number of students in each class, and the pressure for the school to look good in the community and within the district led to a lack of attention for the individual. Following this statement, the other students loudly concurred.

**Large classes.** Students reported that they experienced difficulty getting assistance in large classes. One student indicated, “I couldn’t get attention from teachers.” Another mentioned “the comprehensive high school had too many kids in the class. We didn’t get the attention.” Still another related, “[the comprehensive high schools] need
more than one teacher in the classroom. I left because I did not like it; teachers did pay attention but the classes were too big.” Students felt that without being able to get the assistance they needed, the school was not meeting their needs. The following comment is one example of a student’s frustration:

I said if I can’t get the attention I need, why do it if I know I don’t know how?
Why waste my time trying to do it because I know I can’t because I need help?
And the teachers never had time to get around to me, so I just never did my work.

Students expressed empathy for teachers who had large class sizes and worked hard daily to reach their students. These students reported that they felt lost in the large classes, and as a result they stopped attempting to engage the teacher. In one interview a female student recounted, “I couldn’t get attention from teachers. I would raise my hand and they could not get to me.” Another male student echoed this sentiment and said, “They had large classrooms. There were too many kids in the class.” Expressing frustration, he continued, “We didn’t get the attention we needed to do our work.” The young man justified his disengagement because teachers never interacted with him in classrooms. If he did not get the attention he needed, he could not understand what to do. If he could not understand what to do, then why waste his time doing work? As a result of this pattern students fell farther behind, and without adequate problem-solving skills, in addition to not knowing where or whom to turn to for help, they stopped participating.

Students reported that they felt more comfortable in classes with fewer students. When asked what schools could do to assist them academically, one student said he wanted more attention. Another student added that he would like to have fewer classes during the day. He suggested having four classes rather than six each day. When asked
what class supported their needs and why, their unanimous response was classes with fewer students provided the most support because they received more attention from the adults in the room.

**Teacher practices.** Teacher behaviors were cited as a deterrent to student progress. The students at Thoreau shared that they left the comprehensive campus in order to make up credits they had missed due to absences and academic struggles. Many of the students had track records of not succeeding in a comprehensive setting. They shared specific instances of teacher behaviors that they recounted from the school they left. These negative experiences are still fresh in these students’ minds, whether they took place months or years ago. Students reported that some teachers embarrassed them by announcing grades out loud in front of the class or they were seated according to their grade. They would be chided in front of their peers and questioned whether they had made any attempt to study. Students shared that they tried to remain unnoticed or leave the classroom to avoid embarrassment. These types of teacher practices made them feel angry, humiliated, and frustrated. As a consequence, they avoided seeking assistance from the teacher. At the start of each school year, they would try give their new teachers a chance, but it did not take long before they learned that some could not be trusted to treat them with dignity. Conversely, at Thoreau there is a deeper awareness of the students’ need for dignity in the face of academic challenges. A student summed this up by saying, “Here they ask you, ‘Do you want to know your grade?’ And ‘I'm gonna call you up in letter.’” Over there it is like, ‘you got an F, you got a D.’” One student expressed anger over the interaction stating, “It is like shut up, nobody wants to hear that.”
Students reported that mutual respect was not a common occurrence in the classroom at comprehensive high schools. One student remarked, “If they [teachers] get an attitude with me, they will get it back.” Students agreed that publicly sharing their difficulties was a practice many had experienced, and it led them to confront teachers in a negative way or stop coming to class. One student stated that she would not attend a class when grades were handed out, and she gradually stopped attending a particular subject with which she had difficulty.

**Student-Related Factors**

Wells et al. (1989) define student-related factors as qualities students possess independent of demographics such as drug abuse, trouble with the law, pregnancy, and not taking initiative in class. Student-related factors included activities that distracted from the necessary requirements of school. Students reported that they had responsibility for their academic and social success. Students also expressed that they participated in activities that kept them from doing homework when they got home from school. Students shared that homework, competing interests, academic struggles, and reluctance to ask for help led to their leaving the comprehensive high school campus.

**Homework.** Homework was a factor students felt they were responsible for outside of the classroom. Homework is a factor within the control of the school, but completion is within the control of the student. Within the comprehensive high school campus, they stated that homework often led to a divided classroom of those who “got it” and those who “didn’t get it.” While students control whether or not they allocate time to complete homework, it is also a school practice that bears examination. Students reported that, in the comprehensive high school, they fell behind due to both not understanding and
not completing homework. Students shared that they resented that they were assigned
class work and then when at home were expected to do homework as well.

Repeatedly, students reported they had things that distracted them when they went
home. They stated that they had other things they preferred to do including playing video
games, watching television, or hanging out with friends. The researcher inquired if an
adult required that they do homework, and one student stated, “I am often by myself at
home.” Another stated, “No, their mother was there and that was why they went to hang
out with friends.” One student reported, “Once I get home I get easily distracted from the
homework. Like sometimes I don’t even get it out and I just go straight to the computer or
the TV.” Another student chimed in, “Me, too.” Engagement with parents about how to
guide adolescents toward prioritizing school requirements, as well as how to interact with
their teen, could support students with competing interests.

Students reported that not doing the homework caused them to spiral downward
and as a result miss out on the lesson the next day. Homework was described by students
in all three groups as being an impediment to their success. Students described that it was
hard for them to do homework at home for a variety of reasons. Some stated homework
was neither relevant nor connected to what they did in class. Students stated homework
was often the “next lesson” and included skills that bridged to a future lesson. For
example, students reported that homework would contain a lesson they were to teach
themselves, and these skills were necessary to continue on track for the next day.
Students who missed homework assignments slowly fell behind.

One student shared his perception of how this hindered his progress by stating,
“I didn’t do my homework.” The students in the discussion clearly understood that their
“grade goes down whether you understand it or not” when they did not complete the homework. One student stated how this caused a downward spiral: “It is even worse when you come into school the next day and the topic of the class relies that you did the homework.”

Students reported that their peer group within the class consisted of those who did not do their homework. They banded together in order to avoid being singled out and embarrassed. When asked who did and who did not complete the work, they stated that in their classes the majority of students no longer participated in homework activities as they progressed through high school. One young man stated, “Yeah, so nobody did it, so we didn’t know what to say.” He went further to say, “Or the people who did do it, they need to get taught by the teacher. So the people who didn't do it would just sit there and read or sleep or talk.”

One student reported that the homework piled up and caused him to get farther and farther behind.

Another reason why I stopped trying is because the homework just kept building up because of my other assignments, and if I have to catch up it is a little too hard to do that. So I gave up on it, you know, I couldn’t do everything at once.

Students reported that the quantity of homework caused them to fall behind. Students who struggled during class reported that they needed to spend more time trying to decipher homework on their own than their more successful counterparts. One student noted, “It piled up on me. I couldn’t slow it down.” The quantity of homework assignments varies tremendously across schools and districts. Students reported that they
felt it was given to them so they did not have any “down time” in class, and it was often used as a strategy to control behavior rather than to improve learning.

A male student from Ethan Allen stated he would find ways to trick his parents when they asked if he had completed his homework: “Yeah, I would sit in my room and listen to music for half an hour and bring out a done worksheet like, oh, this is my homework for my math class, but I did it like a week ago in class because I got the answers from my friends.” He went on to say that his parents did try to monitor his work at home, but he showed them work that he had previously completed. He explained,

When my parents push me to do my homework, and they make me do it, I don’t show them what I have until I know that I can do it. Because if I can’t do it, I just get an assignment that I already did out of my binder and show it to them. That is why I never write dates on anything.

As a result of academic difficulty and lack of problem-solving skills, this student developed clever avoidance strategies. He did not know how to do his homework, so he showed his parents work that he had previously completed or copied in order to have his parents believe that he had done what was expected of him. Utilizing this strategy, the student avoided a confrontation with his parents, and possible punishment. Students with a low mastery of course content tend to have a pattern of high avoidance. They avoid seeking help, even from their parents, to deflect attention from their lack of academic success, and being perceived as failures.

The quantity of responses to this question in the three focus groups and the one-on-one interviews was high relative to other subjects. Students stated in all venues that they disliked the use of homework for a variety of reasons. One female student repeated,
“Even though you had class, after that was the homework, too. It just kind of bothered me.”

Further exploration of the comment regarding making friends and their influence on doing homework yielded the observation that students felt socializing at school and within class interrupted their learning. One young man stated,

I went into some of my classes not knowing many people, so I had more time to pay attention, so I got my work done. And then I came here and the people here like help me stay on track. Like we can work and talk at the same time instead of just talk.

The influence of students’ peers in classrooms is a theme that bears further examination.

**Competing interests.** Students who left the comprehensive high school recognized these competing interests as a reason they left. In each of the three group interviews, they mentioned that they enjoyed being away from school and did not continue to work on schoolwork when they got home. They stated that this hurt them as they progressed through high school.

One student noted:

Because as soon as I walk in the house I see my huge TV right there so I’m like, hey, staring at you. That looks more fun than homework. And then if I did distract myself from the TV and go in my room my skateboard is the first thing and then my drums. So I see two things that I would rather be doing than homework and I usually choose one of them.
Students reported that they did not see a short or long term benefit to doing their homework. They stated that they cruised from one year to the next before they found out it was too late.

Students described conflicting feelings about what to do with their free time. One student described how his desire to play video games and watch television superceded his willingness to do homework. Another student analyzed more deeply the root cause stating, “It’s instant gratification. We would rather do something now to get the joy out of it instead of do your homework and get rewarded at school the next day.”

**Academic struggles.** Students expressed their optimism that every year they hoped to make a fresh start and be successful. In hindsight, they recalled that it was not a specific grade level when they stopped feeling motivated, but during the year, each year, they tried and tried but eventually stopped trying. One student related that “it came to a point where you try at first and then it is like it gets too hard.”

One student stated he went into every year trying, and as the work got harder and I couldn’t understand it, that is when I would try less because I would wait for the teachers to help me, and they would never get around to me. So while I was waiting, I was just not doing anything, messing around. I wanted help.

The group concurred with this and nodded in affirmation. Student V stated that he waited for help but, “It never came.”

Students reported that they continued to fall behind academically as the school year progressed. They started each school year ready to try again. Their desire to succeed was evident in comments made by J, an 11th grader. He said each year he went in with a
new goal to do better, but it never worked because “we were at the same school and it was all the same but different.” Another student, P, stated that he set goals in September to pass his classes and move on to the next grade. He said,

Every year you come into probably the same school you were at last year with your sight set, like I’m gonna do my work this year. I’m gonna get great grades. It might work out like that for maybe a month or two, but then you just start to get back into the cycle where you start talking to your friends in class, start sleeping in class.

One student reported that the first progress report gave him a false sense of security. His grades were high at the beginning of the year, but gradually slipped as the year went on. He recounted,

As soon as the first 6-week progress report came out, every year I had good grades, and as soon as the next one came out they were all like at least two grades lower than where they started off, because I made friends and I got assigned more work that kept getting harder.

While students admitted that this was due to their lack of effort and understanding, it could also be indicative of the delay in student assessment that occurs in the beginning of the year. Diagnostic assessments as students enter a class or a pretest of material may be a tool that could aid educators as they explore this concern.

While academic gaps may lead to falling behind, they are distinctly different. In addition to falling behind due to not completing homework assignments, students reported that they needed more assistance during class time. Students described the difficulty they experienced in asking for help. They shared that it was difficult to get out of their seats
and approach the teacher’s desk. Some had teachers who stayed behind their desk and only spoke to students who approached them. They felt they might have had a better experience if their teachers came around and checked on them. They also stated they would have liked to have had more adults to assist them academically. When asked what students needed from teachers, they shared that they wanted teachers to walk around more and ask them if they needed help. They described classrooms where they would walk in, sit down, and look for an assignment on the board without any discussion or interaction with the teacher. They felt they were expected to “do everything on their own.”

Participating students stated that they would have liked a tutor or someone to come and help them one-on-one. They felt that classroom instruction was geared for the whole class using a one-size-fits-all approach. However, they needed to go at a different pace and to work with a teacher, but at times he/she was “sitting behind their desk and ignoring everybody.”

Reluctant to ask for help. Students reported a reluctance to get out of their seat to ask for help. One student stated that she tried to hide with her friend in class and pretended to do her work. Another stated that she did not know what questions to ask, so she waited until someone asked the teacher. The passive learners described have learned that avoidance is better than embarrassment. Student B stated that teachers did not come to them. S asked, “Why do you have to sit here and do your work, and then you have to go up and ask them?” They felt that teachers did not want to come out from behind their desk and check to see how they were doing. One commented, “Yeah, if there is a teacher that is up and walking around seeing if anyone needs help, you’re more likely to ask the teacher for help.” Strategies used when this did not happen were discussed and included
copying the work of a friend who was also struggling. Students stated they wanted assistance but did not want to walk up to the teacher’s desk.

Students also reported that they felt like they were bothering teachers in their comprehensive high school. One shared her view of the difference by stating,

Over there everybody is busy and doing their own thing, and okay, bring it tomorrow or next period. Over here you can go in at lunch, you can go during your class. It’s more . . . everybody is always so busy over there.

A student shared how ambiguous expectations led to miscommunication. The following example describes how a teacher left students to interpret the assignment on their own. K, a student at Northpoint shared, “I had a computer class teacher, like I was in her class but I needed help because in computer class you need help. She was just putting up assignments to do and I would be like, what am I doing?” Students reported that they often did not ask for clarification when they did not understand an assignment.

K expressed that he did not ask for help and often struggled with his coursework. K recalled being told by the teacher that he wasn’t trying, but in actuality, K did not understand where to begin. The student voiced his frustration for not receiving credit for his work or time spent in class.

And she wouldn’t even give me any credit. I would do my best, but she would be like, “Do it again because you’re not trying.” I left and then I came back. And once I was in her room and she was like, “No, I don’t want you in my class. You’re not trying.” So it was just like, okay, I’m trying to get help but it’s just like she wouldn’t even give me credit. She would just give me the book and say, “Do whatever’s in the book.”
This perceptual disconnect between not understanding and not trying led to the student to disengage further. Students shared that they were reluctant to ask for help because they felt they were perceived as being “bad or dumb.”

**Community/Family-Related Factors**

Community-related factors include societal pressure, the impact of poverty, as well as environmental influences. Communities that do not have safe routes to school, facilities such as libraries and recreation centers, and ancillary services to support education sometimes deter students from completing high school. The impact of a childhood in poverty or within a community with positive role models can lead to a pessimistic view of the world and a lack of trust in the adults within the community (Cairns et al., 1989). A school factor that also was impacted by community pressures included the perception that school staff did not trust them.

A male student mentioned that he decided to be bused to a high school north of where he lived because he did not feel safe in his neighborhood. Despite being in a safer neighborhood, he was uncomfortable because he felt that the staff judged him by his looks.

One student related that he felt adults were out to set him up:

> In my old school you would get set up with a security guard or something because if they think that someone is up to something, they will get like one of the people they are cool with to go try and get answers out of them or something, or try and go see what they are up to. And they would go and try to set you up so I didn’t feel safe to do anything I shouldn’t be doing, which is good I guess. In that way I didn’t feel safe.
This senior was visibly upset when recounting his experiences as a freshman at the comprehensive high school. He felt that even if he didn’t do anything wrong, he still risked getting into trouble because someone would try to blame him for something he didn’t do or insinuate that he had been involved in an incident. He was followed when he went to the bathroom, and he felt that he was always being watched. As a result, he was apprehensive and skeptical of adults.

Students were asked if they felt safe at school. This was a question that did not elicit in-depth answers in the focus groups. Additional one-on-one interviews revealed that these students felt safe while on the Thoreau campus but did not feel safe coming to school and going home. The school district does not provide transportation to Thoreau, and students must rely on public transportation. Several students recalled an incident last year when a Thoreau student was killed during a fight at the trolley station while on the way home from school.

During the interview, students shared that they experienced prejudice and discrimination at their previous high school by adults who prejudged them based solely on their appearance or where they lived. As a result, these students felt unsafe, angry, uncomfortable, vulnerable, and were suspicious and distrustful of adults. Students mentioned repeatedly the need to feel comfortable. After more in-depth questioning, the interviewer came to understand that feeling comfortable meant having an adult with whom they could build a trusting relationship. These teenagers desperately wanted someone they could confide in, someone who understood what they were going through, could offer advice, and would provide guidance and support. The bottom line—they wanted an adult who genuinely cared about them. Students shared that by not being
accepted and not feeling safe to reach out to anyone on campus, they became disengaged. They described examples of misperceptions by both students and adults that led to miscommunication and resentment. Adults need to realize the impact of inequality on vulnerable adolescents.

Family-related factors include socio-economic status, parental support, or whether one or both parents live in the home. Few family-related factors were discussed in the interviews. Two students mentioned that they came to Thoreau because they were pregnant; otherwise they would have stayed at their comprehensive campus.

Students shared that pregnancy made them feel like they stood out. One student stated that she felt uncomfortable being pregnant in a traditional high school. “Well, the reason why I left my school was because I was expecting. So when I was there, I didn’t want the teachers to talk about me.” She stated that she did not feel “comfortable” until she came to Thoreau where she felt accepted by the students and staff.

Students did not speak readily about their families. One student stated in the one-on-one interview that he continued school for his mother. He shared that she worked hard for him, and he promised her he was going to finish. Many students spoke of nontraditional family support networks, including blended families and living with friends rather than with their parents. Further research into the families’ influence on progressing through school will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Summary

It is apparent that students are quite vulnerable to adult perceptions. Many feel that adults at their previous comprehensive high school campus did not think highly of them or realized the need for students to be accepted for who they are, to feel that they belong, and
to feel valued. This led to disengagement from school. A deficit in student/adult engagement negatively affects academic achievement. School-related factors and student-related factors dominated the student focus-group discussions. Students shared concrete examples of how schools can improve their student success rate including lowering class size and increasing positive interactions between adults and students. Students also shared their personal stories and detailed what they perceived to be student-related factors that hindered their progress including homework, self-monitoring of achievement, as well as negative perceptions of students according to ethnicity/race and appearance.

School-related factors and student-related factors often overlapped as students reported a joint responsibility to change things. Community-related factors and family-related factors were a smaller part of discussions. Students discussed the experience of going to a school outside of their neighborhood, and how it made them feel like an outsider. They also attributed this “outsider” status for causing the school staff not to trust them.

Family-related factors were not openly discussed. Students rarely referred to their family and did not attribute any causality or correlation to success or failure to their family. While students were very willing to share and self-disclose stories of difficulties they personally experienced, they did not share stories of how their family helped or hindered their journey toward graduation.

**Summary of Findings by Research Questions**

The following includes a descriptive analysis of findings based on feedback from student focus-group interviews to research questions that guided the study. Responses were analyzed by reviewing transcripts of each question. Emergent themes were
identified, and the research questions were addressed. The following three research questions are addressed separately:

1. Why do students leave comprehensive high schools?

2. What activities do students believe teachers and school leaders should provide to increase the likelihood that they will become motivated to remain at their comprehensive high school?

3. What do students identify as factors that support their persevering educational experiences in continuation school?

**Why Do Students Leave Comprehensive High Schools?**

Question 1 was designed to elicit student perspectives on what led them to leave the comprehensive high school campus they originally attended. Student experiences are often not considered when developing appropriate interventions and supports at our high schools. Asking students why they left a traditional campus and enrolled in a continuation high school can provide insight into what our educational system can do to better support at-risk youth.

The prompts were taken from a survey developed by Anderson Williams and Hal Cato for the America’s Promise Alliance Dropout Prevention Initiative (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009). They were used to encourage more in-depth discussions and to foster conversations about the guiding question. Anderson and Cato are affiliated with Oasis Center in Nashville, Tennessee. These prompts have been used in large urban districts across the nation as part of a youth engagement survey (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009). The Oasis Center helps young people overcome serious challenges that could easily prevent them from transitioning into a healthy adulthood, including
homelessness, violence, depression and low self-esteem, and disconnection from caring adults. Student responses to the prompts were used to better understand the reasons they left their original campus.

Students had a variety of locations that they came from to enroll in Thoreau Continuation School. But despite the many locations, they had some common reasons for leaving the comprehensive high school campus. For the majority, they stated they did not choose to attend Thoreau. They shared that they “ended up” at Thoreau after years of going from year to year unsure of their progress.

How did they get there? Most students, with the exception of one, stated that they were steered toward the continuation high school. The general consensus was, “We didn’t choose to come here, we were sent here.” When asked why they left the comprehensive campus, they stated, “Because we were behind in credits.” Many of the students interviewed were older and nearly adults. They had been in our school system for nearly 12 years; some had been in the system longer. They were eager to graduate and felt that Thoreau provided them with opportunities the comprehensive campus had not. Students shared that sometimes the expectations at their previous school were too high. When asked to give examples of high expectations, one student said that he was expected to do all the assignments on his own. Another student concurred, and added that the teacher told the class to read the material and make an attempt to do the assignment before asking for help. “The book was, like, too hard and, like, I didn’t understand the stuff.” A third student chimed, “Yeah, you looked around the room and everybody was working. I didn’t want to look stupid, so I didn’t ask for help.” The students agreed that teachers
expected them to succeed, and they might have been able to if they had only received some one-on-one support or small-group tutoring.

Several students mentioned that they enrolled at Thoreau because their grades were poor, and they were not attending school at all. One student related, “I came here because my grades were bad. I didn’t have enough credits, basically because I was not really in school. I was really out. So that is why I came.” Students admitted that they had spent too much time “messing around and relaxing” at their comprehensive high school and had to leave because they had missed too much school.

Students were aware that they were behind in course credits, and were advised by counselors at their comprehensive campus that going to a continuation school was the way to graduate. They shared that it was “too late” when they became aware that they were behind. Rather than falling behind academically like the others, pregnant minors reported that their coursework had been interrupted by their pregnancy.

When asked by the interviewer if it was a choice, one student stated, “Well, I don’t think we necessarily chose to be here, but I got sent over here because my credits were getting low.” Attending Thoreau was one option her counselor had offered. She liked the idea of attending a continuation school and needing fewer credits to earn a high school diploma.

Another student stated,

I felt like I chose to come here because it is a lot easier to come here, especially for people that get distracted and they have problems in other schools and stuff like that. And it is just a good opportunity to get your high school diploma, like, if you were behind or something like that.
Comfortable. Another student felt more comfortable at Thoreau. Feeling comfortable was a comment repeated by both the focus groups and the one-on-one interviews. Students aligned feeling comfortable with the number of students around them, how they were treated, and whether they were acknowledged by adults. The size of the continuation campus was connected again with feeling “comfortable.” One student shared:

This is, like, way smaller. And it’s, like, you know, everybody. And it’s more comfortable, you know, you feel like you could . . . I don’t know, like, you fit in better. And over there it is just like teachers don’t even know you; well they do, but it is different.

Students attributed the state of being “comfortable” with a better environment. They connected the way students were treated, adults being familiar with students, and how “nice” people were toward them as qualities that made them feel comfortable. A student explained: “This is a more comfortable environment. The environment is better, friendlier. Because teachers can be really mean over there. You never know. Some of them, and some of them nice, but over here everybody is nice.” When the group was asked as a whole, they agreed with the comment they replied in unison that everyone was “nice.”

The majority of focus-group students did not miss their comprehensive high schools. Students described Thoreau as a place that supported them and met their needs. For the first time, they felt connected to adults, and this connection helped them get closer to graduation. One student, however, shared that he missed his old school. Q had attended Nimitz Academy, a K–12 magnet school that focused on global studies, and
alternative teaching strategies were utilized. His former campus was a high-achieving small alternative school (less than 400 students), received funding to support socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and he liked the small, “protected” environment. Q liked the small classrooms and the small number of students his age.

Well, I felt very comfortable at Nimitz. It was really fun for me to go. Basically, your whole grade would be one of your classes, and I really enjoyed that. You knew most people at the school. You even got to make friends with the little kids, and that was fun sometimes.

The enrollment at Thoreau was the same as at Q’s previous school, but there were fewer high-school-age students at Nimitz. He especially liked having his entire group of peers in one classroom. Q attributed leaving Nimitz to increased absences and “falling behind” in credits.

When asked about safety, students stated they felt safer at Thoreau. One student stated, “I feel safer here because you know everybody and you know everybody’s face, and over there you can’t keep track.” Students reported that they felt more anonymous at the comprehensive high school campus.

One of the eight students in the room stated she was given choices and decided to attend the continuation school: “I did choose to come here because I wanted a high school diploma and I am getting a diploma with the community college.” She stated she is getting an option 2 diploma that needs fewer credits and requires a college credit to receive the diploma. She stated that she wanted to be in the focus group to share her opinion. She was a vocal member of the group but the only one to state that she chose to go to Thoreau.
What Activities Do Students Believe Teachers and School Leaders Should Provide to Increase the Likelihood That They Will Become Motivated to Remain at Their Comprehensive High School?

Question 2 was designed to elicit student perspectives on what school leaders can do to increase the likelihood of students succeeding at the comprehensive high school campus. Student voice is a rich source of information for educational leaders. Asking students what would better assist them, as well as what would motivate them, could foster stronger supports for students at risk of dropping out.

The prompts used with Question 2 centered on student expectations, student environment, and how well students connected to their campus. As with Question 1, these prompts were used to deepen the discussion and to foster conversations about each guiding question. Culture and climate are sometimes difficult to measure. The questions and prompts were used to engage students in a discussion about learning environment by discussing their perception of the expectations set for them by adults, as well as the climate and culture of their former campus. Student responses to the prompts were used to better understand the reasons they left their original campus.

Prompts were designed to elicit student perceptions about expectations adults had for them on their original comprehensive campus. Perceptions were gathered about the learning environment, as well as whether they felt like they were connected to the campus. Students were asked to share what they felt would have better assisted them as they worked toward a diploma. Students were also prompted to discuss the learning environment both socially and physically. Finally, a prompt was given to seek perceptions of student connections to their original comprehensive campus. The next
section will describe the categories that students shared impacted their success. When asked “what leaders can do?” students’ responses centered around finding strong teachers and counselors who do not judge students, offering many ways to succeed, creating an atmosphere that promotes a positive community acceptance, and monitors them as well as implementing relevant curriculum.

**Teachers.** Students described behaviors that both deterred and assisted them to stay in school. Teacher behaviors were a large part of the responses when asked what leaders could do to assist all students toward graduation. Students shared personal accounts of why they left the comprehensive campus and treatment they had encountered.

One student shared he thought he was trying in class, but the teacher stated in front of the class that he was not. This inability to understand whether or not they are succeeding was repeated by many students in the three focus groups. Students stated that they believed they were doing what they were supposed to do, but when their papers were returned, they did not receive the grade they had expected. They felt preferential treatment had been given to students who received A’s, and that A’s were given as rewards for positive relationships with the teachers. This lack of understanding of classroom expectations may be a result of ambiguous grading policies, as well as a lack of accurate student self-assessment.

Teachers who built relationships with their students and sought to know them as individuals were cited as being a reason students stayed in school. Relationships both about personal activities as well as school work encouraged students to continue on their path toward graduation. Students shared that they were more willing to participate and engage in class when teachers showed them they cared about them personally.
Conversely, students reported that when teachers appeared to use schoolwork as a punishment, they disengaged and rebelled.

Students described teachers who shared appropriate personal information about themselves and could relate to students, unlike most of the authoritative teachers at the comprehensive high schools. A recurring topic among students was that the poor treatment they had received from adults at their previous school contributed to their disengagement and negative behavior. A teacher who shared personal anecdotes increased student willingness to bond with him or her and motivated them to work harder in that class. One student gave the following example:

Even during class it would keep people focused on them. Maybe little small distractions, like, I used to have a teacher that used to tell little stories about himself, and it really kept me focused. And after he was finished he would be, like, all right go back to work and we were, like, okay. And that wasn’t sarcastic; we were, like, yeah, all right, because we liked him and he was a cool teacher. So he told us a story and threw some jokes in there and we laughed, and we were totally okay with going back to work.

Students were very aware of the importance of the teacher-student bond, and the positive difference it made when teachers shared their “human” side, like hobbies and activities they enjoyed doing outside of the classroom. When further prompted about why they worked so well for this teacher, one student replied, “Because he made us laugh, and that made us like the teacher more. It made us feel bad about disappointing him, so it made us want to do more work.”
Students stated that they admired and listened to teachers who are willing to take a chance. Opening up to students and sharing personal information about themselves was a strategy used by teachers at Thoreau that students appreciated. Students respected teachers who shared personal anecdotes with them, and, as a result, these students were willing to attempt coursework that they had failed at their previous school or not done because they found it boring. Students disclosed that school was a risk for them, and they were more likely to trust adults who were also willing to “take a chance” by letting their guard down and telling these at-risk teenagers about themselves. Students also valued adults who were willing to meet them halfway toward building a relationship.

Students shared that they sometimes perceived teachers used schoolwork as punishment, and at their comprehensive high school they were often told what to do in an authoritative manner. A student related how this was perceived as a punishment.

Some teachers at Ethan Allen, they would be trying to get you, like, I would rather be offered to stay in at lunch than being forced. They tell me I have to stay in during lunch and do my work, and then that makes me want to get through my work faster so I can go out and hang out with my friends. But if they say, you need time and you’re welcome to stay in, that makes me more comfortable about staying in.

The adolescent struggle with authority was evident as this student stated that he would have been more likely to seek help if it had been negotiated more democratically. He stated, “Yeah, they could just offer the room [for tutoring] instead of just telling me I have to.” Further research in the use of democratic classroom practices could assist in resolving power struggles that possibly impede learning.
Counselors. Having counselors with open-door policies, who had time for students and did not show a perceived preference for the “good, smart kids” over the “bad” kids, was important to the focus-group students. Students said they felt counselors were selective with whom they spoke to during the day, and those who were “popular, good, or smart” received preferential treatment.

A student who had previously attended Hillsdale High School stated:

*They [counselors] are very selective on people. Because if they do really know you, and I don’t want to say the smart kids, but most likely the smart kids, they are more known and stuff and they are more, “Oh you have a problem? Let’s fix it or let’s do this.” It just needs to be more even.*

Another student concurred. “It feels like there is a preference for certain students.” Yet another added, “At big schools they know there are either really smart kids or bad kids.” This student observed that due to the large size of the campus, those were the only students the adults had time to keep track of. When asked if there were any other reasons, one student shared that, due to the frequency of interactions, some students received preferential, more timely assistance. One student surmised, “Because they see them more, they help them first.” Another said he “didn’t know” why some had greater access to counseling support.

When further prompted, students shared that this may also be due to the size of the school. Student K felt, “It is a lot of kids to keep track of. You are either gonna see the ones that are good or the ones that are bad.”

Students described the large caseloads of counselors at comprehensive high schools, and said it was hard to reach them because you had to schedule an appointment to
see them. Students recalled that they did not make appointments to see their counselor, instead, they avoided them. A few of the students reported that they had never seen their counselor in the 3 or 4 years they had been at the school. Some stated that the first time they met their counselor was when they were told they needed to leave and go to a continuation school. In hindsight, several said they probably would have benefited if they had known that they could have stopped in after school or even during the day if they’d had an urgent matter to discuss.

Students who had met with their counselor stated that the conversations were not what they had expected or needed. They sought counseling to address their social and emotional issues.

A majority of the focus-group students reported that they had rarely seen their counselor at their comprehensive site. One related, “When I went to Hillsdale since my freshman year, I only saw my counselor twice.” The interviewer asked her the grade she was currently in and was told that she is a senior. Other seniors in the group stated that they had seen their counselor less than five times during their 3 years at the comprehensive high school. Conversely at Thoreau, their counselors were readily available, and no appointment was needed to see them. One said, “Yeah, and I can go in there and, can I talk to you now? And she will tell me, ‘Yeah.’” They found this open-door policy to be “really cool.” One stated that the counselor related to them. “She seems like, more like, I don’t want to say teenagish, but she gets us.” Others added that they found her easy to talk to about class work and personal issues.

Students described the open-door policy of their counselors and explained that it was one of the many supports helping them to be successful. They talked about the
positive relationships with their counselor who “knew them” and “knew what they needed to do to graduate.”

Students were asked if there was an adult at their previous campus with whom they could talk. One student shared that he had an art teacher he could talk to, and another said she had a teacher she could talk to. Once again, they commented on their previous counselors. “My counselor didn’t even know who I was.” Another said that he had not met his counselor but then realized he had met her when he was transferring from the comprehensive high school campus. He recounted, “I never met my counselor. Well, I met her once. I met her when I signed out.”

Students reported how they felt welcomed at Thoreau, and that their current counselor was a big part of the reason. One recalled his first impression of Thoreau.

I think the reason I liked this school from the day I got here was because I came here for orientation or registration, or whatever it was, I don’t know. And then I met my counselor. I only talked to him for 10 minutes, and I saw him 3 months later when the school year started, and he remembered who I was, and that was super new. And all my teachers remembered my name the first couple days, when at Ethan Allen, after the whole semester, the teachers didn’t even know my name. My counselor didn’t even know who I was.

One student reported that at the comprehensive high school he had to repeatedly tell his counselor who he was. He related:

I went into that office every day for, like, a week because I was trying to get out of that school, and every day she would forget who I was, and she would need my
name. Because at Ethan Allen, every counselor had like 500 students because there is like 1,200 kids there.

Students noted that they had more freedom to go in and out of the counseling office at Thoreau. At their former school they were not allowed to go during class and would get in trouble for going to the office during instructional time. One complained, “You can’t go in the counseling office during class. Like, if you go in the counseling office during class, they will kick you out.” Another stated, “Yeah, you’re in trouble, but you can only go during morning and afternoon and passing periods.” Several shared that sometimes it was difficult for them to get to the office during the allotted timeframe, so it did not take long before they gave up trying to get help.

Students shared that, even when they tried, they were unable to get in to see the counselor. One persistent student who did not give up trying to see his counselor related a story that led to his frustration with the counseling office at his comprehensive high school. He repeatedly tried to see his counselor and was ignored.

You fill out a slip and put it in his box. I remember I went to go put a slip and he never called me, and so I went and I filled out like 20 slips and I stuck them all in his box, and I still didn’t get called. They don’t care.

The counselors’ close monitoring of student progress was cited as a method of both assisting the student toward attaining academic goals, as well as exhibiting that staff cared about them. Students expressed that they felt ignored and anonymous at a large school where counselors had large counselor caseloads and classes had too many students.

**Being judged.** Students shared that they had a perception of how they were seen by adults on campus. This perception elicited passionate responses from all three of the
focus groups. A student reported that he felt the teachers and staff at his comprehensive school judged him because he “looked like trouble.” When the interviewer asked him what trouble looked like, he shared a personal story he had experienced at Northpoint High School. “Sometimes I felt like they kind of look at you, and if you look different, they are going to go after you.” Another student confirmed this perception.

That is true because when I went to Northpoint, I would always take my backpack to the restroom because I don’t trust anybody. So, you know, the teachers here, when they have a problem with you, they take you outside the classroom so they won’t embarrass you. So this guy [teacher], in front of everybody would say, “Why do you take your backpack?” Because I don’t trust anybody. He’s like, “No, you’re gonna go smoke in the bathroom, aren’t you?” He didn’t trust me, and he basically called me a druggy in front of everybody.

Another student felt there was segregation in her class.

I had a science teacher at Northpoint High, he would go by your race. If you looked like trouble, he sat you in the back. If you were like Asian, he sat you in the front. If you were like in between, he sat you in the middle. He still does that today. You can go walk in his classroom right now. You will see the Hispanic and the black people in the back. You will see the Asians in the front, and the mix in the middle.

When prompted for her perception of this class’s seating according to race, the student elaborated.

It made me feel like, how come I’m making a B and I’m still sitting in the back? First he said he was doing it by grades, but once you look around the room, why is
the Mexicans in the back, the Asians in the front? If I got a B, why am I sitting in
the back with D’s and the F’s?

Students reported that the practice of seating them by their grades embarrassed them, and
seating them according to their race angered them.

Students repeated the comment about feeling judged by adults prior to developing
a relationship, although some stated they did not have a relationship with any adult on
campus. They shared that they wanted time with the adults and, while wary, they wanted
the adults to “like actually take the time.” Another student summed it up by saying,
“Don’t judge us by the way we look. Just because you’re black or Mexican, it doesn’t
mean we’re all bad. It was like, I want more attention and I know we’re a big class, but
there were teachers in there that actually did care.” Students expressed that they had
teachers who had been a tremendous help to them, and that they understood teachers made
quick decisions (judgments) due to the number of students in their class. Another student
shared that in the continuation high school campus it was different. Student A related,
“When I came over here it was a whole different story. It was a bigger classroom with
fewer students. If you have a lot more students, you get overwhelmed.”

Students who entered the continuation high school due to recent motherhood or
pregnancy shared the perception that they were judged in their comprehensive high school
setting. Pregnant minors or parenting teens who were interviewed disclosed that when
their pregnancy became noticeable they felt self-conscious and uncomfortable because
they were talked about, looked at, and judged. The new mothers’ family obligations
caused them to leave their comprehensive high school campus and enroll in a
continuation high school setting with more flexible hours. Both groups stated that they
felt the continuation high school setting was more accepting, and their peers and staff were not judgmental about their pregnancy.

In conclusion, student perception regarding how they were perceived was critical as a motivational factor. Evidence that they described led them to believe that they were not trusted, nor were they expected to succeed.

**What Do Students Identify as Factors That Support Their Persevering Educational Experiences in Continuation School?**

Question 3 was designed to elicit student perspectives on what motivates them to persevere at their continuation high school campus. Student voice is a rich source of information for educational leaders. Students are intimately aware of what occurs within the classroom setting. Asking students how to better assist them as well as what motivates them to continue can inform educators as we strive to better serve our youth.

The prompts used with Question 3 centered on students’ relationships with adults, student supports provided by the school, and how well students connect and engage in decision making on their campus. These prompts were used to deepen the discussion and to foster conversations about each guiding question. Student engagement is discussed by listening to descriptions of the relationships and connections students have on their current continuation campus. The prompts were also used to engage students in a discussion about student engagement by discussing their perception of the supports currently available to them on their continuation campus. Student responses to the prompts were used to better understand what motivates them to pursue their high school diploma.
Students reported that they continued in a continuation school setting due to the different environment and treatment they received at Thoreau. Within this environment, they found they had multiple opportunities to be successful. They stated they experienced a communal feeling of family, and were monitored closely. Finally, they stated that they could see how the lessons they learned were relevant to their future.

**Multiple opportunities for success.** Students reported that at the continuation school they felt they would have support to succeed, as well as multiple opportunities to try again. They stated that the small classrooms made it hard to hide and that because all students struggled with something, they felt comfortable asking questions. They also praised the way their teachers related to them, and attributed this connection to their willingness to try and complete work. They commented that they could tell when teachers liked working with them, and that this made a big difference on whether they put forth effort to work with them. They stated that at Thoreau they could tell the teachers cared, and as a result they did their work. One student shared that, “If they [teachers] tell you, ‘Do your essay,’ you’re gonna do your essay.” They noted that teachers were there to assist them if they struggled with a portion of their assignment. One student shared,

And of course you’re gonna mess up, but they are just gonna be like, you know, if you want me to look it through, just give it to me. You give it to them. They are gonna tell you they are gonna help you through it.

This description of how assignments were completed required formative monitoring throughout the assignment. Students shared that they did not hide their mistakes from the teachers at Thoreau as they had done at previous schools.
**Family atmosphere.** Students reported that at their continuation school they felt like a family, and even though everyone is different, they get along. They cited activities like potlucks and game time that brought them together. Ping-pong tables and materials for hobbies and activities such as sewing and cooking were evident. Students cited their pride in the campus. One student who had experienced difficulties adhering to behavioral expectations at the comprehensive school was in charge of putting up the flag every day. One student proudly pointed out, “We are responsible here. We clean off the tables [lunch] with a hose, and we take care of the garden. This is our area.”

**Acceptance.** The atmosphere at Thoreau was described as one of acceptance. Students reported that they accepted each other regardless of differences. One student shared: “Every school got the bad kids. Every school got the good kids. Every school got the nerds. Thoreau was just different. We all know each other.” Student B repeated, “Everybody knows each other.” Another student commented:

> We all just learn differently. We have those days where we are just, like, we need to be focused again. Like, I mean, I’m not putting nobody out there, so I’m not gonna say no names, but we have kids that can’t do nothing but have a smile on their face. I mean you have to have patience with this one kid. I’m not gonna say no names.

Students described this atmosphere of acceptance despite differences or challenges. One student shared, “We are together. We might be in our own little group, whatever, that day or today, but we are together.”

Activities and responsibilities that mirrored the model of a community were discussed. Students reported that all of them took part in the maintenance and climate of
the campus. When asked if the school district maintained their campus, they agreed it was a group effort. Students shared with pride how they took care of their campus along with assistance from adults. They stated they felt it was clean and well maintained. They also shared that they felt like a community, and a community takes care of their environment. One student explained:

We do our own gardening, water down the tables. At Northpoint it would be junk after lunch. Northpoint is a jungle. Everyone is just trying to fit in. Here we work together to take care of our campus.

The students connected the sense of community with caring for their environment and belonging. One student stated, “Here everybody knows, just do your own thing. Nobody is gonna judge you for it.” Students repeated that they felt like they belonged at Thoreau.

Students shared that they felt more motivated at Thoreau because they felt they fit in. When asked by the interviewer how it felt, they stated, “It feels better.” When prompted as to how it feels better, one student clarified, “Because you’re more motivated. I think you’re more, you fit more with the students here.” They mentioned that they felt the academic level was more homogeneous. “Over here you want to get your stuff done. I want to graduate. Over there, whatever. I already know I’m not gonna do it, so why even bother.”

One student reported having increased academic confidence at Thoreau but did not articulate how this occurred. “Over here you know you can do it, so you want to do it.” Another assigned a cause to this motivation and stated, “Everybody is on the same page here.” Another student commented, “Teachers take time to talk to us about our work and
help us get to where we need to be.” This illustrates the ability to provide individualized instruction at the continuation high school.

**Monitoring.** Contrary to signals often emitted by adolescents, students interviewed stated that they felt an adult checking up on them was a “good thing.” They stated with pride examples of adults on campus who had gone farther to check up on them than previous teachers and counselors. One commented on a particular teacher, Mr. G:

All the teachers here are cool, but I think honestly just that teacher, for anything at all, he is the one to go to. All the teachers are cool. You can talk to them still, but he is on you [“on you” stated with more volume and feeling].

Students reported that this particular teacher monitored them closely. Student M explained:

If you got a problem, he will find out. I was not ditching because I have not ditched before. I was late for school. And he called me out of that class to come to his class and was like, “Where was you at? Who was you with?” I was, like, that is my business, and dang, dad [sarcastic emphasis on dad], are you serious?

Student M related that this was a good thing, and she appreciated that he cared even though she gave him a hard time. “Mr. G calls us if we are home during the first hour. One time I was late and he called me when I was on my way to school.” The researcher asked, “Is that a good thing?” and the group enthusiastically replied, “Yes!” The student continued to say that teachers have stopped her on the way to school in their cars to make sure she was going the right way. She expressed gratitude for this level of concern.

Other stories of teachers making sure students were on track emerged. One student recalled how a teacher helped him when he needed to complete a job application.
Another student reported how a teacher helped him with something he needed outside of school. “Mr. C helped me on the application. It is harder than you think.” Students reported that teachers cared for them and monitored them very closely. One stated, “All of the teachers go beyond the day to help up.” Another noted, “The classes are small and they look after all of us.” Students reported that they correspond with teachers via text, e-mail, and cell phone.

Students reported that the continuation high school did a better job of monitoring them as they progressed. Students shared that Thoreau staff was more aware of where they were educationally. One student stated:

Over here it is more focusing, just the fact because over there if you’re doing bad, they aren’t gonna tell you, except for give you your progress [report]. But over here they’re gonna pay more attention to you. Just the fact that you’re doing bad, they want to. The whole point you’re here is to do better, so they are gonna catch your attention and let you know and stuff.

Students reported that the adults were more aware of how they were doing emotionally and monitored their progress more closely.

Students stated that they felt they received more assistance with both schoolwork and with the outside world. J recalled that he received more one-on-one assistance at Thoreau. He shared, “Like, they more work with you one-on-one, here at Thoreau they do, and, like, your essays, and they help you out more here.” He compared the assistance at his previous school stating, “Like if you’re not doing well at Hillsdale they won’t even bother with you, but here they will get you to graduate. They get you on track.”
When the interviewer continued this line of questioning, students stated that they trusted that the adults would work to assist them to graduate. One student mentioned that he trusted that they would work to help him and he was “more confident” that he would finish school. When asked why he felt more confident he shared, “Because over there you don’t know if you’re gonna do it, but over here you know, because if you don’t, they are there.”

**Relevance to future goals.** Students reported that they learned necessary skills to not only graduate, but to get a job. A student shared that he believed he was more successful in his summer career due to the preparation he received at Thoreau. He stated that career skills were explicitly taught within his school day. When asked if they felt the continuation campus was helping them by preparing them for the future, Student J shared, “I worked with my dad over the summer, like my real dad and my step dad, and a lot of it was basic school stuff. It was kind of difficult if you don’t know that much.”

Students reported that the continuation high school helped them when they needed help and provided tailored supports that were relevant both in and out of school. They identified activities that prepared them for the workforce such as assistance in writing résumés, completing a job application, completing an application for dual enrollment at a community college, and becoming more proficient in mathematics skills embedded in construction, culinary arts, and business offices. One student commended his counselor for helping him with his résumé, and commented that he never had this kind of assistance at his previous school. He remarked, “I tried applying for jobs, and sometimes did not finish the application. It is hard doing it on your own.” He added that at his comprehensive high school he received “nothing, no help with applications or anything
like that. They just focus on school work, that is it.” He noted that helping him with schoolwork was not helping him prepare for the future. “They make you take classes that you’re never going to use when you leave school.” His comment is indicative of students that do not see the relevance of coursework and their future. The student went on to say that he felt the focus was more on schoolwide test scores and not individual assistance. “They focus more on how the school, the representation is. Because the higher the school is or the scores or anything, they focus more on that than helping you.” Several students in the focus group agreed with this observation. They felt that comprehensive high schools cared more about impressing the public with high test scores and being a top-ranked school, rather than providing assistance to struggling students or taking an interest in their career goals.

Summary

In the three focus-group interviews and the three one-on-one interviews, not one student reported that he or she felt the comprehensive high school had prepared them for the future. A majority of the students reported that they were being taught relevant skills at Thoreau that could be applied to the workplace. A few students commented that they were already using some of those skills. One student shared:

Here [Thoreau] they are even, like, sometimes in, like, advisory or in some of our classes, they are telling us to get online, and they are getting job applications in the office to help us out with finding jobs for our future and stuff. At Hillsdale, they don’t really do stuff like that.

Students in all three focus groups and those in the one-on-one interviews reported that Thoreau actively pursued helping them find employment.
Individual Interviews

Interviews were held with students who were not in attendance during the focus-group interviews. The same questions and prompts used for the focus groups were used for the three one-on-one interviews. The individual interviews were conducted in the same classroom that had been used for the focus groups. Two interviewees were males, and one was a female. They were selected from the group who had completed their parental consent forms and student assent forms but had been not been initially selected out of the original group. For the purpose of this research, pseudonyms were used to identify the participants

Rosa

Rosa is the Associated Student Body president at Thoreau High School. Rosa is a 17-year-old Hispanic female. She has a quick smile, keen eyes, and she spoke assertively. Rosa is a very sociable young lady with noticeable leadership skills. She disclosed that she got in trouble when she was at the comprehensive high school. She felt certain that her behavior was the cause for her to leave her former school and enroll in the continuation high school. Rosa commented that she did not like the “drama” associated with the larger campus, and was not mature enough in her freshman and sophomore years to deal appropriately with peer and teacher relationships. As a result, she was suspended multiple times for aggressive behavior and truancy.

Why she left. Rosa was expelled for fighting and sent to an alternative behavior-modification school. She stayed there for the remainder of the semester and returned to a second comprehensive high school at the beginning of her junior year. She was credit deficient when she started her junior year back in a comprehensive high school campus
which caused her to become even more disconnected. Rosa did not know any of the students at her new school, and they knew she was there because she had been expelled. She could not evade her reputation and felt pressured to live up to her image of being tough. Rosa stopped attending regularly and fell even farther behind academically. When Rosa did attend, she was not a quiet wallflower. She asked for help but was often behind, and her frustration was evident. Rosa shared that some teachers appreciated her more than others.

**Why she stays at Thoreau.** Rosa admitted that even though she is in a leadership role, she still struggles with attendance. She has caught up and excelled academically, and, for the first time, feels successful in school. She attributes her relationship with the principal and her teachers for “keeping her honest.” She meets regularly with the principal, and is one of the principal’s mentees. She also knows that the counselor and her teachers will be “on her” if she does not attend or gets behind.

**What educators can do.** Rosa recounted that teachers at her old schools who were patient and respectful made her feel that she could succeed. Moving to different schools did not give her the fresh start that many thought it would. Students were aware that she was there for disciplinary reasons. Rosa could not explain how they found out. She felt that she would have done better academically if she had been enrolled at Thoreau earlier in her educational career.

**Omar**

Omar is a Hispanic male with multiple tattoos and wears ear jewelry. Initially, he was quiet and listened intently but became animated and informative halfway through the interview. Omar stated that he came to Thoreau because he was behind in credits at the
comprehensive school, and the staff and administrators did not want him there. He was affiliated with a gang and had a history of trouble outside of class and with the law. He did not have a history of discipline problems while in school. When he did attend the comprehensive high school, he hung out with his friends who also were not succeeding academically. As he got older, he attended less regularly and gradually stopped attending.

**Why he left.** Omar’s memories of the comprehensive campus were spotty as he attended little in 9th and 10th grade. His only positive interactions in a traditional setting were with a counselor in middle school whom Omar said talked to him and cared what happened to him. There were no adults at the comprehensive high school that he could talk to or who showed any concern about him. Omar recalled negative instances where both the principal and the campus supervision had treated him with “disrespect.” He shared an interaction with the principal when the principal told Omar to “get the hell off my campus.” He observed that the principal liked to have power over him. Omar left the school and did not return. He entered Thoreau as part of a probationary requirement to attend school. When he went back to his comprehensive high school, he was told he could not attend.

**Why he remains at Thoreau.** Omar has remained at Thoreau because he joined a community organization that has been helping him make plans for the future. He said he wanted to graduate and get a job. He described the mentoring program in his neighborhood community center, and stated that his mentor has helped him stay on track. He shared that the classes at Thoreau enable him work at his own pace, and no one got in his face or tried to have power over him. Omar said that the adults on campus were nice, but he had not formed close relationships as those that were described in the focus groups.
What educators can do. Omar had residual anger at the adults in authority that he had interacted with at Eisenhower, his comprehensive high school. He stated that he especially disliked the principal and the campus security officers. He felt they should not “be working with students” and should be removed. Omar’s experience could point out the need for proactive training for administrators and campus security officers on how to ensure a safe campus without bullying, intimidating, or threatening troubled youth. In addition, a revised process to screen adults for administrative and security positions should be considered. Administrators and staff who are authoritative or antagonistic may not realize the long-term effect of their behavior on at-risk students. Omar related how his experience was not positive and was indicative of the need for building positive, trusting relationships with adults on campus. He did recall the positive influence of the counselor at his middle school. When prompted further, Omar described how the counselor said hello to him often and asked how he was doing whenever he saw him. He stated that this counselor had shown genuine interest in his activities outside of school, and did not hesitate to share with him what he thought about his activities. Omar stated that he had been someone who advised him and seemed to “worry” about his welfare.

Jesse

Jesse is a White student with a slight build who is nearly 18 years old. He is pale, talkative, and seemed somewhat distracted. He shared that he often did not attend the comprehensive high school and instead chose to “stay home a lot.” When I walked him to the office after the interview, he did not speak to any of his peers.

Why he left. Jesse was not successful at his former school. He recalled that a counselor who was not “his counselor” had called him in and told him to go to Thoreau.
He said the counselor then called in his mom and asked her to sign papers so he would leave. Jesse said that he wanted to graduate and was told this was the only way he could graduate.

**Why he stays at Thoreau.** Jesse shared that he liked to be in a setting with fewer students. He also liked that he could work “on his own” and get help from teachers as soon as he needed it. He commented that “he did not have to wait or be ignored.” Jesse disclosed that he always had trouble learning in school, and that it just got too hard in high school; he felt that he could no longer do the work. Teachers at Thoreau made assignments easier to understand and did not give him too much at once. He admitted that he still has trouble in school with coursework but was completing the requirements so he could graduate.

**What educators can do.** Jesse shared that he really did not know what educators should do. He shared that he needed “more help” in class and that it took him longer to do his work. He suggested that maybe if teachers could “wait longer” for work it might help students in class. Jesse exemplifies the theme of academic struggles emerging as a reason for leaving the comprehensive high school campus. Despite regular attendance, he shared that he never fully understood all of the content material. Year after year, he was promoted to the next grade level until the F’s caught up with him. He did not actively seek assistance. This points to the need for an early-warning monitoring system that identifies students who are at risk of academic failure so necessary support systems and relevant interventions can be provided.
Summary

This chapter captured student voices who responded to research questions. These questions were asked to better understand why students leave comprehensive high schools, what activities or supports students believe teachers and school leaders could provide to increase the likelihood that they will become motivated to remain in their comprehensive high school, and what students identify as factors that support their continuing educational experiences in continuation high school.

In the first section, Wells et al.’s (1989) four factors leading to dropping out was used as the framework for sorting the collected data. In the second section, responses were analyzed and sorted by research question. Prompts for each of the three questions were adopted from *America’s Promise Youth Engagement Survey* (America’s Promise Alliance, 2009). In the third section, data from one-on-one interviews which were conducted in a one-on-one setting with students from each of the three locations are shared through vignettes of each student. These students were not part of the focus-group interviews.

Student voice is an often ignored informational source and is rarely used to inform educational leaders. In this chapter, students reported that they perceived their voice (that of the struggling student) as often being ignored in favor of “the smart kids and the bad kids.” Asking students who struggled within our system what supports they did or did not receive can help educators target strategies in order to better support at risk youth. In listening to student voice, themes emerged about how they could be better supported through the educational system. Emergent themes included the need for positive teacher/counselor relationships, desire to have a feeling like a family on campus, the need for
adults who care and check up on them, and the need for an education that is relevant to their future goals.

Chapter 5 provides the reader with an analysis of data within the context of the research, and the emergent themes from student voices. The chapter also discusses the study’s implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 5—DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study’s literature review cited researchers who analyzed the crisis of high school dropout. A detailed review conducted in the field of dropout prevention yielded a complex array of findings. Studies both qualitative and quantitative reinforce the need for individual assessment and targeted intervention. This study analyzed dropout by listening to student voice in order to provide insight into this multi-faceted problem. This chapter analyzed and discussed the findings of the focus-group interviews. Emergent themes are noted and discussed within the context of why students left the comprehensive high school campus and why they continue to progress at the continuation high school campus. The chapter concluded with implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

Overview of the Problem

Students begin their education with optimism and expectations of success. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way they encounter obstacles that lead towards dropout. As educators, our charge is to ensure all students reach their potential. Students who do not graduate are limited at an early stage of their lives. In the United States, one in three high school students do not graduate, and a higher proportion of African American and Hispanic youth do not earn a diploma. Despite numerous attempts to solve the dropout problem, students still leave our schools. The rate at which teenagers dropout has remained about the same for the last 30 years, despite an increase in funding allocated for education.

The dropout rate has been recognized as a national crisis that affects our national health and welfare. Dropouts imperil not only their futures but also negatively impact our
communities. The current challenge to prepare our youth for a productive future has changed in content as we enter the 21st century. New skills and a higher level of engagement are required to battle this problem. Educators can learn from those participating in the educational system what they perceive is succeeding and where we are failing them.

Dropping out is a gradual process of disengagement from the structures and adults within our educational system. There is no single reason why students drop out of high school, and there is no single solution to retain all students in the educational system. However, our teenagers are qualified key stakeholders who can address the dropout crisis. They are the experts on what it is like to be a student.

Despite the narrowly focused academic gains made since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first enacted in 1965 and reauthorized in 1994), nearly one-third of all high school students leave the public school system before graduating (C. Swanson, 2004), and the problem is particularly severe among students of color and students with disabilities (Greene & Winters, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Educators must ask if we are preparing students for the future or if by limiting our measurements of success are we narrowing our preparation and stifling engagement. The dropout rate in this country disproportionately affects students who are low-income, minority, living in a single-parent home and attending a large, urban public high school; one-third of these students do not graduate from high school.

Students who do not succeed no longer have economic options available to previous generations in the trade areas that do not require a diploma. Formerly one of the
top three nations with the highest graduation completion rate, the United States now ranks 17th in high school graduation rates among developed nations. It is significant to note that the United States is the only country in which today’s young people are less likely than their parents to have earned a high school diploma (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2007).

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

Utilizing focus-group responses from students who were unsuccessful in a comprehensive high school setting, this study sought to learn why they left a more traditional learning environment to pursue a diploma in an alternative setting. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to understand students’ perceptions of school support as well as possible structures or reasons the comprehensive high schools did not meet their needs. Further, it examined why students who chose to leave a comprehensive high school opted to continue along an alternative path toward high school completion.

This study solicited input from qualified key stakeholders who can address the dropout crisis—teenagers who are experts on what it is like to be a high school student—and disclose experiences at traditional comprehensive high schools that foster dropping out. Asking students to share their motivation and rationale for choosing an alternative educational setting will contribute to the pool of information, as well as influence best practices within our high schools.

**Review of the Methodology**

This qualitative study took place within the context of a continuation high school in a large urban pre-K–12 school district in Southern California. The continuation school, Henry Thoreau High School, has two satellites in addition to the main campus.
Southern California Unified School District (SCUSD) is a large urban school district in California, it has a wide range of student demographics, including some of the wealthiest and most impoverished in the state. The large urban district has more than 200 schools and provides educational programs to over 100,000 students in grades pre-K–12.

Thoreau students come from 24 high school neighborhoods throughout Southern California. These students were asked what factors contributed to their decision to leave their comprehensive school or to temporarily drop out. Eight to 10 students were selected from volunteers at each of the Thoreau sites, and 30–45 minutes was allotted for each session. In addition, three one-on-one interviews were held using the same questions and prompts. The focus-group responses were recorded and transcribed, and the researcher analyzed each groups’ responses for patterns.

Qualitative methods were used to collect data via a semi-structured focus-group interview. The qualitative data were obtained from tape-recorded responses to three guiding questions and 10 prompts. The findings of the qualitative data were presented through Wells et al.’s (1989) four factors of dropout to provide a framework by which information could be collected and sorted. The data analysis and interpretation were completed through the use of Creswell’s (2003) six-step process, which identified emerging themes and concluded with an interpretation of the data.

**Summary of Findings**

Student voice was a limited component of literature, yet students spend more time than any other group in the education system. Their years of experience in school, coupled with their unique perspective, resulted in some emergent themes. Focus-group interviews at a main continuation high school campus with two satellite locations were
designed to listen to students still involved in the educational process to garner what went wrong, what is right, and how these voices can inform educators and influence effective educational practices. Three one-on-one interviews were conducted to elicit further responses.

Compared to previous research studies, analysis of student voice in this study revealed the greater significance of relationships. While there were parallels in the areas of academic support and school structures, students in all three of the focus groups stated that they needed to feel respected, supported, and monitored before they would commit to the coursework. Students shared that they had repeatedly come to school willing to learn but each year disengaged from the educational process due to lack of what they described as a caring, supportive environment. In Chapter 2, Glasser (1998) stated that most behaviors are chosen and we are driven to satisfy five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. These needs form the core for motivation and behavior. Students confirmed that they needed to feel a sense of belonging, as well as satisfy a need to have freedom and fun when they went home. Students repeated comments about having a community they could depend on, as well as the desire to do something engaging rather than class work and homework that competed with their desire to have fun.

Major findings of the interviews can be broken down into three emergent themes. First, students need to have classes that were small enough to build relationships with adults, as well as to encourage necessary academic interventions. Secondly, relationships are extremely important to students who have a lack of trust in how the educational system supports them. Relationships with teachers and counselors dominated the
discussion. Students shared evidence of the need for both students and adults to develop better human relations skills. And lastly, they need a trusting environment that supports close monitoring of student progress toward relevant student goals.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Many issues have surfaced from this study, which need to be more closely examined by practitioners. We need to heed the voice of students in making changes that may support them and educators in their mutual goal of developing productive citizens.

1. Develop schools that have smaller class sizes.
2. Provide a myriad of student support systems for academic success.
3. Make time and provide the support for educators and students to connect.
5. Make schoolwork more relevant to success in the real world.

**Implications of Recommendations for Practice**

Implications for educators include investigating ways of reducing class sizes, reducing the student-to-adult ratio, expanding monitoring systems, training adults and students in human relations skills, and developing a culture of relevant support with ongoing positive monitoring.

**Smaller Class Size: We Need More Attention**

Students reported that they felt better supported in classrooms with fewer students, and suggested that comprehensive high schools have “more adults in the room.” Class size in California is currently limited to less than 30 students per certificated teacher in kindergarten through third grade. Class sizes in large urban school districts in California can average up to 36 students to one teacher; certain classes can have as many
as 40 students. To better support freshmen, in 2005 the Morgan-Hart Class Size Reduction Act allocated funds to school districts in California for schools that reduced class size to 20 students per certificated teacher in 9th-grade English and one additional 9th-grade course requirement for graduation (either mathematics, science, or social studies). In 2008, due to financial constraints, California imposed a freeze on the funds leaving districts without the financial support to maintain this high-school intervention. Implications for this finding include an emphasis on reducing class size allocations and increasing per pupil funding in California.

Students reported that large class sizes made them feel like a “number” in their comprehensive high schools. They reported that they would hide in classes to avoid embarrassment and felt that they needed space to move. They attributed the lack of informal interactions they had with the teachers to the large class size and stated that at their continuation high school they had many opportunities to have personal and academic conversations.

One student stated, “I feel safer here because you know everybody and you know everybody’s face, and over there you can’t keep track.” Students reported that they felt more anonymous at the comprehensive high school campus. Small campuses help alleviate the feeling of anonymity. However, it was noted by the researcher that the Southern California School District’s small school reform efforts produced students who entered continuation high schools at a similar rate of attendance.

Students reported that they felt sympathy for the difficult job teachers have with so many students to teach. Repeatedly, they stated that large class sizes made it difficult for them to both feel “comfortable” and to get academic assistance. Politicians and
educators need to take into consideration the impact of their budgetary decisions when allocating resources. Further study into the impacts of class size is needed to better illustrate the possible impact.

**Academic Support**

Contrary to the complaints sometimes heard that time and resources are too often focused on those who struggle, students reported that much time was dedicated to the students who already understood the material. They shared their experiences with classroom practices that intimidated and embarrassed those who had not succeeded, as well as outside expectations of homework that led to a separation of those who understood and those who did not. Homework was a topic multiple students discussed as a barrier to staying on track and a factor in their leaving the comprehensive school setting. It was surprising to hear how many students felt homework was a deterrent to their success. An age old practice used to support and reinforce learning was described as a method of “keeping them busy” and punishing them for misbehaving. Instances of mandatory homework sessions were described as a method of correcting bad behavior in the classroom. Other comments discussed the perception that not doing or understanding their homework caused them to fall farther and farther behind. A strategy for reinforcement of lessons was described as an independent study activity. Students described feeling unprepared and ill equipped to teach themselves at home. This discussion was rich with examples of how homework was making it difficult for students to progress. Implications for educators include a clear understanding of the purpose of homework, the quantity of homework as well as structures that support assistance with independent study activities.
Students reported that homework was not a structure that supported their learning but rather a gatekeeper that further divided those who knew what was going on and those who did not. School leaders should consider alternate ways of checking student progress toward goals, as well as providing structures within the school day that can assist students with homework and class work. Advancement Via Inner Determination (AVID) is a program that uses college students to tutor within the school day. Programs that support students when struggling to get them back on the right path are critical to closing achievement gaps and increasing the graduation rate.

Supports within current alternative settings including small schools could help assist in lessening the number of transitions to a continuation high school. Opportunities for summer catch-up programs, as well as online opportunities could assist with those who want to stay in their high school setting but need additional time and support to graduate.

Students noted that they got behind academically and slowly disengaged from the school and classroom. Some factors that were dominant included teacher behaviors, counselor behaviors, and academic struggles. Students stated that teacher practices that embarrassed them or ignored their need for academic support led to avoidance behaviors. Students further stated that the connections they made both at the comprehensive and continuation campus enabled them to persevere toward graduation. The message that it is easier and that it is a place to come if you have problems seems to have been communicated to students via adults while arranging for them to leave.
Human Relations: We Are Like a Family

Students repeatedly reported that adults who connected with them by sharing personal stories, treated them with respect, and trusted them received reciprocal treatment. Educational research points to the importance of adults connecting with students, but guidelines of how to do this successfully are limited. Teacher preparation courses do not explicitly teach this skill, nor is it commonly evaluated. The gap between what we know and what we practice is evident, and human resource departments often reserve human relations training for sites and individuals in conflict. Hammond (2001) stated that behavior within the classroom and the interaction with the subject matter and the instructor are critical. Students strongly supported this research as they shared that the relationships with teachers and counselors were critical to their success. Professional development on how to recognize signals, as well as on how to engage students, can assist in deterring academic disengagement.

Implications for school districts include a proactive teacher preparation course or module taught during the induction period in order to emphasize the importance of building positive relationships with students. Implications for professional development include the explicit teaching of how to incorporate activities structured within the day to connect adults and students. Also, professional development could be offered to teach strategies that increase the student-to-adult informal interactions. These informal interactions as described by students in their interviews were perceived as a successful way to increase student engagement.

Students shared that the connection they had with adults on campus was the key to their motivation. They described incidents of poor treatment within the classroom, as
well as outside of the classroom. This researcher heard descriptions of counseling offices that did not respond to students seeking help, as well as other adults who did not listen to students in distress. Facilitated communication between students and adults on campus could be one activity that helps assist students on their path toward graduation. Human relations training, as well as conflict mediation training, could assist both students and adults as they learn to interact with each other.

School leaders shoulder the responsibility for creating and maintaining a climate of high expectations and mutual respect. Creating forums for student participation and access to services is one way of meeting the needs described in this study. Human resource departments also play a role as they seek to recruit and retain staff with strong interpersonal relation skills. Students described Thoreau as a place that supported them and met their needs. For the first time, they felt connected to adults, and this connection helped them get closer to graduation. Investigation into teacher placement and self selection of continuation high school settings could lead us to understand more about the success of the student adult relationships on this campus.

Students reported that adults showed they cared by treating them with respect, letting them know how to improve, and monitoring their behavior. Educators working to create student-centered schools would need to provide structures to support democratic practices, explicit immediate academic feedback, as well as monitoring of progress.

Omar stated in his one-on-one interview that he felt the adults were involved in a power struggle with him and other students. He had a strong recognition of the power structures within the educational system and felt that the administration of the comprehensive high school had exerted power and authority over him. He exhibited
anger that his lack of power was used to tell him to leave and still recalled how it made him feel. He also recalled the positive influence of the counselor at his middle school. Omar described how the counselor said hello to him often and asked how he was doing whenever he saw him. He stated that this counselor had shown genuine interest in his activities outside of school, and did not hesitate to share with him what he thought about his activities. Omar stated that he had been someone who advised him and seemed to “worry” about his welfare.

Students shared that teachers should learn to build relationships with students that are both formal and informal. Discussion centered on building a school community where all are responsible for the school climate and academic success. Students suggested that access to counseling services both for social and academic needs would have assisted them in the comprehensive high school setting.

**Blend Monitoring With Caring**

Students reported that they tried harder when they knew someone they respected was “checking up” on them. They were interested in support with academics, including mandated checkups to catch them in time. The connection to the adult was critical to their motivation. Students stated that they appreciated being closely monitored at the continuation school but perceived that they were watched in the comprehensive setting for their behavior, not their academic progress. Implications include the need for school systems to provide staff training for both the technical monitoring systems needed to check in with students, as well as the human relations skills necessary to connect with students.
Students shared that they began to hang out with others who were not on track to
graduate. Brindis and Philleben (1998) noted distinct indicators of dropouts. One main
indicator included students who “associated” with other dropouts. Brindis and Philleben
(1998) found this group had a higher incidence of dropping out. Peer groups and their
influence on success was referenced in student discussion, as well as a paradigm shift at
Thoreau. Students described an atmosphere where fellow students were all “on the same
page” and interested in graduating.

Students reported that more individualized attention from teachers and counselors,
as well as an expectation of group respect contributes greatly to their successful
perseverance in a continuation high school setting. Students also cited the pronounced
evidence of caring that was evident in the monitoring of their progress.

The counselors’ close monitoring of student progress was cited as a method of
both assisting the student toward attaining academic goals, as well as exhibiting that staff
cared about them. Students expressed that they felt ignored and anonymous at a large
school where counselors had large counselor caseloads and classes had too many
students.

Students shared that they avoided monitoring and connected it with public
embarrassment. Three strategies that students mentioned they employed to avoid
monitoring were to hide out with a group of peers who were also struggling, disrupt class
in order to get sent out of the room, or to not show up to class. However, students also
reported that they felt that monitoring them was a way school personnel showed that they
cared. Students described teachers who were adept at ensuring they called when they
were staying on task, disrupting because they were struggling with academic or social
issues, as well as not attending. Students shared that this monitoring was done in a respectful way that showed them they were concerned, rather than a punitive way that was designed to catch them doing something wrong.

Students have been found to not only be at risk when they transition to a new grade level, but also when retained at any grade. Retaining students at any point in their K–12 path increased the likelihood of dropping out of high school regardless of the reason for the retention (Alexander & Entwisle, 2001). Alexander and Entwisle (2001) found that the highest predicting factor of dropout was if a student had repeated a grade in elementary or middle school. This has implications for policy on K–8 retention and could inform both school boards and school leaders when making these critical decisions. Students in this study reported that they fell behind in credits and that as a result their peer groups shifted once they reached high school. They also shared that earlier and more frequent monitoring would assist them in understanding what they needed to do in order to succeed. They reported that they were tracked into classes with others who were not succeeding. The combination of factors described led to falling behind in credits and led them toward the continuation campus.

Maslow (1954) stated that needs were hierarchical and if foundational needs were not met, progress would not be made. Maslow suggested that we are all driven by similar sets of needs, but will only be motivated toward particular needs once others have been satisfied. He ordered these needs as first, physical (food, water, shelter, sleep, warmth); second, safety (protection, security, rules, order); third, connection (family, relationships, a sense of belonging); fourth, esteem (achievement, status, reputation); and fifth, self-actualization (personal growth). We move up the needs hierarchy as each need is
satisfied, and unsatisfied needs continue to motivate until they are fulfilled. Students stated that the third need of connection was not met at the comprehensive high school. They further stated that this need was met at Thoreau and they then had opportunities for achievement as a result.

**Relevance**

Students reported that their alternative school cared about them as individuals and helped prepare them for life after high school. Students shared that counselors helped them with job applications and résumés. Students reported feeling what they were studying was relevant to them for the future. They explained that part of the relevance was attributed to the human relations skillfulness of teachers, and the other part was the practical skills that were taught in the classroom. For example, teachers told them that a sound foundation in math and literacy was useful for future goals, and because trust had developed between students and teachers, they bought into what teachers said. In addition, teachers and counselors provided assistance with projects outside of the school setting that helped them with summer employment and future employment. Students expressed a strong desire to be employed, are highly motivated to learn skills directly connected to the work environment, and see the relevance in what they learn and how it can be applied to current employment and a future career.

Students did not see how their education would assist them in their futures. In fact, students reported that school conflicted with surviving by expecting work outside of the school day at a time when they could be or were working. Students stated that relationships were not good with the adults limiting their esteem, freedom, and power.
Finally, they stated explicitly that school assignments, particularly homework, conflicted with their “free time” and competed with their need for fun.

Findings Related to the Research

A review of the literature first investigated factors that have been shown to influence student dropout decisions. School factors, student factors, family factors, and community factors all play a part in affecting success in high school completion. As the relationship is so intertwined, a solution will need to call upon all parts of our community to support our most at-risk youth.

School-Related Factors

Students reported that many factors within the control of the school hindered their progress toward graduation. The most prevalent responses from students were on the topic of the size of both the school and the classroom. Students focused on how difficult it was to get “attention” and assistance in a classroom that had many students. It became apparent that they saw class size as a barrier to academic progress and positive relationships within the campus. Often, students stated that they felt more “comfortable” in the small-school setting. Further research in how the size facilitates relationships with adults is necessary to find a causal relationship.

Student Factors

Wells et al. (1989) found that some factors that led to drop out were caused by activities that students participated in outside of the school setting. Student-related factors are defined as those the student engages in outside of the school setting. Most often they are associated with negative student behaviors such as drug abuse or violent actions.
Students in this study reported that their participation in activities other than those necessary to succeed academically led to their lack of success in the classroom. For example, students reported that other leisure activities filled their home time rather than homework. Students reported that they were distracted by video games, television, and other activities and, as a result, did not complete necessary school requirements.

Research (Cairns et al., 1989) has found a direct correlation between student behaviors and an increase in the dropout rate. Studies point to early childhood development and aggressive behavior as the strongest determinant of dropping out of high school. In a longitudinal study following 248 girls and 227 boys from 7th grade until 12th grade, Eckstrom et al. (1986) examined behavioral, cognitive, and demographic factors relating to dropping out of high school. He found that students who dropped out were earlier noted to have exhibited high levels of aggressiveness and lower academic performance.

Students reported they were in control of many factors that hindered their progress toward graduation. A study by Brindis and Philleben (1998) noted three distinct student factors that correlated with dropping out. Brindis and Philleben stated that students who “associated” with other dropouts had a higher incidence of dropping out. Students confirmed that they started to form their own peer group of nonparticipants within the classroom. In this study, students reported that their peer group within the class consisted of those who did not do their homework. Some shared that they banded together in order to avoid being singled out and embarrassed. When asked who did and who did not complete the work, they stated that in their classes the majority of students no longer participated in homework activities as they progressed through high school. One young
man stated, “Yeah, so nobody did it, so we didn’t know what to say.” He went on to say, “Or the people who did do it, they need to get taught by the teacher. So the people who didn’t do it would just sit there and read or sleep or talk.” This supports the idea of the peer group influencing success, but also points to the peer group developing due to a lack of academic success. Students developed a peer group within the classroom to protect themselves from being identified publicly as a low achiever.

Brindis and Philleben (1998) also found factors including low socio-economic status and early parenthood contributed to dropping out. Students in this study supported Brindis and Philleben’s premise by stating that they left due to pregnancy. Students reported that they were concerned about the adult perceptions of them at the comprehensive high school. For that reason, they stated they left and entered a continuation high school. Students did not report concern about peer perceptions of their pregnancy. This shows the need for further human relations training for our adults who work with pregnant minors.

Carpenter and Ramirez (2007) examined the gap between subgroups of dropouts with African American, Hispanic, and White student populations. The number of times a student had been suspended was a common correlate found in all subgroups. It is unclear whether these behaviors were tied to a specific cause or were the result of a common problem, but it does indicate that behavioral disruptions in and out of the classroom were an indicator of a student in the process of disengaging. While the focus groups in this study did not elicit a response regarding behavior, the one-on-one interviews did lead to discussion of how their behavior caused them to “get in trouble” or “get kicked out.” This study, however, did not interview students who were in the continuation school for
disciplinary reasons. Students pointed out that days they missed due to suspensions led to them falling behind in their coursework and gradually falling behind their peers in accumulated credits. Years later, they suffered the consequences of a freshman year spent in the vice principal’s office or being home on suspension.

**Family and Community-Related Factors**

Students did not report that factors related to their family hindered their progress toward graduation. Students who were pregnant and starting their own family or expanding their current family reported that they came to Thoreau to complete missed credits and to complete high school. They stated that they felt adults were “judging” them in the comprehensive high school. The pregnant students and the new mothers shared that they felt everyone at Thoreau could relate to their challenge. They felt accepted, and their children were accepted as part of the family.

With the exception of one student who mentioned that his mother pushed him to graduate, the focus group interviews yielded little data regarding students’ relationships in their families. Student responses to family were limited to the recollection that a parent had attended the final conference at the comprehensive school. Other than that, they did not disclose any family involvement in their school life.

Students did describe how homework was difficult to complete at home due to family conditions. One student described elaborate methods he employed to avoid his parent’s rules about homework in order to play computer games, drums, or watch television. Another student cited the need to “get out of the house” and inferred she did not have an environment to study or do homework. Further research into adolescent
development as well as parenting styles could help educators form better structures to support students.

Students did not report factors related to their community hindered their progress toward graduation. Most of the discussions were limited to what happened to students during the school day. Students in the study were from all parts of the Southern California urban city and came to Thoreau from various neighborhoods. Students stated that they were a “family” while they were at Thoreau, and did not talk about gang affiliations or activity. There was no evidence of a broad understanding of services or partnerships that could assist students on the path toward graduation.

**Recommendation for Future Research**

The following recommendations for future research on the issues are based on the issues that emerged while conducting the study:

1. Analyze independent factors contributing to dropout

2. Analyze class size

3. Analyze the role of parent advocacy in the graduation process

4. Analyze successful student-to-student academic supports.

**Analyze Independent Factors Contributing to Dropout**

Future research could be conducted focusing entirely on one of Wells et al.’s (1989) four factors leading to dropping out. School-related factors were the most common responses heard from students. Students were very willing to share suggestions on how to improve the comprehensive high school setting, but less willing to share examples of how community- and family-related factors affect their school experience. School-related factors were the most common responses we heard from students. Student
factors surrounding the use and completion of homework, as well as those factors that compete with school could lead educators to discover methods of increasing student success. Family- and community-related factors were rarely discussed when we heard from students. Future research could include one-on-one interviews, as well as a series of interviews to assist in building the rapport necessary for more private disclosure. Students were very willing to share suggestions on how to improve the comprehensive high school setting, but were less willing to share examples of how family and community-related factors affect their school experience.

**Analyze Class Size**

Future research should seek to identify the impact of class size. In all three focus groups, students reported that class size, when smaller, increased their likelihood of receiving and seeking assistance. Students reported that they felt anonymous and that teachers sometimes did not know their names in large classes. Further research into this controversial strategy could shed light on how the size of the class helps or hinders academic achievement. Changing the practices of adults, as well as increasing opportunities for informal student teacher interactions, would be a necessary component. Reducing class size alone will not increase student achievement.

**Analyze Parent Advocacy**

Significant findings related to school structures, adult student interactions, as well as monitoring needs, were reflected in student comments. The absence of discussion of parent advocacy was also noteworthy. Students did not relate incidents of parent teacher conferences, parents visiting the school for reasons other than checking out, or parent advocacy on behalf of the student. Further research into understanding the role parent
advocacy plays in supporting students toward graduation with this similar population could assist in combating the dropout problem.

**Analyze Successful Student-to-Student Academic Supports**

Future research should seek to identify means in which to strengthen student-to-student support. Leveraging student-to-student support and positive peer pressure within a community of learners is a topic that bears further exploration. In the one-on-one interview with Rosa, she stated that she would not listen to adults during her freshman year in high school. She had not had an adult that she trusted within the school system due to her own admittedly poor behavior. As a result, she listened to her peers. She stated that peers who were also motivated or students slightly older could be used to guide and mentor freshman. She stated, “You could see that someone else was doing it.” And she suggested that may have motivated her toward completion within her original comprehensive high school campus.

**Insights of the Researcher**

Students shared that the disengagement process began early, and they slowly stopped asking for help. Each year they were less likely to seek assistance from adults and learned strategies to avoid contact. As we listen to the voices of students, we see both an achievement gap as well as an engagement gap. Students who are not succeeding slowly disengage from the system both mentally and physically. As educators, we bear a responsibility to ensure that students are listened to and engaged throughout their school career. Student voice is a critical component necessary to inform educators as we seek to solve the complex problem of drop out. Students have stated clearly that they need academic assistance, a respectful environment, monitoring of progress, as well as a sense
of belonging. Creating a positive environment that meets the needs of students is impossible without listening to their voices. By involving students in the process of creating support systems, we are better poised to prevent the disengagement that leads to drop out.

Students spoke to the unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act (2009). They stated that they were left behind and left out of the score calculations due to a systemic effort to raise schoolwide test scores. Pressure on schools and school districts to achieve results stand in direct contradiction to the intent of the law. No Child Left Behind, designed to identify and “rescue” those who had formerly been overlooked in data reports, has instead incentivized schools to not admit low achievers, as well as find those who are not succeeding within their campus and send them to another school. Students in focus groups shared that they felt the focus was more on schoolwide test scores and not individual assistance. “They focus more on how the school, the representation is. Because the higher the school is or the scores or anything, they focus more on that than helping you.” They felt that comprehensive high schools cared more about impressing the public with high test scores and being a top-ranked school, rather than providing assistance to struggling students or taking an interest in their career goals.

Student voice is a rich source of information for educational leaders. Asking students what would better assist them, as well as what would motivate them, could foster stronger supports for students at risk of dropping out. Implications of these findings call for a need to increase training in cultural awareness, monitoring of student academic needs, as well as conduct proper support of teacher applicants in both teacher education programs and school districts. Authentic voices of students who have taken a
nontraditional path toward graduation can assist educators, politicians, and parents as we
work together to solve this complex problem. The depth of observation and the keen
insights of the students who contributed to this study point to a successful future. Even
though they have started off slowly, their level of thinking and compassion for others
spoke to greater goals and lessons necessary to grow up successfully. Their path is yet
undetermined, and their story can help us correct the mistakes we have made in serving
them.
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Appendix A

Student Script

Hello my name is Nellie Meyer, I am a graduate student at San Diego State University and an employee in San Diego Unified.

I am doing a study on High Schools and how we can learn from students. We are asking you to take part in a research study. We are trying to learn more about what is working and what is not working in our traditional high schools.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a discussion about why students leave schools? What would help more students stay at their original school? And, what is the most important thing here that keeps you enrolled in school?

You will be in a group of 8-10 students and it will be tape recorded. The conversations will lead to some personal stories but the tapes will not be heard by anyone but me and the typist. You will miss one advisory class and lunch will be provided while we have our discussion.

By participating you will represent other students who are not a part of the discussion. You will also help school leaders solve the problem and help more students succeed.

Please talk to your parents about this study before you decide whether to participate. We will also ask your parents if it is all right with them for you to take part in this study. If your parents say that you can be in the study, you can still decide not to participate.

You can ask me any questions that you have about this study and I will try to answer them for you. If you have questions that you think of later, you can call me at 619-725-7388.

Taking part in this study is up to you. No one will be upset if you don't want to participate. If you decide to participate, you can also change your mind and stop any time you want.

Thank you for your interest.
Appendix B

Parent Consent Form

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

TOPIC: PREVENTING HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: WHAT DO STUDENTS BELIEVE CAUSED THEM TO LEAVE THE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL?

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent for your child to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what your child will be asked to do.

Investigators:
Nellie Meyer, M.A.
San Diego State University Doctoral Student
Chair: Margaret Basom, Ed.D., Carl Cohn, Ed.D.

Purpose of the Study:
This study will ask students who are enrolled in Twain High School why they left their former high school. The purpose of the study is to seek answers for schools so they can support students better at both the original comprehensive high school and the continuation high school campus.

Ten students from each Twain campus will be recruited to participate in a 45 minute discussion on why they left their original school and what motivates them to continue at Twain High School.

Students will be recruited in their advisory class and will be picked out of the volunteers. The demographics of the school will be used to determine who will be selected. The student focus group will mirror the school’s population whenever possible.

Description of the Study: Students will be asked to participate in a focused discussion of why they left their original school and what keeps them at Twain High School. The interview will be tape recorded. Students will only be identified by first name. Student confidentiality will be respected and responses of identifiable students will not be shared with the school site or school district. Information will be safeguarded by the sole investigator.

The research will be conducted on school grounds during an advisory period. The students will only be asked to participate in one 45 minute session. If the researcher determines there is more to learn from a specific student a one on one interview may also occur.

Questions will be about:
• Why did you leave the original high school?
What activities do you believe teachers and school leaders can do to keep students in comprehensive high school?

What do you feel supports you and helps you stay in school at Twain?

**Risks or Discomforts:** Because of the personal nature of the questions asked, your child may reflect on unpleasant memories while responding to a questionnaire or interview. The subject should be informed of the potential for discomfort and told that if he/she begins to feel uncomfortable, he/she may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently.

**Benefits of the Study:** Your child will help support the study of dropout prevention and will help educators hear from students directly what could help them succeed. I cannot guarantee, however, that your child will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** Responses of students will be tape recorded. Tape recordings will be kept in a locked fill cabinet in the office of the researcher located at another location than the school. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. Taped responses will be transcribed be heard by the sole researcher and the transcriptionist. Only the researcher and the transcriptionist will have access to the tapes. After the study has concluded the tapes will be destroyed.

**Incentives to Participate:** The researcher will provide lunch for all of the participants and will also provide a five dollar gift certificate for Starbucks.

**Costs and/or Compensation for Participation:** Students will miss part of a non academic advisory class. They will each participate for part of the advisory class and part of their lunch time.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to allow your child to participate will not influence your future relations with San Diego State University. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your child’s participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact Nellie Meyer at 619-725-7388. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at San Diego State University (telephone: 619-594-6622; email: irb@mail.sdsu.edu).

**Consent to Participate:** The San Diego State University Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form, as signified by the Board’s stamp. The consent form must be reviewed annually and expires on the date indicated on the stamp.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to allow your child to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to allow your child to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this
consent form. You have been told that by signing this consent form you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Child (please print)

____________________________________ __________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian of Participant Date

____________________________________ __________________
Signature of Investigator Date
Hello my name is Nellie Meyer, I am a graduate student at San Diego State University and an employee in San Diego Unified.

I am doing a study on High Schools and how we can learn from students. We are asking you to take part in a research study. We are trying to learn more about what is working and what is not working in our traditional high schools.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a discussion about why students leave schools; what would help more students stay at their original school; And, what is the most important thing here that keeps you enrolled in school.

You will be in a group of 8-10 students and it will be tape recorded. The conversations will lead to some personal stories but the tapes will not be heard by anyone but me and the typist. During the conversation you will be in a group of your peers from your school. Because you are in a group with your schoolmates, only share what you are Ok with other students knowing and sharing.

You will miss one advisory class and lunch will be provided while we have our discussion. The conversation will be close to sixty minutes.

By participating, you will represent other students who are not a part of the discussion. You will also help school leaders by giving them the information they need to try and solve the problem which may help more students succeed in the future.

Please talk to your parents about this study before you decide whether to participate. We will also ask your parents if it is all right with them for you to take part in this study. If your parents say that you can be in the study, you can still decide not to participate.

You can ask me any questions that you have about this study and I will try to answer them for you. If you have questions that you think of later, you can call me at 619-725-7388.

Taking part in this study is up to you. No one will be upset if you don't want to participate. If you decide to participate, you can also change your mind and stop any time you want.

Thank you for your interest.

I want to participate in this study    YES or NO

CHILD’S SIGNATURE   DATE

SIGNATURE OF PROJECT REPRESENTATIVE   DATE