

DROPOUTS WHO RETURN FOR THEIR GED: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE
SOCIO-CULTURAL ISSUES RELATED TO LEAVING SCHOOL

A Dissertation
by
DAVID C. BURLESON

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty at
Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

December 2014
Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership
College of Education

Dropouts Who Return for Their GED:
Personal Reflections on the Socio-Cultural Issues Related to Leaving School

A Dissertation
by
DAVID C. BURLESON
December 2014

APPROVED BY:

Ken D. Jenkins, Ed.D.
Chair, Dissertation Committee

Roma B. Angel, Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Monica A. Lambert, Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Vachel W. Miller, Ed.D.
Director, Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

Max C. Poole, Ph.D.
Dean, Cratis Williams Graduate School

Copyright by David Burleson 2014
All Rights Reserved

Abstract

DROPOUTS WHO RETURN FOR THEIR GED: PERSONAL REFELCTIONS ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ISSUES RELATED TO LEAVING SCHOOL

David C. Burleson
B.A. Appalachian State University
M.A. Appalachian State University
Ed. S. Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Ken D. Jenkins, Ed.D

Since compulsory attendance laws began to dictate when students were able to leave school nearly a century ago, school systems throughout the country have struggled with the lamentable fact that some students leave school and do not complete their education. Research and state dropout records have primarily been filled with statements made by students at the time of their dropping out indicating feelings of anger, alienation, or instability. These data were collected at a time when these students were reacting to current situations or circumstances that caused them to finally leave school. Their voices have been unduly influenced by being interviewed at the time of dropping out when emotions were at a peak. The more valid reasons or influences for a student's dropping out most likely occurred years earlier and then escalated over time (Finn, 1989; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Joselowsky, 2007; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). By exploring

the early and subsequent influences on students, educators can design interventions that will help prevent future dropouts.

The purpose of the study was to identify the influences that provided the initial catalyst for students who decided to drop out of school although they then returned to get their General Education Development (GED) certificate. Data for the study were gathered through interviewing a sample of such students to determine the influences that impacted their decision for leaving school.

An analysis of the responses to structured interview questions along with the review of relevant information provided a better understanding of the factors that lead to students leaving school. This analysis allowed data to emerge that addressed the gap in the literature suggesting a continued need for qualitative research examining a student's experiences at home, in school, and with peers. Few studies (see e.g., Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Kortering & Braziel, 2008) have examined the perspectives of the students themselves regarding their school experiences. Most research regarding dropouts has examined the specific reason for dropping out at the time the student left school, while often relying heavily on the reasons as reported by school officials.

Acknowledgements

As I complete this chapter of my life, I have considered the many people who have assisted me in achieving a lifelong dream. First and foremost, I thank my wife Beth. She was always there to assist, support, edit and give me a push when I needed it. To my children, Heather and Shannon, thank you for always being there to encourage and provide suggestions. I also thank my son-in-law, Ryan, for sharing his experiences as a classroom teacher. Thanks also to my granddaughter, Charlotte, for being such a powerful motivator to complete this journey. I appreciate each of you and I love you very much.

I thank my parents for instilling in me the value of hard work, determination, respect for others and the willingness to work through challenges. To family and friends, I thank you all for your encouragement and for always being there to support me.

I thank my dissertation committee. I appreciate your guidance, patience, assistance, support and encouragement. It was an honor and privilege to learn from you, work with you, and become a better educator because of your guidance. I was proud to have had Dr. Ken Jenkins, Dr. Roma Angel and Dr. Monica Lambert on my team and will be forever grateful. I also appreciate the guidance and support of Dr. Vachel Miller, Dr. Alice Naylor, Dr. Jim Killacky and Dr. Larry Kortering without whose extra effort I would not be at this point. I am also grateful to the faculty and staff of Mayland Community College for their support and willingness to help in any way needed.

I also thank the first Hickory cohort. You were not only a support group but also my friends. To my colleagues and friends in the Avery County Schools, thank you for your friendship, support and prayers. I especially thank the Avery County Board of Education for providing a supportive and encouraging environment in which to make a difference for all students. It is impossible to acknowledge everyone that has been a support through this process, but to each of those individuals I say thank you.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Significance of the Study	4
Contributions.	5
Knowledge added to subject.	6
Educational practice impact.	6
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Conceptual Framework for the Study.....	11
Definition of Terms.....	19
Chapter Two: Literature Review	22
Family Influences.....	23
Poverty.	23
Fatherless homes.	25
Family dispositions.	29

Peer and Individual Influences.....	33
Peer Influences.....	33
Impact of disengagement.....	34
Impact of work.....	39
Individual influences.....	40
School Influences.....	42
Impact of policies.....	43
Impact of push and pull-out factors.....	49
Impact of organizational structure.....	50
Impact of disciplinary practices.....	52
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	55
Introduction.....	55
Research Design.....	56
Study framework.....	56
Interview development.....	58
Role of the Researcher.....	59
Researcher bias.....	60
Ethical considerations.....	62
Assumptions.....	62
Study Procedures.....	63
Participants.....	63
Site.....	65

Research Plan.....	65
Data collection.....	67
Interview method.....	67
Data analysis.....	67
Trustworthiness.....	69
Credibility.....	69
Transferability.....	70
Dependability.....	71
Confirmability.....	71
Summary.....	71
Chapter Four: Findings.....	73
Introduction.....	73
Summary of Participant Interviews.....	74
Participant A-01.....	74
Participant A-02.....	77
Participant A-03.....	80
Participant A-04.....	82
Participant A-05.....	84
Participant A-06.....	86
Participant A-07.....	89
Participant A-08.....	91
Participant A-09.....	94

Participant A-10.....	96
Participant A-11.....	98
Participant A-12.....	100
Participant A-13.....	102
Participant A-14.....	104
Participant A-15.....	106
Procedures and Emerging Themes.....	107
Theme 1: characteristics of the participants as students.	111
Theme 1a: single parent and fatherless homes.	112
Theme 1b: changing schools.....	113
Theme 1c: life altering event or injury.	113
Theme 1d: family structure and poverty.....	115
Theme 1e: impact of work.	116
Theme 1f: traits of participants.....	117
Theme 2: peer and adult influences on participants.....	118
Theme 2a : positive or negative relationships with school staff.....	118
Theme 2b: peer influences.....	121
Theme 2c: parent influences.	122
Theme 2d: lack of school and staff interventions.	124
Theme 2e: lack of engagement in school.....	125
Theme 2f: lack of extra-curricular activities.....	126
Theme 3: school influences on participants.....	126
Theme 3a: grades and performance.	127

Theme 3b: grade retention.	128
Theme 3c: attendance issues.	129
Theme 3d: discipline issues.	130
Theme 3e: school policies.	131
Theme 3f: school organization.	132
Theme 4: participant reflection.	132
Theme 4a: regrets.	133
Theme 4b: advice for students considering leaving school.	134
Theme 4c: advice for improving schools.	135
Theme 4d: feelings about school.	137
Theme 4e: motivators to return to school.	138
Summary of the Results.	139
Chapter Five: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations.	149
Overview of the Study.	149
Conclusions Based on the Findings.	150
Revised Conceptual Framework.	155
Study Applications and Recommendations.	157
Research Compared to Literature.	160
Limitations and Delimitations of the Study.	165
Suggestions for Future Research.	166
Why Does It Really Matter?	166

Study Implications	174
The school experience.....	174
Identifying characteristics of potential dropouts.....	174
When do students begin considering leaving school.....	175
Teacher/student relationships.....	176
Teacher characteristics.....	176
Administrator support.....	177
Counselor intervention.....	178
Organizational structure of schools.....	178
Transition programs.....	179
Development of intervention plans.....	179
Advice for parents.....	180
Advice for students.....	181
Advice for high schools.....	181
Where Do We Go From Here?	185
References.....	186
APPENDIX A.....	202
APPENDIX B.....	204
APPENDIX C.....	206
APPENDIX D.....	209

APPENDIX E	211
APPENDIX F	214
VITA.....	216

Chapter One: Introduction

One of the most vivid memories of elementary school was walking into the first grade classroom for the first time. I started school when kindergarten was not a pre-requisite, so first grade was an extremely exciting yet scary time, especially the first day. I remembered walking in and seeing twenty-four faces I had never seen before--my new classmates. Even today, I can still see, conspicuously sitting in a corner, a young person with pale blue eyes, ragged clothes, and disheveled blonde hair, a young man with the name of Buddy. Buddy stuck out from the others because he was older as he had been retained, or in his words "failed," in first grade the previous year. While only seven, in Buddy's mind, he was an outcast, a loner, or someone who was just in school simply because he was required to be there. Knowing what I now understand about dropouts, chances were good that no one in Buddy's family had ever talked positively about school or education.

As the year progressed and we settled into the routine of first grade, I remember our teacher assigning students to reading groups. We were so excited to be placed in groups with others learning to read--like the big kids. At that time, the reading books were the Dick and Jane series. I can still see the pictures of Spot running after Jane and Jane running after Dick, and they were all having a great time. However, Dick and Jane did not run at the same pace in all of those reading groups.

Now looking back, it was evident that we were in groups based on how "smart" or economically advantaged we might have been, even though in the small elementary

school there was little difference in the economic conditions of the families. The deciding factor seemed to be those who had parents with jobs that supported their families and then those with parents who did not work and obtained a level of government assistance.

In an effort to target students with different reading levels, educators of the sixties often grouped students based on their reading comprehension skills. It was evident, even to a first grader, that the groups were pretty much the “red birds” or high fliers, the “blue birds” or those average students, and the “buzzard” group or the ones who had little chance of success. The latter group of students was not given the opportunity to be involved with regular activities and mostly sat in the corner with a worksheet while being quiet unless they had to go to the restroom. Buddy was in the Buzzard group. He was always the last to complete assignments, the first to find ways to get out of the classroom, and always, as I later learned, at the top of the proverbial “at-risk” chart.

It is now evident as I look back that the teachers only called on Buddy when it was absolutely necessary. When they called on him to read a passage in our round-robin reading time, we all tried to help by whispering the words to him. It seemed that for a sentence of five or six words he would take two minutes to read it. As you can imagine, Buddy had few opportunities to read and that did not seem to bother him. Throughout our school experience, he just tagged along as we went from one grade to the next. In his words, “I’ve been failed too many times for them to hold me back any more.”

As the school I attended only went through 8th grade, graduation was a big event and the last time I saw Buddy. The rest of us went to the high school the next year but he did not show up. He was not in any of the classes, did not have a student number or

locker, or a homeroom class. Sadly, no one seemed to care. In 1974, a lost child or one left behind in the world of education was not perceived to be a problem, at least one the school had to address.

At that time, there were many ‘Buddys’ around our county and many jobs were available for those with a rudimentary education. High school diplomas were for those who wanted to go to college. Buddy got one of those low level, dead end jobs (a job with no benefits, usually part-time and seasonal with pay at below minimum wage). He is still there barely making ends meet with a large family and no possible way to advance. His family was the perfect example of generational poverty and the rigidity of its grip.

Purpose of the Study

The ‘Buddys’ of Western North Carolina were the main reason I wanted to review the influences involved in students’ decisions to drop out and what could be done to prevent these students from leaving school early. Given the high tech world we live in and the related skills required to be successful, the need to graduate from high school is more important now than ever because students who drop out of high school without a diploma limit themselves economically, academically and socially (Morse, Anderson, Christenson, & Lehr, 2004).

This research examined some of the socio-cultural influences that contributed to students leaving high school before graduating. For too long educators focused on immediate reasons supplied by students on exit surveys to describe why students left school, but I believed the influences went much deeper and began much earlier than what these exit surveys revealed. I believed influences early in a student’s school career or family life contributed to him or her becoming a dropout. This research helped to better

understand students who might be at-risk of becoming a future dropout and what solutions could be offered.

Based on my years as an educator and through reviewing the pertinent literature, it became clearer that many early factors influenced future dropouts. Those factors fell into three categories: Family influences, peer and individual influences, and school influences (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008). A better understanding of the influences provided by this study arms educators, parents and legislators with pertinent information to renew the fight for potential dropouts. This understanding encourages the development and implementation of strategies to mitigate the influences promoting dropouts.

Significance of the Study

This study undertook a phenomenological examination of core influences on dropouts who return to GED programs, generating a renewed awareness of what factors impacted at-risk students early in their school career. This study provided educators with an improved understanding of students at risk of school failure and how they might provide interventions that enhanced the chances of these students completing the education needed for a more productive life.

Bridgeland and his colleagues in a study on school dropouts suggested that the early influences on dropouts needed to be further investigated (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Similarly, Hughes and his colleagues found that many adolescents left high school to pursue a GED because they believed it was easier to obtain than a high school diploma (Hughes, Riley, Brown, Moore, Sarrett, & Washington, 2007). It became important that researchers asked these students why they were leaving high school and

inquired about their goals after obtaining a GED. Another study by Hall (2006) discussed the impact nurturing and encouraging teachers had on their students. These teachers had the ability to identify potential dropouts and impact their future. These positive influences at an early age greatly compensated for a negative home environment and helped students to become more engaged in school.

This study also provided new evidence on what influenced students to drop out of school and acts as a catalyst for educators who work especially with high school students, to consider what they can do in a child's educational experience to prevent school dropouts. Positive actions, encouragement, and fostering of relationships instead of negativism can help prevent a student from dropping out of school.

Contributions. This study contributed to the collective information on school dropouts and the importance of changing educator attitudes on at-risk students and improving the intervention programs for these students. It was also my desire to fill the gap in the literature and encourage others to realize there was a need for further research concerning school dropouts.

Additional contributions of this study were to encourage more positive teacher-student interaction and to increase teacher expectations. The hope was that information from this study would prevent educators from labeling students and help them to see that all students have potential. It was my intent that educational pedagogy could be impacted, the significance of influences on students could be better understood, and that educators working with students would better realize how traumatic events can increase the chances of a student dropping out. This study provided advice and strategies for educators, promoted the importance of building relationships with students, and helped

all citizens, especially lawmakers, understand the significance of education on the overall well-being of our country.

Knowledge added to subject. This study contributed knowledge that could help educators understand the nature of the dropout problem. The study revealed the family influences, peer and individual influences, and school influences that led to students dropping out of school and provided strategies on how to mitigate some of the negative influences (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Janosz et al., 2008).

Educational practice impact. The results of this study provided insight into developing programs that could influence potential dropouts throughout their educational career in ways that will encourage them to reach graduation. The study provided perspectives on creating a more student-centered pedagogy that is focused on relationships and real life experiences.

Statement of the Problem

The reasons for students dropping out are as varied as the students. There is no one reason or primary categories of reasons for students dropping out, but rather key influences that put students on the road to being a dropout. Each student represented an individual story. Since the beginning of compulsory attendance laws in the 1870s, dropouts have been an issue (Kortering & Braziel, 2008).

Even many of the nation's most knowledgeable educational authorities cannot agree on a definition of a dropout, much less a formula to calculate dropout numbers, but most professionals define a dropout as:

A student who attends at least one day of school during the regular school year, and then discontinues for any reason other than death. Students who transfer to another school are not to be included as dropouts. This includes transfer to alternative schools. Students who graduate, receive a certificate of completion, or attend to the legal age of 21 are not considered dropouts. (Kortering & Braziel, 2008, p. 65).

A quick look at high schools across America gives educators a snapshot of how schools are performing and their struggle with the students who have not received a high school diploma. Yerhot (2012), in his report *High Schools in the United States*, provided the following statistics:

- Number of students in the graduating class of 2011: 2,993,120;
- Among all public high school students in the Class of 2011, the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate was 76.2 %; (Cohort graduation rate is the percentage of graduates who started as ninth graders and received their high school diploma in no more than four years);
- The annual dropout rate declined from 12 % in 1990 to 7 % in 2010 (this calculation did not include students who transferred to a GED or adult high school diploma program); and
- Seventy percent of male students earned a diploma in 2009, compared with 76% of female students in the same year.

These statistics revealed that the issue of school dropout is improving, yet far too many students chose not to receive a diploma in a world where education is vital. Young adults need more education than their predecessors or they would encounter hardships

and would realize the handicap a lack of education could cause (Finn, 1989; Kortering, Konold, & Glutting, 1998). The statistics for students with a disability are cause for even more concern. The *2008 Annual Report of the Office of Special Education* put the overall high school completion rate between 57% and 59% for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and Other Health Impaired (OHI), and placed those struggling with Behavior or Emotional Disabilities (BED) at a completion rate of 35% (Kortering et al., 1998).

Stillwell and Sable (2013) stated the following on dropouts in general:

Across the United States, a total of 514,238 public school students dropped out of grades 9-12, resulting in a calculated overall event dropout rate of 3.4% in 2009-10. New Hampshire and Idaho had the lowest annual event dropout rates at 1.2 and 1.4%, respectively, while Mississippi and Arizona had the highest at 7.4 and 7.8%, respectively. The median state dropout rate was 3.4%. Across the United States, the calculated dropout rates increased as grade-level increased. The lowest dropout rate was for grade 9 (2.6%) while the highest grade-level dropout rate was for grade 12 (5.1%). Across the United States the dropout rate was higher for males than for females at 3.8% and 2.9%, respectively. The male-female gap ranged from lows of 0.2 percentage points in Idaho to highs of 1.7 in Connecticut and Rhode Island. (p. 4)

In most states, the dropout rate for African Americans, Hispanics, economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, and Limited English Proficient students is substantially higher (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, Fox, & Hornig, 2013). On the opposite side, over three million students graduated from America's high schools in 2010. The

national average state cohort graduation rate (the rate at which students who start in ninth grade, graduate from high school in four years) in 2010 was 79% (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). The rate ranged from a low in Nevada at 58% to a high in Vermont at 91%. When figuring in General Education Development (GED) completions, the national graduation rate has remained near 85% since 1972 (Kortering et al., 1998).

The 15% of high school students who did not graduate represent a portion of the potential lost economic and productivity capacity for the country. Based on current trends, there will not be enough low paying minimum wage jobs to sustain this increasing population throughout their lives. If they are not involved as a part of an economic development system, the vast majority of these non-finishers will end up in some social system, not all of which are positive and contributory to society (Stillwell & Sable, 2013).

The overall national graduation rate in 2010 was 75% , the highest rate since 1970, Furthermore the data confirmed a 2% higher rate than in 2009 and an 8% higher rate than the previous decade (Sparks, 2013a). This improvement pace placed America on track for a 90% graduation rate by 2020, but this goal cannot be achieved unless former dropouts return to complete the graduation requirements and acquire their diploma (Sparks, 2013a). Also, from 2002 to 2011 there were 532 fewer schools classified by the federal government as dropout factories (a high school where twelfth grade enrollment is 60 percent or less of ninth grade enrollment three years earlier). One of the key factors in attaining this accomplishment was a reduction of students attending these ineffective schools (Balfanz et al., 2013). The cohort graduation rate increase was a result of a variety of methods implemented to improve education, primarily building

relationships with students, developing clear connections between students and schools, and focusing on students' interests and needs (Balfanz et al., 2013). Other beneficial recommendations on preventing dropouts included:

- Making students the main priority within the school;
- Community support;
- Partnerships with businesses, colleges, community groups and faith communities;
- Students being prepared to pursue post-secondary study and careers;
- Staff serving as advocates and mentors for at-risk students;
- Technology being used to identify and support at-risk students;
- Schools proactively identifying at-risk students; and
- Schools monitoring student progress and offering alternatives for course credit and graduation (Baker & Bell, 2013).

Even though the national graduation rate is improving, a detrimental epidemic remains in our country: too many young men and women leave high school without a diploma. Roughly, 1.2 million students drop out of high school or do not graduate each year, translating into 7,000 each school day (Sweeten, Bushway, & Paternoster, 2009). Presently, Americans face an economic downturn that cannot accommodate dropouts within the workforce. Nearly two million struggling students are beginning to whirl down the unfavorable pipeline away from graduation, in turn, igniting a renewed interest in dropouts because there is no place for them in a contemporary job world (Sparks, 2013c).

As Terry (2008) stated in her research study, “there is little in the research

literature that records the story of dropping out from the retrospective of students who have taken this journey and are now seeking a second chance to improve their academic skills” (p. 25). This research strives to tell the stories of a sample of these students and use the stories to encourage educators to take seriously the task of preventing potential dropouts.

The following questions guided and structured the research:

1. What are the primary influences affecting a young person’s decision to leave school before receiving a diploma?
 - a. What are the family, peer and individual, and school influences that impact his or her decision?
 - b. What staff actions and school rules contributed to the decision to leave school?
 - c. Are there actions by peers that influence the decision to drop out?
2. At what point in a student’s life does he or she begin to consider dropping out of school?
3. What can individual students do to better position themselves to graduate from high school?
4. What motivates students to return to a formal educational setting to try and secure a GED?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

This dissertation first reviewed the research that attempted to explain why students leave high school without a diploma. It was virtually impossible to determine any single factor leading a student to leaving school since research indicates many factors

lead young people to make this decision. Countless theories have been proposed to understand why students drop out of school; many of which were socio-economic factors (e.g., Finn, 1989; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Other theories related dropping out of school to student achievement (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Ogbu, 1992).

Drawing on these sets of theories, I used the conceptual frameworks provided by Rumberger (2001) that focused on two different perspectives for understanding the reasons students drop out of school. The first framework was based on an individual perspective focusing on the qualities of students, such as their values, attitudes, and behaviors, and how these qualities impacted their decision to leave school. This conceptual framework viewed the attitudes and behaviors of students through student engagement. Theories have been developed that suggest dropping out of school was only the last stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement (Newmann et al., 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989) or withdrawal (Finn, 1989) from school. Even though differences existed among these theories, each suggested there were two aspects to engagement: academic engagement and social engagement. Engagement was demonstrated in students' attitudes and behaviors with respect to the formal aspects of school (e.g., classrooms and school activities) and also the informal ones (e.g., peer and adult relationships). Each engagement factor influenced a student's decision to drop out of school (Rumberger, 2001). This framework implied that dropping out of school represents one aspect of three inter-connected dimensions of educational achievement: (1) academic achievement (reflected in grades and test scores); (2) educational stability (reflected by students remaining in the same school); and (3) educational attainment

(reflected by years of schooling completed and the completion of a diploma). The framework implied that educational stability and academic achievement influenced educational achievement (Rumberger, 2001).

This framework also suggested educational achievement was influenced by a student's background prior to entering school, including his or her educational goals and previous accomplishments before entering school. Lastly, the framework implied joint relationships among these factors that changed over time, affecting later attitudes, peer/staff relationships, and school experiences (Rumberger, 2001).

Many research projects, based on long-term studies of cohorts of students, have reviewed the predictors of dropping out from as early as first grade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Ensminger & Slusacick, 1992; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997; Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991; Roderick, 1993). These studies revealed that early academic achievement and engagement (e.g., attendance, misbehavior) in elementary and middle school predicted eventual withdrawal from high school (Rumberger, 2001).

As an example, Roderick (1993) examined the school transcript data for one cohort of seventh grade students in the 1980s from a small urban Massachusetts school. Academic grades, social acceptance, and attendance from the fourth grade until students left school were reviewed. The data disclosed that future dropouts showed a pattern of deteriorating grades at fourth grade which continued to deteriorate, along with friendships and attendance, until eventually dropping out (Rumberger, 2001).

While the first framework assisted in understanding dropping out of school from an individual perspective, personal attitudes and behaviors were impacted by the

institutional settings where individuals lived. This framework was used in 1993 by a National Research Council Panel on High-Risk Youth, who argued that “high risk” youth and their families have been emphasized too much and not enough emphasis had been placed on the environments in which they lived and went to school (National Research Council, Panel on High-Risk Youth, 1993).

Observations on dropouts have identified factors within a student’s family, school, community and peer groups that predicted dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2001). A student’s background was considered by many as the single most important factor to success in school. Although early work by Coleman, Jencks, and others suggested that by itself a student’s family background could explain most educational outcomes (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, & York, 1966; Jencks, Smith, Bane, Cohen, Gintis, Heyns, & Michelson, 1972), more current research has found that schools can negate the influence from many family factors (Rumberger, 2001). Yet in most research on school achievement family factors still have a powerful influence.

The structural characteristics of families, such as socioeconomic status and family structure, have been the focus of most research on dropouts. This research has regularly found that socioeconomic status, usually measured by the educational status of parents and income, was a strong predictor of school achievement and becoming a dropout (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; McNeal, 1999; Pong & Ju, 2000; Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). The research also revealed that students from single parent and stepfamilies had a greater likelihood of dropping out of school than students from two-parent families (Astone & McLanahan,

1991; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; McNeal, 1999; Rumberger, 1983; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996).

Four kinds of school characteristics have proven to influence student performance: (1) student composition, (2) resources, (3) structural characteristics, and (4) policies and practices (Rumberger, 2001). Student composition influenced student achievement and social interaction (Gamoran, 1992). Many studies revealed that the composition of schools predicted school dropout rates even after the effects of student background are controlled (Bryk & Thum, 1989; McNeal, 1997b; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000).

Some studies suggested that school resources can influence school dropout rates. Two studies revealed that a large student/teacher ratio had a positive and significant effect on high school dropout rates (McNeal, 1997; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Rumberger and Thomas (2000) also found that when students perceived teachers as being of high quality, the dropout rate was lower, while when principals perceived the high quality of teachers, the dropout rate was higher.

School structure (e.g., size, location) and the type of control (public, private); contribute to school performance and dropout behaviors (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Even though student achievement differences have been seen within schools based on school structure, it still remains uncertain whether structural characteristics alone account for these differences or whether student characteristics and school resources created the differences (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Evans & Schwab, 1995; McNeal, 1997; Rumberger & Thomas,

2000; Sander & Krautman, 1995). Studies have found that student dropout rates in private schools were not statistically different than dropout rates in public schools when all other factors are controlled (Lee & Burkam, 1992; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). School size also influenced dropout rates both directly (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000) and indirectly (Bryk & Thum, 1989), although the greatest direct effect appeared to be found in high poverty schools (Rumberger, 1995). Studies suggest that smaller schools are more likely to engage both students and staff in the educational process (Wehlage et al., 1989).

School policies and practices played a role in improving school performance or promoting dropouts. When academic and social climate was measured by attendance rates, advanced courses taken, and student perceptions of a fair discipline policy, school dropout rates can be predicted (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Research on school dropouts suggested that schools affect student withdrawal through general policies and practices that were designed to promote the effectiveness of the school and through policies and decisions that encouraged students to involuntarily withdraw from school. These rules encouraged low grades, poor attendance, misbehavior, or retentions that led to suspensions, expulsions, or school mobility. This type of student withdrawal was school-initiated and demonstrated how schools contributed to students' involuntary withdrawal from school by systematically excluding and suspending "troublemakers" and other problematic students (Bowditch, 1993; Fine, 1991; Riehl, 1999).

Along with families and schools, communities and peer groups influenced students' decision to drop out of school. Some research that implied neighborhood

characteristics helped explain differences in dropout rates among communities, with the highest dropout rates being concentrated in the poorest-quality neighborhoods (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Clark, 1992; Crane, 1991). Negative peer influences also increased a student's likelihood of becoming a dropout (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Wilson, 1987). Lastly, students living in poor neighborhoods may also have been more likely to have friends who drop out of school, which increases their possibility of becoming a dropout (Carbonaro, 1998).

Research has indicated that employment opportunities for students impacted dropout rates in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Favorable employment opportunities for high school students appeared to increase the possibility that students will become employed and eventually drop out. At the same time, a better economy encouraged students to graduate due to salaries of high school graduates being higher than those of dropouts, which tended to lower dropout rates (Bickel & Papagiannis, 1988; Clark, 1992; Rumberger, 1983). Research has also shown that working long hours in high school increased the possibility of dropping out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Seltzer, 1994), although the impact of working in high school depended on the type of job held, the number of hours worked and the student's gender (McNeal, 1997).

The conceptual framework is illustrated in Table 1 as follows:

Table One

Conceptual Framework Based on Rumberger's (2001) Model of School Dropouts

Factors that Influence Decisions to Drop Out	Explanation/Description
Individual Factors	These are factors over which the student has some element of control, from modest to significant
Student Qualities	The characteristics of a student that reveals who they are as a person.
Values	Expressions of those feelings toward school that will help propel the student towards staying or leaving school before graduation
Attitudes	Expressions of schooling elements that shape positive or negative feelings and behaviors.
Behavior	Outward manifestations of values and attitudes.
Engagement	The degree to which the individual is attentive and participative in an activity or event.
Academic	The ability of a student to perform in an academic setting that is manifested by student grades and test scores.
Social	A student's participation in a social group or activity.
Institutional Factors	These are factors over which the student has no or limited control, imposed on them by the school or other institution.
Family	Family influences on students are not only powerful but life changing. Many times the students are unaware of these influences.
Background	A student's background is a powerful factor in dropout behavior. Family members who were dropouts, parent education, school mobility, and low school aspirations contribute a student's dropping out of school.
Support for Attainment	The desire of parents to support their children in school which is manifested through attending school conferences, encouraging the completion of homework, advocating for their children, and showing up to school when there is a problem.
Socio-Economics	These are factors beyond the control of the student that places him/or in a disadvantaged

	Family Structure	situation. Factors that a student has no control over such as single parent homes, fatherless homes and stepparent homes.
School		These are influences that are imposed on students from kindergarten enrollment until they time the exit the school experience.
	Student Composition	The socio-economic, racial, and cultural composition of a school.
	School Resources	The funding level of a school.
	Structural Characteristics	The organization of a school based on grade configuration, academic program and vocational offerings.
	Policies and Practices	Rules and practices governing student discipline, attendance and grade retention.
Employability		Individual qualities that enhances a person's chances of getting a job.

Definition of Terms

The definitions section defines the terms discussed in the study. These terms were defined to give readers a common understanding of this study.

1. Dropout - A student who attends at least one day of school during the regular school year and then discontinues for any reason other than death. Students who transfer to another school are not to be included as dropouts. This includes transfer to alternative schools. Students who graduate, receive a certificate of completion, or attend to the legal age of 21 are not considered dropouts (Kortering & Braziel, 2008).
2. Dropout Prevention – the utilization of data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify and support individual students at high risk of dropping out (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

3. GED – Beginning in November 1942 in the response to the United States Navy’s desire to help veterans show their knowledge in high school subjects, the General Educational Development (GED) tests are a group of five subject tests to determine proficiency in science, mathematics, social studies, reading, and writing which, when passed, certify that the test taker has American high school-level academic skills. Receiving a passing score on the GED test gives individuals the opportunity to earn their high school equivalency credential. The GED Testing Service is the sole developer for the GED test and is now a joint venture of the American Council on Education and Pearson Publishing. The GED is computerized but must be taken in person at a designated testing site. Most states award a Certificate of High School Equivalency or similarly titled credential to individuals who pass the GED. The GED has been revised five times (GED Testing Service, 2010).
4. GPA – Grade Point Average is the statistical average of grades during a specific marking period. The GPA is calculated by taking the number of grade points earned by a student in a given marking period divided by the total number of credits taken.
5. Cohort Graduation Rate - the rate at which students who start in ninth grade, graduate from high school in four years (NC Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2012).
6. Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate - the rate at which students who start in ninth grade, graduate from high school in five years (NCDPI, 2012).

7. Low Achievers – a student who does not do as well as expected by educators on accountability measures.
8. School Engagement – the student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote (National Research Council, 2003).
9. Resiliency – a quality among students who are able to succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003).
10. Dropout factories - a high school where twelfth grade enrollment is 60 percent or less of ninth grade enrollment three years earlier (Balfanz et al., 2013).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Defining dropouts was difficult, but it was even more complicated to discern the influences behind students' decision to drop out of school. However, fifty years of research uncovered some of the primary factors that determine whether a student will graduate with his or her class. These factors were placed into the following categories: family influences, peer and individual influences, and school influences (Janosz et al., 2008).

The need to prevent dropouts and the influences causing them became more critical in April of 2008 when then-Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, required states to follow a single school dropout formula. This new formula, which calculates the percentage of students who start in ninth grade and then graduate from high school in four years, affected every high school in the country. Before this change, graduation rates in many states were based on the percentage of seniors starting their senior year and then graduating at the end of the school year. This new national standard ushered in by the No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation relied on longitudinal cohort analyses rather than yearly dropout rates. North Carolina, in particular, saw its graduation rate plummet from 95% to 68% using the new formula. With the revised system of calculating dropouts, students who leave public school and enroll in GED or adult high school diploma programs were counted as dropouts, which was not the case in the past. Also, the new formula calculated graduation rates by determining the percentage of freshmen

who complete high school in four years. Researchers using this formula found that the new formula revealed an estimated dropout rate of well over 30% for the nation (Dillion, 2008).

Family Influences

Researchers have found that the family exerts a great deal of influence on students and often exacerbates dropout behavior especially for eleventh and twelfth grade dropouts (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Since parents are their child's first teachers, they rank a close second to classroom teachers in influencing their child's decision about school completion (Terry, 2008). A study of family influences and dropouts found that students who came from single parents homes, homes where parents had poor relations with the school, and homes where there was a lack of parent involvement were more likely to drop out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Additional family influences included poverty, the lack of a father's presence, and family structure (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

Poverty. Many real-world issues, like generational and single parent poverty, usually due to teen-age pregnancy, often lead students toward becoming dropouts. In homes impacted by generational poverty, older children often leave school to become a wage earner or care for younger siblings (Bridgeland et al., 2006). A large number of students living in poverty also drop out of school because they become parents themselves and cannot balance this new responsibility with school.

Teens living in poverty or single parent households struggle to complete high school and see dropping out as their only option (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Studies from the 1990s indicated that almost 50% of single parents with teenagers lived below the

poverty level while 37% of all dropouts came from families living in or near poverty (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). More recent studies have revealed that in fact, these students are four times more likely to be living below the poverty line than are peers who graduate (Sum, Khtiwade, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2009).

Most family members in generational poverty have a challenging time breaking the poverty cycle. Poverty's grip can continue from generation to generation. Many times these families also see their children as their most precious possession and see education as a threat. Families gripped by generational poverty fear that if their children get an education, they will never come home. Parents in these homes may think that children will see how the world is outside their home and they will be gone forever. Payne (1998) cited this issue as the main reason these parents in his study discouraged their children from getting an education. Another aspect of generational poverty involves families headed by single parent female dropouts. For instance, Sum et al. (2009) found that young female dropouts gripped by generational poverty were nine times more likely to become a mother than peers with a diploma. Payne (1998) found that without education and positive relationships with individuals outside the circle of poverty, these young women were seldom-able break free of the shackles of this poverty.

Historically, the median income of families led by females working full time has been less than half that of the family led by a father and mother (Blankenhorn, 1995). Where the single head of household was female, they often lacked a male partner's income. Moreover, they were also more apt to be in poverty because women make less than men (Payne, 1998), a fact that remains true today. Payne's research revealed that "a

woman must have two educational levels above a male to even make the same salary” (Payne, 1998, p. 151).

Prior studies have indicated that several adverse outcomes for students living in poverty include poorer health (Luthar, 1999), school failure or ostracization (Davies, 2004; Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997), inadequate transportation, inadequate housing, and a host of social, emotional, and behavior problems (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994). These outcomes also impact not only students but also their entire family.

A 2012 study of the US Census data revealed that over 46.5 million Americans, including many school-age students, lived in poverty (Brenneman, 2013). These students were much more likely to drop out than peers from middle class or wealthy families (Brenneman, 2013). Even when researchers controlled for a number of factors other than poverty, students from lower classes were twice as likely to drop out of school (Brenneman, 2013). In fact, one survey revealed youth in low-income families were twice as likely to drop out as youth in middle class and five times more likely than those living in wealth (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Aside from limited income, these families tended to have less time to tend to their child. Similarly, students who left school before graduation also reported that their parents provided little supervision and took very little responsibility for them (Britt, 2005).

Fatherless homes. In previous studies, fatherless homes contributed to many students dropping out of school. Homes without fathers lack a male influence.

Blackenhorn (1995) stated that

The most important moral and legal rule concerning the physiological side of kinship is that no child should be brought into the world without a man, and one

man at that, assuming the role of sociological father, that is of guardian and protector, the male link between the child and the community. The father, in other words, is necessary for the full legal status of the family. (p. 49)

The father impacts the family, which in turn impacts the community and the entire society. Similarly, Biller (1994) stated "there are data indicating the quality of the father-son relationship is a more important influence on a boy's masculine development than the amount of time the father spends at home" (p. 90). The father's influence by spending time with his children cannot be replaced.

Lamb (2004) noted how history revealed that the father is a vitally necessary role model. A child who feels rejected by this role model tends to become more hostile and suspicious of others in his or her life. This inadequate father-child relationship has many detrimental effects on the child, manifested by such conditions as personality development, aggressive behavior, and less independence (Lamb, 2004). A study by the Educational Testing Service revealed that many of the low scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) had nothing to do with school but a lot to do with the home (Lamb, 2004). Using factors that a child could not control, this study revealed that those raised in single-parent homes faced incredible odds for doing well on the SAT. These factors included less time for parents to give to the child, less time being read to as a young child, more time in front of the TV, and less income (Winerip, 2007).

Fatherhood provides privileges to children. Without fathers, families do not have privileges such as:

- Physical protection;
- Money and material resources;

- Paternal and cultural transmission; and
- Day-to-day nurturing [e.g., feeding, active play, and storytelling]

(Blankenhorn, 1995).

Many anthropologists viewed the rise of fatherhood in the past as the key to the emergence of the human family and ultimately human civilization (Blankenhorn, 1995). Prior research has indicated that without the father's influence, children, especially boys, became more violent (Blankenhorn, 1995). In fact, violence is a chief byproduct of fatherlessness. According to a study by the Progressive Policy Institute, the link between crime and fatherless families is so strong that a father's presence in the family helps to diminish the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime, and "this conclusion shows up time and time again throughout the literature" (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 30).

Fatherlessness also dramatically impacts achievement in school. Winerip (2007) found that children from fatherless homes were much more likely to be lower achievers than peers from two parent families. Even children from single parent homes with high income tended to be low achievers. In Winerip's study, at least one third of children experiencing a parental separation demonstrated a significant decline in academic performance that persisted at least three years. Similarly, Winerip found that dropout rates were dramatically impacted by fatherlessness. Students from single parent households were 1.7 times more likely to drop out than were their peers living with both biological parents (Winerip, 2007).

Another aspect of the fatherless home is its association with premature parental roles. Ken Anderson, in his book *Broken Homes, Broken Hearts*, stated that

in a study of 700 adolescents, researchers found that compared to families with two natural parents living in the home, adolescents from single parent families have been found to engage in greater and earlier sexual activity and drop out of school at a higher rate. (Probe Ministries, 1994, p. 76)

Similarly, children from fatherless homes are much more likely to produce a home without a father (Terry, 2008). Moore (1999) stated that

Boys who grow up in a predominantly feminine environment risk low self-esteem, excessive and unhealthy dependence on females, and emotional immaturity. This immaturity leads to fathers who are less responsible and more violent, and more likely to end up in prison. (p. 1)

Additionally, prior studies have indicated that domestic violence along with child abuse also seemed to increase with fatherlessness (Blankenhorn, 1995). Moreover, fatherlessness contributes to the decline of character and confidence in children. Amneus (1990) stated that

Young men who grow up in homes without fathers are twice as likely to end up in jail as those who come from traditional two-parent families...those boys whose fathers were absent from the household had double the odds of being incarcerated--even when other factors such as race, income, parent education and urban residence were held constant. (p. 15)

Clearly, the absence of father figures in students' lives leads to many negative consequences. In summary, Blackenhorn (1995) stated that

The most urgent domestic challenge facing the United States, at the close of the 20th Century, is the recreation of fatherhood as a vital social role for men. The

stake is nothing less than the success of the American experiment, for unless the trend of fatherlessness is reversed, no other set of accomplishments; not economic growth, or prison construction, or welfare reform, or better schools will succeed in arresting the decline of child's wellbeing and the spread of male violence. To tolerate the trend of fatherlessness is to accept the inevitability of continued societal recession. (p. 222)

The evidence is clear that children raised in fatherless homes are more prone to deviant behavior, more likely to be incarcerated, have a greater likelihood to have their marriage end in divorce, and leave school without graduating.

Family dispositions. Family disposition is another family influence that has a substantial impact on students dropping out, especially when the structure is characterized by abuse or neglect. In a Philadelphia study, Balfanz and Herzog (2005) concluded that students who had a substantiated case of abuse or neglect during high school dropped out of school at a higher rate than their peers. When a foster placement or being a teen mother was added as a factor, over 70% dropped out of school. On the other hand, parents who had been involved in their child's education dramatically enhanced the probability for their child to graduate. This same study revealed that family involvement in learning was the single most important determination of school completion for at-risk students.

Family mobility also challenges a student's high school completion. Balfanz and Herzog (2005) found that students who moved from school to school had a more difficult time graduating unless those transitions brought them to a school that was better equipped to meet their needs. Many times school-initiated transfers place our most at-

risk students in a less-than-an ideal educational environment. Many of those environments are alternative programs that offer little or no academic support for struggling learners (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Similarly, Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that students from any single-parent family, as well as stepfamilies, are more likely to drop out of school. Many of these families had a high level of stress, which often led to problems such as substance abuse, family conflict, family financial difficulties and health problems (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Researchers found that many of these family issues added additional stress and influence a child's decisions regarding school. As a countermeasure the more consistent, stable relationships that students had with significant and caring adults, especially family members, were major factors in determining their success or failure in school (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998). The literature was consistent in revealing that positive, supportive relationships with adults, not necessarily with a parent, improved positive student outcomes (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004).

Researchers have also found that the educational background of parents also affected school completion (Terry, 2008). There was a positive correlation between a parent's educational attainment, attitude about their school experience, satisfaction with school, and their child's completion of high school. Sadly, most dropouts had parents who were dropouts (Terry, 2008). Also, parents, especially mothers who do not have a high school diploma, significantly affected the literacy level of their children (Terry, 2008) and a student whose father was a dropout was 1.4 times as likely to also be a dropout as a student whose father completed high school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

Their home environments can still overwhelm students from disadvantaged backgrounds, even if they have strong, supportive relationships with school staff (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Students whose families monitor them stand a greater chance of graduating than dropping out. On the other hand, a lack of supervision and permissive parenting styles have been linked to higher rates of dropouts (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004; Rosenthal, 1998).

Researchers have also found a substantial difference between the parental relationships of dropouts and non-dropouts. When reviewing that relationship, the parents of non-dropouts were more involved during the middle school and early adolescent years (Englund, Egeland & Collins, 2008). This involvement assisted students in having higher social competence and academic success (Englund et al., 2008).

Prior studies have indicated that parents' attitudes and expectations along with their belief in education, greatly affected their children's success in school (Englund et al., 2008). The conclusion from a 1992 study by the Steering Group on Prosperity was that parental attitudes toward education were more influential than parent or sibling educational attainment or family socio-economic levels in determining a student's potential to become a dropout, even though having an older sibling who dropped out of school heightens the risk of dropping out (Terry, 2008). In short, parents who support and value education tended to have children who graduated from high school (Terry, 2008).

Parental actions are also important to children as they considered dropping out of school. Many parents through their actions demonstrate that it is acceptable to be a

dropout. These educational expectations and values play an important part in encouraging or discouraging a child to finish high school (Boster & Strom, 2007).

Similarly, Boster and Strom (2007) found that parents who use supportive communication negate some of the daily challenges, stressors, and disappointments experienced by their children and can prevent them from becoming the major stressors that produce dropouts. Parents who monitored behavior and homework, had contact with the child's teachers, and demonstrated an overall concern about their child's education were much more likely to have children who graduated. In other words, parental academic support, supervision, and parent/child interactions associated with the parent's view of schooling were directly related to the rate at which students left school (Boster & Strom, 2007).

In contrast, Hallinan (2008) found that many teenagers in permissive home environments dropped out because they perceived they had too much freedom and that no one was supervising their study habits and behaviors to ensure that they stayed focused and on the path to graduation. While educators can help offset this influence, the importance of parental involvement in teens' lives cannot be deemphasized and teens' self-perception has been found to have a considerable influence on their future decisions (Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004). Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that while some parents were willing to allow their children to drop out of high school, others were not aware of their children's plans to leave school or any problems they may have had prior to dropping out. Schools need parents' help to combat the high school dropout problem as parents have tremendous influence on their children's actions and their expectations shape their children's view of the importance of education. In many unfortunate

situations, researchers found that educators actually encouraged students to drop out rather than providing assistance (Thornburgh, 2006).

Family dispositions can also create protective factors that help to keep a student in school. Morse et al. (2004) found, for instance, that families involved in their child's education provided assistance with homework, a dedicated place to study, and study aids, while monitoring and setting high expectations, greatly enhanced the chances for success (Morse et al., 2004). Parents who cooperated with teachers and provided their children with the message that the home and school were in a cooperative relationship prevented students from being confused about how they should behave, what was expected from them in school and exemplified the value of education (Morse et al., 2004).

Peer and Individual Influences

Peer and individual influences play a major role in a student's decision to continue in school or drop out. These influences include disengagement from school, and the impact of work along with individual characteristics and resiliency.

Peer influences. Previous studies have indicated that students are more likely to drop out of school if their peers feel that school is uninteresting and irrelevant (Terry, 2008). Terry (2008) found that students coped with social stigma and low self-esteem by working to gain approval from friends and associating with a peer group with like behaviors. Terry (2008) also reported that peer influences and relationships were the most influential factor in an adolescent's life. These relationships were an integral part of every student's educational experience but students who had problems getting along with others developed greater risk factors to become a dropout. Peers classified these students as unsuccessful, not concerned about making a positive impression, less focused on

other's needs or welfare, and unable to get along with others; and whose attitudes and behaviors alienated them. This inability to get along with peers and their subsequent alienation often led them to leaving school (Terry, 2008). Not only did this alienation lead to students leaving school, they were also influenced by their disengagement from school.

Impact of disengagement. In previous studies, students reported a lack of motivation, boredom, an unchallenging atmosphere, and an overall lack of engagement in school as reasons for dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). These are factors that schools can change to enhance their holding power on students and engage them in their education (Finn, 2006).

The lack of engagement in school is a gradual process (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999), occurring on a continual basis as students become increasingly disengaged with their school and eventually teachers (Morse et al., 2004). Engagement in school refers to "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" or simply as a relationship (National Research Council, 2003, p. 31).

Available research from the past three decades has indicated that the risk of a student becoming a dropout is closely linked to his or her level of school engagement, which could change over time and could be influenced by the student's environment (Finn, 1989; Janosz et al., 2008; Joselowky, 2007; Sinclair et al., 1998). Christenson and Reschly (2006) found that a student's engagement in school, especially for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and Emotional or Behavioral Disabilities

(EBD), was a significant predictor of school completion. Even though school attendance was compulsory, Archambault and his colleagues posited that being committed to attending school and learning was essential if students were to graduate and be competitive in a global marketplace (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009).

Fine (1987) implied that a common thread in dropouts is a cumulative record of poor school performance, which leads to disengagement and thousands of teenagers dropping out of high school daily in the United States (Matherne & Thomas, 2001). For most students to successfully complete school, they must be engaged in school and the educational process.

In a 2013 project in in the Montgomery County Maryland Public Schools, researchers built an early warning system that identified up to 75% of future dropouts as early as the second semester of the first grade (Sparks, 2013a). This study compared measures of engagement (including grades, attendance and behavior) at four transitions points (spring of first grade, fall of third grade, end of sixth and ninth grade) to predict future dropouts. Using an early warning system they were able to predict dropouts and acknowledged there were other students in need of specially designed interventions (Sparks, 2013a). This study demonstrated that disengagement in school manifests itself in ways other than just poor grades. For example, excessive absenteeism was a direct result of disengagement in the education process. For those students with attendance rates below 80%, 79% eventually dropped out (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

The individual student's attachment or bond to school significantly enhances the odds of graduating from high school. In previous studies, this attachment included having a sense of belonging to a group of peers and having teachers who helped them feel

secure and valued (Croninger & Lee, 2001). A National Educational Longitudinal study of tenth graders revealed that students' social capital was raised if they believed teachers cared about them and that this perception reduced their chances of becoming dropouts by 50% (Croninger & Lee, 2001). A feeling of belonging motivates students to take challenging classes and engage in extra-curricular activities.

Archambault et al. (2009a) suggested that engagement involves two types of activities: mental behaviors and observable actions. A student's ability to pay attention in class, solve problems, and use effective strategies to learn are all included in this category of mental behaviors. Students may also exhibit these behaviors by way of their engagement in school, including class participation, selecting challenging courses, and asking for assistance when needed. This engagement evolves over time for successful students. Students who are engaged in school and participate in school related activities (three or more) are less likely to drop out of school (Janosz et al., 2008). These engaged students have better attendance, better grades and are happier at school (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009). In contrast, disengagement, normally beginning early in a student's educational career, manifests itself in terms of truancy, impoliteness, and an alienation from school (Archambault et al., 2009b; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012).

Engagement in school also includes involvement with peers and teachers in relationships characterized by loyalty and trust. If students feel connected to each other and their teachers, this feeling extends a meaningful connection with the school. Relationships with others are an integral part of students being motivated to stay in school. A study of rural students with disabilities and their peers found that socializing with their peers was reported to be the "best" part of high school (Kortering et al., 1998).

Students affiliated with a peer group that was committed to school activities and achieving good grades were more engaged and likely to graduate from school. The goal therefore is to have students engaged in learning and involved in their school community, not just students who go through the motions of doing school (Marcus, Reio, & Sanders-Reio, 2009; National Research Council, 2003).

Students who become disengaged from school are most at risk of dropping out. With no connections to school, these students have no ties to prevent them from drifting away and dropping out. Prior studies have revealed that these students often developed relationships with other unsuccessful students as they sought attention, comfort, and relief from boredom. Many times these relationships led to gang involvement, premature sexual activity and disengaged peers who also drop out (Terry, 2008).

Researchers have also found that student behaviors associated with setting goals and selecting appropriate careers also affected student engagement. School becomes more relevant to those who understand that their future career depends on their education and sees school as a place of personal development (Kortering et al., 1998).

School faculty and staff can increase student engagement by demonstrating a caring, compassionate attitude toward all students. One study linked extra-curricular participation and having something to do to lower rates of pre-11th grade dropouts, especially among the most at-risk students (Kortering et al., 1998).

Prior studies have indicated that students who spent time in two or more extra-curricular activities and other structured groups along with doing homework, as opposed to working and watching television, had higher grades and test scores (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Valentine, 1999; Graham & Knifsend, 2011). Athletic involvement in school has

almost always been found to have a positive impact on students. This participation (reflected in higher grades, courses selected, homework completed, future aspirations, self-esteem, applying for college, enrollment in college and eventual educational attainment) had a positive effect throughout high school and into the postsecondary world (Cooper et al., 1999; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Similarly, researchers have found that participation in sports, extra-curricular, and structured activities lead to a feeling of school attachment:

Attachment influences students' school success. Secure attachment is associated with higher grades and standardized test scores compared to insecure attachment. Secure attachment is also associated with greater emotional regulation, social competence, and willingness to take on challenges, and with lower levels of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and delinquency, each of which in turn is associated with higher achievement. These effects tend to be stronger for high-risk students. In this era of accountability, enhancing teacher-student relationships is not merely an add-on, but rather is fundamental to raising achievement (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 142).

Joselowsky (2007) offered a framework for improving student engagement in school:

- Engaging students in their own learning by providing them opportunities to select their courses, set goals, ask questions, reflect on what they are learning, be involved in communication and problem-solving skills, and be leaders in the classroom.

- Engaging students in their peers' learning by providing opportunities for cooperative learning and empowering them as mentors, coaches and mediators.
- Engaging students in impacting educational opportunities by providing students opportunities to be responsible for school reform and improvement activities.
- Engaging students in community and civic life through service learning projects, internships, and other community action projects.

The more disengaged a student becomes the more difficult it is for him or her to complete high school. These disengaged students become disinterested in school and usually have a low estimation of their own success.

Impact of work. One of the major influences contributing to students dropping out is working more than 20 hours per week, while working less than 20 hours actually enhances their probability of graduating (Cataldi & Warren, 2006; Lee & Staff, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Intense student work of 20 hours per week or more contributes to a lack of time and interest in schools, unless the burden of work is mitigated by positive, goal-directed motivation.

Unemployment or under-employment is a stark reality for many families in this country. As a result, many high school students work to help support their families. This work often serves as a social identifier and assists them in joining a desired social group and not falling to a lower class status (Ali, Fall, & Hoffman, 2013). Roughly, one out of ten females and three out of ten males, respectively, see employment opportunities as a reason for dropping out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

Individual influences. In addition to peers, disengagement and work, a student's unique characteristics and behaviors influence the decision to drop out of school. For example, high-performing students who drop out often do so because school is not capturing their attention (Bridgeland et.al., 2006; Finn, 1989). These students many times are not engaged by the curriculum offered or are not challenged in the classroom (Bridgeland et.al., 2006). Other factors include students' feelings of hopelessness and despair with their current living situation along with feelings of disenfranchisement and disillusion with school (Finn, 2006). On the other hand, some students find life outside the school doors much more exciting than school and quickly drift away from school (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

These individual characteristics often include students' low expectations of themselves and those around them (Hallinan, 2008). Individuals who drop out are often apathetic because they lack a spark of energy about classes or school in general. Prior research indicated that in many cases, students felt they could perform well in their classes but many school models revealed that these same students saw school as a place of frustration that impacted their self-esteem (Kortering et al., 1998).

The Silent Epidemic, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's comprehensive study on high school dropouts, showed that 70 percent of students who dropped out believed that they were capable of completing the necessary coursework to graduate (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Two-thirds of dropouts reported that they would have worked harder if they simply had been challenged to do so. Many also pointed to a lack of external motivation as the primary reason for their decision to drop out of high school (Gerwertz, 2006) and that they were relieved when they left, especially as their problems

reached a critical threshold and they perceived that leaving school was their only option (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002).

Prior studies have also found that peer influences are an influential factor in an adolescent's life and that resilience affects a student's likelihood of completing high school. Resiliency is defined as a quality manifested by students who succeed in school despite the presence of adverse conditions (Waxman et al., 2003) and are able to effectively negotiate, adapt to, or manage significant sources of stress or trauma. Resiliency offers the assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment that facilitate adaption and an ability to "bounce back" in the face of adversity (Windle, 2011). Most resilient students share the following characteristics:

- Adaptable temperament that tolerates ambiguity;
- Optimistic;
- Logical problem solving;
- Creative problem solvers;
- Positive self-esteem;
- Sense of humor;
- Curious inclination to learn from experience;
- Able to "read" people well;
- Internal locus of control;
- Achievement-oriented attitude (Waxman et al., 2003);
- Positive relationship with an adult other than a parent; and
- Committed to school (Anthony, 2008).

The aforementioned characteristics allow an individual to better navigate the complexities of school and life. In prior studies, resilient students coped with difficult issues, responded appropriately to these issues, and endured to the completion of activities (Reivich & Shatte, 2002; Stoltz, 1999). These students also developed an ability to respond appropriately to negative circumstances and initiated a self-righting mechanism or socially accepted response to problems (Richardson, 2002).

School Influences

Another group of factors affecting school dropout relates to school influences. These influences include policies, push-out and pull out factors, organizational structure, and discipline practices. Research on school influences suggests that they shape student outcomes even more than individual characteristics (Morse et al., 2004). Tuck (2012), in her research on urban youth in New York City, took it a step further by suggesting that school policies, rules, and practices worked illegally to force students out of school; she observed that educators even asked students to leave school and pursue a GED. The composition of a school's student body, school size, and institutional policies greatly impact student achievement, academic engagement and overall student success (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). School characteristics, staff attitude, school environments, school policy, and school organization influence students in multiple ways and heighten the chances of them becoming a dropout (Zvoch, 2006). Goldsmith and Wang (1999) determined that school factors could account for approximately two-thirds of the difference in mean dropout rates. Research also revealed four examples of interventions that school policies could support to help students persist until graduation:

1. Listening to students;

2. Communicating an attitude of caring;
 3. Schools taking an active role in dropout prevention; and
 4. Encouraging students taking an active role in preventing dropouts
- (Knesting, 2008).

Impact of policies. Research has indicated that there is no one reason students become disengaged from school and eventually drop out. However, a review of the available literature shows four policies that enhance student engagement and eventually school completion:

1. Academic policies that encourage educators to foster academic engagement with best instructional practices. For example, students who are engaged in assignments that are moderately challenging and differentiated based on student levels are normally more successful in school. Students also should have options for assignments, opportunities to develop learning goals and the flexibility to choose to do an individual or group assignment (Morse et al., 2004). On the other extreme, Tuck suggests that many school policies show only concern for raising test scores and actually force students out of school (2012).
2. Behavioral policies should be consistent, made available to students, and work to encourage students to complete school. Some examples include a policy that offers alternatives to suspension from school, allowing student participation in extra-curricular activities, and recognition for students' hard work and effort.

3. Cognitive policies should be part of the decision making process at school and involved in determining how to best to provide engaging educational opportunities. When students are involved in making decisions, they are more apt to persist at tasks such as graduating from high school.
4. Psychological policies should support student self-perceptions and demonstrate how their relationships to others affect their success. Students who have a high academic self-concept are more likely to pass classes, have higher GPAs, be engaged in their education and have higher expectations. Also, students who feel that administrators, teachers and staff care about them are more likely to be successful in school (Morse et al., 2004).

Retention is another dropout indicator that has recently received attention. School policies advocating grade retention also affect students' decision to leave school. Retained students often feel alienated from peers due to a difference in age (Terry, 2008). For many years, a large number of students were retained in school annually. Data from National Education Longitudinal Study implied that approximately one in every five eighth graders in 1988 had been retained at least one time since first grade (Rumberger, 1995). With the addition of high school exit examination requirements in many schools, this number will no doubt be on the rise. Nearly all the observed studies to date revealed that retention, even in lower elementary grades, significantly increased the likelihood of dropping out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Grisson & Shepard, 1989; Jimerson, 1999; Kaufman & Bradby, 1992; Roderick, 1994; Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon, & Easton, 2000; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Rumberger (1995) found that students

who were retained in grades 1 to 8 were four times more likely to drop out of school than students who were not retained.

For example, a 2001 report showed that students who repeated a grade were twice as likely to drop out as peers and those who repeated two or more grades were four times more likely to leave (Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). A 1992 survey showed that 90% of 17 year-old African American male dropouts were below their expected grade level in reading and 78% had dropped out in ninth grade. It stands to reason that policies allowing for multiple retentions increase a student's risk of dropping out and Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) suggested that it may be the most powerful predictor for a student potentially dropping out (Alexander et al., 1997; Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Cairns et al., 1989; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Jimerson, Anderson, & Wipple, 2002).

Even though most dropouts feel that school policies had a significant impact on their performance, few educators listen to them as most are considered deviant and unwilling to follow school rules (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Educators tend to pay attention to comments from students who do well in school. Those who are at risk seldom have adults who listen to their concerns. Not having the sense of acceptance encourages many students to leave an unwelcoming environment (Tuck, 2012). Many school policies tend to negate caring and supporting students along with suppressing collaboration between the school and home (Osterman, 2000).

In terms of getting better grades, students point to a lack of policies that support appropriate tutoring and assistance to help them make up missed work or grasp difficult subjects (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Students who drop out tend to have poor grades in core

subjects (especially ninth grade English), low attendance, a lower GPA, grade retentions (especially before high school), low achievement on test scores and disengagement in the classroom which leads to behavioral problems (Bartholomew, Heinrich, Hickman, & Mathwig, 2008; Finn, 1989; Pinkus, 2008; Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007; Jimerson et al., 2002).

It is difficult for students to persist in school when they are not satisfied with their performance, preparedness for future independence, or educational endeavors. This is especially true with students who have a disability, making it more difficult for them to finish high school since most school policies seem to build barriers to these students finishing school (Bear, Kortering, & Braziel, 2006; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002).

Inflexible school policies concerning academic performance and accountability standards often place students well behind their age peers, thus making the decision to leave more attractive than enduring additional years of high school. Therefore, poor academic performance is a prime indicator of dropping out and inflexibility on the part of school administration only makes this situation worse. Research reveals that students reading at a proficient level at the end of third grade are much more likely to be successful in school and graduate (Balfanz et al., 2013). School policies that lead to early academic failure and feelings of disengagement cause students to devalue the importance of grades, which, in turn, significantly impacts their chance of becoming a dropout. It is evident that most dropouts can be identified early on, even as early as the elementary grades (Bear et al., 2006). Studies reveal that differences between high school graduates and dropouts emerge as early as kindergarten. Dropouts exhibited lower kindergarten performance in reading, writing, spelling and math (Bartholomew et al., 2008). As early

as first grade, academic failure becomes evident and the tendency tends to worsen over time, which provides the opportunity for even elementary teachers to identify potential dropouts (Hernnstein & Murray, 1994; McDill, Natriell, & Pallas, 1986).

Few schools have polices encouraging a curriculum that at-risk students find as relevant as real life (Gerwertz, 2006). Gerwertz (2006) also reported that 70% of recent high school dropouts reported that their academic studies were unrelated to the “real world” that they would encounter upon graduation. Another study indicated that the lowest risk of dropping out of school occurred when high school students enrolled in one Career and Technical Education (CTE) class for every two core academic classes (Deluca, Estacion, & Plank, 2008). Students in a non-relevant curriculum find school disengaging and simply “boring.” In prior studies, this disengagement manifested itself through behavioral, psychological and social disengagements, along with a feeling that they will just do as little as possible to get by in school and eventually also in their lives (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009). These potential dropouts were much more likely to get into trouble in school, while also exhibiting poor attitudes toward school, poor academic performance, and poor social skills (Archambault et al., 2009a).

As students move from grade to grade, the signs of their potential for dropping out become more evident. The greatest number of students in any high school class is the ninth grade. This is because the lowest high school promotion rate is historically from ninth to tenth grade and most dropouts do not occur until after the ninth grade (Tuck, 2012). Failure of core academic courses, especially failure of two core courses in ninth grade math or language arts, is a key predictor of a student dropping out. Also, students who failed to be promoted from ninth grade due to polices that require them to pass

English 1 or Algebra 1 demonstrate poor attendance, and low grade point averages (GPA), putting them at an increased risk of dropping out (Therriault, O'Cummings, Heppen, Yerhot, & Scala, 2013).

Many students drop out because they struggle in school. There is strong evidence that students' academic performance in the primary grades sets the stage for future academic success. A history of poor academic performance is a leading factor in a student dropping out and many Americans would consider it the primary reason, although eighty-eight percent of students who drop out have passing grades (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2005).

Overly strict school attendance policies discourage many students from completing school. Many students experience difficulty because they fall behind in their studies due to poor attendance or frequently changing schools (Sinclair et al., 1998). In some cases, these problems stem from students missing classes as early as elementary or middle school. A study on attendance rates in elementary schools revealed that these patterns are highly predictive of school completion (Sinclair et al., 1998).

Chronic absenteeism (missing more than ten days in a school year), grades, and behavior are prime indicators in developing a profile for future dropouts (Sparks, 2013c). In fact, Kennelly and Monrad in a 2007 report from the National High School Center notes the following:

One key study indicated that more than half of sixth graders with the following three criteria eventually left school; they attend school less than 80% of the time, received a low final grade from their teacher in behavior and failed either Math or English. Eighth graders who miss 5 weeks of school and

fail either Math or English have at least a 75% chance of dropping out of school. Retention in middle school and even elementary schools is associated with dropouts. One study with dropouts determined that 64% of students who had repeated a grade in middle school left school without a diploma. (p. 1)

Impact of push and pull-out factors. An understanding of the peer and individual influences on school dropout requires an appreciation of push and pull-out factors. In terms of push out factors, Scanlon and Mellard (2002) describe them as a primary catalyst for dropping out. Tuck's (2012) research revealed that push out factors occur in all type schools, especially in under-resourced schools where educators narrow instruction and employ more severe discipline policies. These factors include situations or experiences within the school environment that heighten students' feelings of alienation and failure, such as:

- Problems getting along with teachers;
- Suspension and expulsion;
- Repeating a grade;
- Insufficient evidence that school staff care;
- Low grades and academic achievement; and
- Disliking school.

In-school and out-of-school peers provide an additional push to leave school if they do not value education, school attendance, grades or extra-curricular activities (Terry, 2008). Not only do peers create push factors but educators do as well. In the past, and even in some schools today, troubled educators may push out problem students that they do not know how to deal with (Thornburgh, 2006).

In terms of pull-out effects, a variety of external factors weaken and distract from the importance of school completion. These external factors include

- Financial responsibilities;
- Pregnancy;
- Caretaking responsibilities;
- Employment (Morse et al., 2004; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002); and
- Drug use with peers (Garnier et al., 1997).

Many students are “pulled” to quit school by peers who devalue education, encourage skipping school and are dropouts themselves (Terry, 2008). Other students are “pulled” out of school because of the need to support their families, either their own children or their parents and siblings (Terry, 2008).

Impact of organizational structure. For many students, the organization of the school encourages dropout behavior rather than providing the nurturing atmosphere they need. For instance, schools continually toy with grade configuration based on financial prudence but seldom consider students’ “feelings” (Zvoch, 2006).

As an example of school organization, the STAR study in Tennessee linked smaller class sizes in grades K to three to higher overall school achievement and an improvement in the participating students’ chances of graduating from high school (Finn et al., 2005). Similarly, Britt (2005) found that former students frequently mentioned the lack of concern on the part of teachers, counselors, and administrators as being a problem. Despite this information, in many unfortunate situations educators actually encouraged students to drop out rather than providing assistance (Thornburgh, 2006).

Teachers who support their students build relationships through positive communication and encouragement, fostering student engagement, student interest, and internal motivation in students. Teachers, particularly core teachers in tested subjects often feel that they are particularly under pressure for test scores when compared to teachers in non-tested subjects. In most high schools, coaches, performing arts teachers, and career and technical education teachers tend to command far more loyalty and affirmation from their students than most core subject area teachers, thus building more positive and enduring relationships (Boster & Strom, 2007). Relationships with school staff are the most salient and influential relationships that many students have during their lifetime and are more easily formed in smaller classes and schools. Relationships between students and teachers in early elementary school have long-term effects on student academic and behavioral outcomes, particularly for negative aspects of these relationships (Anderson et al., 2004). Most research indicates that schools organized into smaller units or classes tend to increase student performance (Anderson et al., 2004; Finn et al., 2005).

Students from schools with low performance, along with high rates of absenteeism and misbehavior, have higher dropout rates. Misbehavior in school interferes with individual learning, decreases the chance of graduating or attending a post-secondary institution, and causes disruption in individual classrooms (Finn, Fish, & Scott, 2008).

Organizational features that contribute to students feeling unsafe at school also affect students dropping out. Students who feel safe in their school environment and whose disciplinary punishments and rewards are similar at home are much more likely to

graduate than those experiencing fear at school, including having concerns about being attacked at school (Brenneman, 2013; Terry, 2008; Tuck, 2012). One previous study reported that students who believed they were victims of bullying or who were mistreated at school from grades 5 to 12 tended to experience less hope and lower levels of school connectedness, which led to overall life dissatisfaction and alienation from school (Kortering & Braziel, 2008).

Impact of disciplinary practices. A school's disciplinary policy has a tremendous impact on school dropout rates. In one study, researchers found that students who perceived a climate at school characterized by fair and consistent discipline policies were more likely to graduate (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). School climate definitely affects a student's decision to stay in school. Successful schools utilize discipline policies that help retain students while facilitating their engagement, focusing on the ninth grade year in high school, providing additional help to students and teachers with meaningful professional development and ensuring academic alignment from one grade to the next. A school where rigorous class work is the norm keeps students engaged thereby enhancing their chances to be a graduate (Morse et al., 2004).

Behavior policies such as zero tolerance long-term suspensions/expulsions and unilaterally having students cited for criminal charges increase the number of student dropouts and of student becoming involved with the court system (Miller, Ross, & Sturgis, 2005; Tuck, 2012). Low behavior marks from middle school teachers are much better than suspensions at predicting which students will eventually drop out. For example, a Philadelphia study revealed that sixth graders with poor behavior, earning an

unsatisfactory final behavior mark, had a one in four chance of making it through to the twelfth grade on time (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005).

Schools that use zero tolerance discipline policies requiring automatic suspension or expulsion and arrest for serious discipline infractions and illegal activity normally impact dropout rates in a negative way (Miller et al., 2005). Policies that increase the likelihood of these punitive consequences also increase the number of students put at risk for dropping out (Miller et al., 2005).

Research does not suggest that school safety or student behavior is improved by using suspension as a method of student discipline (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). A study of one state showed that only 5% of all out-of-school suspensions were for disciplinary incidents considered serious or dangerous (e.g., possession of weapons or drugs). The other 95% were arbitrary suspensions that had significant repercussions in the future especially for middle school students (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Current data revealed that schools with high suspension and expulsion rates have lower student performance measures even after controlling for student demographics. This same data revealed that schools should be as concerned with high suspension rates as they are with poor attendance, low student performance, or low test scores (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

One study reported the comments of a former student who summed it up this way: “Suspension for truancy was like giving candy to a baby, first I skipped and then they kicked me out” (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 266). Similarly, another student in this study commented, “Suspension and expulsion often provide troubled kids exactly what they do not need: an extended, unsupervised hiatus from school that increases their risk

of engaging in substance abuse and violent crime” (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 266).

Available data revealed that students with behavior problems are at a high risk of failure. As previously discussed, behavioral marks from middle school teachers are much better than suspensions at predicting which students will drop out. For these students, negative behavior tends to escalate around 12 or 13 years of age and their commitment to school drops significantly (Archambault et al., 2009b). A study conducted in Philadelphia found that

Sixth graders with poor behavior and earning an unsatisfactory final behavior mark have a one in four chance of making it through to the twelfth grade on time. Poor school performance has been found to impact dropouts starting in the first grade and continuing throughout elementary school and then into high school. (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007, p. 16)

In summary, school influences along with poor academic performance caused by school policy or practice, are the strongest predictors of dropping out for most students. Furthermore, the impact is enhanced when the factors of single-parent families, low annual family income, having been retained at least one time, parents and siblings without a high school diploma, low academic achievement, limited English proficiency, working while enrolled in school, and misbehavior are figured into the formula (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This study investigated what students who drop out of school yet return to pursue a General Education Development (GED) certificate reported as influences that contributed to their leaving high school. The study participants included a sample of students in the GED program at a community college in western North Carolina. The study examined their perceptions of educational experiences, including family influences, peer and individual influences, and school influences that led to them being a high school dropout. The study provided insight into the participants' K-12 educational and life experiences. The purpose of analyzing their experiences was to help educators develop dropout prevention programs that begin early in the student's school career, while providing insight into what educators can do to encourage school completion.

This chapter describes the research design, role of the researcher, and study procedures. Qualitative research methods were utilized to help ensure that the study's findings contributed to a better understanding of school dropouts and help develop new interventions that could be implemented earlier in a student's school career to mitigate against the decision to drop out. The qualitative investigation in this study was designed to explore, explain, and describe the influences that led students to drop out. Consequently, this research provided the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of events, people, and behaviors that influenced dropouts.

Research Design

The research was designed to formulate questions to emphasize the participants' voices and to use these voices to investigate the basic assumptions of the study. These assumptions are the primary factors in determining the recommendations gleaned from this study. The research design included three sections: an overview of the study's framework, research questions, and study assumptions.

Study framework. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the overall understanding of school dropouts. This understanding informed educators as to the nature of the school dropout and provided interventions that would help students to complete school and assist them in overcoming negative family influences, peer and individual influences, and school influences that led to students dropping out of school (Patton, 1990).

Over the years, researchers (see e.g., Chenail, 1995) have justified why qualitative research should be used and have put to rest many of the vehement objections by quantitative purists (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2010). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2010) named major characteristics of traditional qualitative research as “induction, discovery, exploration, theory/ hypothesis generation, the researcher as the primary ‘instrument’ of data collection, and qualitative analysis” (p. 19). They also explained that qualitative research was more responsive to local situations, personal circumstances, conditions, and stakeholders, along with offering the ability to take the words of the participants to explain a certain phenomena (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2010).

Most researchers now agree that qualitative research has been effectively used in anthropology, social science, history, and political science (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Miles and Huberman (1994) also suggested that qualitative research validated previous research, developed the scope of existing research, offered new perspectives, and provide more detail about something that had already been investigated. Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (2006) described qualitative research as humanistic, interactive, naturalistic, emergent, and interpretive. Chenail (1995) noted that the themes of qualitative research are openness, use of data to guide the study, and using data to make the presentation for the researcher. Furthermore, Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested using qualitative research when the research was (a) related to the views and personal experiences of the researcher, (b) in agreement with the nature of the research problem, and (c) used to investigate areas about which little is known. When the researcher wants to understand the participants' life experiences and gain meaning from them, it is best to use the qualitative method (Glesne, 2006).

Because the study's goal was to better understand and gain meaning from the participants' educational and family experiences, phenomenology was an appropriate qualitative methodology. According to Creswell (2009), phenomenological inquiry describes the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for a group of people. The participants in the study have experienced the phenomenon of dropping out of school. This phenomenological application allowed a focus on what the participants experienced during their time in school, while allowing them to express these experiences in their words (Creswell, 2009).

Personal life experiences prepared me to do this research. The experiences as a student, teacher, coach, school administrator, and parent provided the understandings necessary to interact and identify with the participants and understand the collected data,

even though I was never at risk of being a dropout. Growing up in rural western North Carolina, I witnessed a number of students become disengaged with school and ultimately dropping out.

Interview development. When developing the questions to ask participants based on information gleaned from the pertinent literature and personal experiences, it was important to determine how they would sound to the participants. Similarly, it was critical for me to be sensitive to their needs and emphasize the confidentiality of the study, while probing the key influences leading them to leave school and adding to the influences revealed in the literature. Upon reviewing the questions, it was important to take out references such as dropout and other emotionally charged words. I chose to use terms such as “leaving school early” or “before graduation” instead of dropout, believing that it was important to use words that created a positive interview atmosphere. In addition, I informed participants as to the safeguards to ensure the anonymity of the data including the use of alphanumeric coding (e.g., A01) to identify the participants. I ensured that all electronic audio files of the interviews and transcripts were password-protected and encrypted on a laptop computer. Backup files were also stored in a secure cloud-based storage system.

The following general research questions guided the study and provided the structure for the interview protocol:

1. What are the primary influences affecting a young person’s decision to leave school before receiving a diploma?
 - a. What are the family, peer and individual, and school influences that impact his or her decision?

- b. What staff actions and school rules contributed to the decision to leave school?
 - c. Are there actions by peers that influence the decision to drop out?
2. At what point in a student's life does he or she begin to consider dropping out of school?
3. What can individual students do to better position themselves to graduate from high school?
4. What motivates students to return to a formal educational setting to try and secure a GED?

Role of the Researcher

The task of contributing to a greater body of knowledge on the subject of dropouts was massive, and with this task came immense responsibilities. As a researcher, I was eager to assume these responsibilities. The role of the researcher section included three sections: researcher bias, ethical consideration, and assumptions.

As a foundation for qualitative research, Creswell (2009) suggested that a qualitative study requires an in-depth experience with participants. He also commented that researchers should do the following: (a) help the audience better understand the participant's perspective by gathering background information through statements about past experiences, (b) explain connections between the researcher and participants along with the site being used, (c) obtain permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), (d) connect with the individuals of the site to work out the details of using the site, and (e) consider sensitive ethical issues that might arise. Following these strategies provided for a richer set of data and a more positive experience for the participants.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) also discussed theoretical sensitivity as a personal quality of the qualitative researcher. This sensitivity referred to the ability to have insight, give meaning to data, and retain the capacity to understand the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Another element of theoretical sensitivity involved the ability to separate the relevant from the irrelevant. The final aspect was the researcher's credibility or the confidence readers have in his/her ability to be sensitive to the data and make appropriate decisions in the field while doing the research (Creswell, 2009).

Researcher bias. Creswell (2009) described how the qualitative researcher guarded against bias by being reflective, sensitive to their background, and understanding of how this played into the study. As a high school educator, I witnessed on a daily basis the family, school, and peer influences on students. Creswell (2009) also observed students from similar backgrounds achieving success while others eventually dropped out of school. I have always had a particular interest in students who appeared to be on the road to becoming a dropout, and have always pushed myself to consider ways to keep them in school. In regards to my family and educational background, I strove to ensure that my position as a researcher would not be interfered with because of my background. Researcher bias was monitored throughout the data collection and analysis process. For example, I had my dissertation chair examine the construction of themes that I used to make sense of the collected data. The results also were reviewed to ensure that the words of the participants are accurately presented without being overshadowed by potential researcher biases.

As I have reviewed the literature and interview notes from other research, I realized how important it was to be unbiased. The lens I looked through came from my

past as I watched students leave school without a high school diploma. It also started early in my life; my father, who was one of the most intelligent people I ever knew, was a high school dropout. For him, being a dropout was a matter of necessity, not choice. His father developed terminal cancer and because he was the oldest son, he had to work as a lumberjack in the woods of Maryland. From a very young age, I have been challenged by the various circumstances that lead students to drop out of school.

I was also sensitive to the fact that the research was examining something that I really cared about. Having spent many years as a high school teacher, coach, and administrator, I have seen too many bright students leave school without graduating. Their reasons were as varied as the students were. However, I believed that collectively, students decided early in their school experience to make the decision to drop out because of negative influences. I have an interest in understanding these influences and sharing them with other educators. Given this perspective, I understood the importance of keeping my feelings separate from what the participants have to say.

During the research, an additional potential bias involved my experiences and how I viewed the world. It was important to guard against leading participants to the answers I might be looking for and to allow them to share their experiences and beliefs. Maxwell (2005) warned that being too involved in a situation could cause your ideas to come through instead of those of the participants. The safeguards I put in place included asking the same questions to all participants and not leading them to provide the answers that I was expecting. Objectivity was important for this research in order for the voices of the participants to come through. Participants represented varied backgrounds and I

was aware that they could differ from the pattern that I had in mind of what a dropout should look like.

Ethical considerations. The study was submitted for approval to the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in January 2014 (see Appendix B). Sieber (1998) notes that the IRB provided protection against human rights violations and minimizes risk to the participants. It also guaranteed that the participant would be able to make informed decisions, withdrawal from the study without penalty, and understood any risks and benefits of the study (Creswell, 2009).

Assumptions. This study included three primary assumptions based on my past experiences and as the review of the literature: (1) the responses would reveal a disconnect between the needs of an at-risk student and the way school operates; (2) dropouts' families were likely to provide insufficient support or encouragement about in regards to school; and, (3) that the participants' peers were also dropouts or unsuccessful in school. It seemed that there is a void of qualitative data to understand the student at risk of becoming a dropout.

Another assumption gained from the interpretation of the literature suggested that the most revealing and coveted solutions to the dropout problem came from the selected group of participants. Educators would also learn how to engage students in the school experience and understand the importance of building relationships with them. These relationships can ultimately lead to more socially acceptable behaviors and an increase in at-risk student involvement in extra-curricular activities.

A further assumption was that the influences of family, school, peers, and individuals would rise to the top and become the themes of the study. These influences

contributed to the potential dropouts disengagement from the school environment, poor attendance, poor academic performance, numerous discipline referrals, and other deviant behavior. A lack of qualitative, pedagogical understanding of the at-risk population inhibits educators from providing these low achievers the opportunities for a successful education experience and future.

Study Procedures

This section includes seven subheadings: participants, site, research plan, data collection, interview methods and data analysis. Special attention is given to the participant pool and why returning to get a GED was important to the study. Protecting the anonymity of the participants was also a major point of emphasis.

Participants. The GED program at a community college in western North Carolina provided the study participants (*n* of 15). All the participants were over 18 years of age, volunteered for the study and were from the same county. The participant pool of GED students was critical to the study due to the fact they had the ability to look back maturely on their school experiences and the time at which they made the decision to drop out of school. These participants were better able to rationalize the reasons that led them to leaving school and had the ability to share those reasons from a renewed perspective that education is necessary. They had also proven that the life-altering events in their lives that provided the impetus to push them out of school had been put into perspective and they were now able to discuss the events in an unemotional and thoughtful way. These students understood the importance of an education, as did the 500,000 former dropouts who pursue a GED every year (Reder, 2007). The value of the information from these participants had been confirmed by a recent brief from the

National Center for Education Statistics that questioned GED participants on the reasons they left high school. This brief reported that 91% left for school related reasons, 29% for work related reasons and 26% for family related reasons. These numbers were comparable to a group of high school dropouts who participated in a similar research project (Malkus & Sen, 2011). The students from these studies understood that the GED builds a bridge to post-secondary education and impacts them economically and socially (Malkus & Sen, 2011).

This county, according to current Census data, had a total population of 17,797 with 17.2% of the population below the age of 18. The poverty rate was 23.5% according to the US Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates and 25.5% of citizens were uninsured (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The median family income was \$33,919, \$10,000 less than the state average, yet the median value of owner occupied housing units was slightly higher than the state average at \$145,000. There were 2,400 school-aged children in the county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The public school system was comprised of five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. There were two charter schools and almost 200 home schooled students (NC Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2012).

According to the NC School Report Cards website, nearly 94% of the students passed their end of grade tests as compared to the state average of 83% for the 2011-12 school year (NC DPI , 2012). Census data from 2012 showed the county population to be 91% white (state average of 72%) with just over 84% of the adult population reporting having been graduated from high school, which matches the state average (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2012). In addition, the per capita income was \$26,864, or \$1,579 above the state average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Site. After talking to the director of the GED program at the participating community college, it was appropriate to conduct the interviews on site where the participants felt comfortable, and where there was sufficient space to have private conversations; the director's office was identified as the most feasible location for interviews. The logistics of conducting interview on site encouraged efficiency as the participants would already be present and there would be no transportation issues. The office space was roughly 100 square feet with a centrally located desk and two adjoining chairs.

Research Plan

This type of phenomenological research used a dominant strategy called purposeful sampling and sought information-rich data (Patton, 1990). This purposeful sampling concentrated on the scope of realities that made up an individual's perspective rather than just generalizing to a larger population. Since someone can only know what they have experienced, the initial target group was fifteen to twenty dropouts who were enrolled in a GED program, as of January, 2014. All participants were enrolled at the same community college. These participants were identified because they were likely to exhibit an understanding of the importance of an education and were mature enough to share their stories. The participant pool of GED students was critical to the study due to the previously stated reasons. Participants of this age were also likely to realize that additional education makes a positive difference in income, crime, health, mental health and substance abuse (Ou, 2008).

Ou (2008) also argues that that the requirement from business and industry of a more literate and highly trained workforce has caused many former dropouts to pursue a high school diploma to enhance their chances for a job along with improving their social mobility and life satisfaction. Approximately 50% of those who enroll in a GED program do so for employment reasons while others are encouraged to enroll by their own teachers (GED Testing Service, 2010; Tuck, 2012).

Participant selection was based on those willing to participate. All participants volunteered to be part of the study. Since all were high school dropouts, the only limitation was if they were not eighteen years old. Permission was obtained to conduct the study from the director of the GED program along with the college president (Appendix F). The director also consulted with the program's teachers to determine the most appropriate times, what the students would like as some type of compensation (their choice of a barbeque lunch or a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card), and if there were any concerns he needed to take into consideration.

The iPhone memo app served to record interviews and create an electronic file for each interview. Each electronic file was then transcribed for review.

Before the interviews, each student received a pre-notice letter that described the research project in understandable terms, the study procedures, a consent form explaining their rights, including the feature that they could opt out of the study at any time (Appendix C). At the beginning of each interview session, participants were reminded of their consent to participate and given an opportunity to verbally express their wish to continue in the project.

Data Collection. In collecting the data, the following guided the interview process: 1) the same questions were asked of each participant; 2) research questions were clarified upon request; and 3) the interviewer's thoughts were not injected into the conversation nor were the participants led to answer a question in a specific way.

The participants' points of view were sought through detailed interviewing as described by Denzin and Lincoln (1994). Each participant was cautioned to not try to answer the questions with what they thought I wanted to hear but with their own thoughts and feelings. I conducted each interview. Based on previously reviewed research, each interview was structured to last one to one and a half hours.

Interview Method. A fundamental aspect of interviewing provided an opportunity for participants to express their thoughts and perceptions in their own terms (Patton, 2002). For the purposes of this study, open-ended interviews were the chosen method. The interview protocol developed for this study included broad open-ended questions. These questions were based on the literature along with the conceptual framework. The literature provided the framework to build the questions to gather information of the influences that impacted the participants while the conceptual framework added sample questions and responses. The interview protocol was made up of 27 specific interview questions that were useful in answering the research questions that guided this study. Each participant experienced the same interview protocol. The Interview Protocol is provided in Appendix E.

Data Analysis. Creswell (2009) stated that the process of data analysis is making sense out of data and managing data. It involved preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data

(some qualitative researchers like to think of this as peeling back the layers of an onion), representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data (p. 183).

Qualitative researchers normally use inductive analysis of data, meaning that the main themes emerge out of the data (Patton, 1990). A phenomenological research method and an interpretative approach to data analysis were used, to carefully examine each transcript and develop a manageable classification or coding system. The primary patterns in the data were identified, labeled, and classified from these core patterns. Data that did not contribute to the study were removed, essentially building a theory from the ground up and using the observed data to determine patterns of behavior. The patterns determined by recurring words, phrases, and concepts in the data assisted in developing theories about which influences impacted dropouts. It was probable that this study would uncover data that were unexpected and helpful in developing hypotheses of why dropouts occur, and allowances were made to include these unexpected findings as the data were reviewed and compared. The steps involved in data analysis were:

1. Transcription of recorded materials;
2. Review of transcripts for accuracy;
3. Provided participants with a copy of the transcript to review and make any changes;
4. Initial review of data to gain a general sense of meaning;
5. Organization and indexing for easy retrieval;
6. Substitution of sensitive data to protect confidentiality;
7. Coding of data (deciding how to conceptually divide the raw data)
 - a. Development of initial codes

- b. Development of provisional themes or categories
- c. Exploration of relationships between themes
- d. Refinement of themes; and
- e. Development of theory (Creswell, 2009).

To assist in this process NUD*IST or Non numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing software was utilized. This software program is a robust and reliable program, appropriate exclusively for qualitative research analysis. NUD*IST is designed to automate much of the tedious work associated with qualitative data analysis, by auto coding signified text data, importing table data and using command files to regulate analysis processes (Jupp, 2006).

Trustworthiness. In qualitative research methodology, the overall trustworthiness and study quality are enhanced by some key elements (Baxter & Jack, 2008). First, the case study research questions must be clearly written. Next, sampling strategies were to be purposeful and appropriate. Lastly, the data were collected and managed systematically. The data were collected through recorded interviews and field notes. The field notes were intended to be descriptive and reflective, detailed and concrete, and included relevant visual details. These field notes allowed me to better describe the interviews when writing up the results and make low level inferences interpretations from each observation (Spradley, 1980). The recordings were then transcribed, analyzed, and themes were determined (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Credibility. Credibility in qualitative study research referred to how the participants were appropriately identified and chosen (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Recorded interviews, document analysis, and field notes were used to collect data. All interview

sessions were transcribed and each individual transcript was given to each participant for his or her review within one week of the interview along with a thank you letter. They were asked to make additions, deletions, or amendments if needed. This process of member checking ensured that the interviews were verified for accuracy (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Credibility depends less on the size of the sample than on the richness of the data and analytical abilities of the researcher (Patton, 1990).

Trust was established with the participants by building rapport (Glesne, 2006). To gain access to this rich source of data, I established rapport with each participant by first visiting the classes and introducing myself along with the study. Then at the beginning of each interview, I began with a friendly but professional introduction. I greeted each participant at the door of the interview site, shook their hand, and reminded them of the purpose of the study. I also built rapport by just casually talking with each participant before getting started with the interviews. This approach assisted in negating any prejudices the participants might have of me and helped prevent the loss of trust. I made every effort to establish eye contact, be attentive and relaxed while showing respect to each participant. I made sure the words of the participants were accurate in the transcripts by asking each participant to review his/her transcript for accuracy.

Transferability. Transferability in qualitative research refers to how applicable the findings of the study will be to others, in this case, educators and other potential dropouts. The degree to which the results of this study can be related to future studies on dropouts are an example of transferability (Mertens, 1998). Educators should be able to use the findings of this study to better understand how to develop programs to prevent dropouts.

Dependability. Dependability in qualitative research communicates the consistency of the study findings and stability over time (Baxter & Jack, 2008). One way to help make the data dependable was to have the themes analyzed by an outside authority who works with dropouts to determine their appropriateness (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To establish dependability in this study the themes were reviewed with another authority on dropout prevention.

Confirmability. Confirmability denotes how the findings reproduce the participants' opinions and perceptions related to the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Confirmability came from the interpretation of the data and ensured the perceptions of the participants were connected to the transcripts and field notes—not the researcher's opinions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the transcripts and field notes were traced to the original source by using alphanumeric coding (e.g., A01). Since each participant reviewed the transcript of their respective interview, they were able to approve and validate the data.

Summary

To bring the participants' real stories to light, qualitative research provided the most reasonable and useful approach. One of the most difficult parts of the process was analyzing the data and making sure that the words put on paper were an accurate reflection of what the participant said. Patton (1990) states,

The data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous. I have found no way of preparing students for the sheer massive volumes of information with which they will find themselves confronted when data collection has ended. Sitting

down to make sense out of pages of interviews and whole files of field notes can be overwhelming. (p. 170)

For validity's sake, it was important to accurately reflect what the participants shared, their feelings, and the story they related.

Another challenge involved trying to efficiently transcribe all the data, which was the most difficult for me. I believe that my strength, on the other hand, was the interview process itself. I enjoyed this part of the process and looked forward to doing this activity.

I countered biases by emphasizing the language that comes from the participants. The review of the literature also taught me that it is important to listen to what the participants share and not categorize it into my belief system.

Interpreting the collected and transcribed data also posed a challenge. The data needed to be segmented into manageable bits, coded, and put into categories. The different categories provided insight into identifiable relationships that then illustrated the emergence of themes, patterns, and hierarchies. From these emerging themes, patterns, hierarchies diagrams, tables, matrices, and graphs were constructed which lead to validating the results (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2010).

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

The primary purpose of the study was to identify the influences that provided a foundation for students who decided to drop out of school but then returned to get their General Education Development (GED) certificate. These students returned to school due to the low quality of their current employment, limited job opportunities, or their general quality of life. The method for determining these influences was a set of one-on-one interviews. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the primary influences affecting a young person's decision to leave school before receiving a diploma?
 - a. What are the family, peer and individual, and school influences that impact his or her decision?
 - b. What staff actions and school rules contributed to the decision to leave school?
 - c. Are there actions by peers that influence the decision to drop out?
2. At what point in a student's life does he or she begin to consider dropping out of school?
3. What can individual students do to better position themselves to graduate from high school?
4. What motivates students to return to a formal educational setting to try and secure a GED?

The participant interview data and subsequent analysis were done with the clear understanding that these self-reports were expressions of perceptions. The participants were encouraged to express what they thought their reality was, but it was beyond the scope or intent of this study to verify their perceptions. Therefore, the following summaries provide the perspectives of the participants, echoing their language and points of view to the fullest possible extent. Chapter four includes the following: summary of participant interviews, procedures and emerging themes, and summary of the results.

Summary of Participant Interviews

The most powerful part of this study was the opportunity for the voices of the participants to be heard. The following section is a paraphrased summary of the transcripts of the participant interviews and provides an accurate reflection of the thoughts and feelings of the participants. The participant voices provide the passion required to encourage educators, parents, and legislators to take seriously the need to prevent students from leaving school without a diploma.

Participant A-01. Participant A-01 was a nineteen year-old male who had moved around quite a bit and held no jobs during school. He felt forced to leave school, feeling it was not his choice but that there were no schools nearby that he could attend since he was expelled due to using drugs. He did not believe there were any options other than leaving school. Participant A-01 wanted to stay in school, but left between the 10th and 11th grade. His dad left school at 14, but became a mechanic and earned his GED.

Participant A-01 reported that his parents had very few positive things to say about school or about him, basically saying he was not as smart as others and they didn't

believe his teachers were very good. His parents wanted him to enroll in an online program to get his diploma. He did find out after leaving school that to get a job he had to have an education and that is why he decided to get a GED.

When describing himself he felt he was obsessive compulsive and uncomfortable with silence. His two best friends in high school were very different; one was the smartest person he had known and the other he classified as dumb. He liked his friends because he felt he was right in the middle intellectually and they were fun to be around. He enjoyed his time with friends and there was really nothing he disliked about them. His friends stayed in school while he felt he had to leave. He did say the advice he would give a high school student thinking about not graduating was to “Slap them!” and they needed to be “Knocked into good thinking.”

His first memory of school was feeling panic. He always felt alone because he lived out in the country and going to school with others made him nervous. He liked history and science the best because he enjoyed learning something new. He disliked math and English but hated foreign language the most because he was really bad at it. His math teachers were more like “robots,” just giving him worksheets that bored him and he pretty much slept through class. His reading ability was above grade level and he seemed to always be advanced when it came to reading and doing class work.

In school he did not participate in any type of school activities because he could not afford to do so. His best memory of school was during an ancient civilization class where he had to make a replica of an ancient weapon. He enjoyed doing something hands-on that was not in a textbook. He was very proud of the weapon he had made.

He really doesn't have a worst memory of school, just the thought of being required to leave school. He actually left school during the sophomore year. He had home issues, depression, and was involved with drugs. Because of the drug involvement, he was expelled from school. Through this event he felt he learned a lot about himself and the need for an education. He had good relationships with his teachers and had more in common with science and history teachers, which was probably one of the reasons he feels he liked those two subjects most. He didn't like the math teachers he had. He was retained in the third grade due to an incident of having an eyeglass repair kit at school which contained items classified as a weapon. He was long-termed suspended and believed he was not able to get caught back up.

His main success in school was working with metals and he felt that was also his hobby. He was able to bring in a metal kit to demonstrate to the class and felt that was a positive experience. He did have a seventh grade science teacher that went out of his way to help him. The teacher knew he was very smart in science and tried to encourage him to do homework even though, to him, it was boring. As he thought back on his school days he never remembered anyone trying to intervene to help him stay in school.

One of the hardest parts of high school for him was the inability to get along with people. Since he grew up away from other kids, he seemed to have an adult mind set and felt he was smarter than the other students. This attitude caused him difficulty in getting along with others. When asked what could be done to help students like him stay in school, he basically said to be aware of the situation that kids grow up in and the issues they bring to school. He also emphasized that schools should move away from the zero tolerance policy and teachers needed to understand that students depend on them and need them. The reason

he wanted to come back to school was he knew that he couldn't go through life without an education. In the GED program he could be connected with assignments that he related to and could work more at his own pace.

Participant A-02. Participant A-02 was an eighteen year-old male who has traveled all around the country and never really had a stable home. During his school days he did not have any kind of job. The main reason for leaving school, at that time, was believing he lacked math and other skills. He didn't think people would help and that the teachers were not supportive: "They sure didn't have the attitude of 'No Child Left Behind.'" He thought there were some other options he could have explored but really didn't know where to look or believe he had any one to help him. He left school several times during his educational career. Middle school was really the time he decided he was going to leave school. Middle school was pretty much, as he described, "the nail in the coffin," especially since his perception was that there was no one to help him. His father was a dropout, but he was not sure when his father dropped out. When he was growing up he had a really tough childhood, and made many of negative references about school and about having little understanding of what he wanted to do. He felt his parents were not concerned about his decision to drop out of school. His main reason to come back to school was that he always wanted to try and get some form of knowledge. He liked to learn and this was an opportunity for him to do so.

When asked about himself, he said again he liked to learn and wanted to get some sort of education in science. He felt like he excelled in computers and wanted to create computer programs. His friends at school lived next to him, but were really never in class with him. They grew up together and enjoyed being around each other. He liked

his friends because he could say whatever was on his mind; they didn't get upset with him and there was really nothing annoying about his friends. None of his friends dropped out; they all finished to the best of his knowledge. When asked about advice for potential dropouts he said he would not encourage them to leave, but, if they did leave, he would encourage them to have some sort of plan to move forward.

His first memory of school was the fact he always had some type of health issue. He didn't understand the nature of the issues and as they became more serious, school became harder. His favorite classes were science and math. He enjoyed learning how math worked. To him, science was "information that you don't understand with questions that need to be answered." Since some of the questions didn't have concrete answers he enjoyed trying to learn what they were. He enjoyed the variety of science. Geometry was his most difficult subject because he felt he just couldn't grasp the concepts. He felt like his reading was slower than others in his class, but he understood what he read very well. The only extra-curricular activity he participated in was band, but he didn't enjoy it because of the teacher. Because of his asthma he was not able to participate in any kind of physical activities.

His best memory of high school was his friends and the opportunity just to walk around and talk. His worst memories were about half of the teachers he had. He said he couldn't even name the classes he was in; he just remembered he didn't like the teachers and they made school very difficult for him. He actually dropped out of school when he was only 15. The middle school and high school were joined together and he didn't like the way the school was organized and didn't feel that this set-up was helpful to him. He did have some difficult relationships with staff. He believed that one counselor said some

things about him that weren't true and that his health issues were not addressed. The counselor did not relay his health issues to the teachers so they did not help him get from class to class. He had a math teacher that tried to help but would only tutor him for about five minutes and that was not enough time. He just didn't feel like anyone was willing to take the time to help him do what he needed to be successful. He did study at home and wanted to do better, but he continued to fall behind because of his continued health issues. He was held back in school one year but then was skipped ahead. He really couldn't think of any successes in school. He had one volunteer teacher help him in the fourth grade. He assumed it was a substitute teacher that didn't really teach from the textbooks, and he really enjoyed the unorthodox style of learning.

During his school career, he didn't perceive that any interventions were put in place to help support him. There was a kindergarten teacher that tried to help him but the intervention was so early in his career it wasn't really meaningful. The hardest thing in high school was that he fell behind because of his health issues and it was hard for him to catch up, and there were just subjects or certain classes he was not good in. His perception was that the counselor did not help with his health issues, which could have provided opportunity to keep him in school. Instead, he felt she gave him a lot of empty promises, as did the principal and teachers who were also rude to him. His suggestion on how educational leaders could improve high school was that they needed to do more teacher observations, see how they are teaching, and correct problems when they occur. He said he would like to see school changed so that teachers know if students are progressing, really understanding the subject and are able to get the knowledge they need. He believed the teachers had given up on him and tried to put him in classes that were not

good for him. He did believe he was trying, but teachers believed there was nothing else to do. Since he was not the best student and was dealing with his health issues, he felt he had nothing else he could do but leave school and try to do something different. He had to miss about half his school days due to health problems and if he had been given more time to deal with those health issues he might not have dropped out. He realized he needed to come back to school and get a GED to get a good job.

Participant A-03. Participant A-03 was a sixty-two year old female who had no jobs during her school days. She expressed that she really didn't know why she quit other than in Biology class she had to collect fifty insects and identify each of them. If she did not do this she failed the class. It was her opinion, at the time, that she just couldn't do that and so she left school. She felt she would have the option of getting a good paying job if she quit school. She started thinking about dropping out and left school in the tenth grade. Her brothers and sister all left school without graduating.

When growing up her parents always had positive comments about school. Her parents were not supportive of her decision to leave and were not happy when she left. She and her brother owned a small grocery store and they made a good living, but when her brother passed away she had to close the store and draw unemployment. In an interview with one lady she was told she was unemployable at her age with no education. The interviewer made the comment, "Maybe you could just go clean houses." At that point in time, she was scared that she was not able to do anything else. She began her GED program four years ago and is currently finishing up. She worked a short time at McDonalds, and now works at Wal-Mart.

When asked about herself she said she loves people, loves working with them and enjoys going to car shows. She had two really good friends in school. She loved hanging out with those two girls every day. They just loved being with each other and being around other people. She did not have friends who left school early that she knew about. When asked about her advice to someone considering leaving school early she said students need to finish school, go to college and that being a high school dropout or just a high school graduate “doesn’t cut it” any more.

Her first memory of school was her first grade teacher who let her sit on her lap and drink her coffee. She remembered how much she really loved and cared about that teacher because she knew the teacher cared about her. The classes she liked most were English and math because they were easy for her. She didn’t like biology because of the assignment that really, in her mind, forced her out. Her ability to read in school was a bit lower than the rest of her class members. She really didn’t have the opportunity to participate in any activities in school.

When asked about her best memory she said it was the people she went to school with. She enjoyed being around them. Her worst memory was a 62 year-old teacher who would take her hand and hit her with a ruler. She wanted to avoid that at all costs. She really didn’t have any positive or negative relationships with staff at school. She got along with them and really can’t remember having any problems with them. She was never retained in school.

When asked about her successes in school she said, “I really don’t have any in my head. I would have finished school.” She really felt like teachers did not give her the same attention as children with money. She felt that she and her family lived in poverty.

She did have one Home Economics teacher who helped her through school and encouraged her in the class. Her understanding is that no one in school really tried or attempted to intervene to keep her in school.

The hardest part for her was the biology class. She said she couldn't really see anyone at school who tried to help her stay. She felt like the biology teacher could have helped her stay in school if she had considered an alternative to the assignment or had given her more help. When asked about suggestions to improve school she said that every student should be treated the same. If they fell behind then they should have been able to get more help. The main factor that caused her to come back to school was the desire to help her grandson pay for college and trying to encourage others to stay in school.

Participant A-04. Participant A-04 was an eighteen year-old male who worked while in school, especially in the summer. He began to consider leaving school when he was a sophomore and required to take a Fundamentals of Algebra class for his fourth math credit. The senior project also required a heavy workload. He did consider switching high schools as an option but then decided instead to enroll in the GED program. He did not have any family members who left school early. As he was growing up, his parents wanted him to do well in school and make decent grades (A's and B's). They also emphasized going to college and getting a good job. His parents were fine with him leaving school early as long as he got a GED and moved on with his life. Nothing really changed in his life that forced him to come back to get a GED. He went from high school straight to the GED program, and expressed that he just wanted to move on with his life.

When asked about three ways he would describe himself he said had a good attitude, was willing to learn new things and was a quick learner. His best friends were Gage and Justin. He had known Justin since they were little. Their moms were best friends. They hung out all through elementary, middle and high school. They didn't have the same interests but got along. Being different helped their relationship. When they were together they had a lot of fun. He described his friends as really funny, and their relationship was characterized by humor, going to the movies, and kayaking. He had two friends who left school early and they are currently enrolled in the same GED program. He advised anyone considering leaving school early to make sure it was what they wanted and, no matter what they decided, to have a back-up plan.

His first memory of school was in elementary school sitting on a mat learning Spanish. This was a lot of fun to him. He also liked his welding classes since he received a certification and history because it was interesting, like a "movie" of how America was formed. He disliked math because he was "really bad" at it and disliked science because he was not interested in it. He perceived his reading ability as average or a little higher. His highest End of Grade (EOG) scores were in reading. He was on the wrestling team all four years in high school. He participated in football in the ninth grade and cross-country in the tenth grade.

His best memory of high school was Friday night football games spent hanging out with friends. The state championship wrestling match was also a great memory but was very intense. His worst memory in school involved almost not passing the fifth grade and needing to retake the EOG tests. He left school mid-year during his senior year. He described good relationships with his coaches and with some teachers. He

believed other teachers didn't care about him or other students. He didn't believe his relationships led him to leaving school. He was not retained in school but did come close in the fifth grade. He listed his three main successes in school as an Algebra II award, two conference wrestling titles, and a wrestling state championship. His Algebra II teacher really helped him out by assisting with problems and encouraging him. His history teacher was really funny and incorporated humor into his teaching. The welding teacher assisted him by providing the opportunity for a real life career.

He could not think of anyone at the school attempting to provide an intervention for him or trying to keep him in school. The most difficult part of high school for him was getting the four math credits. He felt the school could have helped him stay in school by assisting him with getting the one math credit needed for graduation. He suggested that high schools could be improved by providing clear course assignments and by keeping students on the same path from the first day. He was willing to come back to get a GED because he could do other things and come to school. He could come and go if he needed to.

Participant A-05. Participant A-05 was an eighteen year-old male with no jobs during school. At the time he left school, he had torn his Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) while wrestling, and was absent several days. He didn't feel that the doctors' notes he brought in were used to excuse his absences. He got behind in school to the point he felt he had no other option than dropping out. He first began thinking about dropping out midway through his fourth year in high school, which he felt was his senior year, although the school classified him as a sophomore. This is when he actually dropped out of school. He does remember that his grandfather had dropped out of school. When he left school

his parents agreed with him that the way the school had handled the issue with his ACL, counting his absences against him, was “crappy.” When his parents found out he was going to leave school, they still wanted him to get a diploma somewhere. Then they had a long talk when he left school and agreed with him that the school did not properly handle the situation by making him go to school two more years because of his absences. The thing that changed his life and made him want to come back to school was a desire to be a mechanic and knowing the only way to do that was to get his GED.

He believes he got along well with others and could follow directions. His best friend in school got in trouble and dropped out and the rest of his friends also left school. What he liked best about his friends was they always got along. They were on the wrestling team and played football in the ninth grade. What he liked least was that one of his friends did drugs which is really what caused his friend to leave school early. The advice he would give a high school student who was thinking about leaving school was to think through it really hard. He said, “If it’s your final year don’t quit and stay in school.”

His first memory of school was being scared when he got there, but once he got there he liked it. His favorite classes were math and physical education. He liked math because he was good at it and physical education because he was active and played all the sports he could. His least favorite classes were reading and social studies. He also disliked reading just because he couldn’t sit still; his mind wandered and it was hard for him to concentrate. This was also why he did not like social studies. He believed his reading ability was a little bit higher than others in his class. He felt that he could have done much better if he had been able to sit and concentrate. He was active in several sports in school, wrestling primarily, but also soccer, football, and baseball.

His best memories of school were being able to meet friends and believing he was easy to get along with. His relationships with staff members were positive. He felt he was liked by everyone and really had no problems in school. He was retained in the eighth grade because he and his parents felt like he was not ready to go on. His greatest successes came in athletics, especially being a starter on the wrestling team. He felt that was a great accomplishment. He didn't feel like the teachers did anything to help or hurt him. He did believe that he was treated more poorly if the teachers just didn't like him. His belief was that no one at school tried to intervene. There were teachers who stayed after school to help him if he needed it but none of them tried to talk him out of leaving school.

In his view, the hardest thing in high school was all the work. He felt his freshmen year required a ton of work, the senior year was loaded down, and the senior project was an additional pain. He felt he could have been helped to stay in school if the school had used the notes he had brought from the doctors to excuse his absences so he wouldn't have had to repeat two grades. His memory was that the school staff said they had lost the notes. His suggestion to improve schools would be for the schools to keep up with the paperwork and try to talk students out of leaving school. A desire to attend mechanics' school was what changed his mind and he knew a GED would enable him to do this.

Participant A-06. Participant A-06 was a nineteen year-old male who moved from Florida to North Carolina. During his high school time, he did not have any full time jobs. He decided to leave school when the school informed him he would need to stay two additional years because in the tenth grade he had fallen and broken his hip causing an extensive absence. The absences amounted to several months and they were

not excused, which did not allow him to make them up. There were other absences prior to those related to his hip. He didn't see any alternatives to dropping out other than obtaining his GED.

He first began thinking about dropping out during the first semester of his fourth year in high school. He realized he did not want to stay an additional two years and be on the six-year plan for high school. He could not remember any family members who left school without graduating. His parents told him when he was young that school was important for getting the job he needed later in life. However, his parents were supportive of his decision to leave school because of the requirement for him to go an additional two years. His dad was the family member who found out about the GED program. For him, nothing really changed in his life that encouraged him to come back to school. He wanted to continue on after he dropped out and so he entered the GED program.

He felt he worked well with people and was good with computers making him able to do computer engineering. His best friend in high school, whom he described as like a brother, was someone he knew in Florida that moved to the mountains two years after he did. What he liked most about him was that they helped each other out. At times his friend did make "smart" comments and he really didn't appreciate that. The only friends he had that dropped out of school were those that were in the GED program with him. The advice he would give someone thinking of dropping out of school was to make sure it was the decision that person wanted because he believed most people would regret it in the future.

His first memory of school was the desire to meet other children and hang out with them. The class he liked most was computer class because he was building computers and programming them. He also liked carpentry class where he could create things. He felt he was a very creative person. The class he liked least was called Digital Communications Systems because it included writing letters. He believed his reading level was about average with the other students. The only extracurricular activity in which he participated was an aviation club and he enjoyed that.

His best memory of school was being with friends and his worst memory was breaking his hip, which ultimately forced him out of school. He decided to leave school his fourth year of high school, which was actually his sophomore year based on the credits he had earned. When he left school he was doing credit recovery at the alternative school. He had good relationships with staff members at school and felt they liked him and he liked them. He was retained in the third grade. His greatest successes were completing carpentry certification and being the treasurer for the Aviation Club.

He felt some teachers tried to help him succeed by staying after school and tutoring him. However, his belief was that no one at the school tried to develop an intervention plan or convince him to stay in any way. The hardest part of high school, for him, was his math classes because he just didn't feel he did well in them. In his opinion, there was nothing the school could have done to keep him from leaving. He suggested that school leaders could improve high school by keeping up with attendance and encouraging students not to miss. He didn't change his mind about coming back to school because he had already planned to continue on with the GED program.

Participant A-07. Participant A-07 was a twenty-two year old female. She had no official jobs in high school, but did help out at a plant nursery where she was paid as a non-employee. She decided to leave school because she became pregnant during her junior year and the private school she attended did not allow her to return. She did enroll in an on-line school as an alternative to regular school but a volatile relationship with her boyfriend prevented her from continuing. She had not previously considered dropping out of school but was forced to do so because of the school rules regarding her pregnancy. Her father and stepfather both left school without graduating.

She did remember her parents telling her to focus and pay attention in school. Her mother was a teacher and so most of the comments made in the home were positive concerning school. When she told her parents she was leaving school, they realized there was no choice in the matter because of the school rules. They still made negative comments and had a great deal of concern about what she had done.

She described herself as someone who cared about people and liked to help them. She also described herself as outgoing and nonjudgmental. Her two best friends in school were Bill and Amy. Bill and she had been friends since the third grade and enjoyed doing a lot of outdoor things together. Amy basically lived with her during the summer, but after three years in school, Amy moved away which was very difficult. What she liked most about her friends was they were fun to be around. They were in small classes together so they became very good friends. What she liked least about her friends was their lack of support and abandonment when she got pregnant. She didn't have any friends who left school without a diploma. The advice she would give to any student contemplating leaving school before graduating was, "Just don't do it!"

Her first memory of school was that she loved PE. She liked sports; they were fun to her and a really good outlet. English, history and science were her favorite classes. Since her mother was an English teacher, she was always into literature and loved to read. The most fun class she had was Biology. She enjoyed learning everything about biology. Math was her most difficult class because she didn't like it. She believed her reading level was higher than most everyone in her school. She did participate in softball, volleyball, Fellowship of Christian Athletes and High School Chorus. Her best memory was setting up for the senior prom during her junior year. Being too talkative was a bad memory since that often caused her to be called down. The one teacher she didn't like was her math teacher.

She had to leave school the summer between her junior and senior year. Her relationship with her teachers was very close; the teachers knew her entire family and she felt that she could go to them for anything. She was retained in the fifth grade when she went back to the private school and had to repeat that year. Her greatest successes in school were softball and English since she was good at both. In her mind there were no attempts at intervention. The principal and a few teachers acknowledged the problem with the rule that forced her to leave but really did nothing about it. The counselor was upset she had to leave but felt there was nothing she could do.

The hardest part of school for her was just focusing. Because it was such a small student body it was easy for the students to socialize, making it hard to concentrate. There was also a great deal of turnover in science teachers, which made it difficult to stay focused. She felt she could have stayed in school if the school officials had considered a rule change regarding her pregnancy. She felt the principal did not like her because of

the boy she was dating. In her opinion, educators could improve high school by showing more attention to the students. The main reason she was back in school was because she didn't want to be a waitress for the rest of her life and she wanted the best for her daughter. Her daughter was the main reason she wanted to get an education and thereby get a better job. She had also found a group of friends that were more supportive of her desire to get a GED.

Participant A-08. Participant A-08 was a thirty-three year old male who had moved frequently. During school he didn't have any jobs. He decided to leave school between his tenth and eleventh grade year, stating, "I just didn't want to be there." He had little connection with the school and felt he had a thousand other things he could be doing. He had issues with discipline at his first high school so he transferred to another school. He then moved out on his own and really didn't think about school. He didn't plan on quitting; he just came to the point where he stopped going. His parents and little brother also left school early. While he was growing up, his parents put a great deal of value on school and graduating, but he never shared that value. When he told his parents he was leaving school they pushed him to finish or get a job. They knew, however, that he was going to do what he wanted to do. At the time of the interview, he expressed that he now understood the value of education and realized there was a ceiling on his career that he couldn't rise above without further education. Now, he understood that education provides more options.

When asked about himself he said he had a "do whatever it takes attitude," realized he has to work hard and understood it was important to get an education for personal reasons. In talking about his friends in high school, he said they were from all

segments of the school population. Many of his friends didn't value education and those were the friends he had more in common with. His friends easily accepted him. His natural attitude of "I don't care" was "cool" to them. Now as he looks back he realizes it was hard to trust many of his friends but at the time he didn't see that. When asked about friends leaving school early, he said most of them did leave without graduating. One friend in particular left school five weeks before graduation, but finally did go back and finish. His advice to a young person considering dropping out of high school was,

To be sure to do your best while you are there, understand the importance of staying in school and that it will make you feel better about yourself. School will give you high self-esteem. Dropping out of school will eventually hit you in a negative way.

His first memory of school was all the new people and the new things he was doing. After a short time, though, it was hard for him to remain interested and school just became repetitious and mundane. The classes he liked most were art and science. They were interesting to him and hands-on. The hardest was math because he couldn't grasp the concepts at the time and didn't remember all he was asked to learn. Currently, he often uses math but did not find it as hard as it was in school. He felt he was above average in reading, especially comprehension.

In school he participated in baseball until ninth grade. In the ninth grade everything seemed to fall apart. He was kicked off the baseball team due to missing practice, his parents divorced and everything was in chaos. His best memories of school were his friends and a few teachers who had a positive relationship with him. His worst memory was feeling that he just didn't belong. He left school between his tenth and

eleventh grade year. He was scheduled to be in the eleventh grade, but he would be taking some tenth grade classes.

His relationships with teachers were fairly positive. He was often a class clown and frequently did not show up to class. The teachers didn't brush him off because they knew he had potential. They would provide extra time for him, talk to him, make classes personal for him and wanted him to have high self-esteem. However, there was a lack of attention at that time from his parents and he didn't feel like there was encouragement from them to remain in school. He was really not retained until he got to the tenth grade and didn't continue in school after that time. His main success in school was the time spent playing baseball. He felt he had the talent to play baseball at a higher level, but because of leaving school that didn't work out. He did feel, at times, that some teachers were trying to help. Many times they gave him more breaks than he probably deserved. Some would take time to help him when he would allow them to. He didn't remember any time that a teacher, counselor, or any school staff tried to develop an intervention plan to help him stay in school. The hardest part of high school for him was not wanting to put forth an effort to do the work. He now perceives that most of his problems went back to the people he hung out with. He needed other people to motivate him and most of the motivation he received was negative. He didn't know of anything in particular that the school could have done to prevent him from leaving. At the time, he was going to do what he wanted to do. He felt that if the school had really cared they could have come up with something to keep him in school. The suggestions he made for improving high school would be to not be as impersonal, to not see trouble makers as outcasts, and when teachers and counselors deal with students with problems be sure to deal with those

issues in private not in public. Also, he suggested that staff try to understand the psychological makeup of all students.

He changed his mind about school and came back to get his GED because what he was doing just wasn't good enough. He could see he was heading in a downward spiral, had something to prove to himself and wanted more. He also wanted to be able to show his son how education is important and that as a father he could take care of him and would be "someone."

Participant A-09. Participant A-09 was a twenty-year-old male. He wasn't employed during the school year but did work in the summer at a fruit stand and at Bojangles. Part of the reason he decided to leave school was because he believed there was not enough one-on-one time with teachers. To him school was just too many long hours and meaningless. The only option he could think of before leaving school would have been to talk with counselors, but when he tried to talk it just seemed they didn't have time for him. He began thinking about dropping out of school at the beginning of his 11th grade year. At the first of the year he was enjoying school, but as time went on he just didn't enjoy it any more. He did have several family members who left school early. His dad left and got a GED. His older sister and brother also left school early. He remembered while growing up, his parents made positive comments about school. They encouraged him to do his best, to work hard and to graduate. When he told his parents he was leaving school they didn't like it. What changed in his life to encourage him to come back to get a GED was a desire to have a better career.

When asked about himself he said that he was smart, enjoyed school some, and loved welding. He earned a welding certification and really enjoyed the hands-on classes.

His favorite friend in school was Sean, whom he described as being there for him during high school. He went to Sean for everything he needed. What he liked most about his friend was he could talk to him about anything, although he did believe Sean could lie to him at times. He did remember one of his friends leaving school without graduating. When asked about advice he would give a student who was thinking about leaving school he would first of all say “Don’t Do It, it sure is not worth the trouble.” He learned his lesson because leaving school created “a whole lot more trouble.”

His first memory of school was his kindergarten teacher; he believed her to be the “greatest” teacher ever. The two classes he liked most were welding and carpentry because they were hands-on. The teachers were a great help and he was able to work in the shop. His least favorites were math and English because he felt like he was really bad at both of them. Talking about his reading ability, he felt like he was about the same as others in his classes, but believed he could have been a better reader if he had enjoyed reading.

In school the activity he participated in was band. He played the baritone from the seventh to the tenth grade. He basically left the band because he didn’t believe the teacher wanted him in the class. His best memory of school was the first day of high school because he realized he had much more freedom than he had had in elementary and middle school. His worst memory was leaving school. He left about the middle of his junior year. He had good relationships with staff, especially with one of the janitors, whom he considered his “good buddy.” Unfortunately, he now felt that if they had really cared about him they would have “gotten onto him” about leaving school.

His main successes in school were getting his welding certification and coming close to being certified in carpentry. Some of his teachers helped him learn and worked with him to improve his understanding. He also had some counselors who tried to help him. He missed ten days of school and the school would not allow him to come back. They dropped him from the roll and wouldn't let him come back even though he went back and tried to re-enroll. The hardest part of school was getting up early. The one thing he believed could have been done to help him stay in school would have been to encourage him to come back and not discourage him. They could have opened the doors and let him return. He felt it would improve high school if teachers would provide more one on one help to students who need it. He decided to come back to school because he wanted to do better and now has been encouraged to finish school, especially by his girlfriend.

Participant A-10. Participant A-10 was a nineteen-year-old female who held no jobs during her school days. She decided to leave school because she had missed a lot of days. She was sick and her doctor's excuses were not put in her records. The principal basically told her it would be better to leave. Her teachers didn't help her at all in school. She first started thinking about dropping out of school around the sixth or seventh grade. She had difficulty learning and the teachers would not take time to help. She did not feel she had any options other than dropping out of school. Her father and sister left school without graduating. During her early years she remembers her parents telling her to keep going to school. Her dad said he had dropped out and she would regret it. When she told her parents she had dropped out of school, they didn't like it. But, they were okay with it

as long as she would go back and at least get her GED. What changed her mind and caused her to come back to get her GED was the fact that she really couldn't get a job.

When asked about herself she said she liked animals, especially chickens and horses. Her best friend in high school was Ashley, who was there to help her. Ashley was also related to her and would encourage her to do her homework and help her with it. There was nothing she didn't like about her friends. She didn't remember any of her friends that left school early. The advice she would give a high school student thinking about dropping out was to try to finish and look at other options if he or she dropped out.

Her first remembrance of school was getting in trouble a lot because she was, in her words, "mean." She believed that she had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and really couldn't concentrate. The classes she liked most were science and math. She enjoyed them because she liked animals, so she really liked learning science, and she enjoyed math if someone explained it to her. The classes she liked least were Social Studies and English, because she was not good in reading and couldn't concentrate. She would rate her reading ability lower than her classmates because she could read it but not understand it. The only activity she participated in was band at the middle school and did not continue because her family didn't have the money for instruments.

Her best memory in school was one of her teachers, Ms. B., who taught her government and economics. Her worst memory was a lot of her teachers, especially the fact that they didn't help her. She left school between the ninth and tenth grade. Her relationship with most teachers was good. When she was older she didn't get in trouble nearly as much. But, she really didn't have any strong relationships with any teachers.

She didn't remember ever being retained. Her main successes in school were an award she received in the economics and government class with Ms. B and her study of science concerning animals. Ms. B really helped her and would sit down one on one and explain information. She explained that Mrs. B. "would also help me with other homework if I needed her to." There was really no intervention put in place to try to keep her in school. The principal said it would probably be a good idea if she stayed, but also felt that she was not going to make it and might be better off to leave school and get some different help. The hardest part of high school for her was homework. She and her mother would often sit up until 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning trying to finish the homework. She believed the school staff could have helped her stay in school if the principal had followed up when she explained the teachers were not willing to help her, but she said nothing ever changed for her. The suggestion she would make for improving high school would be a program for students where they could get one-on-one help on things they didn't understand. What changed her mind and caused her to come back to school was trying to get a job and the fact that it had become too hard to get a good job without an education.

Participant A-11. Participant A-11 was a forty-three year old female. She did not work during the school year but did answer the phone in the register of deeds office in the summer. She left school two months into her senior year to take care of her three month-old brother, feeling there were no other options. She went into "mother mode." Her mother and father had to work and there was no one else to keep the baby. Prior to actually leaving school she had not considered quitting.

Her father was a high school graduate but her mother was a dropout. Her parents were not involved in her school activities, but she liked school and earned decent grades. When she told her parents she was leaving school they were fine with it because they were glad she would be keeping the baby. She came back to get a GED because she was not satisfied staying home. She also wanted to be an example for her children.

Participant A-11 described herself as being persistent, outgoing and determined. Her best friend in high school stayed at her home a lot and excelled at everything. Her friend was always confident and didn't change around other people. All her friends finished high school. She would advise any student thinking about dropping out to carefully consider the decision because it was not as easy as one might think. In the GED program students must really apply themselves.

Her first memory of school was meeting new people. She also saw it as a chance to grow educationally and see what the world had to offer. She liked her computer class the most because it interested her. She also liked science because there was always something new to learn. She disliked math the most. Her math teachers would just put the problems on the board and wanted the students to do them. She always felt intimidated by math and the math teachers. When considering reading ability she felt she was about average compared to her classmates.

The only activity she participated in while in school was a 4-H fashion show. This was also her best memory of school because she won second place in the show. Her worst memory of school was the intimidation by certain teachers. She was always drawn to outcasts and upset when she saw teachers intimidate them. Personally, she had a good relationship with her teachers except a math teacher. She was not retained in school until

she left two months into her senior year. Many of her teachers would provide help but her math teachers would never help.

There was no one at the school that tried to intervene when she talked about leaving school. Her best friend did try to talk her out of leaving. Math was the hardest part of school. Due to the need to take care of her baby brother she did not think there was anything else the school could have done. She believed that schools could be improved by having staff that wanted to make a difference in the students. She commented that the staff should not “condemn but love on them.” She came back to get a GED because she knew in the tenth grade that she could work in an office and be a resource for people. To do this work she realized she needed a GED.

Participant A-12. Participant A-12 was a twenty-four year old female with no jobs during school. She was classified as a dropout due to the fact that she did not pass the high school exit exam. She felt she had no options but was upset that she was not told earlier. She had not considered leaving school early even though she did not like high school. When she was growing up, her parents spoke positively about school and still loved school. Her parents were upset when they were told she did not get a diploma and felt she could have done better. She came back to get a GED because she had to have one to be a police officer like her father.

She described herself as a procrastinator, a goal setter with little follow-through, but a positive person. Her friends in high school caused her a lot of trouble. They would skip school and she went along with them. She liked her friends because they had fun together. All of her friends graduated from high school. The advice she would give a

high school student who was thinking about leaving school before graduation was to not do it. High school was much easier than the alternatives.

Participant A-12's first memory of school was that she loved it because it was fun and seemed like the best place in the world. But things changed and for her, high school became the worst place in the world. It was hard for her since she went from Catholic school to public school. Her teachers didn't take time to work with her. She loved history because it was interesting and always something new. She also liked science because it was hands on. She really struggled with math and needed more help and time with it. Her reading ability was really low in high school. She needed intensive reading instruction.

In high school she participated in the social inclusion club, weight lifting club, and a leadership program. Her best memory of high school was prom week and all the different activities. Her worst memory was always being in trouble for leaving school. She skipped 58 days of high school in her last year. She had good attendance the other years. She was very close with teachers and the SRO. They were more like friends. Yet, the counselor was no help and the teachers did not help her get a diploma.

In her view, the teachers could have taken more time with her to help her pass the exit exam. There was no intervention plan for her. The counselor just called her father and told him she needed to get her scores up. The hardest part of high school was getting through the state exam. In her opinion, the teachers didn't help her do anything. She believed that schools could be improved if teachers and staff worried more about education than what students wore. She came back to school to get a GED to further her education and be a police officer.

Participant A-13. Participant A-13 was a thirty-four year old male who was in special education classes in school. He transferred from one school system to another when he started high school because he wanted to take a mechanics class. Teachers at the new high school didn't try to help students in special education. When he turned 16 in the ninth grade he thought about quitting but went back and completed another half year. He had personal issues and dropped out of school to get a job. He did not work while attending school. The primary reasons he left school were that he wasn't getting help from teachers and his mom's boyfriend was taking his social security check and also making him pay for bills. He felt he had no other options, especially after the principal talked to him about getting his GED. He also had a fear of being around people and was required to take medication to control this anxiety.

He first began thinking about dropping out of school in middle school. It was hard for him to do homework at home due to his living arrangement. His father only went to the second grade and his mother dropped out in eighth grade. Lots of his family members dropped out of school. His father did tell him when he was eight or nine year old that he needed a high school diploma to get a good job. His father had died before he left school and his mother didn't care about his finishing school. He believed he would have finished school if his father had not died. He was now trying for the second time to get his GED since his ex-wife was not around to give him trouble and because he finally had a scooter for transportation.

When asked about himself participant A-13 said he was a good plumber and listener. He had no good friends in high school since his new school was "kind of redneck." The friends he did have liked to go to the pool hall with him. As far as he

knows, all of his friends finished school. When asked about any advice he would give to students considering dropping out of school he said he would tell them his experience and all he had to go through to make a couple of bucks.

His first memory of school was that it “seemed fine.” He was excited to be around people because his parents did not drive and he had not been allowed to be around others. He liked his Reserve Officers Training Cadet (ROTC) class because it calmed him down. He also liked the welding class because it was fun and he wanted to be able to weld. He disliked English and reading because he couldn’t comprehend what he read even though he could pronounce the words. He could read better than others in his special education class but was never able to read well enough to be in a regular class.

He did not participate in any school activities because his parents couldn’t take him. His best memory of high school was going to football games and sometimes getting to go to a friend’s house to spend the night. His friends could not go home with him due to his mom’s boyfriend. His worst memory of school was getting a paddling every day in middle school. He actually left school the year he repeated ninth grade.

He got along with most teachers but the bus driver didn’t like him. She got him in trouble almost every day. He was retained in kindergarten, fifth grade and ninth grade. He was able to make up fifth grade in summer school and move on to sixth grade. His main success in school was that he was a good runner. He received awards for that and wanted to run track in high school but his parents wouldn’t let him.

He had a couple of special education teachers try to help him but no one else. The only intervention to keep him in school was the principal telling him about the GED program. This was the only time he had talked with the principal. The hardest part of

school for him was not getting the help he needed. Few teachers would help him and many didn't even show up for class. He felt that the school could have helped him stay if the teachers had read the school records and looked at his disabilities. He felt he would have stayed if teachers had been willing to help him. He believes school leaders could improve schools by having programs to talk to kids and encourage them. He also felt that because schools are underfunded there are not enough teachers to help. He decided to return and get his GED because of how rough his life had been. He had lived in tents and under rock cliffs. He was currently living without power but at least had a trailer to live in. He expressed that the GED will let him find a job and better himself. He believed he had finally grown up.

Participant A-14. Participant A-14 was a nineteen year-old male who started changing schools when he went to high school. He did not have an official job in high school but was paid "under the table." He was really far behind because of moving around and what he believed was depression. He felt his only option was getting the GED. He began to think about leaving school when he saw his last report card during his sophomore year. He was also taking some junior level classes. His father left school in the tenth grade. Growing up his parents told him that graduation would provide a better life and job. At first, his dad was not happy when he told them he was leaving school but when he saw his grades and realized he would be twenty or twenty-one before he could graduate he understood. Thinking about the future and the need for an income led him back to get his GED.

He described himself as someone who had had diabetes since age seven. He was a social person and proud to have been Alabama born and raised. His best friend in high

school didn't go to the same school but their dads were friends. His friend was hyperactive like him, loved sports and family. Sometimes his friend was too hyperactive. As far as he knew, all his friends graduated from high school. The advice he would give someone thinking about dropping out would be that it made life a lot tougher. The only jobs anyone could get were at McDonalds and Burger King. Dropouts also miss out on a lot like the prom, senior year activities and not seeing friends.

His first memory of school was that he was never good at it and always struggled. He did like naptime. He enjoyed history because he thought war was fascinating. He also enjoyed English but was not sure why. He hated math and couldn't understand geometry even though he took it for two years. In elementary school his reading ability was a little lower than others and he was not a "big" reader. In the seventh through ninth grade he played soccer but when he moved his new school didn't have a soccer team.

His best memory of school was playing soccer. His worst memory of elementary and middle school was being bullied. The bullying stopped when he outgrew the bullies but the damage was still there. His relationships with staff were varied. Some teachers said he would be a drug dealer and wouldn't graduate, while he was "cool" with other teachers. He felt the counselor didn't like him. He was retained in kindergarten and again in tenth grade. His greatest successes in school were being the class clown, getting along with people and playing soccer.

He noted that staff didn't do a lot to help him nor did anyone attempt to intervene and keep him in school. The most difficult part of school was caring about what happened to him. When he left his first high school he was depressed, didn't know anyone and just didn't care. He felt the school could have helped if they had pushed a

little harder instead of trying to push him out. In his opinion, high schools could be improved if there was more time to talk, especially between classes. He changed his mind and came back to get his GED because of his father's encouragement and the need to get a job.

Participant A-15. Participant A-15 was a fifty-three year old female who had no formal jobs during high school but worked quite a bit at home. She felt that the decision to leave school was not hers but happened because she was sent to live with a family in Michigan because her parents could not afford for her stay at home. Relocating to another area of the country was very difficult for her. The other students made fun of her because of her strong southern accent. There was never a time in her life that she thought about leaving school until she moved. She liked school and always wanted to finish but she got married and life got in the way. Her mother died when she was still in school and her father finished his education while in the Navy. He also left the home to work and support the family. Her parents did not say much about school when she was growing up but her stepmother made her stay home and miss school. Her stepparents did not care about her or school. They were the main reason she quit school. She has now returned to school because she understood that more was required to get a job.

When asked about herself she stated that she was a good mother, a good person and a hard worker. In high school she had a group of friends that she hung out with. They were smart and she wanted to be like them. They provided someone to talk with since she did not have that opportunity at home. Her home life was very strict. All of her friends graduated but she did have a son who has dropped out. She would advise any

high school student not to drop out of school. In her opinion it was a devastating experience and there would be no jobs available for those who decide to drop out.

For her school was a refuge since life was so hard at home. She always liked school and was happy there. She enjoyed English and history because she loved to read and her reading level in school was average or a little above compared to others in her class. Math and science were her least favorite subjects because she thought they were boring. Hands on activities were more enjoyable and she did much better in those types of classes. Because of her home issues she was not allowed to play sports or participate in any extra-curricular activity. She was involved in the clubs related to vocational classes. Her inability to be involved in school due to the home expectations was hard for her. She actually left school at the end of her junior year in Michigan. She thought she was a senior but was told she needed eight more credits and would not be able to get a driver's license. The relationships with teachers were positive for the most part. She was never retained and was even a helper for other students. She had no teacher try to help her in school, except for one who attempted to assist with her home environment. There were no intervention plans put in place or suggested. She felt schools could be improved if all students were treated the same.

Procedures and Emerging Themes

Based on the analysis of the 15 interviews and the transcripts of the participants' interviews, four major themes surfaced along with sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes were organized systematically to align with the study's conceptual framework, which attempted to explain why students leave school without a diploma. The themes came from Rumberger's (2001) suggestion that qualities of students, influences on

students and engagement and success in school impacts their decision to leave school without graduating. Theme one, characteristics of participants as students, reviewed the environmental and home influences on the participants. These environmental and home influences emerge in six sub-themes that reflect a more in-depth analysis of the participant characteristics.: single parent/fatherless homes, changing schools, life altering event or injury, family structure and poverty, impact of work, and traits of the participants. This theme and sub-themes reflected the foundation of the participants' attitudes toward school. Theme two, peer and adult influences on participants, provided an in-depth look into how relationships the participants developed with others and engagement in school influenced their decision to leave school early. The groups that relationships were developed with and school activities were revealed in the sub-themes: positive or negative relationships with school staff, peer influences, parent influences, lack of school and staff interventions, lack of engagement in school, and lack of extra-curricular activities. Theme three, school influences on participants, revealed the participants' experiences in school and how these experiences were negative influences, leading them to leave school. The school influences included six sub-themes: grades and performance, grade retention, attendance issues, discipline issues, school policies, and school organization. Theme four, participant reflection, displayed information regarding the participants' regret over making the choice to leave school early, who they blamed for this decision and their advice for students who are faced with the same dilemma, along with advice on how to improve schools to help students similar to them. Table 2 revealed these themes, sub-themes, and compared them to Rumberger's work used for the conceptual framework.

Table 2

Major Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Rumberger	
Characteristics of the Participants as Students	Single Parent/Fatherless	School Mobility	
	Home	Teenage Parenthood	
	Changing Schools	Socio-Economic Status	
	Life Altering Event or Injury	Parent Education	
	Family Structure and Poverty	Single Parent Families	
	Impact of Work	Step Parent Families	
	Traits of Participants		Gender
			Race
			Ethnicity
			Immigration Status
Peer and Adult Influences on Participants	Positive or Negative Relationships with School Staff	Language Background	
	Peer Influences	Low Educational and Occupational Aspirations	
	Parent Influences	Family Background and Influences	
	Lack of School and Staff	Peer Influences	
		Need for Interventions	
		Lack of School Engagement	

	Interventions	
	Lack of Engagement In	
	School	
	Lack of Extra-curricular	
	activities	
School Influences on	Grades and Performance	Attendance
Participants	Grade Retention	Misbehavior
	Attendance Issues	Grade Retention
	Discipline Issues	Student Composition
	School Policies	School Resources
	School Organization	School Structure
		School Processes and
		Practices
Participant Reflection	Regrets	None Noted
	Advice for Students	
	Considering Leaving	
	School	
	Advice for Improving	
	Schools	
	Feelings About School	
	Motivators to Return to	
	School	

Theme 1: characteristics of the participants as students. Rumberger (2001) suggested that many educators consider a student's background as the single most important factor to success in school. Rumberger (2001) went on to suggest that a student's background prior to entering school, including educational goals and previous accomplishments, influences his/her success in school. This study's findings were consistent with Rumberger's study, thereby substantiating that socio-economic status and family structure contributed to a young person's attitude concerning school and were strong predictors for completion of school with a diploma. In this study, participants tended to come from families of low socioeconomic status, single parent or fatherless homes, parents with little educational attainment, and with other family members who were dropouts.

The majority of the participants in this study expressed an understanding of the circumstances that led to their dropping out of school and of the environmental factors that were out of their control. Participant A-07 made the statement: "I got pregnant my junior year and they didn't allow pregnant women to go to school there, so I had to drop out." All of the participants realized their home environment affected their attitude about school and their future. For example, Participant A-02 said, "I traveled all around the country. I never really had a stable home." He went on to say, "When I was growing up I had a really tough childhood, a lot of negative references about school and little understanding about what I wanted to do." Similarly, Participant A-11 felt she had to leave school because "I had to dropout to take care of my baby brother. Mother mode kicked in." Participant A-13 also had a very difficult home environment and noted that "My mom's boyfriend made me pay for bills and I had to quit school. I also had no transportation or

place to live.” The participants also failed to see the connection of education with future employment during their years in school. Participant A-08 said “[I] got out on my own and didn’t think a lot about school or my future.”

Theme 1a: single parent and fatherless homes. Three of the participants revealed they lived in single parent homes while in school. Two lived in fatherless homes but one of the two lived in a home where his mother’s boyfriend was mentally and emotionally abusive. Participant A-13 said the following about his life:

I’ve had a rough life. I’ve had to live in tents. It wasn’t my choice. I was living in a tent while I was going to the high school up there in Avery County, the first year, during the Blizzard of ‘93. I was living in a tent and my mother and her boyfriend was living in another tent. And, there was a bunch of other stuff in between that.

Mom’s boyfriend made me pay rent. I’ve had to live under rock cliffs.

Participant A-15 shared that the time she started the path to being a dropout was when “I was sent to live with this family when my mother died, and they lived in Michigan. In fact, my step-mother kept me at home, and I had to work at home and miss school.” Her life was “turned upside down” and she was not able to adjust to the move. Participant A-07 stated, “my step-dad dropped out and was not concerned about me leaving school.”

The participants from single parent homes lacked the emotional and financial stability needed to overcome the issues they faced in school. The chaos they lived in at home spilled over into their school lives and impacted their ability to progress in school. None of the participants in single-parent homes had a parent willing or able to advocate for them to stay in school.

Theme 1b: changing schools. Educational stability, staying in the same school until a time of transition, promotes graduating from high school (Rumberger, 2001). Of the six participants who changed schools, four had no choice and two changed to avoid an unpleasant situation. For those two, their current school provided too many challenges due to discipline and attendance issues for them to continue. They felt they had no options other than getting out of an unmanageable and painful situation. For the remaining four participants, they felt the new schools were uninviting and unwelcoming.

Changing schools caused participants to get behind academically, become separated from friends, and be unable to continue in specific school activities. The non-voluntary moves led to missing days from school and the development of an indifferent attitude. Participant A-14 said, “We moved around a lot and I got behind.” He went on to say, “When I left my first school I didn’t know anyone and didn’t care. This caused my depression to get worse.” Similarly, participant A-08 said, “I had issues at my first school and transferred to another school.

Theme 1c: life altering event or injury. Most of the participants experienced events in their lives that were difficult to cope with. Alat (2002) said that when students experience a traumatic event in their life (e.g., violence, physical accidents, abuse, or sudden death of a family member) they would suffer cognitive and affective difficulties. These events, whether the death of a parent, an accident, an injury while participating in wrestling, the need to provide care for a younger sibling or a life threatening illness, created circumstances that the participants felt they could not overcome. Participant A-01 described his experience as:

I left school during my sophomore year. I had home issues, depression, was involved in drugs. And, because of that drug involvement I was expelled from school. But, through that I felt that I had learned a lot about myself and the need for an education.

Participant A-05 had an injury that started him down the path to leave school. He related his issues as follows:

Well, I tore my ACL, and they (coaches and trainers) told me it wasn't torn, so I had to wrestle two more matches with it. I walked on it for about a week, then finally I went to the doctor because it was still swollen. They told me it was just a sprain, and then I went down to a sports/medicine doctor. He told me I should have had surgery two weeks before.

Health issues were also a catalyst for participant A-02's decision to leave school. He said, "The health issues I had when I started school continued to cause me problems."

Participant A-14 also had health issues. He stated, "I had diabetes since I was seven years old" which forced him to miss school and fall behind academically. Participant A-13's life altering event was the death of his father. He stated, "Dad had passed away before I left school. Would have finished if dad hadn't died. Mom didn't care."

Participant A-03 also had to deal with death. She explained her issues as:

We owned a market, and I was in the store with my brother and he died. When he died we sold the store. I had never drawn unemployment in my life, and I thought well I'm going to sign up for it and see what happens, so I did. I had to go to meetings at the unemployment office, one of the

ladies out there told me that at my age, and my education that I was unemployable, and maybe I could just go clean houses. I thought I don't even like to clean my own house, much less someone else's. So, that was that, and I got to thinking about what she said to me, and it was so, it would be really scary if I wasn't where I was at in my life, being financially able to make it, and trying to get a job. Know what I'm saying?

Divorce was another example of a disruptive life event. Participant A-08 explained the change in his life as, "Everything fell apart in ninth grade. I was kicked off the baseball team and my parents divorced." Without the support of his parents and coaches, he was no longer motivated to stay in school.

Most of the participants believed there was little to no support for them at the school level and few believed they had resources at home to help them. Participants were faced with life challenges that they were unable to deal with given, their perceptions of support. Participant A-09 stated, "Seems like they [school staff] just really didn't care." Participant A-11 said, that the school staff "didn't help me do anything." Since many of these events occurred during the participants' early high school years, they were the catalysts that led them to leave school.

Theme 1d: family structure and poverty. Finn (1989) suggested that many of the reasons students drop out of school were related to socio-economics. Students from generational poverty lack many of the resources needed to be successful in school. The participants in the study who believed they were poor, felt disadvantaged and disengaged from school. Participant A-03 related her circumstances as, "We were really poor. We

were a poor family and we didn't get the same attention that kids did in families with money.”

This lack of resources manifested itself in participants not receiving proper medical treatment, living in sub-standard housing, not being able to complete assignments and being unable to participate in school activities. Participant A-15 made the comment, “I got married, and life sort of took over. I never really wanted to quit school; life kind of took over.” Participant A-03 felt the pain of generational poverty by stating another point, “I felt like teachers did not give me the same attention as children with money. I felt like me and my family lived in poverty.” Participant A-02 stated, “When I was growing up I had a really tough childhood with not much money.” Payne (1998) also suggests that students in similar circumstances are even discouraged by their families to complete school and are normally from female dominated homes,

Theme 1e: impact of work. In this study, only one participant worked a substantial job while attending high school. In his view, his job was not a factor in leaving school. Participant A-15 did not work outside the home but she did work at home, in her words, “quite a bit.” Several participants worked during the summer or in odd jobs for which they were paid off the books. None of the participants worked long hours or at times that made it difficult to attend school. Participant A-13 did stated, “I dropped out to get a job.” He had to pay for his living expenses and he could not go to school and work enough to pay for his expenses. Even though work did not force the participants to leave school the need for a good paying job did motivate them to return to get a GED.

Theme 1f: traits of participants. Personal traits are predictors of student success in school. Students whose qualities match what schools reward (i.e. good attendance, paying attention, doing assignments on time, not misbehaving, participating in class, etc.) normally graduate from school while those who have qualities not emphasized in schools (i.e., students with attitudes, behavior issues, performances that challenge the lower limits of acceptability, smarting off in answering questions, late or almost late to class, mildly and perpetually disruptive, sloppy presentation of work, etc.) normally struggle (Rumberger, 2001). The participants shared several positive traits. These traits included perceiving themselves as outgoing, friendly, having the ability to set goals, being good with their hands, being persistent, liking people, willing to get the job done, and being a positive person. Participant A-02 described himself as, someone who “like[s] to learn. I want to get some sort of education in science. I feel like I excel in computers, and want to create computer programs.” Participant A-03 said, “I love people, and I love working with people.” Participant A-05 said this about himself: “Right off, I can get along with people. I work well with other people. And I can do whatever I’ve been told.” Participant A-06 stated, “I care a lot about people and like to help them. I’m going into psychology. I’m outgoing, and not very judgmental.”

They also realized that negative personal traits, like not following-through, being a procrastinator, and being too social, hurt their chances of success in school. Participant A-12 put it this way: “I am a procrastinator. I set goals but don’t complete them.” Participant A-14 experienced problems in school because as he says, “I am a very social person.” These traits are unrewarded in schools, tend to give educators a negative opinion of students and lead to students being unsuccessful academically.

Theme 2: peer and adult influences on participants. Young people are bombarded continually by influences from others. One of the most powerful influences came from a student's peer group.

The earliest influences on a student come from parents since they are their child's first teacher. Terry (2008) suggests that parents rank a close second to classroom teachers in influencing their child's decision regarding school along with their total attitude about school. Each participant had a vivid memory of the comments their parents made about school and their teachers. Participant A-13 described what his dad told him: "When I was eight or nine Dad said you will need a high school diploma to get a good job." Participant A-14 shared a theme that was common among the participants. He stated, "My parents wanted me to get an education so I can have a good job."

Theme 2a : positive or negative relationships with school staff. Teachers and staff often have a tremendous influence on the students they work with. The importance of staff/student relationships was emphasized throughout the literature review. Theme 2a contained the participant's perceptions on their relationship with teachers and staff. Most participants had at least one teacher with whom they had a positive relationship. The participants each commented on positive and negative relationships with teachers and staff. Participant A-01 put it this way: "I had good relationships with my teachers. I had more in common with science and history teachers, which is probably one of the reasons I liked those two subjects most. I didn't like the math teachers."

They each revealed an understanding of how important teachers were in the life of a student. Participant A-01 said:

I did have a seventh grade science teacher that went out of his way to help me. He knew that I was very smart in science and tried to encourage me to do homework even though it was boring and I didn't enjoy doing it.

Many participants gave advice that centered on teachers making an effort to get to know and help their students. Participant A-01 went on to state, "Teachers need to understand that students depend on them and need them." Participant A-07 stated the following about her teachers, "We were very close, they knew my whole family, and if I had any problems I could go to any of them." Participant A-09 said:

I knew one of the janitors, he was a good buddy, to just about every student there ever was. He'd talk to anybody. He was just a good all-around guy. And, then I'd say some of my teachers I got along with them, and certain ones of them I didn't get along with. I just didn't pay attention real well.

All participants liked the majority of their teachers but most related at least one incident in which a teacher negatively impacted them. Participant A-04 shared the following:

I had a good relationship with coaches. I had a good relationship with some teachers. It was kind of like a give respect to get respect thing. Some teachers I didn't care for too much, because of the way that they acted. They didn't care for me. There (was) some classes where, it seemed like some teachers weren't that good at explaining things. The majority of the teachers that I had that I didn't really care for that much were in my earlier high school years. After that I could kind of plan which classes to take and who to take them with, and stuff like that.

The negative characteristics of faculty described by the participants were: (a) not being willing to provide one on one help; (b) not expecting them to do well in their class;(c) not caring about students; (d) not explaining the material; (e) having a negative attitude; and (f) having favorites.

Even though the participants shared positive relationships with at least one teacher, no participant discussed a positive relationship with an administrator or counselor. The only interaction they had with an administrator was for a discipline issue or to encourage them to leave high school and get a GED. The majority of participants had negative comments about their relationship with a counselor. They believed their counselor either discouraged them or withheld information that might have helped them stay in school. They also believed their counselor did not provide the information they needed about school policies and graduation requirements. Participant A-9 shared

I knew I could have probably talked to the counselors and maybe the principal, maybe to try to get some help, but sometimes it seems that they just don't want to listen to the problems that the students have.

Participant A-02 described his relationships as generally unhelpful:

I did have some difficult relationships with staff. One counselor said some things about me that weren't true, and my health issues were not addressed. The counselor did not relate that to the teachers and help me get from class to class. I had a math teacher that tried to help some but would only tutor for about 5 minutes and that was not enough time. I just didn't feel like anyone was willing to take the time that I needed to be successful. I did do studying at home and

wanted to do better, but I continued to fall behind because of my continued health issues.

Participant A-14 described his relationships with staff as hostile: “Some teachers said I would be a drug dealer and wouldn’t graduate. The counselor didn’t like me.”

Participants had limited interactions with administrators and when they did interact, the administrator encouraged the participant to leave school and get a GED. Participant A-14 said the only time I talked with the principal, “He tried to talk me into getting a GED.” Participant A-10 said that during the only conversation she had with the principal that he said, “It would be better if you left.” Participant A-07 said, “I think the principal had it out for me anyway, because of who I was dating at the time. Of course, that gave me a bad reputation.”

Theme 2b: peer influences. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) suggested that negative peer influences increase a student’s likelihood of becoming a dropout. The participants discussed how their friends in school influenced them and their actions. Participant A-11 said that her friends “Caused me trouble. They skipped school and I went along with them.” Participant A-12 also stated, “[I] could have made better decisions without my friends.”

Most of the participants listed their best memory of school as spending time with their friends. Whether it was hanging out during Friday night football games, spending nights with each other, or just walking around school together, friends were important. Participant A-05 said one of his best memories of school was, “Probably Friday night football games, time to hang out with everybody, all your friends and socialize.” The participants each discussed how influential their friends were. Several participants also

talked about how their friends attempted to talk them into staying in school. “The only person that tried to keep me from dropping out of school was my best friend,” said Participant A-11. All but two participants shared that all their close friends completed school. On the other side however, Participant A-09 shared, “Well, I had one buddy that I hung around with but he left school way before I ever thought about it.”

Theme 2c: parent influences. Each participant commented on parental encouragement. In a number of incidences, the participants described an environment supportive of school and encouraging about graduating from school. Participant A-04 confirmed his parents’ support by saying:

They wanted me to stay in school and get decent grades. They never really ever pushed me to be a straight up straight A student, they just wanted me to not make C’s and D’s. They were passionate about me doing good and moving on to college so I could get a good education and get in a good work field.

Similarly, participant A-08 emphasized that “My parents always valued education.”

However, this support and encouragement deteriorated over time along with the inability of parents to assist with homework. Participant A-11 revealed that her parents “were not involved at all when I got to high school.” Participant A-13 said, “My parents couldn’t help me with homework.” Two other participants revealed their parents were functionally illiterate.

The majority of participants sensed their parents were supportive and understanding when they decided to leave school without graduating. Participant A-04, when asked about parent reaction when he told them he was leaving, shared, “Yeah, they were fine with it. They want me to get this done so I can move on with my life.”

Participant A-5 continued this theme by stating, “Yeah, we sat down and had a long talk about it. They decided it was better to come up here [to the GED program].” In contrast, parent reaction to leaving school was not the same for Participant A-09. He stated, “They didn’t like it too much. They wanted me to keep going and stay in school. But, I told them I would do my best to get my GED. And, now I’m finally starting to get it.” Participant A-01 shared that his parents did not support him and were not positive about school. He said, “My parents had very few positive things to say about school or about me. They basically said I was not as smart as others and they don’t know I have gone back.” Most shared that their parents did expect them to get their GED.

In several instances parents were the driving force for them to work toward their GED. Participant A-14 shared that he returned to school because “My dad encouraged me.” Participant A-12 indicated that, “I want to be a police officer like my dad. That is why I am getting a GED.” Parental support for most participants was stronger early in their school career. When participants entered high school, most parents were not actively supportive of school or encouraging their child to be involved in school activities.

In most instances, participants reported that parents were positive in their discussion about school. No participant shared negative comments from their parents about school when they were young but in high school several participants commented on their parents disagreeing with how the school handled specific issues. When relating comments from parents, Participant A-05 said, “They decided it was better to come up here, because they felt it was kind of crappy (sic) the way that they did me.” Participant

A-11 went on to say, “My parents didn’t care if I left (school) because of the way they treated me.”

Most participants had at least one parent who was a high school dropout along with other family members. Parents’ example of being a dropout spoke much louder than the words of encouragement and support. None of the participants shared an incidence in which a parent advocated for them with anyone at the school who could have made decisions that would have supported the participants staying in school. A few of these parents returned to get their GED, which acted as a motivator for some of the participants to return to a formal education setting.

Theme 2d: lack of school and staff interventions. None of the participants perceived they had anyone to advocate for them or had an intervention plan developed. Most of the participants felt that no one cared about them or even knew they left school. In the minds of the participants, the only comments from school staff were words of encouragement to leave school and enter the GED program. Based on participant comments, the absence of intervention plans was a factor in the participants making the decision to leave school. Participant A-01 confirmed this fact when he said, “I never remember anyone trying to intervene to help me stay in school.” Continuing the same thought, Participant A-02 stated:

Later, in my school career there was really no interventions put in place to help support me. There was a kindergarten teacher that tried to help me but [the] intervention was so early in my career it didn’t really help a whole lot.

Participant A-10 continued the same theme when he said:

It didn't really seem like it very much. I didn't actually leave, I got kicked out from when I missed right near 10 days. Then I came back and was there for a week and then I got sick and I was gone for just a day or 2 to 3 days. They hadn't called about me missing any days, so we called up there and they had dropped me from the roll. When I tried to go back and enroll they didn't want me to come back. They said I didn't say anything.

Theme 2e: lack of engagement in school. Students who are engaged in school and in the classroom are more likely to graduate from high school (Rumberger, 2001). Rumberger (2001) suggests there are two aspects to engagement: academic and social. Engagement is disclosed in students' attitudes and behaviors with respect to the formal and informal aspects of school. Academic disengagement happens when a student's attendance and grade begins to deteriorate, while social disengagement begins to occur when students begin to believe they have no friends or reasons to attend school.

Most participants reported not being engaged in school and felt left out of classroom activities. They shared that teachers did little to involve or engage them in their learning and were unwilling to spend additional time to help them. Participant A-02 made his point by saying, "I had a math teacher that tried to help some but would only tutor for about five minutes and that was not enough time." Participant A-12 said, "They didn't help me do anything."

Several participants felt that if teachers provided more one on one assistance they could have been more successful in school. Participant A-09 suggested, "Students would be more successful if teachers would give one on one help.... Mrs. B was the only teacher who would sit down one on one and help me. I did good in her class."

Theme 2f: lack of extra-curricular activities. Research on dropouts also indicates that participating in extra-curricular activities and having something to do while in school can impact students' decision to stay in school. Students who are involved in sports are more likely to do well and graduate (Kortering et al., 1998).

At the time they left school, none of the study participants were involved in extra-curricular activities. Very few of the participants were involved in extra-curricular activities at any time and for those who did participate, only two participated after ninth grade. Participant A-04 was one who did participate after ninth grade. He shared his experiences: "Freshman year I played football and wrestled. My sophomore year I ran cross-country and wrestled. My junior year I just wrestled and my senior year I wrestled."

Several of the participants would have liked to have participated in extra-curricular activities but their parents would not allow it, they didn't have transportation, or they could not afford the equipment. Participant A-01 explained his dilemma when he said, "In school I did not participate in any type of school activities, because I could not afford do so." "The only activity I participated in was band; I didn't enjoy it because of the teacher and due to my asthma I was not able to participate in really any kind of physical activities," said participant A-02. Participant A-10 was in also in middle school band but she stated, "I was in band at middle school but didn't have money for instruments."

Theme 3: school influences on participants. Schools as organizations have strong influences on student achievement along with dropout behavior. Many times it was difficult to demonstrate the influence schools had and identify the specific factors

that affected student achievement (Zvoch, 2006). Educators or researchers can't determine one discrete school influence that impacts students most. The influences on students that trigger dropout behaviors are as unique as the students themselves.

Schools influence student withdrawal through general policies and practices designed to promote the effectiveness of the school and through policies and decisions that encourage students to involuntarily withdraw from school. These rules, conversely, can encourage low grades, poor attendance, misbehavior, or retentions that can lead to suspensions, expulsions, or school mobility (Bowditch, 1993; Darby, 2014; Fine, 1991; Jimerson et al., 2002; Riehl, 1999).

Theme 3a: grades and performance. Academic performance is a strong indicator of high school completion (Garnier et al., 1997). Many of the participants simply gave up because of falling behind in school. They did not have the desire or resources to continue in school. Participant A-13 said, "I left school because I really got behind." Participant A-2 shared his experience as:

The hardest thing in high school was the fact that I fell behind because of my health issues, and it was hard for me to catch up and there was just areas, or certain classes, I was not good in.

As a group, participant grades tended to go down over time. Most reported they did well in elementary school except for two who were retained in kindergarten. High school was the time that participants encountered an assignment they couldn't complete or felt they had no chance of making up the work they had missed. Participant A-03 shared the following:

I really don't know why I quit. The one thing that sticks in my mind is we had a biology class and we had to collect 50 insects, and we had to identify them. If we didn't we failed the class and I knew I was never going to touch those bugs. That's one thing that sticks in my mind.

For the majority of the participants, math was the one subject they disliked most.

Participant A-04 left school because math was difficult: "I didn't want to take another math. I'm still having to work on that math." Participant A-05 expressed his thoughts as follows:

Well, um, I felt like one of the reasons was when I was a sophomore I took a course, it was a math course, and I'm not very good at math, so it was a course called Fundamentals of Advanced Algebra. They said it would count as my 4th math whenever I took it. Well, after I took it they told me it would only count as an elective class. So, I feel like the guidelines weren't that clear when I took it. And another reason was the workload of the Senior Project, and it was all the work that I was doing and I felt like I just didn't have time for the Senior Project.

Theme 3b: grade retention. The majority of the participants in the study were either retained during their school experience or were required to make up lost time due to external circumstances. For many, the impetus for leaving school was being retained in high school. After repeating ninth or tenth grade multiple times, several participants didn't feel they could continue. In their minds time was running out and they needed to move on with their lives. Participant A-08 summed it up well for the group: "I was so far behind in the tenth grade I just stopped coming." Also,

participant A-04 left because, as he said, “I couldn’t see spending two more years in the tenth grade.”

Theme 3c: attendance issues. Poor attendance was another indicator of students eventually dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2001). Multiple absences caused many of the participants to become further disengaged in school, caused them to fall behind academically, and led to them do poorly in school. Many of the participants’ attendance issues were in response to illness, injury, or suspension from school. Several participants attempted to bring notes from doctors but believed that school officials, especially counselors, did not follow through and use the notes to excuse the absences. The participants became frustrated because they lost credit for courses due to attendance policies and just gave up. Participant A-05 stated, “I got behind because of missing days.” Participant A-09 felt pushed out of school because of attendance issues. He described his experience as:

It didn’t really seem like they cared very much. I didn’t actually leave, I got kicked out from when I missed right near 10 days. Then I came back and was there for a week and then I got sick and I was gone for just a day or 2 to 3 days. They hadn’t called about me missing any days, so we called up there and they had dropped me from the roll. When I tried to go back and enroll they didn’t want me to come back. They said I didn’t say anything.

Participant A-10 also felt missing school caused her to be pushed out of school. She said, “I was sick and missed a lot of days. I brought doctor’s notes but they were lost.”

Participant A-04 also stated:

Well, I tore my ACL as I was wrestling, and I took medical notes to the school

and they still hadn't excused all the absences so I had to either go 2 more years or I could come up here and get my diploma up here. So, I decided to come up here and do that.

Several participants began to skip school with friends and the participants shared that this behavior leads to a loss of interest in school. Participant A-12 related that she "skipped 58 days of high school but had good attendance the other years of school." For the participants, their desires and future plans were located outside the school environment. When the participants became more disengaged from school, which manifested itself in skipping and missing school, they finally just stopped showing up for school. Participant A-08 said, "I just didn't want to be at school. There were a thousand other things I would rather be doing. I just stopped coming."

Theme 3d: discipline issues. School discipline policies can be a significant predictor of student school success. When students perceive a fair discipline policy school dropout rates can be decreased (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Zero tolerance discipline policies that require automatic suspension or expulsion and arrest for serious discipline infractions and illegal activity normally impact dropout rates in a negative way (Miller et al., 2005). Policies that increase the likelihood of punitive consequences for minor discipline issues also increase the number of students put at risk for dropping out (Miller et al., 2005).

Many of the participants missed school time due to suspensions. Two participants believed they had to move to another school due to discipline issues. When they changed schools they lost interest and began the journey of leaving school. One participant felt

that he was disciplined almost daily in middle school due to issues on the school bus. Participant A-13 said, “I got a paddling almost every day in middle school.”

Zero tolerance policies led to the expulsion of two participants due to drug possession. Each would have continued in school if they had been given the opportunity.

Participant A-01 relates an incident early in his school career:

I was retained in the 3rd grade due to an incident of having an eyeglass repair kit at school, which was classified as a weapon. I was pretty much long-termed suspended and was not able to get caught back up.

Theme 3e: school policies. For several participants, school policies had a negative impact on them. Three of the participants noted that the requirement of a senior project was a factor in leaving school. Participant A-05 commented, “Another reason for leaving school was the workload of the senior project, and it was all the work that I was doing and I felt like I just didn’t have time for the senior project.” One participant was forced from school due to a pregnancy and the private school she attended did not allow a pregnant student to attend. One participant was classified as a dropout due to not passing a senior exit exam.

Attendance policies that required students to make-up time led many of participants to leave school. Participant A-05 also said:

If the school had kept the notes that I had brought from the doctor to school, I wouldn’t have had to repeat 2 grades. The school said that they had lost the notes.

The participants did not feel the policies allowed for any flexibility and actually forced them out of school.

Theme 3f: school organization. Studies show that the organization and structure of schools can predict school dropout rates (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; McNeal, 1997b; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000).

Several of the participants left school due to the organization of their school. They did not like middle and high school students together in one building. Participant A-02 shared this concern:

I actually dropped out of school when I was only 15. The middle school and high school was joined together, and that caused issues for me because it seemed unorganized and I didn't like that or feel like that was helpful to me.

One student had to repeat an entire grade level because she moved from a public to a private school. Participant A07 said she was retained in school because, "That one year that I went to public school, they held me back, when I went back to private school." Most of the participants attended small schools and felt more engaged in school because of the size. Two participants moved to large schools and felt unwanted and left out.

Theme 4: participant reflection. This segment discusses the participants' thoughts about their school experience, what most impacted their decision to leave school, their feelings about leaving school without a diploma, the advice they have for other students and advice on how high schools can be improved for students like them. As the participants reflected on their school experience, they shared regret over their decision, described lack of interest from school officials, and offered advice that could be

used to assist in closing the gap in the literature regarding the perspective of school dropouts.

Since many of the participants were mature enough to look back objectively on their school experience, their advice was thoughtful and meaningful not reactionary and defensive as it would have been at the time they actually left school.

Theme 4a: regrets. This segment reviews the participants' thoughts about dropping out and the regret they had about this decision.

Each participant revealed that he or she regretted leaving school without a diploma. Based on their reactions and passionate remarks, they gave every impression of being honest about regretting their decision. They also felt they could have continued if there had been more support and encouragement. Each participant shared that they regretted their decision or the circumstance that led them to leaving school. Each would have liked to continue to attend school if they had felt they had a chance to be successful. Their regret over leaving school impacted their decision to return to get a GED. Participant A-10 said, "I dropped out of school and regret it." Participant A-13 continued this thought by saying, "I ended up dropping out in the second year in the ninth grade and got me a job. I hate I had to do that." Participant A-14 revealed his regrets when he stated:

I only made it to the 10th, so I didn't get to go to prom, or senior year and all that. It's hard to see your friends, because they are in school and you are having to work your butt off to make ends meet.

Participant A-09 made the comment, "When I tried to go back and enroll they didn't want me to come back. They said I didn't say anything and I wish I had done more to get back

in school.” Each of the participants shared that they would have liked to have finished school and not have been required to return later in life.

Theme 4b: advice for students considering leaving school. The advice each participant shared for other students was well thought out and sincere. Their advice, which came from the heart, suggested that students should avoid getting behind in school and stay on track to graduate. The participants also recommended that all students have a plan and have goals for their lives if they have to leave school. Participants expressed that students should know that getting a GED was more difficult than they thought and life away from school was difficult. The consensus from the group was that if students leave school they will miss school activities and all the good times that come with being in high school.

Participant A-01 said that if a student was considering leaving school to, “Just slap them. They need to be knocked into good thinking.” Participant A-03 spoke from years of experience when she said: “I would tell them they need to go on to school, and then they need to go on to college, because high school just don’t do it anymore.” Participant A-10 summarized the consensus of the group very well when he said the following:

Don’t do it. It’s definitely not worth the trouble of having to go back and finish later in life. I know I’ve learned my lesson from leaving school. I wish I had stayed and just got an actual high school diploma, and I’m probably a lot better off already, and anybody that leaves is going to have a lot more trouble.

Especially nowadays, the way it’s going.

The participants also recommended that the students have a plan and if they left school to be sure to have goals for their lives. Participant A-02 advised, “I would not

encourage them to leave and, if they did I would encourage them to have some sort of plan to move forward.” Participant A-04 also stated, “Make sure it’s what you want, know what you are going to do after school, and then plan according to that, whether it be stay in school or go somewhere else.”

They also wanted students to understand that getting a GED was more difficult than they thought and life away from school was tough. Participant A-11 advised, “Getting a GED is not as easy as you think. Must apply yourself. Students thinking about dropping out must understand how important education is and they will regret the decision for the rest of their life.” The consensus is that students miss too much if they leave school. Participant A-14 summarized this view when he stated, “you will miss out on a lot if you don’t graduate. The prom and your senior year. You don’t get to see friends.”

Theme 4c: advice for improving schools. As I continued the analysis process, I found myself drawn to the advice the participants gave about improving schools. Their advice, although spontaneous, was a mixture of reflections from specific times in their lives, events that occurred in school, times staff let them down, and thoughts about how things could have been different if they had stayed in school. As the participants reflected back on the past, they were able to discuss their thoughts about improving schools.

The advice the participants provided on improving schools was, for me, the most important facet of the study. Based on the participants’ reaction to the question, it was evident that their advice was heartfelt, thoughtful, reflective and important for them to provide. Their advice came from their thoughts about specific times in their life, events

that occurred in school, times they perceived staff let them down, and how their life could have been different if they had stayed in school.

The participants' advice focused on teachers caring about students, spending individual time with students, communicating rules consistently and schools providing a more flexible environment for students. The participants as a group collectively suggested that counselors needed to be more involved with students and take time to make students aware of rules, policies and requirements. They also felt administrators should be involved with students before they were ready to drop out and that instead of encouraging students to leave school they should be trying to talk them into staying.

Participant A-01 suggested, "To improve schools, the teachers need to understand that students depend on them and need them." Participant A-10 also suggested that schools offer "Programs so kids can have a one on one program if they don't understand." Participant A-04 added that schools needed "clearer course assignments. Plan from day one, work on plans from day one for students, and stick to those plans." Participant A-05 followed up by saying schools could do a better job "Probably, [by] keeping up with the paper work that everyone has, and if somebody is going to quit, try to help them and talk them out of it." Participant A-02 was specific with his advice:

Do more teacher observations, and to see how they are teaching and to correct problems when they occur. I would like to see school changed so that teachers knew if children were progressing, understanding the subject and were able to get the knowledge they need. Teachers had given up on me and tried to put me in classes that were not good for me. Teachers did believe I was trying, but teachers believed there was nothing else to do. Since I was not the best student ever,

combined with health issues I felt like that I had nothing else to do but just to leave school and try to do something different. I had to miss about half the school days due to health issues and if I had more time to deal with those health issues I might not have dropped out of school.

Participant A-03 gave advice that was personal to her. She stated “Every child should be treated the same, and if they had a learning disability and they fall behind, that they would try to help them.” Participant A-08 also stated this advice from a personal perspective: “Be more personable. Maybe not see troublemakers as an outcast in public. Deal with issues in private.” Participant A-12 added, “Teachers and staff need to worry more about education than what students wear.” Participant A-14 suggested that schools provide a “Little more time between classes for talk time.” Participant A-07 suggested, “show more attention to the students.” Participant A-11 summed up a common theme when she gave the advice, “don’t condemn but love on them” and went on to say:

I say don’t condone their behavior if they are acting up. You still continue to love on them, and make them feel as important, and not make a difference.

This advice was consistent throughout the themes developed in the study. The participants simply wanted adults, either school staff or parents, to care and treat them as individuals. In summation, the participants suggested that educators must consider the needs of students and not be so concerned about teaching the curriculum.

Theme 4d: feelings about school. A student’s perception of school dramatically impacts his/her motivation to persist in school. The participants’ feelings about school deteriorated as time passed. If they had felt the same about high school as they did elementary school, each of the participants would have had an excellent chance to

graduate from high school. The development of negative feelings about school occurred at the same time the participants sensed that few adults in their life, especially those at school, cared what happened to them. These thoughts were further solidified when the participants believed that no educator made an attempt to keep them in school when they knew the participants were contemplating dropping out of school.

Most of the participants liked school when they first started. Participant A-09 made the statement, “My kindergarten teacher, Miss E, she was the nicest woman I’ll ever meet, and the greatest teacher I ever had.” Their opinion of school became more negative as they advanced through middle school and then into high school. Participant A-12 said, “When I started I loved school. Best thing in the world. High school was the worst place in the world.”

The participants began to believe that no one in school or at home cared if they were in school or not. No one did anything to encourage them to stay in school or intervene when they discussed leaving. Participant A-01 summarized the thinking of the group when he said, “I never remember anyone trying to intervene to help me stay in school.”

Each of the participants talked about teachers who cared about them and did something special for them. The teachers who did not care and were unwilling to provide any additional help or support negated these positive relationships. Participants suggested that students would stay in school if teachers showed they cared, took time to better explain the material, and were willing to spend extra time with individual students.

Theme 4e: motivators to return to school. Participants openly and excitedly shared their motivations for returning to school to get a GED. Participants discussed

either external or internal motivators that led them to return to school to get a GED. The majority related that the need to get a good job and positively impact their future was the primary reason for getting a GED. Family influences had a very positive impact on the participants, especially their parents and participants' desire to be a role model for their own children. Participant A-11 made the comment, "I want to be an example for my children." Participant A-07 also wanted to return to school, "Because of my daughter." Similarly, Participant A-08 wanted, "Something to show my son." A few were motivated because of their desire to get an education. Participant A-12 stated she wanted to get a GED to, "Further my education."

Summary of the Results

To address the problem that was at the heart of the study, these research questions were posed. They were:

1. What are the primary influences affecting a young person's decision to leave school before receiving a diploma?
 - a. What are the family, peer and individual, and school influences that impact his or her decision?
 - b. What staff actions and school rules contributed to the decision to leave school?
 - c. Are there actions by peers that influence the decision to drop out?
2. At what point in a student's life does he or she begin to consider dropping out of school?
3. What can individual students do to better position themselves to graduate from high school?

4. What motivates students to return to a formal educational setting to try and secure a GED?

Research question one was posed to determine what were the most important influences in the decision to drop out of high school. The data were both extensive and varied. Perhaps the most defining influence was the perceived disconnect between participants' commonly expressed feeling that the school had lost concern for, along with the school's apparent lack of any intervention planning to address these perceptions.

Several important influences that initiated a decision to drop out of school were school policies that were intolerant of circumstances participants brought on themselves, such as pregnancy, drug use, injuries, and missing school. These policies were perceived by the participants to be inflexible and intolerant.

Question 1a inquired about the family, peer and individual, and school influences that impact the participants' decision to leave school. Adult influences were a powerful factor in leading the participants to leave high school. Parents were, in large part, a positive influence in the lives of the participants. The majority of participants recalled that their parents were positive about school, but in an apparent contradiction, they were supportive of the participants leaving school. Parents seemed unwilling to advocate for their children or confront the bureaucracy of schools. The majority of the parents were powerless to deal with the issues their children faced or tackle the obstacles that prevented them from progressing to graduation.

Most parents had set the example of being a high school dropout themselves. However, support for leaving school was contingent on the participants' finishing school at some other time or getting a GED. The influence of stepparents was not as positive.

These relationships led to participants not only leaving school but also leaving home. Participant comments revealed they loved their parents, wanted to please them, and wished to stay with them no matter how painful the living conditions might be.

Peers, especially close friends, were influential in the lives of the participants. Most every participant perceived that the best part of school was being with their friends. These friends provided powerful influences and for a couple of participants those influences were negative and helped solidify the decision to leave school. For other participants, their friends attempted to keep them in school, but in spite of their friends' counseling, the desperation they felt at school could not be overcome. The participants' friends, except for two, finished high school and could not influence the participants to stay in school.

For the majority of the participants, the influence of the school was the final factor that caused them to leave. Most of the participants enjoyed school when they began but as they progressed through school they fell behind, became dissatisfied, and gave up. This dissatisfaction was magnified by the lack of participation in school. None of the participants were actively involved in an extra-curricular activity when he/she left school. Also, only one participant continued in an extra-curricular activity after ninth grade. For most, their greatest success in school was while they were participating in an extra-curricular activity. From competing in a 4-H talent show to winning a state wrestling championship the participants longed to find success in school and be accepted by others. When their chances of success were gone, their school days were over.

Most of the participants felt their reading level was average or above compared to their classmates but they felt their math skills were lacking. For the majority of the

participants, math was the subject they disliked most and a major influence in him or her leaving school. The performance of students declined as they progressed from one grade to the next. This decline led most of the participants to be retained at least one time while in school. Most of the participants failed to advance at least one time during high school, and most failed to advance past tenth grade.

Question 1b addressed the influence of school staff and school rules that contribute to students leaving high school. Participants related positive influences on them by school staff along with negative influences that in most circumstances outweighed the positive influences. Teachers, and in some cases coaches, provided these positive influences on the participants. Yet these positive influences for most of the participants could not mitigate the circumstances that led the participants to dropping out of school. Each of the participants noted a lack of counselor involvement. None of the participants shared that they had ever had a positive relationship or even a positive encounter with a counselor. The interactions they had with a counselor related to the counselor not following through with what was promised or failing to share with the participant that they did not meet a requirement. The only interaction the participants had with administrators was to encourage them to leave school and get a GED or due to a discipline issue.

For most participants, school policies provided obstacles too great to overcome. Attendance policies impacted most of the participants in high school. Many of the participants missed enough days to force them to either make up a class or an entire school year. They got so far behind they couldn't see any hope of continuing in school.

Zero tolerance discipline policies impacted several of the participants. Possession of drugs put two participants out of school with no hopes of returning. A policy not allowing pregnant girls to be in school forced another participant out of a private school.

Question 1c posed how the example of peers influenced dropout behavior. Only four participants related that their friends left school before graduating. Those four were influenced by their peer group to skip school and to develop an attitude of not caring about anything, especially how they did in school. Several participants perceived that their friends encouraged them to stay in school and had set a good example for them to follow. Even though the example of friends was powerful, it did not overcome the difficulties that most of the participants dealt with on a personal basis that led them to leaving school.

Research question number two attempted to determine when a student began to consider leaving school. For all but one of the participants in the study, this determination coincided with a life-altering event or injury that occurred in high school. The participants shared that they had not considered dropping out of school until a traumatic event occurred in their life that forced them to either get behind in school or feel uninterested in being at school. Generally, the participants encountered a life altering or life-changing event that with their limited resources and support, provided too much difficulty to overcome. Most felt trapped in their individual prison of circumstances that were beyond their control. Through analysis it became evident that if educators had been listening many of these issues could have been mitigated. One participant began considering leaving school while in middle school. He had experienced health issues since starting school and had the feeling of being behind in school since

kindergarten. The inaction of school officials and parents did not provide the participants the resources and encouragement needed to overcome their life-changing events.

The third question asked what individual students could do to better position him/her to graduate from high school. The most appropriate answer to this question comes directly from the advice given by the participants. The participants each gave positive advice for students who might be considering dropping out of school. Some of the participants' advice to such students was (a) think about what they are doing; (b) encourage them to stay in school; (c) have a plan if they do leave; (d) stressing the need to finish high school and go to college; (e) consider the consequences; (f) leaving school is not worth the trouble it causes; (g) getting a GED is not as easy as it seems; (h) high school is easier than being on your own; (i) people can't get a good job without a diploma; and (j) students will miss a lot if they leave school.

The fourth question answered by the study was what motivates students to return to a formal education setting to get a GED. The vast majority of the participants were externally motivated to return to school to get a GED to get a good job and advance their career. Their inability to find a job or advance in a career prompted the participants to seek an education that would lead to a better job. For example, Participant A-15 wanted a better job.

I didn't want to just settle. I mean, working for Verizon was a great job, and I did great with that until the end when everything got really bad. But, I just always wanted to do it. And, know that I can probably get a job now because of my work record, but I wanted it.

Participant A-01 emphasized this same idea when he stated, “The reason I wanted to come back to school was I know that I can’t go through life without an education.”

Several participants were motivated to return to school by someone in their family; either a parent or a child was the reason for most to return. As Participant A-14 commented, “My dad, he encouraged me.” Participant A-07 further emphasized family influences along with job opportunities when she said:

The main reason I am back in school is the fact that I don’t want to be a waitress the rest of my life and the fact that I want the best for my daughter. My daughter is the main reason I wants to get an education so I can get a good job.

A few were intrinsically motivated to return because they just wanted to learn and get an education. Participant A-12 confirmed this feeling by saying the reason to return to the GED program was, “to further my education.” Participant A-11 further emphasized being intrinsically motivated to return to a formal education setting when she said:

I knew when I was probably in the 10th grade that I wanted to work in an office. I knew I wanted to help people, be a resource for people to come to. And, I give them resources you know, that they wouldn’t know about and do community work.

The most disturbing revelation was that, in the opinion of the participants, no intervention plan was developed to keep them in school. They were just allowed to leave school with no one showing any concern for their futures. Clearly, when friends care more about a student staying in school than any school staff member, schools have some work to do.

Table 3

Summary of the Answers to the Research Questions

Question	Answer
<p>What are the primary influences affecting a student's decision to leave school before receiving a diploma?</p>	<p>Perceived disconnect between the participant and school, and the feeling that the school had lost concern for him or her.</p> <p>The school's apparent lack of any intervention planning to address the participants' perceptions.</p> <p>School policies were intolerant of circumstances participants brought on themselves, such as pregnancy, drug use, injuries, and missing school.</p> <p>School policies were perceived by the participants to be inflexible and intolerant.</p>
<p>What are the family, peer and individual, and school influences that impact their decision?</p>	<p>Parents were in large part, a positive influence in the lives of the participants.</p> <p>The influence of stepparents was negative and encouraged participants to leave school.</p> <p>Peers, especially close friends, were influential in the lives of the participants.</p> <p>Friends attempted to keep participants in school.</p> <p>The influence of the school was the final factor that caused them to leave.</p> <p>Lack of participation in school.</p>

<p>What staff actions and school rules contributed to their decision to leave school?</p>	<p>Most were retained at least one time while in school.</p> <p>Positive influences could not mitigate the circumstances that were faced by the participants.</p> <p>Lack of counselor involvement.</p> <p>Lack of interaction with administrators.</p> <p>School policies provided obstacles too great to overcome.</p> <p>Attendance policies impacted most of the participants in high school.</p> <p>Zero tolerance discipline policies impacted several of the participants.</p>
<p>Are there actions by peers that influenced the decision to drop out?</p>	<p>A policy not allowing pregnant girls to be in school forced another participant out of a private school.</p> <p>Influenced by their peer group to skip school and to develop an attitude of not caring about school.</p> <p>Friends encouraged them to stay in school.</p> <p>Friends set a good example for them to follow.</p> <p>Example of friends was powerful.</p>
<p>At what point in a student's life does he or she begin to consider dropping out of school?</p>	<p>During a life-altering event or injury that occurred in high school.</p> <p>During a traumatic event that occurred in life that forced him or her to either get behind in school or feel uninterested in being at school.</p>

What can individual students do to better position themselves to graduate from high school?

Think about what they are doing.
Encourage them to stay in school.
Have a plan if they do leave.
Need to finish high school and go to college.
Consider the consequences.
Leaving school is not worth the trouble it causes.
Getting a GED is not as easy as it seems.
High school is easier than being alone in the world.
People can't get a good job without a diploma.
Students will miss a lot if they leave school.

What motivates students to return to a formal educational setting to try to secure a GED?

The desire to get a good job and advance their careers.
Either a parent or a child was the reason for most to return.
Some were intrinsically motivated to return because they just wanted to learn and get an education.

Chapter Five: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

Overview of the Study

This study's conceptual framework was based on my review and interpretation of the literature as it applied to the influences leading students to drop out of school and then return for a GED. The literature reviewed on dropouts and schools in general emphasized the concept that negative influences were a contributor to students leaving school before graduating with a diploma.

Since some dropouts return to get their GED (Hughes et al., 2007), this study attempted to understand the influences that led participants to leave school and then led them to return to get a GED. Since the GED students were more mature and focused than teenagers who recently dropped out, I rationalized that the findings would be more appropriate and useful than those obtained from teenagers having just left school. As a result, the information and advice from this study should benefit several groups of educators: teachers, administrators, counselors, board of education members and even legislators as they make funding decisions concerning schools.

The focus of the study was to address the following guiding research questions:

1. What are the primary influences affecting a young person's decision to leave school before receiving a diploma?
 - a. What are the family, peer and individual, and school influences that impact his or her decision?

- b. What staff actions and school rules contributed to the decision to leave school?
 - c. Are there actions by peers that influence the decision to drop out?
2. At what point in a student's life does he or she begin to consider dropping out of school?
3. What can individual students do to better position themselves to graduate from high school?
4. What motivates students to return to a formal educational setting to try and secure a GED?

Data were gathered through one-on-one interviews with 15 participants in the GED program at a community college. Each of the participants were enrolled in the GED program and were at least eighteen years of age. The participants answered a series of questions related to their K-12 (or until they withdrew from school) experience. This phenomenological study of current GED students provided an unusual perspective, in that it allows us to view the educational experience of a school dropout who now sees the importance of an education.

Conclusions Based on the Findings

The four major themes and sub-themes that emerged from this study were: (a) characteristics of the participants as students (single parent/fatherless homes, changing schools, life altering event or injury, family structure and poverty, impact of work, traits of participants); (b) peer and adult influences on participants (positive or negative relationships with school staff, peer influences, parent influences, lack of school and staff interventions, lack of engagement in school, lack of extra-curricular activities); (c) school

influences on participants (grades and performance, grade retention, attendance issues, discipline issues, school policies, school organization); and (d) participant reflection (regrets, advice for students considering leaving school, advice for improving schools, feelings about school, motivators to return to school).

The conclusions from the research assist in bringing the data into a usable format that can be used to positively impact the dropout problem. These conclusions imply that if educators are willing to put forth an extra effort, build relationships with their students, and partner more with families, they can prevent the majority of students who currently leave school from dropping out. The conclusions are as follows:

- The participants perceived math as their most difficult subject and this impacted their leaving school more than having a low reading level. When the interviews first began, I felt that most students would drop out of school due to not being on grade level in reading. This belief has permeated the educational world to the extent that legislation has required interventions as early as third grade for students not reading on grade level. For the participants in this study, the requirement of the fourth high school math credit and the feeling of math being beyond their ability had a significant impact on their decision to leave school.
- Lack of parent anger or frustration over the participant's decision to drop out. From the participants' perspective, their parents did not show much concern when they decided to leave school. So often parents, especially those who live in generational poverty, believe that education can function as a threat to take their child away. Many times parents encourage their child to drop out

of school through words and actions.

- Lack of school and school district responsiveness. None of the participants believed that anyone from the school or school district responded to them when they began the process of deciding to drop out of school. In most cases, students will react to supportive and encouraging responses from adults in a position of authority. The lack of responsiveness led the participants to believe that no one cared about them or cared if they stayed in school or left. There was scarcely any mention of any one from the district level initiating any conversation or survey.
- Lack of principal intervention. None of the participants related a positive interaction with a principal. Several had the feeling that their principal encouraged them to leave school and get a GED. One of the primary functions of a school principal is not only to provide leadership to faculty and staff but to also build supportive relationships with students. These relationships should encourage students most at risk of dropping out of school to feel comfortable approaching their principal to ask for help.
- Little to no perceived support from counselors. No participant felt they had a positive relationship with a counselor or other school administrator. Several believed that the inaction by a counselor caused them to have difficulties in school. Much of the blame for lack of access to counselors can be placed at the feet of the school system and those who fund schools. Counselors are currently asked to assume quasi-administrative responsibilities that detract from their time to counsel students and advocate for them.

- Participants were anything but stereotypical “bad” kids. The participants were not major discipline problems nor in their opinion did they have negative relationships with many of their teachers. Many times young people who are average students can blend into the woodwork of schools and they are not missed when they are gone.
- Reinforced that being a dropout was in their family history. Most every participant had family members that were also a dropout. For most, it was a parent. Parents are the first teacher, a powerful role model, and an example. The actions of parents are louder than the words that are spoken. Even though the participants shared that parents had positive comments about school, the knowledge that they dropped out of school had an impact on the participants and seemed to negate the positive comments. Knowing that a student has a history of dropouts in their family should be a reason to monitor a student’s progress through school.
- Friends were not role models for being a dropout. The participants each shared that their friends were very important and one of the reasons they went to school. The majority of the participants’ friend groups completed school but their example was not powerful enough to keep them in school. The participants believed they could be with their friends outside school even if he/she left schools and friends stayed.
- The conditions were fixable, but no one with the authority to make the fixes seemed to take action. The majority of the issues that forced the participants out of school related to school policies and procedures. For many of the

participants, if the school had provided more flexibility for attendance make-up or the ability to do credit recovery, some of the participants would have graduated from school. There was also the opportunity for counselors and administrators to help the participants to select a more appropriate fourth math class along with other elective courses that were more suited to the students' interests.

- High school teachers placed a higher priority on subject matter than the success of students. The participants related that many of their core academic teachers in high school were much more interested in covering the material than providing them the assistance they needed to be successful. The participants perceived that if their high school teachers had made the lessons more engaging and hands-on they would have been able to stay up with the class. Having a sense of falling behind and having no hope to learn the materials led to the students becoming disengaged from school.
- Parents seemed to feel disempowered or unable to intervene on behalf of their children. None of the participants shared a time that a parent went to school to advocate on his or her behalf. The reason for this lack of advocacy could be related to a myriad of factors. Many of the parents had been unsuccessful in school, had dropped out themselves, felt alienated from the school experience and were intimidated by school officials. The last place they wanted to go was back to school, even if it was to advocate for their own child. Some of the parents would not have felt comfortable dealing with what they believed was political red tape or with policies they did not

understand. When dealing with schools, many parents are left feeling unwelcome and uninvited since their child's first entry into school.

Revised Conceptual Framework

As noted in chapters one and three, the conceptual framework for this study was based on two different conceptual frameworks developed by Rumberger (2001) that were both useful and necessary to understand the phenomenon of students dropping out of school. The first framework is based on an individual perspective focusing on the qualities of students, such as their values, attitudes, and behaviors, and how these qualities impact their decision to quit school. This conceptual framework views the attitudes and behaviors of students through student engagement.

The second framework reveals that personal attitudes and behaviors are impacted by the institutional settings where individuals live. Observations on dropouts have identified factors within a student's family, school, community and peer groups that predict dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2001). A student's background is considered by many as the single most important factor to success in school.

The revised conceptual framework closely resembles the original framework for the study. The data only strengthened and enhanced Rumberger's study. The modifications to the framework were minor, yet added reinforcement to the original framework and gave a better representation of the factors that might contribute to dropouts. The modifications added to the original framework were (1) *life altering event or injury*; (2) *traits of the participants*; (3) *relationship with school staff*; (4) *lack of extra-curricular activities*; and (5) *reflections of the participants* as reflected by the italicized and bold faced text.

Table four uses Rumberger’s 2001 model and modifies it with the data from the study. The chart explains and describes the factors that influenced the participants’ decision to drop out of school.

Table 4 Conceptual Framework Based on Rumberger’s (2001) Model of School

Dropouts

Factors that Influence Decisions to Drop Out		Explanation/Description
Individual Factors		These are factors over which the student has some element of control, from modest to significant. <i>Traits of the participants were indicators of dropout behavior early in the participants’ school career.</i>
Student Qualities		The characteristics of a student that reveals who they are as a person.
	Values	Expressions of those feelings toward school that will help propel the student towards staying or leaving school before graduation
	Attitudes	Expressions of schooling elements that shape positive or negative feelings and behaviors.
	Behavior	Outward manifestations of values and attitudes.
	Engagement	The degree to which the individual is attentive and participative in an activity or event. <i>The lack of extra-curricular participation was a sign of dis-engagement for the participants.</i>
	Academic	The ability of a student to perform in an academic setting that is manifested by student grades and test scores.
	Social	A student’s participation in a social group or activity. <i>Peer influences were not as strong a dropout factor than first believed.</i>
Institutional Factors		These are factors over which the student has no or limited control, imposed on them by the school or other institution.
Family		Family influences on students are not only powerful but life changing. Many times the students are unaware of these influences. <i>A like-changing or life-altering event was a factor in each of the participants’ decision to drop out of school, even if they had no</i>

	<i>control of the events. The effects of these life-altering events were more powerful than first believed.</i>
Background	A student's background is a powerful factor in dropout behavior. Family members who were dropouts, parent education, school mobility, and low school aspirations contribute a student's dropping out of school.
Support for attainment	The desire of parents to support their children in school which is manifested through attending school conferences, encouraging the completion of homework, advocating for their children, and showing up to school when there is a problem. <i>The participants' parents did not have the skill or did not feel comfortable advocating for their child.</i>
Socio-Economics	These are factors beyond the control of the student that places him/or in a disadvantaged situation.
Family structure	Factors that a student has no control over such as single parent homes, fatherless homes and stepparent homes.
School	These are influences that are imposed on students from kindergarten enrollment until they time the exit the school experience. <i>Relationships with school staff were found to be powerful influences on the participants.</i>
Student Composition	The socio-economic, racial, and cultural composition of a school.
School Resources	The funding level of a school.
Structural Characteristics	The organization of a school based on grade configuration, academic program and vocational offerings.
Policies and Practices	Rules and practices governing student discipline, attendance and grade retention.
Employability	Individual qualities that enhances a person's chances of getting a job.

Study Applications and Recommendations

In this study the findings were reported, discussed, and analyzed. From these findings, benefits for educators will be discussed and suggestions for specific school

changes will be made. Presenting this advice from students provides parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators suggestions on how to prevent students from dropping out of school.

The adults who influence children must remain committed to using the advice provided to make a difference in the lives of children. Educators especially must continue to review their daily practice and their commitment to meeting the needs of all the students they encounter. Educators must also understand that the influence they have on a child can mitigate many of the negative influences on children in the home.

The more opportunities schools can create for teachers to have positive interactions with students the more likely the students will enjoy school and graduate. These positive interactions can negate many of the influences that can lead to students dropping out of school. These interactions also have the ability to change the teachers' perceptions of students. When teachers have the opportunity to interact with students in settings other than the classroom (i.e. as athletic coaches, club sponsors, drama coaches, mentoring programs and other extra-curricular activities) they can create relationships that can provide motivation for students to persist in school. These relationships need to begin in elementary school and continue through high school.

Not only do these positive relationships impact students they can also influence parent attitudes about school. Many parents have negative feelings about school and are unwilling to be involved in their child's education. When teachers develop positive relationships with students early in their school experience, more opportunities are provided to involve parents in non-threatening activities. Parents who are engaged early in their child's education, are empowered to advocate for their child and are made to feel

welcome at school are more likely to continue to be involved in and support their child throughout their school career. Strong Pre-K programs can foster this type of parent engagement and support.

Not only do strong Pre-K programs need to be developed but transition programs as students enter middle school and high school need to be developed and implemented. Summer programs for rising sixth and ninth graders to have time in their new school without other students provide successful models. Many ninth grade students have benefited from being enrolled in ninth grade academies where a team of teachers is dedicated to providing the support needed to make the transition to high school go smoothly.

Along with model Pre-K and transition programs, the curriculum we offer must be more relevant and engaging for the students we serve. Much is said and taught concerning differentiating instruction in the classroom but little attention is paid to differentiating the curriculum. From kindergarten to twelfth grade, most all students are exposed to the same core curriculum. For many high school students, their career plans and aspirations dictate a differentiated curriculum to prepare them for their future plans. Many of our students would benefit from technical English instead of the current English curriculum. Instead of students being required to complete Algebra II and a math course beyond Algebra II, many students would be better prepared for the future by completing a business math or consumer math class. Differentiating the curriculum would be as beneficial to keeping students in school as differentiating classroom instruction.

Schools should also take notice of what they do to either encourage or discourage their students. The climate of the school dramatically impacts student attitudes about

school. If potential dropouts are to be saved, schools must be willing to change policies, rules and practices. These ideas and concepts will be expanded and elaborated on in the section entitled, “*Study Implications.*”

Research Compared to Literature

The literature suggests that individual student characteristics can predict a student’s ability to continue in school until graduating. Some of the characteristics identified by the researchers that lead to students leaving school are boredom with school, hopelessness and despair due to their current living situation, living in poverty, finding life outside school more exciting, low expectations of themselves, lack of external motivation, lack of educational goals and previous successes, family structure, attitude concerning school, single parent/fatherless homes, parents with little educational attainment, and having other family members who are dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Finn, 1989; Finn, 2006; Hallinan, 2008; Kortering et al., 1998; Rumberger, 2001).

The literature review minimally addressed the impact of a life-altering event or injury on a student’s ability to finish school. The participants in the study all had an event in their life that derailed their educational experience. For the participants these events were varied and individualized, but they all caused the participants to begin the dropout process. These events caused the participants to struggle in school and, with minimal parental and school support, to eventually drop out of school.

The literature reveals strong influences on students’ decisions to drop out include poverty, the lack of a father’s presence, and family structure. Most of the participants struggled with chaotic family issues and a lack of family support, even though there was support when the majority of participants started school.

Personal traits that compare favorably with what is rewarded in schools are predictors of student school completion (Alat, 2002; Rumberger, 2001). Even though those interviewed revealed that they believed they possessed many positive traits, they perceived their negative traits (those traits not rewarded by schools) counteracted the traits that could have assisted them in finishing school.

The literature speaks to the tremendous influence that is exerted by the adults in school who have contact with the students. The positive influences from teachers and school staff mitigated, for a time, the desire of the participants to leave school. Even though the positive influences of adults in school left an impact, the negative influences provided more impact and these negative influences were well remembered by each participant, contributing to their limited success in school.

The literature discussed the need to develop interventions for students who showed signs of dropping out of school (Sparks, 2013b). These interventions took the form of (a) listening to students, (b) communicating an attitude of caring, (c) schools taking an active role in dropout prevention and encouraging students to take an active role in preventing dropouts (Knesting, 2008). The results of the study revealed that none of the participants perceived they had an intervention plan designed even after educators realized the students were at risk of dropping out of school.

The literature showed that the indicators of student engagement are typically represented by good grades in core subjects, high GPAs, high attendance rates, interest in school activities and few behavioral problems (Bartholomew et al., 2008; Boster & Strom, 2007; Finn, 1989; Pinkus, 2008; Stearns et al., 2007). Consistent with the literature, as the students progressed through school, their interest and involvement in

school decreased. By the time the majority of the participants left school they disliked school and just wanted to leave.

Those interviewed in the study validated the power of the school's influence on their desire to stay in school. Nearly every participant was negatively impacted by a school policy or procedure. Those participants frustrated with school design soon found school policies discouraging and bureaucratic. The participants did not have the energy or staying power to overcome the rules they felt put them at a disadvantage.

A review of the literature revealed that student grades and performance deteriorated as eventual dropouts progressed through school and low grades predicted dropout behavior (Rumberger, 2001; Sparks, 2013b). The literature also revealed that students with good grades are more engaged in school and more likely to graduate while students who drop out tend to have lower grades (Bartholomew et al., 2008; Finn, 1989; Pinkus, 2008; Stearns et al., 2007; Marcus et al., 2009). The lower grades for these individuals were the result of several factors that included poor attendance, changing schools, health issues, and traumatic life altering events. The grades for the majority of the study participants were not, however, as historically low as the literature suggests.

The literature listed grade retention as one of the primary predictors of students dropping out of school. Most studies, to date, suggest that retention, especially multiple retentions, significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Grisson & Shepard, 1989; Jimerson, 1999; Kaufman & Bradby, 1992; Roderick, 1994; Roderick et al., 2000; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

The majority of participants in this study were retained at least one time before they actually left school. Those who were retained suggested they left school because they felt they could not spend the extra time required to complete the necessary classes.

Poor attendance was another indicator addressed by the literature. If a student's attendance deteriorates, then his or her chances of becoming a dropout increase (Bartholomew et al., 2008; Finn, 1989; Pinkus, 2008; Rumberger, 2001; Stearns et al., 2007). The literature also suggested that students who have attended school regularly normally persist until they graduate (Archambault et al., 2009a; Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

This study's participants followed the pattern implied by the literature as it relates to attendance. The attendance for all but one of the participants deteriorated as they progressed through school. For most, attendance was the straw that broke the camel's back. The participants felt they were so far behind in school due to poor attendance that they could not get caught up and finish, at least not on time.

The literature revealed that students who have a history of poor behavior in school were more likely to not finish school (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005). Dropout rates were negatively impacted by student discipline (Miller et al., 2005). Also the literature suggested that if students did not perceive discipline policies to be fair and consistent they had a high risk of being a dropout (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Discipline policies that were entirely punitive and provided no flexibility, especially for minor discipline infractions, normally increased the number of students who became dropouts (Miller et al., 2005).

The participants who had discipline issues consistently left school without a diploma, as the research predicted. Only three of the participants shared examples of

discipline issues early on in their school career. Those three gave the impression they could not overcome being labeled as troublemakers early in their school careers. Two of the participants encountered discipline issues that permanently forced them out of school. As the literature suggested, when students perceived the rules regarding discipline as being totally punitive and inflexible, the chances of students becoming a dropout greatly increased as in the case of the study's participants.

The literature confirmed that school policies and practices could play a role in promoting dropouts (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). The literature also suggested that schools affected student dropout behavior through general policies and practices, especially severe discipline policies (Bowditch, 1993; Fine, 1991; Riehl, 1999; Tuck, 2012). School policies also impacted student achievement, academic engagement and overall student success (Roderick & Camburn, 1999). School policies having significant impact on student dropout behavior were retention policies, zero-tolerance discipline policies and inflexible attendance policies (Balfanz et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2005; Terry, 2008; Tuck, 2012).

School policies created at least some negative impact on all the participants. Few participants were immune from inflexible attendance policies. Attendance policies of this nature created obstacles that proved too difficult for the participants to overcome. Three participants confirmed the predictions of the literature in that they were forced out of school by zero-tolerance policies, while one student had to leave school because pregnant students were not allowed in her private school. All but three participants were negatively impacted by school retention policies, which is consistent with previous research.

The literature showed that the organization, structure, size and control of schools could predict and negatively impact school dropout rates (Bryk et al., 1993; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Lee & Burkam, 1992; McNeal, 1997; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). The participants in the study also suggested that factors related to schools impacted their feelings about school. The participants who attended larger schools found them to be unfriendly and unwelcoming. Schools organized with multiple grade levels together caused problems for two of the participants. Rules unique to private schools caused one participant to leave school.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

All participants interviewed were from a small, rural community college in western North Carolina. I made the choice to do convenience sampling due to the difficulty of locating participants after the school day. The choice was also made due to the desire to provide support to the system in which I am superintendent. All the participants were white and most grew up in the same community. Some of the participants did drop out of a school from other areas in the country. This causes the transferability of the results to be limited. Since only GED students were used in the study, there were limitations on generalizing to non-GED populations and on comparing non-GED to GED dropout populations.

For the purpose of the study, only the educational experiences of the participants were explored. I was, however, able to address the impact of family influences and other peripheral influences on the participants. To protect the anonymity of respondents, I chose not to conduct any follow-up, teacher, or focus group interviews.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study revealed the need to examine the perceptions of dropouts who had returned to get their GED regarding their experiences in school. The perspective of these participants helps fill a gap in the literature regarding the educational experiences of dropouts. The advice from the participants provides information that can change how schools operate and how we impact students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. The results of this study could also provide educators with suggestions on how to deal with students facing similar obstacles during their journey through school.

Additional research on what influences students to leave school without a diploma could be done in other type communities and with students from a variety of backgrounds. Richer data could be extracted by doing follow-up interviews with participants with an emphasis on critical times in their lives. Follow-up questions could also be asked of the participants' teachers, counselors and principals. These additional interviews could provide additional information on the role of educators in educating all students.

Why Does It Really Matter?

It was evident that family influences, peer and individual influences, and school influences lead many students to drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Janosz et al., 2008). The big question is "Why does it really matter?" Why should educational leaders and policy makers be concerned about students dropping out and why should we look at developing and creating programs to keep students in school? One of the main reasons it is important to look at how to prevent dropouts is the fact that our economy has changed. Students who once could drop out and find decent paying jobs no longer have access to

such jobs, as most jobs not requiring education are in China, India or South America. A main idea expressed in a 2007 executive summary by *Education Week* (Swanson, 2007), was that today's high school graduates are entering a world in which they will need at least some college to gain access to decent paying careers. The Alliance for Excellent Education in 2006 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006) projected that by the year 2020, 66% of all jobs will require some form of postsecondary education and training. The Alliance also reports that workers with at least some postsecondary education or training represent a large majority of today's labor market. Those without even a high school diploma will face increasingly bleak labor market prospects and limited adult success (Swanson, 2007). In a recent study (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007) it was shown that the average dropout would take three years to start a job that will last one year and eleven years to find stable employment that lasts at least three years, compared to their peers with a diploma at three and six months and one and three years, respectively (Kortering, 2009).

Friedman (2005) reminds us that high school completion and, increasingly, two or more years of college, are perhaps a person's only opportunity to obtain meaningful employment that includes job-related benefits, livable wages, and future advancements with higher educational opportunities. Our economic wellbeing is closely tied with school completion especially in light of the "greying" of America and the greater demands this places on today's workforce (Kortering & Braziel, 2008). Tanner in his 2004 study related these sobering statistics: for every retiree in 1950 there were 16 workers paying taxes; Today there are 3 workers paying taxes for every retiree and within 15 years there will be only 2 workers for every retiree (Tanner, 2004). America is the only

industrialized nation where today's young people are less likely than their parents to receive a high school diploma. Also, while minority populations in the United States are growing as a share of the total US population, over a third of African-American and Latino students do not graduate from high school (Habash, 2008).

Individuals without a high school diploma pose a dilemma for educators, politicians, and society. Morse and her colleagues (2004) state that

Society and schools also suffer consequences when students drop out. The costs to society in terms of lost tax revenue and the expense of government assistance programs for employment, housing, medical care, and incarceration are staggering. Furthermore, the trend in education in recent years has been one of increased accountability with a focus on student outcomes. Although student achievement is the most common accountability indicator, school-level dropout rates and graduation rates are also being used as measures of school effectiveness. (p. 9)

In light of the fact that in 2007 the US Chamber of Commerce projected that 90% of jobs in the 21st century would require some form of postsecondary education, the cost of students dropping out of high school is staggering. The annual cost of the 1.23 million students who do not graduate from United States' high schools is more than \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity. For one eighth-grade cohort of dropouts, the cost in the total loss in lifetime tax revenue is \$70 billion (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). The more than 12 million students who drop out over the next decade will cost our country more than \$3 trillion dollars (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). In these economic terms, the lack of a high school diploma costs the nation an estimated \$3.7 billion a year in

individual taxpayer terms, \$800 per year per taxpayer (Dounay, 2007; Sinclair et al., 1998). This is a negative net fiscal contribution of \$5,200 compared to the positive \$287,000 generated by a high school graduate over a lifetime of earnings (Sum et al., 2009). It is estimated that if the 1.2 million likely dropouts this year actually graduated, it would save the states more than \$17 billion over their lifetimes of earning (Sweeten et al., 2009). Similarly, increasing the graduation rate by just 5% for male students could lead to a combined savings and revenue of almost \$8 billion each year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

For those young people who are high school dropouts the average annual income in 2004 was \$16,483 compared to \$26,156 for a high school graduate and this income difference of \$10,000 is repeated annually (Sweeten et al., 2009). This annual income of \$16,483 is \$2,000 more than the federal poverty guidelines for one person and almost \$10,000 below the guideline for a family of four. In other words, an average high school graduate-led household will accumulate ten times more wealth than a school dropout-headed household (Kortering, 2009). For young people to be in higher paying jobs education is necessary. An analysis in a 2007 *Education Week* article shows that despite the increasing importance of education in the labor market, 1.23 million students will fail to graduate from high school this year, with the lowest graduation rates among Native American, Hispanic and African American students. Nationwide, only 70% of ninth graders make it to graduation four years later and that figure drops to 46% for African American males and 56% for Hispanic males. About six in ten black and Hispanic females earn a diploma within four years of entering high school (Swanson, 2007).

If the United States graduated 90% of its high school students, the additional graduates from a single class would generate over \$5.3 billion in additional income, create more than 37,000 jobs, and would increase the national General Domestic Product (GDP) by over \$6.6 billion per year. These high school graduates historically have been more civic minded, meaning they participate in voting and volunteer activities and are more viable participants in the labor force (Sinclair et al., 1998). They are also more inclined to serve in the military thus impacting our national defense (Balfanz et al., 2013). This makes it simple to understand that students need to stay in school; they are healthier, less likely to commit crimes and keep the entire nation more globally competitive (Balfanz et al., 2013).

The social cost of the dropout problem is overwhelming. These costs include an unskilled labor force, lower productivity, lost taxes, increased public assistance, substance abuse, increased crime, greater chance of imprisonment and a generally less productive adulthood (Bear et al., 2006; Woods, 1995). Just a 10% increase in the number of males graduating from high school would reduce murder and assault by approximately 20%, car theft by 13%, and arson by 8% (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). States save an estimated \$13,706 (in 2005 dollars) in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care, for every high school graduate as compared to a dropout, over the course of a lifetime (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). Most researchers agree that there are a multitude of negative consequences associated with dropping out of school for the dropout and society in general (Cassel, 2003; Rumberger et al., 1990).

More than a fifth of the U.S. population ages 18-24 do not have a high school diploma or a General Education Development (GED). The employment rate for these

students was 22% below the rate for high school graduates, 33% below students with some college (1 to 3 years), and 41% below college graduates (Sum et al., 2009). In 2008, only 60% of dropouts were employed during the year compared to 80% of high school graduates and 89% of those with some college (Sum et al., 2009). This shows that today's dropout expects to make from \$8,000 to \$37,500 less per year than a peer that has simply graduated from high school or has completed four years of college. When calculated for a forty-year lifetime of working these figures rise to from \$320,000 to \$1,500,000 (Kortering, 2009). Even job training and prevention programs for dropouts are expensive and, looking all the way back to the 1970's, have cost over \$200 billion, historically (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

Amos (2008) brings the issue closer to home by citing economic factors relevant to North Carolina, including the following:

- If all members of the Class of 2008 had graduated, they would have generated an additional \$10.8 billion in income over the course of their lifetime.
- If the graduation rate for males increased by only five percent, North Carolina would realize \$151.9 billion in savings related to crime, \$80.9 billion in additional earnings by those men, and \$232.8 billion in overall benefits to the state economy.
- The state saves \$12,355 per additional graduate on health-related expenses.
- If all heads of households were high school graduates, the state's families would have an additional \$2.6 billion in personal wealth.

- If all community college students graduated from high school, the community college system would save almost \$100 million in remediation costs.

Also, a recent NCSMTEC-sponsored research project by Coble and Jenkins (2013) unearthed the following facts related to North Carolina's future economy:

1. By 2018, there will be about 1.4 million new jobs in North Carolina, either from retirements and/or new job creation.
2. Of those new jobs, about 833,000 will require some post-secondary education.
3. About 59% of all jobs in NC will require some post-secondary education.
4. The areas of greatest growth in NC over the next 5-6 years will be in medical and allied health, and computer technology, all of which require additional training beyond high school completion.

Another negative consequence for dropouts that has a profound impact on our society is the heightened chance of jail or prison time. Although not all dropouts go to prison, a large percentage does. Dropouts make up approximately 20% of our nation's population but about 80% of our prison inmates and juveniles in court. This inmate population has increased from 466,400 in 1980 to about 2 million in 2006, an increase of 430% or over 16% per year (Kortering, 2009; Kortering & Braziel, 2008).

In America, nearly 75% of state prison inmates, almost 59% of federal inmates, 69% of jail inmates, and 82% of all inmates and juvenile offenders are high school dropouts (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Harlow, 2003). Dropouts are 13% more likely to be repeat offenders and 8% more likely to be convicted of arson (Alliance for Excellent

Education, 2006). Only 1 in 1,000 college graduates are in prison and only 1% of high school graduates. A staggering 6.3% of high school dropouts are incarcerated, or putting it another way, a high school dropout is 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than a college graduate and on any given day in 2006-2007 nearly 1 of every 10 dropouts was incarcerated (Sum et al., 2009). Furthermore, a single incarceration has an annual cost of \$23,000 which is more than double the \$10,600 spent each year on the education of a student with SLD define acronym (Kortering, 2009). If a 14 year-old is saved from a life of crime, the current economic value is between \$2.6 and \$5.3 million, and just the external costs for a career criminal are between \$1.3 and \$1.5 (Cohen & Piquero, 2009).

Dropouts, usually from families living in poverty, are twice as likely to be unemployed and on welfare, to be in worse health at 45 years of age than the average 65 year-old high school graduate, have a life expectancy of 9.2 years lower than a graduate, and are three times as likely to be incarcerated (Peterson, 2006). Mortality rates among high school graduates are 2.3 times higher and dropouts are 2.7 times higher than individuals with at least some college education, which demonstrates that an educated populace is in a better position to make decisions about health care, lifestyle, and to navigate the treacherous waters of the current health care system (Woolf, Johnson, Phillips, & Philipsen, 2007).

In summary, the future of most dropouts involves a higher risk for chronic unemployment, reliance on government assistance, high possibility of incarceration and a higher chance of becoming a teen parent. Not only does dropping out affect the future of our children, but it also affects the future of our nation's economy and ability to compete in a global workforce.

Study Implications

The school experience. The school experience impacts every student that walks through the schoolhouse door each day. Schools must be changed to make the school experience for each student as caring and meaningful as possible. Each school's climate should be warm and inviting not only for each student but also for all visitors, especially parents.

The participants in this study had positive experiences in elementary school because they believed their teachers cared about them, treated them as individuals and took time to help them if they needed additional help. The participants always saw their parents more involved in school and more supportive of the teachers in elementary school. These strategies and involvement should be carried over into middle school and high school.

Identifying characteristics of potential dropouts. Students don't show up to school trying to hide the characteristics that could lead them down the road to becoming dropouts. Early on in a student's school career educators must be in tune with their students' needs and be willing to take the time to get to know their students. Teachers must be alert when their students come from difficult home environments, especially those homes in generational poverty. Schools and teachers must be sensitive to students who move into their schools and classrooms. Additional time must be provided to these students and their families to help with a smooth transition to their new school. Schools also need to routinely follow-up on the progress of these students.

The issue that most impacted the study's participants in persevering in school was a life altering event or injury. Teachers and schools must be extra sensitive when

students are impacted by a traumatic incidence. Continuing interventions must be put in place for these students and their families. The participants in the study not only shared the impact of a traumatic event but also their perceptions that nothing was done to intervene at the school level. Most of them believed that with assistance from the school, they could have persisted in finishing school.

When do students begin considering leaving school. There is continued debate in the education world about when students actually considering leaving school. Based on the input from the participant pool, the consideration first began when the participants encountered a major obstacle in their schooling. For all but two participants, this occurred in high school as they started down the path of leaving school. The obstacles ranged from personal injuries, to family obligations, to expulsion from school, to the death of a parent.

Educators must be more sensitive to these types of events in the life of a student. Follow-up with these students is imperative to assist students with these tragic occurrences. When students begin to verbalize dropping out of school, interventions must start immediately. Educators must get to know their students and listen to what concerns them relative to school. After learning of these issues and observing behavioral signs that could indicate that students are contemplating dropping out, educators must then act on that information.

A suggestion for assisting with these issues is to develop a school or system-wide intervention team to work with students considering dropping out along with their families. Members of this team should include counselors, social workers, nurses, school resource officers and administrators.

Teacher/student relationships. Based on comments from the participants in this study, the teacher/student relationship produces significant impact when it comes to a student progressing successfully through school. Each of the participants related at least one relationship with a teacher that made a difference for them. A majority of these positive relationships occurred in the elementary years, signifying the caring, compassionate nature of elementary teachers. None of the participants commented on a positive relationship with a middle school teacher but several had a good relationship with a high school teacher. The high school teachers that had a positive influence on the participants shared common interests, taught a class that the participant enjoyed, or was willing to take extra time to help the participant. Teachers must be continually reminded of the importance of developing positive relationships with students and how powerful those relationships are for children.

Teacher characteristics. The participants openly and thoughtfully discussed what they thought were traits that defined a “good” teacher along with those characteristics that were true of “bad” teachers. It was evident that when the participants were students, they were very much aware of the behavior of their teachers.

The participants shared the following as characteristics they observed in their “good” teachers:

- Caring
- Positive attitude
- Willing to give additional time
- Had common interests
- Were respectful

- Would listen
- Treated students as individuals

The participants listed the following as the characteristics of “bad” teachers:

- Acting like robots
- Would not take time with students
- Didn’t care
- Had favorites
- Would not explain material
- Had low expectations
- Negative attitude
- Talked negatively about students

Teachers and educational staff need to be informed/reminded about what students believe impacts them, both positively and negatively. School administrators need to continually monitor the interaction between students and teachers. If administrators are made aware of negative behaviors in a teacher, they need to be willing to address the behavior and provide the support needed to prevent any reoccurrence.

Administrator support. The participants were quick to share that they felt no support from an administrator. The only encounter any participant had with an administrator was when the administrator encouraged them to leave school and do something else. The participants shared they were disappointed that the only time they spoke with an administrator was when they were in trouble or planning to drop out of school.

School administrators need to be visible throughout the school and willing to get to know their students. They should initiate and coordinate intervention plans for students considering leaving school or those who have experienced any type of trauma in their lives.

Counselor intervention. A void identified by each participant was counselor support and intervention. None of the participants related a positive relationship with a counselor or a time that a counselor attempted a positive intervention. Any time a participant mentioned a counselor, it was in regards to a negative situation.

For too long, counselors have been asked to deal with testing, administrative issues, and community concerns instead of dealing with students. As reported in 2011 by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the counselor to student ratio in North Carolina is 363:1 which provides counselors with little time or support to assist students. School systems and those making funding decisions must understand the need for counselors in today's world. We can't continue to ask counselors to do what they were expected to do twenty years ago. The issues impacting children are very different today and the interventions counselors need to design now are much more important than in the last decade.

Organizational structure of schools. The participants shared their concerns regarding how the school they attended was organized. The primary concern was having multiple grade levels in the same building. These participants wanted to be treated as individuals and didn't want to share resources with other students. There was also a concern about the differences in the expectations in private schools as opposed to public schools. Reviewing these concerns make it evident that educators must consider the

number of grade levels housed in the same building. A critical concern other than a variety of grade levels in the same facility is the number of students in a school. Small schools were viewed as more supportive for the participants in the school. Helping students to feel valued as individuals and special is easier to accomplish in a smaller environment. It is also critical for schools to evaluate the type of school environment students transfer from so students don't lose credits or fall behind on meeting graduation requirements.

Transition programs. Many students face difficulties when transitioning from one grade level to the next. The participants in the study commented on issues they encountered early in their high school years. The ninth grade is a difficult time for most students, as it was for the participants.

Schools need to review the activities and processes they have in place to support students who are transitioning into the school for the first time. For the participants in the study, a ninth grade academy would have been beneficial. The ninth grade academy provides a core team of teachers to support the students and offer assistance when needed. These types of transition programs or some version of them should be implemented in most high schools.

Development of intervention plans. Every participant in the study commented on the lack of an intervention plan to support him or her when they encountered an event in their life that led them to leaving school. The absence of intervention plans spoke volumes about the desire of educators to support at-risk students. Without an intervention plan, students were left to fend for themselves. They had no one to

encourage or support them as they navigated the treacherous waters of school completion after suffering a life altering event.

Student support teams of counselors, social workers, nurses, school resource officers, and administrators must be tasked with developing intervention plans for students who begin to think about dropping out or who have the characteristics of previous dropouts. These plans should be individualized and based on what would be of greatest assistance to the individual student. This assistance could take the form of a more flexible schedule, a work experience, a counseling program, enrollment in courses that are more hands on, assistance in making up missed work, or providing opportunities for the student to participate in school activities.

Advice for parents. The study participants related how important their parents were in their lives. Each participant continued to have a desire to please their parents, even if they lost sight of that at the time they left school. No matter the age of the participant, they had not lost the desire to make their parents proud.

Parents need to continue to be as active throughout their child's educational experience as they were during the elementary years. It is also important for parents to make positive comments about schools and teachers. They need to communicate frequently with their child and with their child's teacher. Parents need to take advantage of times designated to meet with teachers and understand that their suggestions are important to school personnel because they know their children better than anyone else. They also must look at the school as an ally, not an enemy. Being on the same team with the school is essential if the needs of students are to be met.

Advice for students. The participants provided helpful and possibly life changing advice for students in similar situations and those who believe that leaving school is the only solution to their problems. Advice came from the personal experiences of the participants. A summary of the advice is as follows:

- Think about what you are doing
- Be around people that can encourage you to stay in school
- Have a plan if you do leave
- Need to finish high school and go to college
- Consider the consequences
- Leaving school is not worth the trouble it causes
- Getting a GED is not as easy as it seems
- High school is easier than being on your own
- You can't get a good job without a diploma
- You will miss a lot if you leave school

This advice needs to be communicated to students even before they begin to think about leaving school. All educators need to be aware of this advice and be comfortable with sharing versions of this advice with students.

Advice for high schools. The primary purpose of the study was to use the advice from participants to improve our schools and prevent students from dropping out of school. Each of the participants had meaningful and helpful advice for ways to improve schools and keep students similar to themselves in school. A summary of their advice is as follows:

- Teachers need to understand that students depend on them and need them

- Do more teacher observations and make needed changes
- Treat all students the same
- Make students aware of all requirements
- Intervene when students discuss quitting school
- Have high expectations for students
- Don't cast out the troublemakers
- Discipline students in private
- Individualize instruction for students
- Don't condemn students but love them
- Encourage all students to succeed
- Give students time to socialize

Reviewing the advice of the participants and the literature it became evident that schools can make changes that could enhance a student's chances of successfully completing high school with a diploma. Some of the changes are as follows:

- Provide a more flexible schedule for students who need it. Schedule later start times and evening classes for students who would benefit from them.
- Develop work-based internships for students who would benefit from this type of activity. These internships have the potential to provide students with much needed work skills.
- Train faculty and staff in strategies that assist students who do not function well in school. Emphasize the need to build caring relationships with students. Also, provide training that provides teachers with different strategies to teach reading and math to all students.

- Train student assistance teams made up of counselors, social workers, nurses, school resource officers and administrators to work with students and families that experience a traumatic, life-altering event in their lives.
- Review course requirements that force many students to leave school. The requirement for four years of math in high school with one of the classes being higher than Algebra II should be altered based on the student's ability and future plans.
- Design remediation and after school homework assistance for students who need additional support. Staff these programs with individuals who are specially trained in reading and math.
- Offer more career and technical education (CTE) programs. These programs are more relevant for many students and give students a course opportunity that is more hands on.
- Provide extra-curricular opportunities that are open to all students and available even if students do not have rides home after school.
- Avoid zero tolerance policies. Work with the school community to develop discipline policies that are fair and consistent. Use alternatives to suspension whenever possible.
- Design attendance policies that are not entirely punitive in nature. Attendance policies should allow for work to be made up and provide support for students who are out of school for extended periods of time.
- Develop a culture that is sensitive to the needs of all students. Provide follow-up for all students who transfer into the school.

- Design transition programs that support students, especially as they move into high school. These programs should model freshman academies that focus on having a core team of teachers supporting a specific group of students.
- Develop alternative programs that are designed to be different than the comprehensive high schools that are currently in place. The programs should be flexible, self-paced, competency based, utilize on-line options and not housed in a specific location for some students. Having child care available for students with children would be another important component.
- Have programs available for children at the youngest possible ages. Pre-K type programs for four year olds should be provided for as many children as possible.
- Utilize all available community resources. Establish cooperative relationships with the department of social services, law enforcement, juvenile court counselors, the medical community and any other group that is established to support children.
- Colleges of Education must provide more information and strategies to inform teachers on how to prevent dropouts. Currently educators can move through these institutions to the doctorate level without hearing more than ten minutes of conversation concerning dropouts.

This study and the literature confirm that there is no one specific program or intervention that impacts all students. In order to prevent students from dropping out of school, a variety of strategies must be used. Schools must be sensitive to the needs of students and be willing to support all individual students.

Where Do We Go From Here?

This study assists in closing the gap in the literature concerning the influences that cause students to drop out of school from the perspective of the dropout. This study reinforces the importance of parents supporting their children, identifying students at-risk of dropping out at an early age, educators building positive relationships with students, and schools developing intervention plans for at-risk students.

Helping students persist in school until they receive a high school diploma not only provides greater opportunity for the student but for society in general. A society with more citizens with a high school diploma contributes to a more robust economy, less crime, healthier communities and an overall higher standard of living.

If this study keeps one more Buddy from dropping out of school the work is well worth it. In the words of Ron Edmonds,

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that.

Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far (Edmonds, 1979, p. 23).

In education, we must concentrate on the whole while never losing sight of the individual if we intend to successfully teach and graduate them all.

References

- Abbott, R. D., Hill, K. G., Catalano, R. F., & Hawkins, J. D. (2000). Predictors of early high school dropouts: A test of five theories. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 92*(3), 568-572.
- Alat, K. (2002). Traumatic events and children: How early childhood educators can help. *Childhood Education, 79*(1), 2-7.
- Alexander, K. K., Entwisle, D. R., & Horsey, C. (1997). From first grade forward: Early foundations of high school dropout. *Sociology of Education, 70*, 87-107.
- Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Kabbani, N. S. (2001). The dropout process in life course perspective: Early risk factors at home and school. *Teachers College Record, 103*(5), 760-822.
- Ali, R. S., Fall, K., & Hoffman, T. (2013). Life without work: Understanding social class changes and unemployment through theoretical integration. *Journal of Career Assessment, 21*(1), 111-126.
- Alliance for Excellent Education (August, 2006). *Saving futures, saving dollars: The impact of education on crime reduction and earnings*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.
- Alliance for Excellent Education (November, 2006). *Healthier and wealthier: Decreasing health care costs buy increasing educational attainment*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.
- Amos, J. (2008, August). *Dropouts, diplomas, and dollars: U.S. high schools and the nation's economy*. Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieved from <http://www.all4ed.org/files/Econ2008.pdf>
- Amneus, David. (1990). *The garbage generation*. Blackrock, TX: Primrose Press.
- Anderson, A. R., Christenson, S. L., Sinclair, M. F., & Lehr, C. A. (2004). Check & connect: The importance of relationships for promoting engagement with school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 42*, 95-113.
- Anthony, E. A. (2008). Cluster profiles of youths living in urban poverty: Factors affecting risk and resilience. *Social Work Research, 32*(1), 6-17.

- Archambault, I., Janosz M., Fallu, J., & Pagani, L. S. (2009a). Student engagement and its relationship with early high school dropout. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 651-670.
- Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Morizot, J. & Pagani, L. (2009b). Adolescent behavior, selective, and cognitive engagement in school: Relationship to dropout. *Journal of School Health*, 79(9), 408-415.
- Astone, N. M., & McLanahan, S. S. (1991). Family structure, parental practices and high school completion. *American Sociological Review*, 56, 309-320.
- Baker, S., & Bell, V. (2013). *North Carolina 2012 graduation rate: successful strategies and trends from the field* (M0113). State Board of Education, NC Department of Public Instruction. Raleigh, NC: Department of Public Instruction.
- Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., Fox, J., & Hornig, J. (2013). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic - 2013 annual update*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises, the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University School of Education, America's Promise Alliance, and the Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieved from http://www.civicerprises.net/MediaLibrary/Docs/Building-A-Grad-Nation-Report-2013_Full_v1.pdf
- Balfanz, R., & Herzog, L. (2005, March). *Keeping middle grades students on track to graduation: Initial analysis and implications*. Presentation given at the second Regional Middle Grades Symposium, Philadelphia, PA.
- Barrington, B. L., & Hendricks, B. (1989). Differentiating characteristics of high school graduates, dropouts, and nongraduates. *Journal of Educational Research*, 82, 309-319.
- Bartholomew, M. F., Heinrich, R. S., Hickman, G. P., & Mathwig, J. (2008). Differential developmental pathways of high school dropouts and graduates. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 102(1), 3-14.
- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544-559. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13/baxter.pdf>
- Bear, G. G., Kortering, L. J., & Braziel, P. (2006). School completers and noncompleters with learning disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 27(5), 293-300.
- Bergin, C., & Bergin, D. (2009). Attachment in the classroom. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21, 141-170.

- Bickel, R., & Papagiannis, G. (1988). Post-high school prospects and district-level dropout rates. *Youth & Society, 20*, 123-147.
- Billler, H. (1994). *The father factor*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Blankenhorn, D. (1995). *Fatherless America: Confronting our most urgent social problem*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Boesel, D., Alsalam, N., & Smith, T.M. (1998). *Educational and labor market performance of GED recipients*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.
- Boster, J. F., & Strom, R. E. (2007). Dropping out of high school: A meta-analysis assessing the effects of messages in school. *Communication Education, 56*(4), 433-452.
- Bowditch, C. (1993). Getting rid of troublemakers: High school disciplinary procedures and the production of dropouts. *Social Problems, 40*, 493-509.
- Brenneman, R. (2013). The 'dropout crisis' is a poverty crisis. *Education Week, September 19*, p. 1.
- Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J. & Morison, K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- Britt, D. (2005, November 11). Don't let poverty numbers obscure the kids. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-78845.html?>
- Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. J. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *Future of Children, 7*(2), 55-71.
- Brooks-Gunn, J., Duncan, G. J., Klebanov, P. K., & Sealand, N. (1993). Do neighborhoods influence child and adolescent development? *American Journal of Sociology, 99*, 353-95.
- Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bryk, A. S., & Thum, Y. M. (1989). The effects of high school organization on dropping out: An exploratory investigation. *American Educational Research Journal, 26*, 353-383.

- Cairns, R. B., Cairns, B. D., & Neckerman, H. J. (1989). Early school dropout: Configurations and determinants. *Child Development, 60*, 1437-1452.
- Carbonaro, W. J. (1998). A little help from my friend's parents: Intergenerational closure and educational outcomes. *Sociology of Education, 71*, 295-313.
- Cassel, R. N. (2003). A high school dropout prevention program for the at-risk sophomore student. *Education, 123*(4), 649-659.
- Cataldi, E. M., & Warren, J. R. (2006). A historical perspective on high school students' paid employment and its association with high school dropouts. *Sociological Forum, 21*(1), 113-143.
- Chenail, R.J. (1995). Presenting qualitative data. *The Qualitative Report, 2*, 3-13.
- Christenson, S. L., & Reschly, A. M. (2006). Prediction of dropout among students with mild disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 27*(5), 276-292.
- Christenson, S. L., & Thurlow, M. L. (2004). School dropouts: Prevention considerations, interventions, and challenges. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 13*(1), 36-39.
- Chubb, J. E., & Moe, T. M. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America's schools*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Clark, R. L. (December 1992). *Neighborhood effects on dropping out of school among teenage boys*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Clark-Keefe, K. (2006). Degrees of separation: An ourstory about working-class and poverty-class academic identity. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(6). Retrieved from <http://qix.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/6/1180>
- Coble, C., & Jenkins, K. (2013). *Strategies that engage minds: Empowering North Carolina's economic future*. Research Triangle Park, NC: North Carolina Science, Mathematics, and Technology Education Center. Retrieved From <http://www.ncsmt.org/scorecard>
- Cohen, M. A., & Piquero, A. R. (2009). New evidence of the monetary value of saving a high-risk youth. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 25*, 25-49.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*, S95-S120.
- Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E., Hobson, C., McPartland, J., Mood, F., Weinfeld, F., & York, R. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

- Coleman, J. S., & Hoffer, T. (1987). *Public and private high schools: The impact of communities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cooper, H., Linsday, J. J., Nye, B., & Valentine, J. C. (1999). Relationships between five after-school activities and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(2), 369-378.
- Crane, J. (1991). The epidemic theory of ghettos and neighborhood effects on dropping out and teenage childbearing. *American Journal of Sociology, 96*, 1226-1259.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Croninger, R. G., & Lee, V. E. (August 2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record, 103*(4), 548-581.
- Darby, B. (2014, September 15). 6 ways to improve dropout prevention efforts. *ESchool News*, 3-4.
- Davies, D. (2004). *Child development: A practitioner's guide* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Deluca, S., Estacion, A., & Plank, S. B. (2008). High school dropout and the role of career and technical education: A survival analysis of surviving high school. *Sociology of Education, 81*, 345-370.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dillion, S. (2008, April 1). U.S. to require states to use a single school dropout formula. *The New York Times*, 1.
- Dounay, J. (2007). *The progress of education reform: Dropout prevention*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.
- Dubow, E., & Ippolito, M. (1994). Effects of poverty and quality of the home environment on changes in the academic and behavioral adjustment of elementary school-age children. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 23*, 401-412.
- Dunn, C., Chambers, D., & Rabren, K. (2004). Variables affecting students' decisions to drop out of school. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*(5), 314-323.
- Edmonds, R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership, 10*(1), 15-24.

- Englund, M. M., Egeland, B., & Collins, W. A. (2008). Exceptions to high school dropout predictions in a low-income sample: Do adults make a difference? *Journal of Social Issues, 64*(1), 77-93.
- Ensminger, M. E., & Slusacick, A. L. (1992). Paths to high school graduation or dropout: A longitudinal study of a first-grade cohort. *Sociology of Education, 65*, 95-113.
- Ekstrom, R. B., Goertz, M. E., Pollack, J. M., & Rock, D. A. (1986). Who drops out of high school and why? Findings from a national study. *Teachers College Record, 87*, 356-373.
- Evans, W. N., & Schwab, R. M. (1995). Finishing high school and starting college: Do Catholic schools make a difference? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 110*, 941-974.
- Fine, M. (1987). Why urban adolescents drop into and out of public high schools. In G. Natriello, (Ed.), *School dropout: Patterns and policies* (pp. 84-105). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research, 59*(2), 117-142.
- Finn, J. D. (2006). *The adult lives of at-risk students: The roles of attainment and engagement in high school. Statistical analysis report*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Finn, J. D., Fish, R. M., & Scott, L. A. (2008). Educational sequelae of high school misbehavior. *The Journal of Educational Research, 101*(5), 259-274.
- Finn, J. D., Gerber, S. B., & Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2005). Small classes in the early grades, academic achievement, and graduating from high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 97*(2), 214-223.
- Friedman, T.L. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the 21st century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gamoran, A. (1992). Social factors in education. In M. C. Alkin (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, (pp.1222-1229). New York: Macmillan.
- Garnier, H. E., Stein, J. A., & Jacobs, J. K. (1997). The process of dropping out of high school: A 19-year perspective. *American Educational Research Journal, 34*(2), 395-419.

- GED Testing Service. (2010). *Who passed the GED tests? 2008 statistical report*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Gerwertz, C. (2006, March 8). H.S. dropouts say lack of motivation top reason to quit. *Education Week*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ738593&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ738593
- Gleason, P., & Dynarski M. (2002). Do we know whom to serve? Issues in using risk factors to identify dropouts. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 7(1), 25-41.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3rd ed.). New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Goldschmidt, P., & Wang, J. (1999). When can schools affect dropout behavior? A longitudinal multilevel analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36(4), 715-738.
- Graham, S., & Knifsend, C. (2011). Too much of a good thing? How breadth of extracurricular participation relates to school-related affect and academic outcomes during adolescence. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 41, 379-389.
- Grisson, J. B., & Shepard, L. A. (1989). Repeating and dropping out of school. In L. A. Sheppard & M. L. Smith (Eds.), *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention*, (pp.34- 63). New York: Falmer Press.
- Habash, A. (2008). *Counting on graduation*: New York: The Education Trust.
- Hall, R. S. (2006). *Voices behind bars: Correctional education from the perspective of the prisoner student*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.
- Hallinan, M. (2008, June). Teacher influences on students' attachment to school. *Sociology of Education*. 81, 271-283. Retrieved from <http://proxy.lib.duke.edu:2067/pqdlink?index=9&did=1542985271&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1259257096&clientId=15020>
- Hallinan, M. T., & Williams, R. A. (1990). Students' characteristics and the peer-influence process. *Sociology of Education*, 63,122-132.
- Hanushek, E. A. (1997). Assessing the effects of school resources on student performance: An update. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 19,141-164.

- Harlow, C. (2003). *Bureau of justice statistics special report: Educational and Correctional populations*. Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>
- Hawes, C., & Plourde, L. (2005). Parental involvement and its influence on the reading achievement of 6th grade students. *Reading Improvement, 42*(1), 47.
- Heckman, J. J., Humphries, J. E., and Mader, N. S. (2010). *The GED* (NBER Working Paper 16064). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16064>
- Heckman, J. J., & LaFountaine, P. (2006). Bias-corrected estimates of GED returns. *Journal of Labor Economics, 24*, 661-700.
- Hedges, L. V., Laine, R. D., & Greenwald, R. (1994). Does money matter? A meta-analysis of studies of the effects of differential school inputs on student outcomes. *Educational Researcher, 23*, 5-14.
- Henry, K. L., Knight, K. E., & Thornberry, T. P. (2012). School disengagement as a predictor of dropout, delinquency, and problem substance use during adolescence and early adulthood. *Journal of Youth Adolescence, 41*, 156-166.
- Hernstein, R. J., & Murray, C. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.
- Hughes, C., Riley, L., Brown, G., Moore, S., Sarrett, J. & Washington, B. (2007, Winter). The "adolescentizing" of the GED: Youth perspectives. *The Journal of At-Risk, 13*(1), 23-33.
- Janosz, M., Archambault, I., Morizot, J., & Pagani, L. S. (2008). School engagement trajectories and their differential predictive relations to dropouts. *Journal of School Issues, 64*(1), 21-40.
- Jencks, C., Smith, M., Bane, M. J., Cohen, D., Gintis, H., Heyns, B., & Michelson, S. (1972). *Inequality: A reassessment of the effects of family and schooling in America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jimerson, S. R. (1999). On the failure of failure: Examining the association between early grade retention and education and employment outcomes during late adolescence. *Journal of School Psychology, 37*, 243-272.
- Jimerson, S. R., Anderson, G. E., & Wipple, A.D. (2002), Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychological Scholar, 39*: 441-457.

- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2010). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14-26.
- Joselowsky, F. (2007). Youth engagement, high school reform, and improved learning outcomes: Building systemic approaches for youth engagement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 91(3), 257-276.
- Jupp, V. (2006). *The SAGE dictionary of research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kaufman, P., & Bradby, D. (1992). *Characteristics of At-Risk Students in the NELLS: 88*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Kennelly, L., & Monrad, M. (2007). *Approaches to dropout prevention: Heeding the early warning signs with appropriate interventions*. U.S. Department of Education, American Institute for Research. Washington, DC: National High School Center.
- Knesting, K. (2008). Students at risk for school dropout: Supporting their persistence. *Preventing School Failure*, 52(4), 3-10.
- Kortering, L. (2009). School completion issues in special education. *Exceptionality*, 17(1), 1-4.
- Kortering, L., & Braziel, P. (1998). School dropout among youth with and without learning disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 21(1), 61-74.
- Kortering, L., & Braziel, P. (2008). Engaging youth in school and learning: The emerging key to school success and completion. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(5), 461-465. Retrieved from <http://www.interscience.wiley.com>
- Kortering, L., Konold, T., & Glutting, J. (1998). Comparing the reasons for coming to school among high school dropouts and nondropouts. *The Journal of At-Risk Issues*, 13, 10-15.
- Lamb, M. (2004). *The role of the father in child development*. New York: Wiley Publishing.
- Lee, V. E., & Burkam, D. T. (1992). Transferring high schools: An alternative to dropping out? *American Journal of Education*, 100, 420-453.
- Lee, J. C., & Staff, J. (2007). When work matters: The varying impact of work intensity on high school dropout. *Sociology of Education*, 8, 158-178.

- Lehr, C. A., Johnson, D. R., Bremer, C. D., Cosio, S., & Thompson, M. (2004, May). *Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion: Moving from policy and research to practice*. Minneapolis, MN: National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Losen, D., & R. Skiba. (2010). *Suspended education: Urban middle schools in crisis*. Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center.
- Luthar, S. S. (1999). *Poverty and children's adjustment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Malkus, N., & Sen, A. (2011). *Characteristics of GED recipients in high school: 2002-06* (NCES 2012-025). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Science. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Maralani, V. (2006). *From GED to college: The role of age and timing in educational stratification*. California Center for Population Research On-line Working paper series. Retrieved from http://www.ccpr.ucla.edu/ccprwpseries/ccpr_005_03.pdf
- Marcus, R. F., Reio, T. G., & Sanders-Reio, J. (2009). Contribution of student and instructor relationships and attachment style to school completion. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology, 170*(1), 53-71.
- Marshall C., & Rossman, G.B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Matherne, M., & Thomas, A. (2001). Family environment as a predictor of adolescent delinquency. *Adolescence, 36*, 655-665.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. (2nd ed., Vol. 41). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McDill, E., Natriello, G., & Pallas, A. (1986). A population at risk: Potential consequences of tougher school standards for student dropouts. *American Journal of Education, 94*, 135-181.
- McNeal, R.B. (1997). High school dropouts: A closer examination of school effects. *Social Science Quarterly, 78*, 209-222.
- McNeal, R. B. (1999). Parental involvement as social capital: Differential effectiveness on science achievement, truancy, and dropping out. *Social Forces, 78*, 117-144.

- Mertens, D. M. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, J., Ross, T., & Sturgis, C. (2005, November). Beyond the tunnel: Addressing crosscutting issues that impact vulnerable youth. *Briefing Paper #2. Redirecting youth from the school-to-prison pipeline: Addressing crosscutting issues in youth services*. A Briefing Paper Series of Youth Transition Funders Group in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.readbag.com/ytfg-documents-beyondthetunnelproblembriefingpaper2nov2005fin>
- Moore, C. (1999). Boys lost in fatherless homes. *Western Catholic Reporter*, 2, 1-2.
- Morris, J. D., Ehren, B. J., & Lenz, B. K. (1991). Building a model to predict which fourth through eighth graders will drop out of high school. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 59, 286-293.
- Morse, A. B., Anderson, A. R., Christenson, S. L. & Lehr, C. A. (2004). Promoting school completion. *Principal Leadership*, 4, 9-13.
- National Association for College Admission Counseling 2011 annual report* (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.nacacnet.org/research/PublicationsResources/Documents/2011AnnualReport.pdf>
- National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings*. Panel on High-Risk Youth, Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- National Research Council. (2003). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Washington DC: The National Academies Press.
- NC Department of Public Instruction. (2012). *Report to the joint legislative education oversight committee*. State Board of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/research/discipline/reports/consolidated/2011-12/consolidated-report.pdf>
- Neild, R. C., & Balfanz, R. (2006). *Unfulfilled promise: The dimensions and characteristic's of Philadelphia's dropout crisis, 2000-2005*. Baltimore: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University.
- Newmann, F. M., Wehlage, G. G., & Lamborn, S. D. (1992). The significance and sources of student engagement. In F. M. Newmann (Ed.), *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools*, (pp.11-39). New York: Teachers College Press.

- Ogbu, J. U. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational Researcher*, 21, 5- 14.
- Osher, D., Coggshall, J., Colombi, G., Woodruff, D., Francois, S., & Osher, T. (2012). Building school and teacher capacity to eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 35(4), 284-295.
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323-367.
- Ou, S. R. (2008). Do GED recipients differ from graduate and school dropouts?: Findings from an inner-city cohort. *Urban Education*, 43(1), 83-117. Retrieved from <http://uex.sagepub.com>
- Patterson, M. B., Song, W., & Zhang, J. (2009). *GED candidates and their postsecondary educational outcomes: A pilot study. Research Studies 2009-5*. Washington, DC: GED Testing Service.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Payne, R. (1998). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Baytown, TX: RFT Publishers.
- Peterson, K. F. (2006, January). Education quandary: Curbing dropouts. *Stateline.org*. Retrieved November 21, 2009, from <http://www.stateline.org>
- Pinkus, L. (2008, August). Using early-warning data to improve graduation rates: Closing cracks in the education system. *Alliance for Excellent Education*, 1-2, 14.
- Pong, S. L., & Ju, D. B. (2000). The effects of change in family structure and income on dropping out of middle and high school. *Journal of Family Issues*, 21, 147-169.
- Probe Ministries. (1994). *Broken homes, broken hearts (as the family goes so goes society)*. Richardson, TX: Leadership U.
- Ream, R. K., & Rumberger, R. W. (2008). Student engagement, peer social capital, and dropout among Mexican American and non-Latino white students. *Sociology of Education*, 81, 109-139.
- Reder, S. (2007). *Adult education and postsecondary success*. New York, NY: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy. Retrieved from www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/content/rederpolicybriefrev10807.pdf
- Reivich, K., & Shatte', A. (2002). *The resilience factor: 7 essential skills for overcoming life's inevitable obstacles*. New York: Broadway Books.

- Richardson, G. E. (2002, March). The metatheory of resilience and resiliency. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 58* (3), 307-321.
- Riehl, C. (1999). Labeling and letting go: An organizational analysis of how high school students are discharged as dropouts. In A. M. Pallas (Ed.), *Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization*, (pp.231-268). New York: JAI Press.
- Roderick, M. (1993). *The path to dropping out*. Westport, CN: Auburn House.
- Roderick, M. (1994). Grade Retention and School Dropout: Investigating the Association. *American Educational Research Journal, 31*, 729-759.
- Roderick, M., & Camburn, E. (1999). Risk and recovery from course failure in the early years of high school. *American Educational Research Journal, 36*(2), 303-343.
- Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Bacon, J., & Easton, J. Q. (2000). *Update: Ending social promotion*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Rosenblatt, Z., & Peled, D. (2002). School ethical climate and parental involvement. *Journal of Educational Administration, 40*, 349-377.
- Rosenthal, B. S. (1998). Non-school correlates of dropout: An integrative review of the literature. *Children and Youth Services Review, 20*(5), 413-433.
- Rumberger, R. W. (1983). Dropping out of high school: The influence of race, sex, and family background. *American Educational Research Journal, 20*, 199-220.
- Rumberger, R. W. (1995). Dropping out of middle school: A multilevel analysis of students and schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*, 583-625.
- Rumberger, R. W. (2001). *Why students drop out of school and what can be done*. The Civil Rights Project. Retrieved from <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/58p2c3wp>
- Rumberger, R. W., Ghatak, R., Poulos, G., Ritter, P. L., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1990). Family influences on dropout behavior in one California high school. *Sociology of Education, 63*, 283-299.
- Rumberger, R. W., & Larson, K. A. (1998). Student mobility and the increased risk of high school drop out. *American Journal of Education, 107*, 1-35.
- Rumberger, R. W., & Thomas, S. L. (2000). The distribution of dropout and turnover rates among urban and suburban high schools. *Sociology of Education, 73*, 39-67.
- Sander, W., & Krautmann, A. C. (1995). Catholic schools, dropout rates and educational

- attainment. *Economic Inquiry*, 33, 217-233.
- Scanlon, D., & Mellard, D. F. (2002). Academic and participation profiles of school-age dropouts with and without disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 68(2), 239-258.
- Seltzer, M. H. (1994). Studying variation in Program success: A multilevel modeling approach. *Evaluation Review*, 18, 342-361.
- Sieber, J. E. (1998). Planning ethically responsible research. In L. Bickman & D. J. Rog (Eds.). *Handbook of applied social research methods* (pp. 127-156). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sinclair, M. F., Christenson, S. L., Evelo, D. L., & Hurley, C. M. (1998). Dropout prevention for youth with disabilities: Efficacy of a sustained school engagement procedure. *Exceptional Children*, 65(1), 7-21.
- Smith, J. R., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Klebanov, P. K. (1997). Consequences of living in poverty for young children's cognitive and verbal ability and early school achievement. In G.J. Duncan & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), *Consequences of growing up poor* (pp. 132-189). Washington, DC: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Sparks, S. D. (2013a, May 31). A 'neglected' population gets another chance at a diploma. *Education Week*, 32(34), 3-4, 6. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/06/06/34overview.h32.html?intc=EW-DC13-TOC>
- Sparks, S. D. (2013b, June 6). As graduation rates rise, focus shifts to dropouts. *Education Week*, 32(34), 1. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/06/06/34>
- Sparks, S. D. (2013c, July 29). Dropout indicators found for 1st graders. *Education Week*, 32(37). Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/07/29/34overview.h32.html?intc=EW-DC13-TOCexecsum.h32.html>
- Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Stearns, E., Moller, S., Blau, J., & Potochnick, S. (2007). Staying back and dropping out: The relationship between grade retention and school dropout. *Study of Education*, 80, 210-240.
- Stevenson, R., & Ellsworth, J. (1993). Dropouts and silencing of critical voices. *Frontiers in Education* (pp. 259-271). New York: Sunny Series.
- Stillwell, R., & Sable, J. (2013). *Public school graduates and dropouts from the common core of data: School year 2009-10: First look (Provisional Data)*. (NCES 2013-309). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

- Stoltz, P. G. (1999). *Adversity quotient: Turning obstacles into opportunity*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Sum, A. B., Khtiwade, I., McLaughlin, J., & Palma, S. (2009). *The consequences of dropping out of high school*. Center for Labor Market Studies. Boston: Northeastern University.
- Swanson, C. B. (2007). Learning and earning. *Education Week*, 26(40), 16-17. Retrieved November 21, 2009, from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2007/06/12/index.html?intc=ml>
- Sweeten, G., Bushway, S. D., & Paternoster, R. (2009). Does dropping out of school mean dropping into delinquency? *Criminology*, 47(1), 47-91.
- Tanner, M. (Ed.). (2004). *Social security and its discontents: A comprehensive guide to social security reform*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute.
- Teachman, J. D., Paasch, K., & Carver, K. (1996). School capital and dropping out of school. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58, 773-783.
- Terry, T. (2008). The effects that family members and peers have on students' decisions to drop out of school. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 31(3), 25-38.
- Therriault, S. B., O'Cummings, M., Heppen, J., Yerhot, L., & Scala, J. (2013). *High school early warning intervention monitoring system implementation guide* (S283B050028). Retrieved from <http://www.betterhighschools.org/documents/EWSHSImplementationguide.pdf>
- Thornburgh, N. (2006, April 17). Dropout nation. *Time*, 167(16), 30-40.
- Tuck, E. (2012). *Urban youth and school pushout: Gateways, get-aways, and the GED*. New York: Routledge.
- Tyler, J. H., & Lofstrom, M. (2009, Spring). Finishing high school: Alternative pathways and dropout recovery. *Future of Children*, 19(1), 77-103.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington DC: Census Bureau.
- Wagner, M., & Newman, L. (2012). Longitudinal transition outcomes of youth with emotional disturbances. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 35(3), 199-208.

- Waxman, H. C., Gray, J. P., & Padron, Y. N. (2003). *Review of research on educational resilience*. (Research Report 11). Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.
- Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Windle, G. (2011). What is resilience? A review and concept analysis. *Reviews in Clinical Gerontology, 21*, 152-169.
- Winerip, M. (2007, December). In gaps at school, weighing family life. *Parenting, 9*, 2.
- Woods, G. (1995). Reducing the dropout rate. In *School improvement research series* (Close-Up #17, pp. 1-24). Washington, DC: North Northwest Regional Education Laboratory.
- Woolf, S., Johnson, R., Phillips, R., & Philipsen, M. (2007). Giving everyone the health of the educated: An examination of whether social change would save more lives than medical advances. *American Journal of Public Health, 97*(4), 679-683.
- Yerhot, L. J. (2012). *High schools in the United States. Condition of education*. Washington, DC: The National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research.
- Zvoch, K. (2006). Freshman year dropouts: Interactions between student and school characteristics and student dropout status. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 11*(1), 97-117.

APPENDIX A

Dissertation Timeline

1. Introduction, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Significance of the Study and Research Questions – March 15, 2013
2. Literature Review – August, 2013
3. Methodology – August, 2013
4. Status Review with Committee – December, 2013
5. Qualifying Exam – January, 2014
6. Proposal and IRB Process – January 2014
7. Data Collection – February 2014 to April 2014
8. Data Analysis and Writing – April 2014 to September 2014
9. Dissertation Submitted – September 2014
10. Defense – October 2014

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval Form



To: David Burleson CAMPUS MAIL

From: IRB Administration **Date:** 3/19/2014 **RE:** Notice of IRB Exemption **Study #:** 14-0149

Study Title: The Socio Cultural Issues Related to Dropouts **Exemption Category:** (2) Anonymous Educational Tests; Surveys, Interviews or Observations

This study involves minimal risk and meets the exemption category cited above. In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b) and University policy and procedures, the research activities described in the study materials are exempt from further IRB review.

Study Change: Proposed changes to the study require further IRB review when the change involves:

an external funding source, the potential for a conflict of interest, a change in location of the research (i.e., country, school system, off site location), the contact information for the Principal Investigator, the addition of non-Appalachian State University faculty, staff, or students to the research team, or the basis for the determination of exemption. Standard Operating Procedure #9 cites examples of changes, which affect the basis of the determination of exemption on page 3.

Investigator Responsibilities: All individuals engaged in research with human participants are responsible for compliance with University policies and procedures, and IRB determinations. The Principal Investigator (PI), or Faculty Advisor if the PI is a student, is ultimately responsible for ensuring the protection of research participants; conducting sound ethical research that complies with federal regulations, University policy and procedures; and maintaining study records. The PI should review the IRB's list of PI responsibilities.

To Close the Study: When research procedures with human participants are completed, please send the Request for Closure of IRB Review form to irb@appstate.edu.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Protections Office at (828) 262-7981 (Julie) or (828) 262-2692 (Robin).

Best wishes with your research.

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

Consent Form

1. Title of this study

Dropouts Who Return for Their GED: Personal Reflections on the Socio-Cultural Issues Related to Leaving School

2. Purpose of this study

Since compulsory attendance laws began to dictate when students were able to leave school over half a century ago, school systems throughout the country have struggled with why students leave school before graduating. Research documents and state dropout records have primarily been filled with statements from dropouts who, at the time of their dropping out, were angry, disconnected, or unstable. This data was collected at a time when these students were reacting to current situations or circumstances that caused them to finally leave school. The voices of student dropouts have been silenced by taking the information on the reasons for dropping out at the wrong time. My belief is that the true reason or reasons for a student dropping out occurred years earlier and escalated over a period of time. By exploring the true reasons for dropping out of school, I believe we can design programs and develop interventions that will help save potential dropouts.

The focus of the study will be to identify previous dropouts who are now enrolled in a General Education Development (GED) program. I plan, through questioning a sample group of dropouts, to determine their reason for leaving school.

Please know that your responses will be part of a published dissertation.

3. What you will do in this study

I would like to interview you about your k-12 education for about 1 hour. All your comments will be recorded to guarantee everything you say is stated as you said it. These audio files will then be transcribed. These audio files will be deleted when the study is completed. Anything you say can be used in the study.

4. Risks

You may not like talking about your educational experiences or your family. If you do not want to talk about something, you do not have to. Just let me know and we will skip that topic. Also, if you get tired during the interview, let me know and we can take a break or stop the interview.

5. How this may help people

The results of this study may be used to help principals, assistant principals, and

teachers understand the reasons students drop out of school. The information you share can also be used to encourage students to stay in school. I also hope to use the research results to help schools develop programs and strategies to prevent dropouts.

6. Can you stop?

If you want to stop, you may do so at any time. Mayland Community College is aware and supports that I am conducting this research, but they do not know who is participating. . This study does not affect your grades or progress toward a GED.

7. Protection of your name and history

Names will not be used on audio file or any other part of this study. What you say will be typed by a typist. I will keep the audio files and typed reports on my computer which is password protected. I will destroy the typed reports and the audio files no later than one year from the interview. No details will be recorded that could link any information you provide with you. I will not record the date or time of the interview or your name. No one will be able to link you to the information you provide. Anonymous comments and quotes will be published in the dissertation.

8. What you will get

There will be no money or other payment for doing this study, nor will your participation in the GED program be impacted in any way.

9. Other information

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Dr. Larry Kortering at Appalachian State University. [

The Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has determined that this study is exempt from IRB oversight.

10. Would you like to participate?

You have been told of what will happen in this study and the risks for this study. If you would like to participate, please sign below.

By continuing to the research procedures, I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years old, have read the above information, and agree to participate.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

APPENDIX D

Participant Selection Process

Participant selection will be based on those willing to participate. Since all of them are high school dropouts, the only limitation will be if they are not eighteen years old. I have obtained permission to conduct the study from the director of the community college GED program along with the college president (Appendix F). I have also consulted with the teachers of the program to determine the most appropriate times, what the students would like as some type of compensation (their choice of a barbeque lunch or a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card) and if there was any concerns I need to take into consideration. I also plan to use the memo app on my iPhone to record the interviews and create an electronic file for each interview. I will then have the recorded interviews transcribed into word for word transcripts.

Before the interviews, each student will receive a consent form that describes the research project in understandable terms, the study procedures, their rights and the feature that they can opt out of the study at any time (Appendix C). At the beginning of each interview session, participants will be reminded of their consent and verbally express their wish to continue in the project. I will emphasize my desire to get their true thoughts not the information the participants just think I want to hear.

APPENDIX E

Interview Questions

I. Family Influences

1. What jobs did you have while you were attending school? On average, how many hours a week did your work at each job?
2. At the time you decided to leave school, what were the two main reasons for making the decision?
3. What options did you believe you had other than leaving school?
4. When did you first start thinking about dropping out? What grade were you in?
5. Do you have any family members that have left school early? If so, what was their relationship to you?
6. What comments did your parents make about school when you were young?
7. Were your parents supportive of your decision to leave high school? Do you remember their comments when you told them of your decision?
8. What has changed in your life that has caused you to want to continue your education by getting your GED?

II. Peer and Individual Influences

1. Tell me three things about yourself?
2. Tell me about your two best friends in high school?
3. What did you like most about your friends? What did you like least?
4. Do you have any family friends that have left school early? If so, what was their relationship to you?
5. What advice would you give a high school student who is thinking about leaving school before graduation?

III. School Influences

1. What is your first recollection of school and what do you remember?
2. What two classes did you like most? (Tell me the reasons?)
3. What two classes did you like least? (Tell me the reasons?)
4. How would you compare your reading ability to others in your class? (Lower, about the same, or higher)
5. What school activities did you participate in while in school?
6. Go back to your high school days, tell me about your best memory in school.
7. Tell me about your worst memory
8. When did you leave school?
9. Tell me about the nature of the relationships you had with teachers, counselors, or other school staff members? How did these relationships lead to your decision to leave school?
10. Were you ever retained in school? If so what grade(s)?
11. What were your three main successes in school?
12. How did your teachers and other school staff help you?
13. At any time, did a school official attempt an intervention aimed at helping you change our perceptions of school? If so, what was the intervention, and what happened?
14. What was the hardest part of high school for you?
15. What else could the school have done to help keep you from leaving school early?
16. If you could make one suggestion for how we could improve high school, what would it be?
17. What made you change your mind and come back to school?

APPENDIX F

Approval Letter from MCC

MAYLAND
Community College
Excellence Within Reach

January 21, 2014

Mr. Burleson-

Thank you for your interest in the needs of adult learners in our community. Your plans to further investigate the circumstances surrounding why students leave the public school setting will certainly add to the body of knowledge available for this topic and help us, as partner systems, make choices that will support student learning and success even more effectively in the future.

We look forward to assisting you with your research and want to assure you that you have the support and permission of our program in talking with our students who are willing to participate.

Thank you so much for your ongoing partnership and for the contributions you make to education in our communities. We look forward to growing this relationship going forward. If I can be of assistance or provide any support or information, please let me know.

Sincerely,



Steve Gunter
Dean, Adult Education

PO Box 547, Spruce Pine, NC 28777 ■ 828/765-7351 ■ 1/800/462/9526 ■ FAX 828/765/0728
<http://www.mayland.cc.nc.us>
An Equal Opportunity Institution

Vita

David C. Burleson

Vita

A graduate of Appalachian State University with an Ed. D. in Educational Administration, David Burlison, an Avery County native, started his career in education at Freedom High School as a math teacher and coach. He served as assistant principal of Freedom High until becoming the principal of what was then Oak Hill Junior High School. He returned to Freedom as principal and remained in this capacity until moving into the associate superintendent's position in 1996. Mr. Burlison became superintendent in 2000 and held that position until June 30, 2009. Under his leadership, the school system was awarded the prestigious National Magna Award of Excellence for its pre-k mobile education on wheels. Also, during Mr. Burlison's tenure as Burke School's superintendent, the county experienced the lowest dropout rate in the public school system's history. In 2011 he became the superintendent of the Avery County Schools (ACS) and in 2014 ACS had the highest graduation cohort rate in the state of North Carolina.

Professionally, he has received local, regional and state Principal of the Year Awards, Educational Office Personnel Administrator of the Year Awards, North Carolina Middle School Association Superintendent of the Year Award, the United Way Community Builders Award, the United Hmong Association Community Service Award, Regional Superintendent of the Year, the Mayland Community College Citizen of the Year, and the Avery County Man of the Year.

He is married to the former Beth Dayton of Spruce Pine, Vice-President and CFO of James Tool. They have two daughters, Heather, an attorney in Raleigh and Shannon, a science teacher at Athens Drive High School also in Raleigh.