

THE HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT
OUTCOMES AND FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT PERSISTENCE

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DEDICATION

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HSSC	High School Success Classroom
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCDPI	North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
TFM	Teaching Family Model
NCSCOS	North Carolina Standard Course of Study
EOG	End of Grade
SBE	State Board of Education
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
SM	School Membership
ISS	Iredell-Statesville Schools

ABSTRACT

THE HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT
OUTCOMES AND FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT PERSISTENCE

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The detrimental effects of dropping out of high school are well established in the literature. Programs specifically designed to address the needs of at-risk high school are a targeted intervention to lower the dropout rate. One such program is the High School Success Classroom (HSSC), a self-contained classroom on the campus of Pressly School in North Carolina. Pressly School is an alternative school serving students in grades Kindergarten through 12. The HSSC uses the Teaching Family Model (TFM) of interaction, which emphasizes clear communication and mutual respect. The primary mode of instructional delivery is computer-based learning. The theoretical framework that was utilized in this study is Wehlage's (1989) theory of School Membership (SM), which is grounded in four concepts explained by Tinto (1975): adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation.

One purpose of this case study was to determine the effect of the HSSC at Pressly School on the graduates. Quantitative data describe how the HSSC affected the outcomes of its students in comparison with students who did not attend the HSSC. Students within the

HSSC were paired for the purpose of comparison with students who were not in the HSSC but who also entered high school during the 2005-2006 school year. HSSC and non-HSSC students were paired based on the following factors: socioeconomic status, eighth grade reading end of grade (EOG) test scale score as a measure of student achievement, ethnicity, and gender. The groups were compared with each other based on the following factors: absenteeism, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions. On average, HSSC students were absent 9 more days than non-HSSC students during the 2009-2010 school year. HSSC students and non-HSSC had the same graduation rate (98%). HSSC students tended to select employment as their most likely post-graduate intention while the non-HSSC students selected Community/Technical College most frequently.

Another purpose of this study was to evaluate how the HSSC assists students in persisting through graduation. Pressly School HSSC staff and graduates participated in interviews to describe the factors that led to students' successful completion of high school. The intertwining factors of the HSSC program, the nurturing influence of the HSSC staff, and the personal characteristics of the graduates were key in the persistence through graduation.

The implications for professional practice include school staff members using findings from the study to meet the needs of marginalized students and the creation of a new track of student in the graduate-dropout continuum: the state-required credit earning graduate. The suggestions for future research include setting up focus group interviews for HSSC

graduates on the day of graduation as well as a longitudinal follow-up study to determine the status of HSSC graduates years after they have graduated.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Dear Mr. Gabriel:

I want to thank you and the teachers of the Success Program for the ongoing effort given toward my son. This program truly is the last chance for him to obtain a diploma instead of a GED, and that is important to us both. Without telling you long, sometimes disturbing details, please know that my son is a victim of statistics....

You know that stuff that happens to "other people?" We're those people. He can still remember when he was 2 and he watched his father attack me. When he was around 4, I took the kids to a park to teach them to catch & throw football, where gang members used us for target practice as they drove by. It seemed to last forever because they started shooting from a couple blocks away and continued until after they passed us... We moved to New York when J__ was 7, where he was later hit by a cab driver on his way to Summer School one day. (Summer school became a yearly thing for him). At age 13 he was injured on a scooter (no helmet) and was airlifted via helicopter to Stony Brook University Hospital for emergency surgery to relieve the bleeding between his brain & skull. We almost lost him. He was beaten by gang members while walking from a friend's house one night a couple years ago. We spent all night in Good Samaritan getting stitches. I don't know how this kid survives, but he always does....

I want to thank you because as stubborn as my son is, I know he is only one of many students that your staff must deal with daily. I also know that people their age are growing up in a hostile world & they don't know what's best for them, don't cooperate, and don't always express gratitude, even when they feel it. Since we moved to Statesville this summer I have seen my boy grow closer to being a man than ever; I think he'll be ok. Under the instruction of you all he has not only been educated, but has been forced to "man up" & communicate more, he has been forced to exercise patience, self-restraint, and a form of respect which tested & refined him. I don't know if any of you can see the difference, but I want you to know I see it... (J's mother, personal communication, January 28, 2009)

This email provides a glimpse into the life of a student who graduated from the High School Success Classroom (HSSC). The HSSC is a self-contained classroom on the campus of Pressly School in North Carolina. The HSSC uses the Teaching Family Model (TFM) of interaction, which emphasizes clear communication and mutual respect. The

primary mode of instructional delivery is computer-based learning. The focus of the HSSC is assisting 11th and 12th grade students in graduating from high school when they are contemplating dropping out or have already dropped out. The student mentioned in the email had difficult life circumstances that kept him from graduating from a traditional high school in New York before he moved to the Iredell-Statesville school district. He found success in the classroom highlighted in this study.

The Negative Impact of High School Dropout

The high school student dropout issue is becoming increasingly important as educators and taxpayers alike gain awareness of the detrimental impact this problem has on our nation's economy. According to an Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) report, 15.4% of high school dropouts were unemployed, compared to just 10% of high school graduates. Dropouts are more likely than graduates to experience health problems, engage in criminal activities, and become dependent on government programs such as welfare (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002). Broader negative outcomes associated with dropping out of school include lower national income and tax revenue for the support of government services, increased demand for social services, increased crime and antisocial behavior, reduced political participation and intergenerational mobility, and poorer levels of health (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) makes steadily improving rates of student graduation one of the key criteria by which public schools are evaluated. NCLB states that by 2014, student graduation rates should be 100% nationwide. To have a 100% graduation rate, a district must have a 0% dropout rate. Though an accurate measure of the dropout rate nationwide is difficult to obtain due to differences in definition, the status dropout rate provides an

estimate for a given year. Status dropout rate is the percentage of individuals ages 16 to 24 who do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent General Education Diploma (GED). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2010), the nationwide status dropout rate was 8.1% in 2008-2009. This indicates that school districts are not currently meeting the mandates of NCLB regarding dropout rate.

For districts to achieve a 0% dropout rate, they must implement radical changes in how they serve students at the greatest risk of dropping out. The punitive nature of NCLB will likely create an incentive for districts to reduce the dropout rate. School districts failing to meet the goal of a 0% dropout rate over a period of time may face federal sanctioning and may even lose federal funding (NCLB, 2001).

Throughout the United States, definitions of school dropouts contain similar language, including a lack of high school credential attainment. The term dropout is defined as, "...individuals who are not enrolled in high school and have not earned a high school credential such as a diploma or a General Educational Diploma (GED)" (Provasnik et al., 2007, p. 58). Characteristics of students who typically drop out include but are not limited to (a) low socio-economic status, (b) being of a minority ethnicity, (c) poor school attendance, (d) poor academic performance, and (e) poor school engagement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Predictors of dropout can also be categorized by family context (family changes, parental attitudes, and socialization), student's personal resources (attitudes, behaviors), school factors and experiences such as test scores, and school tracking (Alexander et al., 1997; Hess & Copeland, 2001).

Protective Factors

Existing alongside the factors surrounding student dropout, protective factors can potentially contribute to persistence through graduation. Protective factors generally fall into two categories: student-owned and staff-owned. Persisting students appear to have several important characteristics that contribute to successfully obtaining a high school diploma. Students who persist through graduation often have an internal locus of control regarding their academic future (Finn & Rock, 1997; Suh, S., Suh, J., & Houston, 2007). Persisting students often report having strong relationships with their peers and instructional staff (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Worrell & Hale, 2001). Optimistic views of the future and optimistic belief systems are also characteristic of persisting students (Suh, S. et al., 2007; Worrell & Hale, 2001). Persisting students are often goal oriented and expect to attend school in the upcoming school year (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Suh, S. et al., 2007). High levels of student engagement and strong self-esteem are often possessed by persisting students (Finn & Rock, 1997). Persisting students also have positive attitudes about school in general and are willing to “play the game” to get their high school diplomas (Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Worrell & Hale, 2001). School staff can nurture at-risk students by tapping into protective factors that foster student persistence through graduation.

Staff-owned protective factors are equally important in encouraging students in persisting through graduation. Students are more likely to persist if they have strong relationships with their instructional staff (Smink & Reimer, 2005), benefit from positive staff attitudes and mannerisms (Kortering & Braziel, 1999), and receive counseling services in individual and/or group settings (Trusty, 1996; Chow, 1996). When staff members form strong partnerships with parents and community agencies (Chow, 1996),

students persist through graduation more often. Schools in which staff members modify their academic programming for students at risk of dropping out and provide ongoing academic support are more likely to increase student persistence through graduation (Chow, 1996; Suh, S. et al., 2007).

Alternative Education

Another significant staff-owned protective factor, alternative education, is a common form of academic programming modification. Many students who have been identified as potential school dropouts are placed in alternative school settings.

Alternative schools have often been viewed by the general public as well as those in the public school community as schools for students who, for various reasons, have not been successful in the mainstream school setting. However, alternative schools assume a variety of forms to serve different purposes. Raywid (1994) grouped alternative schools into three categories. The first category, Type I, includes schools of choice based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students. Type II schools are placements for students as a last step before expulsion. Type III schools are designed with a remedial focus on academic, social, and emotional issues, and utilize a non-punitive, therapeutic approach toward students. The alternative school is a versatile construct with different strategies for serving at-risk students.

Some students in alternative schools overcome personal and school-related obstacles and attain their high school diplomas. Because of the past research preoccupation with student dropout factors, relatively less is known about strategies available to education professionals to promote student persistence through graduation (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). By understanding factors integral to the

success of alternative school graduates, alternative school staff can shape future policies and practices aimed at increasing the likelihood of student graduation. Increases in the graduation rate among alternative school students would assist districts in improving their overall graduation rates to meet the demands of NCLB.

The literature provides substantial information and data on factors that predict dropouts but relatively little on factors that make at-risk students more likely to graduate (Christenson et al., 2001). Interventions designed without attention to the specific needs of students at risk of dropping out are not as effective as targeted efforts (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007). Since many at-risk students attend alternative schools at some point in their school careers, identifying factors that increase their graduation chances, including personal factors and educational programs, is a useful addition to existing literature and practice. A case study of one alternative school model, the High School Success Classroom (HSSC), will contribute to existing alternative school literature by calling attention to a program whose primary focus is fostering student persistence through graduation.

Significance of the Problem

The student dropout problem has negative consequences both for the individual who drops out as well as the society in which the dropout lives. The United States depends on students graduating from high school prepared to enter the twenty-first century workforce. The cost of assisting students to complete their high school education is a small investment compared to the cost of failing to do so. Levin et al. (2007) concluded, “Educational investments to raise the high school graduation rate appear to be

doubly beneficial: the quest for greater equity for all young adults would also produce greater efficiency of public resources” (p. 1).

In 2008 approximately 6 million people between the ages of 16 and 24, representing 8% of the total U.S. population of that age group, were without a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). Approximately one-third of all high school students in the United States fail to graduate in any given year (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). During the 2009-2010 school year, 16,804 students in grades 9-12 dropped out of school in North Carolina. While this number represents the significant amount of work to be done in the area of dropout reduction, it does represent a 12.4% decrease from the 2008-2009 school year, when 19,184 students dropped out of school (NCDPI, 2011). As the dropout rate decreases, the graduation rate increases. In the ten-year period from 1993-2003, the high school graduation rate in the United States rose to 85% (U.S. Census Bureau, “Educational Attainment,” 2004). A higher percentage of students in the southern United States drop out than in any other region of the country (NCES, 2005). Since the HSSC is located in a southern city in North Carolina and the southern region has the highest dropout rate of any region in the United States, this study is particularly relevant; conclusions drawn from this analysis could shape curriculum in alternative schools throughout the southern region, thus alleviating the costs of student dropout on both the societal and personal levels.

Cost to Society

The educational levels of citizens and the economy they contribute to and receive benefits from are inextricably linked. Levin et al. (2007) reported, “One of the best documented relationships in economics is the link between education and income: more

highly educated people have higher incomes” (p. 6). About 1.3 million students did not graduate from U.S. high schools in 2004, costing more than \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). According to Levin et al. (2007), “Failure to graduate from high school has both private and public consequences: income is lower, which means lower tax contributions to finance public services” (p. 14). Illustrating this point further, the average high school dropout is associated with approximately \$240,000 worth of costs to society in terms of lower tax contributions, higher Medicaid and Medicare reliance, higher reliance on welfare, and higher rates of criminal activity (Levin & Belfield, 2007). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) provides current unemployment data indicating that high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates.

The United States strives to keep pace with the rest of the world in terms of developing an educated populace. In global competition, the United States ranks 18th in high school graduation rates among developed nations (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2006). Kennelly and Monrad (2007) stated, “The high school dropout problem is a crisis for the United States, in part because it impacts not only individuals and their education, but also because the economic and social costs are so dramatic” (p. 4). The more than 12 million students who will drop out over the next decade will cost the United States about \$3 trillion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). A higher percentage of dropouts are unemployed compared to adults with a graduation credential (U.S. Department of Labor, “Unemployment rate,” 2010). Levin et al. (2007) stressed the macroeconomic benefits of students graduating from high school:

A society that provides fairer access to opportunities, that is more productive and

with higher employment, and that has better health and less crime is a better society in itself. It is simply an added incentive that the attainment of such a society is also profoundly good economics. (p. 22)

The economic impact of high school graduation does not end with the amount of revenue educated citizens produce. The impact is also felt in the societal resources that are not expended to alleviate the negative outcomes associated with student dropout. Lochner and Moretti (2004) report a strong causal relationship between education and crime. Levin et al. (2007) found that higher educational attainment reduces crime both by juveniles and adults. Approximately 75% of state prison inmates and 59% of federal inmates are dropouts. A dropout is also 3.5 times more likely to be incarcerated at some point in his/her lifetime compared to a high school graduate (U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Because high school graduates are less likely to commit crimes, increasing the high school completion rate by just one percent for all men ages 20-60 would reduce costs in the criminal justice system by an estimated \$1.4 billion per year (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006). Striving for higher graduation rates is good policy, both socially and fiscally.

Personal Cost

The personal economic cost to the individual dropout is best exemplified by the projection provided by Wise (2007) at the Senate Committee hearing regarding the NCLB reauthorization. Citing a report by the Teachers College of Columbia University, Wise (2007) reported that male high school graduates earn up to \$322,000 more over the course of their lifetimes than dropouts, while college graduates earn up to \$1.3 million more. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2010) reported a significant

difference in median income of persons age 18-67 who graduate from high school (\$42,000) compared to those who did not (\$23,000). A survey of families living in poverty indicated that a family in which the head of the household does not have a high school education has a one in four chance of living in poverty (Iceland, 2000). As a cause for alarm, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) held that U.S. high school and college graduation rates are behind those of other nations at a time when about 90% of the fastest growing jobs will require some post-secondary education.

The personal costs of dropping out are not just economic. The physical health of a high school dropout is shown to decline more rapidly than that of a high school graduate. In one survey, dropouts age 25 or older reported being in worse shape than adults who were not dropouts, regardless of income (Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2009). Gibbons (2006) reported that an average 45-year-old high school dropout is in worse health than a 65-year-old high school graduate. He also found that high school dropouts have a life expectancy nearly a decade shorter than high school graduates. In terms of emotional health, students benefit from extending their time in educational settings because they mature while attending school until they graduate:

The more time adolescents have to gain educational experience during the teenage years, the better prepared they will be to face life's challenges in adulthood. Early dropout from high school is a "pseudo mature" event that precipitates premature involvement in adult roles. It is important to extend education as long as possible within the developmental period from age 14-18. (Newcomb, 1996, p. 4)

Prolonging the maturation process to its logical conclusion is especially important in today's society, which is fraught with emotional stressors, including media saturation,

economic recession, and other problematic forces. In some cases, a school may be the most nurturing setting a student finds himself/herself in on a regular basis. Young people in danger of leaving the nurturing support structure provided by schools need to be identified and helped.

Early Identification

Many intellectual and behavioral factors can predict, with varied levels of accuracy, which students are most likely to drop out long before they are old enough to do so. Many future dropouts can be identified as early as sixth grade by studying academic and engagement issues (Balfanz and Herzog, 2005).

Given the potential negative outcomes for both the individual and society, students displaying risk factors for dropping out should be identified as accurately and swiftly as possible. Levin et al. (2007) asserted that the net benefits would increase significantly if the educational interventions could be targeted more accurately to at-risk individuals who need them. Delays in identifying students exhibiting risk factors can complicate interventions needed to prevent dropping out of school. When delays in identification and intervention occur, multiple dropout factors may develop when previously only one factor was present (Suh, S. et al., 2007).

The purpose in identifying and interpreting these factors is to accurately predict which students are most likely to drop out of school. Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, and Pagani (2008) emphasized the importance of developing cost-efficient screening procedures to assist in identifying students predicted to dropout of school. The National High School Center (2007) has developed an early warning tracking system for students who are likely to drop out. There are two high-yield indicators that this particular

tracking system documents: attendance and academic course performance. Student attendance is tracked as a key data point (students missing 10% or more of instructional time are considered at-risk). Course performance is tracked using course failures (students are listed as at-risk if they fail one class), Grade Point Average (students with a GPA below 2.0 are at-risk), and an on-track indicator (indicating that the students have passed enough classes to be promoted to the next grade). With early identification comes the potential to establish appropriate interventions and curb the cycle of failure.

The Current Study

The current study is a case study on one alternative education program designed to prevent dropout. The High School Success Classroom (HSSC) is a self-contained classroom on the campus of Pressly School. Pressly School is an alternative school serving students in grades Kindergarten through 12. The HSSC uses the Teaching Family Model (TFM) of interaction, which emphasizes clear communication and mutual respect. The primary mode of instructional delivery is computer-based learning. Online instructional programs, Nova Net and EPIC Learning, provide students with content aligned to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) for each subject. Peer accountability is used in the classroom as a mechanism for building a cohort mentality among the HSSC students.

The purposes of this case study were to determine the effect of the HSSC at Pressly School on the graduates and to evaluate how the HSSC assists students in persisting through graduation. This study will contribute to the literature in documenting the performance of a dropout prevention program focused on juniors and seniors in high school. *Ex post facto* design was used to determine how the HSSC affected the outcomes

of its students in comparison with students who did not attend the HSSC. Students within the HSSC were paired with students who were not in the HSSC but entered high school during the 2005-2006 school year. HSSC and non-HSSC students were paired based on some or all of the following characteristics: socioeconomic status, eighth grade reading end of grade (EOG) test scale score, ethnicity, and gender. The students were compared with each other based on the following outcome variables: absenteeism, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions. Pressly School HSSC staff and graduates provided qualitative insight into the factors in the classroom that led to students' successful completion of high school even though the students possessed characteristics predisposing them to dropout. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with HSSC instructional staff and graduates to obtain information related to factors that increased student persistence through graduation. I conducted the individual interviews and a paid interviewer conducted the focus group interview. Findings were analyzed using the HSSC staff roles, HSSC staff personality traits, and Wehlage's (1989) School Membership Theory categories: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation.

Definition of Terms

Terms in Table 1.1 will be used throughout the dissertation.

Table 1.1

Definition of Terms

Alternative Education	Addresses needs of students who typically cannot or have not been met in a traditional school setting.
At-risk	An adjective used to label a student who bears one or more characteristics indicated by the literature as predisposing a student to drop out of school prior to graduation
Daily attendance	Percentage of students enrolled in a school or classroom who are present on a given day
Differentiated diploma	Indicates the completion of 21 specific courses identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Students obtaining this document are high school graduates, although the standard district diploma may have additional credits required
Dropouts	Students who stop attending school prior to obtaining their high school diploma(s)
Free and reduced lunch status	Students living in households of annual incomes in certain ranges may receive school lunches for a reduced fee or free of charge. These household income ranges are set by the Federal government.
Graduation rate	The percentage of students who begin high school in ninth grade and graduate in four years
Persistence	The ability of students with multiple risk factors associated with dropout to continue their education through graduation
Protective factors	Characteristics that positively impact the probability of at-risk students persisting through graduation
Resilient students	“Individuals who have many risk factors for a particular negative outcome but do not develop the predicted outcome” (Worrell & Hale, 2001, p. 370)
Risk factors	“...student characteristics or measures of past school performance thought to be associated with future dropping out” (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002, p. 25).
School dropout rate	The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) calculates the dropout rate by subtracting the number of students who were enrolled in the previous school year but dropped out prior to the 20 th day of school the current school year. This number is added to the enrollment of the school at the 20 th day of the current school year and then divided by 2.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dropping out of school is an event that occurs as a result of various factors. Factors that are correlated with dropouts and supported by the literature include low socioeconomic status, combined impact of low socioeconomic status and ethnicity, poor academic performance, ninth-grade transition, low self-esteem, absenteeism, and low student engagement. To mitigate the dropout problem, some school districts use alternative education schools and programs. Alternative schools and programs may be designed to meet a variety of student needs or they may target a particular risk factor to improve student attendance, academic performance, and behavior. Alternative schools and programs may also be designed to decrease the rate of student dropout. This chapter will review definitions of dropout, review risk factors impacting student dropout, introduce alternative education as an intervention to address student dropout, and detail protective factors that are key in student persistence.

Defining Dropout

Though it is difficult to fathom, there is no standard definition of what constitutes a student dropout from school. Consequently, the task of acquiring accurate national dropout data is rendered problematic by inaccurate reporting mechanisms and varied formulas. The National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES, 2010) defines “dropout” in the following manner:

...a student in grades nine through 12 who fits any of the following criteria: was enrolled in the district during the previous school year; was not enrolled at the beginning of the succeeding school year; has not graduated or completed a program of study by the maximum age established by the state; has not

transferred to another public school district, to a non-public school or to a state-approved educational program; or a student who has left school for reasons other than death, illness, or school-approved absence. (p. 1)

The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) policy HSP-Q-001 (NCDPI, “Dropout Prevention and Intervention,” 2007) reports students who “...were enrolled in a school during the previous school year but are not enrolled in that same school on the 20th day of the current school year” are counted as dropouts (p. 103). The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) calculates the dropout rate by subtracting the number of students who were enrolled in the previous school year but dropped out prior to the 20th day of school the current school year. This number is added to the enrollment of the school at the 20th day of the current school year and then divided by 2. NCDPI defines “dropout” in a very similar fashion to NCES, but includes another item of special importance to track: cohort graduation rate. NCDPI defines “cohort graduation rate” as the percentage of ninth graders who have graduated from high school four years later (NCDPI, “Dropout Prevention and Intervention,” 2007).

In 2008, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings took administrative steps to ensure that all states used the same formula to calculate rates of student dropouts (Dillon, 2008). Instead of focusing on the rate of dropouts, Spellings wanted states to begin focusing on the rate of student graduation. In focusing on the cohort graduation rate, many states’ graduation rates bore significant discrepancies from those reported by other states. For example, in 2007 New Mexico reported a graduation rate of 95% because they focused their formula on the percentage of 12th graders who receive a diploma. When including the students from that graduating class who left school before

the 12th grade, the graduation rate plummeted to 65%. In using the same cohort graduation rate for the 2007 school year, New York's graduation rate dropped from 77% to 65%, and California's graduation rate dropped from 83% to 67% (Dillon, 2008).

Mishel and Roy (2007) argue that without a uniform definition of "dropout," it is difficult to acquire accurate dropout data. Without accurate dropout data:

Reports of artificially low graduation rates also help advance a misdirected across-the-board indictment of schools. Inaccurate characterization of success in high schools can lead to misguided or wrongfully targeted reform efforts that could be harmful. (p. 21)

Even without a nationwide consensus for reporting high school graduation rates, Levin et al. (2007) reported two general agreements: nationwide graduation rates are approximately 66% to 70%, and they vary by gender and race. For the purposes of this study, student dropout is defined as leaving high school before receiving a high school diploma.

Current Federal Policy

With the advent of NCLB, school districts cannot be satisfied with having most of the students they serve be successful academically. NCLB was designed to force school districts to ensure that all students, regardless of demographic variable(s), be provided with a quality education and to close the achievement gap. The quality of the educational offerings of a particular school is measured by what NCLB called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP is attained when schools meet the following criteria: ninety-five percent of students in each subgroup must participate in state assessments, students in each subgroup must meet or exceed proficiency, and high school graduation rates must

show progress. School systems with schools that fail to make AYP over a period of time may face federal sanctioning and may even lose federal funding (NCLB, 2001). In order for school districts to meet the academic needs of every student they serve, alternative programs need to be in place when the traditional setting is not successfully meeting those needs. The third tenet of AYP, improving graduation rates, is a key reason for school districts to form alternative programs targeting students at-risk to drop out of school.

In addition to determining when students left school, school districts and building-level administrators were expected to determine why students were leaving school before graduating and find out what could have been done to change the outcome for each non-graduate. Increasing graduation rate is a more daunting task than lowering the dropout rate because the graduation rate involves tracking student cohorts for four years, whereas dropout rate is determined over the course of one school year. School districts in North Carolina will eventually be accountable for reporting both dropout rates and cohort graduation rates.

Risk Factors in Student Dropout

The literature on the dropout problem documents several risk factors. The term “risk factors” as defined by Gleason and Dynarski (2002) refers to “...student characteristics or measures of past school performance thought to be associated with future dropping out” (p. 25). In this review of the literature, risk factors are organized into three general categories: status (low socioeconomic status, ethnicity), school-related (grade retention, student engagement), and student-related (absenteeism, delinquent behavior, low self-esteem, poor academic performance).

In a qualitative study that involved interviewing students who had dropped out of school, Bridgeland et al. (2006) reported the following student risk factors for dropping out: classes were not interesting (47%), students were not motivated or inspired to work (69%), students were failing in school (35%), students started high school poorly prepared by their earlier schooling (45%), and the students had repeated at least one grade (32%). Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs (1997) found in a 19-year longitudinal study that dropping out of high school is determined by multiple factors. These factors include early influences beginning in childhood and involve family as well as individual factors. The study's findings indicated that cumulative individual and family factors, in concert with lower sixth-grade school performance, lower high school achievement, low motivation, and drug use were associated with increased potential of dropping out. Britt (1995) interviewed 15 students of varied ethnicities and genders on their perceptions of risk factors for dropping out. The students identified their poor home environments, their lack of engagement in school, and a lack of money to meet basic needs.

Combinations of multiple risk factors are strong predictors of student dropouts; however, students who have particular risk factors or combinations of risk factors are not guaranteed to dropout. Jerald (2006) noted, "Some experts contend that risk factors are cumulative in nature, such that the greater number of risk factors a student has, the higher the probability he or she will drop out" (p. 8). Finn (1989) found that the school dropout problem is a cyclical process in which factors interact with each other to produce a negative outcome. He developed a "frustration- self-esteem" model in which school failure was correlated with low school engagement and low self-esteem. When student engagement and self-esteem were low, the potential for negative behaviors increased,

which in turn lead to poor academic performance. The poor academic performance then made student self-esteem even lower, perpetuating the negative cycle.

Variables that may predispose a student to drop out of school that are not related to the school itself are called societal variables. Two societal variables associated with drop out are prevalent in the literature: low socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Jerald, 2006). Societal variables are the strongest predictors of students who may eventually drop out. The identified school-related and student-related factors common among the literature reviewed are failure to be promoted to the next grade, low levels of student engagement, absenteeism, delinquent behavior, low self-esteem, and low academic performance. The following subsections address societal variables, school-related variables, and student-related variables.

Societal Risk Factors

Students may find themselves at-risk of dropping out of school due to factors outside of the school experience. Minority students or students in poverty face challenges that predispose them to drop out of high school.

Low socioeconomic status. Low socioeconomic status (SES) is frequently cited as a predisposing factor for school dropouts. Low SES is one of two status variables discussed in this review of literature that require a united effort between both school and community agencies to decrease its negative effects. Some researchers have found that SES factors are more predictive than any other demographic categories applied to students choosing to drop out (Gruskin, Campbell, & Paulu, 1987). In a technical report by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University, family SES level has been tied in numerous studies to other educational outcomes at all stages of a students'

school career as well as to predicting dropping out (Hammond, 2007). In one study, graduation rates for students of low SES who attend school in high poverty, racially segregated, and urban school districts lag from 15 to 18 percent behind their peers (Swanson, 2004). The 2004 U.S. Department of Education report “Dropout Rates by Family Income” revealed that during 2000-2001, high school students from low-income families (the lowest 20% of American families) dropped out of school at six times the rate of their peers from higher-income families. The Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center (2006) found that ninth grade attrition is far more pronounced in urban, high-poverty schools (40%) than in low-poverty schools (27%). According to the findings of a study conducted by the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, poverty appeared to be the strongest correlate of students not being promoted to the next grade (Balfanz & Letgers, 2006).

Mishel and Roy (2007) divided the percentage of dropouts by SES into five quintiles. The top three SES categories comprise only three percent of students failing to attain a high school diploma. The fourth of five SES categories contains 13% of students who drop out. The bottom SES class has a 27% dropout rate among its members. The data support the claim that SES background is a strong predictor of the students who eventually drop out of school.

Orr (1987) points out that educational and socioeconomic background together are the strongest determinants of whether a student will drop out of school. Brantlinger (1990) theorizes that many students of low SES background suffer from cognitive distortions and tend to have negative attitudes toward their own ability. He also reported that students from low SES accepted a subordinate relationship with the rest of the world

because of their perceived personal deficits. The cumulative effect of this negative thinking provides a mentality of inferiority that students of low SES may carry into their adult lives, causing them to attribute poor life outcomes to their own perceived lack of ability.

Mishel and Roy (2007) proclaim the importance of combining community resources with school resources to help students from low SES backgrounds overcome their status limitations and graduate from high school. They state:

We have to think of these students outside of school and the disadvantages they face before they ever get to school (there are huge disparities in educational attainment by income and race when students start kindergarten). This means fighting poverty through better jobs and wages, providing early childhood development programs, creating stable housing, providing health care, and fighting crime. These are, of course, daunting tasks, but their difficulty in no way diminishes their importance. (p. 21)

SES is associated with a pattern of low achievement which is both intricate and sustained. In very fundamental ways, the home environment of children of low SES can predispose them to educational disadvantages. For example, children's initial reading competence correlates with home literacy environment, number of books owned, and parent distress (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). Since parents from low SES communities may be unable to afford resources such as books, computers, or tutors to create a positive literacy environment, the child's academic development suffers (Orr, 2003). Aikens & Barbarin (2008) found that children from low SES environments acquire language skills more slowly, exhibit delayed letter recognition and phonological awareness, and are at-

risk for reading difficulties. Students from low SES schools entered high school performing 3.3 grade levels behind students from higher SES schools (Palardy, 2008). Coley (2002) found that children with higher SES backgrounds were more likely to be proficient on tasks of addition, subtraction, ordinal sequencing, and math word problems than children with lower SES backgrounds. In sum, children from lower SES households are about twice as likely as those from high-SES households to display learning-related behavior problems. A mother's SES was also related to her child's inattention, disinterest, and lack of cooperation in school (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009).

Ethnicity and socio-economic status. A report by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) noted startlingly that only about 52% of Hispanic students and 56% of African American students will graduate in four years, compared with 78% of White students. One study estimated that nearly 30% of students who enter high school this year will not graduate in four years and nearly half of all African American and Latino students entering high school will not graduate in four years (Greene & Winters, 2005). Students from historically disadvantaged minority groups such as Native American, Hispanic, and African American have little more than a 50% chance of finishing school with a diploma (Swanson, 2004). A study completed in the Philadelphia public schools on the classes of 2000-2003 found that only 46% of Latino males graduated with a diploma within six years (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

Individual students who emerge from a low SES background have different outcomes according to a study by Mishel and Roy (2007). These researchers report a puzzling connection between race and ethnicity in our society: in the low SES group,

African-American students have the highest probability of completing high school compared to White and Hispanic students. These data support the claim that SES may be a stronger predictor than ethnicity in determining students most at-risk to drop out of school.

School-related Risk Factors

If students do not feel connected to their school and are not engaged in the learning process, their potential for dropping out of school is increased. In order for students to perform academically, school staff must provide assistance to struggling students so they are not retained.

Grade retention. Grade retention of students in elementary and middle school is another factor associated with the dropout problem. Pagani, Vitaro, Tremblay, and McDuff (2008) asserted that grade retention has an impact on child development. One dropout study focused on retention in the elementary and middle grades determined that 64% of students who had been retained in elementary school and 63% that had been retained in middle school never graduated from high school (Alexander et al. 1997). In researching student dropouts after the withdrawal event had occurred, Viadero (2006) reported that a student's repeating a grade in elementary or middle school was the factor most indicative of eventual dropout. Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) found that grade retention showed a strong relationship to dropping out, particularly when it occurred at the middle school level. Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) similarly concluded that in both early and late drop outs, a student being retained is the single strongest predictor of a student's eventual dropping out. Armed with these data, many well-meaning elementary and middle school administrators may erroneously choose to

promote students who are not properly equipped to move on to the next academic grade in an attempt to protect them from the negative effects of being retained. Since grade retention is a predictive factor indicating students' propensities dropping out, those who are retained or should be retained based on academic performance and should receive additional academic and in some cases emotional support to prevent them from becoming dropout statistics.

Ninth grade hurdle. The ninth grade year represents the grade level in which the highest percentages of students are not promoted. A report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2005) found that 4.19 million students enrolled in the ninth grade during the 2003-2004 school year. In 2005, the enrollment numbers for the 10th grade were around 3.75 million. This represents a 10.5% decrease. Ninth grade is also the grade level that comprises the largest percentage of students who choose to drop out. In fact, some states report a 20% decrease in enrollment between the ninth and tenth grades (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). One study reported that more students fail ninth grade than any other high school grade, and an inordinately large number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

A noticeable gap in the attrition rate from ninth to tenth grade exists for students in high poverty schools. The ninth to tenth grade attrition rate in urban, high-poverty schools is as high as 40%, while low-poverty districts report an average of 27% (EPE Research Center, 2006). Ninth grade represents the year that most instances of school dropouts occur in North Carolina. The decrease in promotion between the ninth and tenth grades results in a larger number of ninth grade students since this grade encompasses the incoming ninth graders as well as the ninth grade repeaters. The phenomenon is referred

to by the National High School Center (2007) as the ninth grade bulge and the tenth grade dip. Of the ninth grade repeaters, only 10 to 15 percent ever continue their schooling through graduation (Balfanz & Letgers, 2006).

One possible explanation for the ninth grade hurdle is the method by which students are promoted. Until ninth grade, North Carolina students are promoted by the year; for example, a student is promoted from eighth grade to ninth grade in all subjects. In ninth grade, on the other hand, those same students must pass at least six courses to be promoted to the tenth grade. If students do not pass six of the eight courses they take, they remain ninth graders, since they have not managed to earn a specified number of credits. If the same criteria were applied to previous grades, many students who are retained in the ninth grade would have been retained in previous grades as well.

Student engagement. Student engagement in the classroom and with the school in general is a major factor in determining likelihood of dropout. Fredericks, Blumenfield and Paris (2004) conceptualized school engagement as containing three dimensions: behavioral (compliance, participation), affective (interest in school), and cognitive (learning motivation). As a student's engagement levels in school dwindle, school avoidance dominates the student's focus. Low student engagement and academic failure increase student alienation and subsequently can manifest in increased student absenteeism (Devine 1996). Increased absenteeism is viewed as a major predictive factor for students at risk to drop out (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz & Herzog, 2005) because it often is detected before decreased academic success and concomitant disengagement. A research study performed by Civic Enterprises in association with the Peter D. Hart Research Associates (Bridgeland, Diliulio, & Balfanz, 2009) reported that

between 59% and 65% of dropouts missed class often during the year they dropped out, and 33% to 45% missed class often the previous year as well. The above research findings are echoed by Kennelly and Monrad (2007), who listed poor grades in core subjects, low attendance, failure to be promoted, and disengagement in the classroom as key predictors in determining which students will most likely drop out of school.

Peer rejection can play a significant role in students' disengagement. One research study detailed the negative effect of peer rejection on student engagement with the school. Two cohorts of students were followed from eighth grade through the tenth grade. Students were tracked based on the variables of antisocial behavior, social preferences, and achievement. The findings of this study supported the idea that low student engagement was related to peer rejection and led to elevated levels of dropout (French & Conrad, 2001).

According to Kennelly and Monrad (2007), student disengagement from school and academic failure are precursors to dropping out, a finding corroborated by an earlier study (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Decreased academic success can lead to student disillusionment and disengagement. Kaplan et al. (2001) determined several reciprocal relationships between factors that begin with academic failure and end with reduced levels of school engagement. Their study stated "...cyclical reciprocal relationships existed between negative academic experience and the desire to quit school, between teacher rejection and association with deviant peers, and between the adoption of attitudes devaluing school grades and association with deviant peers" (p. 340).

Student-related Risk Factors

Students have a measure of control over their school completion outcomes. Despite challenges presented by society or the school itself, a student's ability to attend school regularly, behave socially, and perform academically is integral to eventual graduation.

Absenteeism. The number one reason given for dropping out in North Carolina in 2009-2010 was poor attendance (NCDPI, "Dropout Prevention and Intervention", 2010). Poor attendance can be evidence of a lack of school engagement or of issues occurring outside of school. According to a Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson (2007) study examining dropout rates in Kentucky high schools, next to academic achievement, the rate of school attendance showed the strongest relationship to dropout of any variable. This finding supports the observation that students who feel a sense of belonging and are connected to school are less likely to drop out of school. Kearney (2003) developed a continuum of the progression of absenteeism as well as ideas to address each type effectively. The continuum denoted two primary types of absenteeism: non-problematic and problematic. Non-problematic was defined as "...any formal absence agreed on by parents and school officials as legitimate in nature and not involving detriment to the child" (Kearney, 2003, p. 59). Examples of non-problematic absences include short-term or temporary absences; self-corrective school absenteeism involving occasional student truancy; longer term absences attributable to illness, natural disaster, or other unusual conditions appropriately compensated for in some way (Kearney, 2003).

Problematic absences are then divided into two categories: child motivated and non-child motivated. Child motivated absenteeism is self-explanatory; it involves a student making a conscious choice not to attend school. Child motivated absenteeism is

“...a disruption of age-appropriate functioning by failing to cope with school-related stressors and/or a desire to eliminate regular school attendance from daily life” (Kearney, 2003, p. 60). One explanation for poor student attendance due to student choice is school-related anxiety (Brand & O’Connor, 2004). School-related anxiety may stem from a fear of failure or from inability to meet expectations of family or teachers (Last & Strauss, 1990). Students experiencing school-related anxiety may avoid school; the school avoidance will then lead to increased rates of absenteeism. Non-child motivated absenteeism denotes circumstances that are beyond a child’s control. Examples of non-child motivated absenteeism include a parent keeping a child home from school deliberately, students experiencing homelessness, and students attempting to flee from abuse (Kearney, 2003).

Proper identification of the type of student absenteeism is central to applying the appropriate strategy to address it effectively (Kearney 2003). One research study offered an interesting observation regarding the close relationship that absenteeism has with course failure and eventual dropout. The researchers encouraged schools to monitor student attendance rates closely, since poor attendance is linked to course failure and course failure is in turn associated with dropout (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Currently 26 states that have the 17 or 18 year dropout age requirement. Opponents of this increase in age cite problems for school districts that lack both the extra teachers to handle students who do not want to be in school and the truancy officers to enforce mandatory attendance laws. Increasing the dropout age and enforcing mandatory attendance are only two interventions. Operating in isolation from other interventions, these strategies alone are not the answer. A multidisciplinary approach is necessary to offer students the assistance

they need to improve their school attendance and thus improve their chances of staying in school (Kearney 2003).

Regardless of how the students arrive at the decision to drop out of school, the factors leading to that decision may be mitigated if adults understand the factors and how to address them properly. Students growing up in poverty are at risk of having academic difficulties because of a lack of access to stimulating resources at home as well as at school. Students of low SES are also at risk of having emotional or self-esteem problems associated with a lack of material resources. Once students begin to struggle academically and feel inferior to their peers, poor attendance often follows. Poor attendance exacerbates the academic struggles students are having because of the limited access to intellectually stimulating activities available at home. Students might then adopt anti-social behaviors that make them devalue their education altogether. When education is of secondary importance to a student, the dropout potential increases.

Delinquent behavior. Recent scholarship corroborates and extends earlier conclusions concerning the relationship between student absenteeism and delinquent behavior. The two constructs were linked in a 2006 study by Mueller, Giacomazzi, and Stoddard. The connection begins with the premise that students should be in attendance when school is in session, and students not in attendance have more opportunities to engage in anti-social behavior due to a lack of adult supervision. Stouthamer and Loeber (1988) support the notion that students with poor attendance are more likely to engage in delinquent acts than students who attend school on a regular basis. Socially maladjusted behaviors such as gang activity, substance abuse, and criminal activity often manifest in students with poor school attendance (Dryfoos, 1990). Sulzer-Azaroff and Mayer (1991)

assert that juvenile crime is a close correlate to poor school attendance and dropping out. Clearly, improving student attendance is an important social and academic concern. If students transition into high school settings, which have no value to them, dropping out often becomes the logical choice if no alternatives are present.

Poor academic performance. Dropping out has also been viewed as a gradual process that begins early in a child's school career and ends when school no longer provides academic relevance to the student (Ensminger, Lamkin, & Jacobsen, 1996). Most future dropouts may be identified as early as sixth grade and many can be identified even earlier based on several academic factors, not the least of which is poor academic performance. Research strongly suggests that a proportion of student dropouts occur as a result of academic difficulty (Rumberger, 1983; Garnier et al. 1997).

One key study indicated that more than half of sixth graders with the following three criteria eventually left school: attend school less than 80% of the time; receive a low final behavior grade from their teachers; and fail either math or English (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005). Most future dropouts identified as sixth graders have significant academic and engagement issues that only intensify as they enter the middle school years (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005). Chronic academic failure often alters student perceptions of school as a welcoming or nurturing environment. As a defense mechanism, students engage in a variety of behaviors and develop attitudes to protect themselves from negative feelings they associate with school (Kaplan et al., 1997). Miscellaneous struggles outside of school can impact their performance; stressful life events, for instance, have been correlated with poor academic achievement and negative school decisions (Hess & Copeland, 2001). If these early identified students received additional academic,

behavioral, and emotional support, the number who later elected to drop out might be decreased.

Impact of low self-esteem. The negative impact of early poor academic performance may affect student self-esteem and lead students to drop out. In a longitudinal study, the link between academic failure in the seventh grade and eventual dropping out in the ninth grade was explored. Using a questionnaire method during the spring of each year (beginning in the seventh grade), the researchers found that early academic failure led students to feel alienated from students, teachers, and the school in general (Kaplan et al., 2001).

Since grades provide one of the only objective measures of students' performance, they are extremely important to children's self-esteem formation. Students want to feel better about themselves; if they receive poor grades in school they may engage in negative behaviors and exhibit poor attitudes towards school to hide the fact that they feel their performance is inferior (Rosenburg & Simmons, 1971). As noted earlier in this review of literature, Finn (1989) developed a "frustration-self-esteem" model that argued the initial antecedent of withdrawal from school is early school failure. This early failure depreciates self-esteem, which then precipitates problem behaviors that further inhibit school performance and then take a heavier toll on students' self-esteem. Often, in an effort to develop an identity with anyone in the school community, students experiencing academic failure form connections with students who also struggle academically. Many times these students are tracked together into the same classes, thus providing more of an opportunity to form a group identity. The connections between students who struggle academically can lead to detrimental anti-social activities.

The negative feelings students develop after receiving poor grades can cause them to view low grades as reflections of the teacher's personal feelings about them (Kaplan et al., 2001). When students feel their personal value is determined by the grades they receive, it can have a detrimental impact on their self-worth. Instead of feeling a sense of control and ownership of their learning, struggling students may feel that their instructor has all of the control and thus succumb to hopelessness. Kaplan et al. (2001) summarized the negative cycle that begins with academic failure and ends with a student choosing to drop out of school:

...a cyclical pattern will be set in motion with poor academic performance, leading to feelings of rejection and the adoption of contra-normative attitudes and behaviors, leading in turn to continued poor academic performance until the opportunity to leave the perceived source of rejection and failure presents itself and the student drops out of school. (p. 334)

This review of risk factors clearly demonstrates the crucial role that interventions can play in mitigating risk factor impact on student dropout decisions. Of the risk factors discussed, low SES and low academic performance appear to be the two most accurate indicators of potential student dropout. However, dropping out of school is often a cyclical process in which risk factors interact with each other in a complex fashion.

Protective Factors

While risk factors predisposing a student to drop out of school are numerous and daunting, many other factors can assist students in persisting through graduation. Factors that help students to persist through graduation are called protective factors. School persistence is an ongoing process in which protective factors interact to help students

successfully complete high school. Multiple protective factors—categorized as student-owned and staff-owned—can facilitate student persistence through graduation.

Student-owned Protective Factors

Student-owned protective factors are characteristics inherent to students who persist through graduation. Student engagement is an important protective factor in increasing student resiliency; however, student engagement and student resiliency are two distinct constructs. A student may be engaged in learning but struggle to overcome obstacles in his/her life or in academic pursuits and thus fail to persist through graduation. Finn and Rock (1997) completed a study involving over 1,800 minority students with low SES. Their findings indicated that as student engagement increased, so did resiliency. When the minority students of a low SES background exhibited high levels of engagement and resiliency, the rate of dropping out was lower. The study also determined the principal components of resiliency: locus of control and self-esteem. When students exhibited an internal locus of control and higher levels of self-esteem, the rates of high school success increased (Finn & Rock, 1997). A study involving 12 to 16 year old students in Montreal, Janosz et al. (2008) found that students who showed a rapid decrease in engagement or who reported low levels of engagement at the beginning of adolescence were more likely to drop out.

In a qualitative case study involving 17 students grades 9-12 in one high school, who were deemed at-risk of dropping out by school administration and staff, researchers sought to develop a grounded theory explaining student persistence (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). The researchers examined which school support services were most helpful in encouraging students to persist through graduation. The research setting was a

comprehensive high school known for its high standards. Semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted. For contextual analysis, individual interviews were also conducted with several members of the school administration and staff.

The results of this qualitative study indicated that there were three factors critical in student persistence: goal orientation, willingness to play the game, and meaningful connections (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). In goal orientation, persistent students saw school as a means to a better life, financial independence, continuing education, and a mechanism to avoid the consequences of dropping out. With regard to being willing to play the school game, persistent students saw the benefit of figuring out the rules, taking responsibility for their actions, and minding their own business. Persistent students in this study formed meaningful relationships with supportive school staff and were open to receiving help from caring staff. On the other end of the relationship, school staff had to communicate caring, know about the lives of their students, have high behavioral and academic standards for their students, and provide safe havens for these at-risk students (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). The findings of this study validated the research of Croninger and Lee (2001), which suggests that positive staff-to-student relationships can help reduce the dropout rate.

In a longitudinal quantitative research study involving 97 students attending an urban school and identified as at-risk to drop out of school, researchers inquired as to the impact hope in the future and school climate had on student persistence through graduation. The participants were identified as at-risk by their school placement: a high school for students who were unsuccessful in a traditional high school. The study measured risk factors by obtaining each student's GPA, Likert scale self-reports by the

students as to their satisfaction with the school, the number of days each student did not attend school, and a 13-item risk-factor composite (Worrell & Hale, 2001).

The study indicated that potential graduates and dropouts rated the climate of the school similarly. However, the study indicated a few significant differences between graduates and dropouts. The discrepancies centered on positive versus negative attitudes towards school, internal versus external locus of control, and optimistic versus pessimistic views of the future (Worrell & Hale, 2001). Although the study took place in an alternative school, there were no significant findings regarding to the positive impact the school or its staff had on student persistence.

The concept of students at-risk being persistent through high school graduation is an important one for schools to consider in forming support systems to foster student resilience. Research performed by Doll, Jew and Green (1998) indicates that “...predictable and malleable characteristics of certain high risk students appear to support their educational and personal success despite very difficult life circumstances” (p. 3). One of the characteristics noted in this study was the formation and maintenance of close peer friendships. Without implying causation, the study found that the at-risk student’s ability to form and maintain relationships was positively correlated with success in school. Another characteristic noted in the study was optimistic belief systems. The study found that optimistic beliefs equipped students with successful coping behaviors to handle daily struggles that may sabotage individuals who lack that characteristic.

Student expectations are vital in nurturing persistence through graduation. In a study utilizing data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth database from the U. S. Department of Labor, the most significant predictor in determining which students will

persist and which students will drop out was the students' expectation to attend school the next year (Suh, S. et al., 2007). Students who expect to attend school in the upcoming school year exhibit a form of resilience that may predispose them to continue despite obstacles. Students with little or no expectation to attend school the next year are not likely to be highly engaged in their education.

Staff-owned Protective Factors

Croninger and Lee (2001) suggest that positive staff-to-student relationships can help reduce the dropout rate. Students of low SES need increased academic and emotional support, including strong staff-to-student relationships. Since some students from low SES backgrounds have mothers without high school diplomas, extra academic support needs to be provided to them (Suh et al., 2007). Students of low SES also benefit greatly from interacting with strong mentors, either from the community or school staff. Smink and Reimer (2005) describe mentoring as, "...a one to one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust" (p. 13). Effective mentoring increases aspirations and forms positive outlooks among at-risk high school students (Suh et al., 2007). Positive relationships with caring, committed adults can also encourage at-risk students to find peers they can mentor as well. Increasing an outward focus is integral to encouraging at-risk students from a low SES background to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for their community and its people. Counseling services in individual and mixed group settings can also help provide students from low SES backgrounds with coping and support mechanisms necessary for the development of their self-esteem (Trusty, 1996).

In a case study referred to earlier, the Ogden, Utah School District sought to determine the reasons students were dropping out of school. As a result of the findings, the district modified the process for monitoring attendance, modified educational programming for students at-risk of dropping out, increased the responsiveness of staff-to-student needs, and increased efforts to partner with parents and community agencies to provide support to at-risk students (Chow, 1996). The goal of the modifications was the lowering of the districts' dropout rate.

The attitudes and mannerisms of instructional staff toward their students impact student engagement. In a study by Kortering and Braziel (1999), a group of 44 students who exhibited learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, and mild mental retardation, identified poor engagement as a primary cause for their dropping out. Interviews were conducted to elicit their suggestions for improving student engagement in school. The students called for teachers to change their attitudes toward struggling students, for better instructional practices, for access to better materials, for their classes to be changed, and for principals to change their attitudes toward and treatment of students. An astute summary of the suggestions for both students and school staff was provided in a closing statement of the study, "Students need a change of mind, educators need a change of heart" (Kortering & Braziel, 1999, p. 82).

Alternative Education

A protective factor related to staff-owned protective factors is alternative education. Alternative education is an educational design that seeks to assist students who have not had their needs met in the traditional setting. Alternative education provides the needed flexibility for school staff to engage in student-centered practices to help

marginalized students, including those at-risk of dropping out of school. Gleason and Dynarski (2002) stated, “Even the highest quality dropout prevention programs will have little influence on the dropout problem if risk factors identify the wrong students” (p. 25). Not surprisingly, much of the research seeks to determine which at-risk students are more likely to drop out. Understanding the factors that place students at-risk of dropping out is a key step in establishing appropriate strategies. In a case study the Ogden, Utah School District (Chow, 1996) sought to determine the reasons some of their students were dropping out of school. The district conducted face-to-face interviews with administrators and staff and telephone interviews with 123 of the 722 students identified as at-risk of dropping out of school. The process of dropping out was determined to be a gradual one which might be reversed by timely administrative focus and intervention. The presence and complex interaction of risk factors make identifying potential dropouts an arduous task.

Alternative educational environments are required to meet the needs of diverse learners, to satisfy the demands of NCLB, and to prevent the social and economic problems of student drop outs. DeRocco (2005), in a speech to the National Association of Workforce Boards, stated her views regarding alternative education:

There is a great need for a variety of alternative pathways to educational success, ranging from essential early intervention and prevention strategies in the early years, to a multiplicity of high-quality alternative options within mainstream K-12 systems at the middle and high school levels, and finally to opportunities outside of the mainstream for those unable to learn and thrive in the general education system.

Alternative schools have, across a broad historical spectrum, played an integral role in the evolution of education in the United States. Garrison (1987) noted:

Early in our history we recognized that the needs of a few often mirror the needs of the many. From the establishment of Harvard College in 1636 to the magnet schools of today, American education is the collective result of countless alternative school programs. (p. 3)

Unfortunately, during recent years, the expression “alternative education” has come to conjure images of gangs, litter, graffiti, poor facilities, below average school staff, and very little academic activity or success. In reality, however, “alternative education” denotes any type of school or program that is not a part of the traditional, mainstream school setting. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) defines an alternative education school as one that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular setting; therefore, International Baccalaureate (IB) schools, early colleges, performing arts magnet schools, and schools of technology also fall under the alternative education umbrella. Additional insights into the nature of alternative education are provided by the Michigan Department of Education (2010) website:

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

Like the Michigan Department of Education, many educational entities are endeavoring to remove the negative connotations from the terms “alternative education” or “alternate school,” in some instances resorting to changes in basic terminology. Many districts now use the designations “non-traditional education” or “non-traditional school.”

North Carolina describes alternative education in SBE policy HSP-Q-001 having to do in the broader sense with school dropouts, “...as services for students at-risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior problems, and/or dropping out of school” (NCDPI, 2010, p. 97). Alternative learning programs serve students at any level who

- are suspended and/or expelled,
- are at risk of participation in juvenile crime,
- have dropped out and desire to return to school,
- have a history of truancy,
- are returning from juvenile justice settings or psychiatric hospitals, or
- have learning styles that are better served in an alternative setting. (p. 97)

While often sharing components of each other’s definitions of “alternative education,” different states have different views of what it entails. Understandably, alternative education, whose purpose is to meet the specific needs of students whose needs have not been met by mainstream schools, does not have a universal definition but rather is defined specific to the needs of the state.

Alternative schools have historically represented a departure from traditional school curriculum and school environments and have served a population of students who have not been successful in a traditional setting. Raywid (1994) grouped alternative schools into three categories. The first category, Type I, includes schools of choice which

rely on innovative programs or dynamic pedagogical strategies to attract students. Type I schools are often called magnet schools because of their ability to attract students with certain interests. Type I schools are often the most successful at meeting the needs of a variety of students due to the diverse nature of the programming. Magnet schools have also had a long history as a vehicle for racial integration. The HSSC would fall under this type of alternative program because of the specific academic features it provides to attract at-risk students.

Type II schools, on the other hand, serve students on the verge of expulsion, providing them with a last opportunity for success. Often these schools are the least successful of the three types because the students typically attend against their will. Students in a Type II alternative school generally attend for a certain period of time, until their behavior, academic achievement, and attendance improve. Since Type II schools often function as a last resort for students, they primarily focus on behavior modification or remediation.

Achieving similarly mixed results, Type III schools are designed with a remedial focus on academic and social/ emotional issues, utilizing a non-punitive, therapeutic approach toward students. Day treatment schools fall into the Type III category. Students in a Type III school may show improvement in the alternative setting for the duration of their attendance but often revert to previous patterns upon returning to the traditional setting. To decrease recidivism, Raywid (1994) suggested longer periods of enrollment for students in a Type III school to allow them to experience prolonged success and form positive habits that will serve them well even after being transitioned back to the traditional setting.

Credit Recovery Programs

Multiple models for credit recovery exist nationwide, but the abiding aim of all is to propel at-risk students closer to graduation. No single program design meets the needs of students across the United States, so local districts are compelled to create targeted programs. Credit recovery programs are designed to meet the needs of the individual learner but typically fall into three categories of instructional delivery: direct instruction, virtual/online classes, and blended instruction including components of direct and virtual instruction. Though far from an exhaustive list, the following programs provide examples of credit recovery mechanisms used in public schools at the time of this study.

In the Jackson (Michigan) Public Schools credit recovery program, face-to-face interactions are the primary mode of academic delivery. The Student Alternative for Expulsion (SAFE) program operates four days per week from 3:30 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. Students spend two days per week focusing on English and the other two days per week focusing on math. Midway through the evening, students receive a 30-minute recreation break and a bag lunch prepared by the district. After this break period, students spend the remainder of the evening working on curricula from the Michigan Virtual School with assistance from their classroom teachers. The program is staffed with a special education instructor and a behavioral specialist. Students must be making progress toward course completion and must be in attendance at least 80% of the semester-long program. Program staff have a “zero tolerance” stance on misbehavior, lack of sustained effort, and poor attendance (Dessoff, 2009).

The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is a district unto itself. An open enrollment policy exists and students may begin a course anytime of the year. Students must

complete online semester courses in 18 weeks but may receive a maximum of nine extra weeks if needed. Incorporating a highly-interactive mode of online instructional delivery, the courses are taught by full-time highly qualified certified teachers. Students may call their instructors from 8:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. every day, and monthly teleconferences involving the students, their parents, and the instructors occur, primarily focusing on student progress. The Georgia Virtual School follows a similar pattern of student-teacher interaction and course delivery (Dessoiff, 2009).

The Omaha (Nebraska) Public Schools use a blended approach to delivering credit recovery. Each of Omaha's seven public high schools offers after-school credit recovery programs. The programs are offered in computer labs at their schools for three hours at least once per week from either 3:00 p.m. until 6:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. The district uses a learning management system that is an e-learning platform allowing for the creation and management of its own unique credit recovery curriculum. The curriculum is housed on district servers in four content areas: English, math, social science, and physical science. While students work through the courses at their own pace, teachers circulate throughout the lab to assist anyone who has questions. Not only does this configuration allow for student flexibility in subject matter and pace, it also allows instructors to form relationships with the students. Volusia (Florida) Public Schools uses a similar model in its nine high schools. Students in the credit recovery program in this district may attend for a block during the school day or after school if they do not have an available block. Volusia staff members involved in the credit recovery labs are trained in an Apex Learning program. The Apex Learning program aligns with state standards and local curriculum. Students receive assignment sheets for each course they are recovering,

and check off assignments as they complete them, thus achieving a sense of accomplishment that may motivate them to continue through course completion (Dessoff, 2009).

Credit recovery programs like the ones highlighted are an important component of a school district's approach to lowering the rate of drop outs. Resource availability and student needs should determine the types of credit recovery programs offered.

Characteristics of Alternative School Programs

Alternative schools or programs are entities that target students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school setting (Paglin & Fager, 1997). The reported benefits of alternative schools include reduction in dropout rates, reduction in student truancy, redirection of disruptive and inattentive students from mainstream institutions into more productive and successful learning environments, and re-engagement with learning and the sense of community belonging that derives when the students are placed in a more responsive and flexible environment.

According to North Carolina SBE Policy HSP-Q-001 (NCDPI, 2010), alternative schools are to provide a caring atmosphere in which students learn the skills necessary to redirect their lives. An alternative learning program must

- provide the primary instruction for selected at-risk students,
- enroll students for a designated period of time, usually a minimum of one academic grading period,
- offer course credit or grade-level promotion credit in core academic areas,
- provide transition support to and from/between the school of origin and alternative learning program,

- address behavioral or emotional problems that interfere with adjustment to or benefiting from the regular education classroom,
- provide smaller classes and/or student/teacher ratios,
- provide instruction beyond regular school hours,
- provide flexible scheduling, and/or
- assist students in meeting graduation requirements other than course credits. (p. 98)

Nation et al. (2003) used a meta-analysis to compile characteristics of an effective intervention program. The characteristics noted by Nation et al. (2003) include: comprehensive programs, varied teaching methods, theoretical underpinning, positive relationship building, appropriate handling of student developmental needs, socio-cultural relevance, outcome evaluation, and well-trained staff. Aron (2006) detailed characteristics of successful alternative schools as revolving around academic instruction, instructional staff, staff-to-student ratios, professional development offerings, facilities, community agency support, school leadership, and school environment. Shared governance is an important characteristic of alternative schools; alternative school leaders utilize the input and expertise of both staff and students in creating an environment where ownership of institutional successes and challenges is shared (Paglin & Fager, 1997). The academic instruction maintains high standards for student performance and is relevant to student current realities and future life goals. Staff-to-student ratios in alternative schools are typically smaller than those of traditional settings, thus allowing for more personalized learning opportunities and closer relationships. Students are held to high standards for academic performance, behavioral conduct, and attendance (Paglin &

Fager, 1997). These features constitute a many-faceted support system for at-risk students.

The instructional staff build positive relationships with students based on mutual respect and accountability (Martin et al., 2002), and feel a sense of mission in working with students whose needs are not met in traditional settings (Aron, 2006). A survey of 45 at-risk students enrolled in an alternative rural high school revealed that teachers appeared more concerned about students, were less authoritarian, allowed students more input into decision making, treated students more fairly, and were more enthusiastic than teachers at traditional high schools previously attended by the participants (Griffin, 1994). Personal relationships between staff and students figure prominently in establishing an environment of mutual respect (Paglin & Fager, 1997). To prepare staff to function effectively in this unique setting, professional development is crucially important, having perhaps more relevance than in traditional schools; however, the sessions are designed specifically for alternative school personnel and are not simply modified versions of traditional trainings (Aron, 2006).

The physical appearance of an alternative school is important insofar as it directly impacts the school's perception by stakeholders. The facilities that house alternative schools may not be traditional school buildings but should be clean nonetheless and provide amenities comparable to those afforded traditional students. Students should feel a sense of pride in their school setting. Strong community partnerships characterize successful alternative schools; community agencies can provide services to give alternative schools and students the support needed for positive change (Aron, 2006).

Finally, successful alternative schools provide multi-faceted support for students. Behavioral support is often a key feature of alternative schools; indeed, if the quality of social skill instruction lags, it often precludes student classroom success (Martin et al., 2002). Post-school preparation is combined with the delivery of content to provide relevant daily instructional activities (Martin et al., 2002). Parents of absent students are contacted to determine the reason for the student's absence. Students in successful alternative schools feel valued and respected as contributing members of the learning organization instead of passive recipients of services. Parents of alternative school students are actively involved in the education of their children (Aron, 2006).

Alternative school student characteristics. Understanding the types of students typically served in alternative education settings is of paramount importance in developing programs that reduce the likelihood of dropout. Students in these types of alternative schools do not attend magnet schools based on student interest. Attempting to classify alternative school students into a particular category is difficult due to the complex blend of characteristics of individual students. Some characteristics of alternative school students detailed in the literature include having low self-esteem, experiencing minimal consequences for behaviors, living in single-parent households, lacking boundaries, having negative peer affiliations, engaging in promiscuity, experiencing dysfunction within the family, and abusing drugs (McCall, 2003).

Four typical student profiles are most likely to need alternative educational services as indicated by Roderick (2003). Student profile A includes students who have gotten into trouble and need a short time away from the traditional setting to refocus. Transitioning back to the traditional setting is an attainable goal for this type of student.

This student would benefit from what Raywid (1994) labels a Type II school. Student profile B includes those whose life situations have forced them to assume adult responsibilities prematurely. Such students may flourish academically but the familial issues in their lives take precedence. An extended-day school program that allows these students to attend during the evening without interfering with work schedules is an effective way to address this issue. This student would benefit from what Raywid (1994) labels a Type I or III school. Student profile C includes those who have been out of school for an extended period of time and want to get their high school diploma or equivalency in order to enroll in a community college, technical program, or enlist in the military. Students falling into this category would benefit from a differentiated diploma, which would entail completion of only the essential requirements for a state accredited diploma. These students would benefit from what Raywid (1994) labels a Type I or III school. Student profile D involves those who typically are not successfully served in any academic setting. Students in this category have been retained multiple times, served multiple long-term suspensions over the course of their school years, and/or have been identified as having special needs. They are students who have attended high school for multiple years but have few or no high school credits. This category of student would be served in what Raywid (1994) labels a Type II school.

Evaluations of alternative school programs. Alternative programs provide diverse educational options designed to serve unique student needs and are divided into different categories. Alternative schools are not only settings to make students feel more involved, appreciated, and nurtured, they also serve to improve student academic performance and reduce the dropout rate. One such institution, the High School Success

Classroom (HSSC), was created to address the issue of student dropout in the 11th and 12th grades in the Iredell-Statesville Schools (ISS). The HSSC is not the only program offered at Pressly School, but it is the only one with the primary focus of high school graduation. Other alternative schools identified by the literature target student graduation as part of the overall comprehensive program offered, but in those schools, graduation is an ancillary focus.

In one such program, Johnston, Cooch, and Pollard (2004) provided impressive data from Bear Lodge High School in northeastern Wyoming, which has, since its inception in 1991, served at-risk students. Bear Lodge High School enrolls students from single-parent homes (47%) and from low socioeconomic backgrounds; in 2001-2002, for example, 54% of Bear Lodge students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Bear Lodge High School focuses on providing sustained academic assistance to its students in an environment emphasizing close staff-to-student relationships. Students play a vital role in the daily operations and decision-making processes. Expectations for student participation and behavior are clearly stated and consistently enforced. The curriculum of Bear Lodge High School, which encourages integration of academic studies with the world of career work, achieves good results. Bear Lodge students taking the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) scored at or above grade level at a 54% rate, while 8% scored within one year of their grade level. Most impressively, 83% of Bear Lodge students successfully graduated from high school (Johnston, Cooch, & Pollard, 2004).

A study that involved another successful dropout prevention program analyzed a “school within a school” at Ballard High School in Louisville, Kentucky. Professionals and family members recommended students for the program on the basis of poor grades,

poor attendance, and the presence of learning disabilities. The participants attended a daily three-hour afternoon block in which core subjects were taught in a classroom environment with a student to staff ratio of 15:1. Along with the small group instruction, students received ongoing social skills instruction. Data for this study were obtained from three different instruments administered at the beginning and end of the two-year program: (a) the Children's Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Locus of Control Inventory (CNSIE), (b) the Interpersonal Adjective Scale (IAS), and (c) the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA) (Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004).

Participants in the program indicated increased internal locus of control, development of their social skills, and ability to form relationships. Moreover, the academic performance of program participants improved. The findings of this study indicated a positive impact on student graduation rate among program participants, who graduated at a rate of 98% (Nowicki et al., 2004).

The alternative programs noted in this section represent only a few permutations of the alternative programs in existence. Both alternative programs are public school programs are open to students within those respective schools and districts. The two alternative programs highlighted show significant differences between the stand-alone alternative program and the school-within-a-school concept. Though adopting different approaches, both of the programs were successful in decreasing the rate of student dropout.

Criticisms of alternative education. The literature also criticizes alternative education. Critics cite a lack of “universal standards” for alternative education, making

overall evaluations of the quality of the programs difficult. Researchers also cite the lack of evidence that alternative schools are effective in teaching academic objectives and reshaping negative student behavior (King, Silvey, Holliday, & Johnston, 1998). Gregg (1999) further criticizes alternative education campuses as being environments where poor teachers are sent to work, as having few staff to serve as positive role models, as fostering an atmosphere of hopelessness and failure, and as causing students to feel labeled as outcasts. Alternative schools are also often seen as a socially acceptable version of school segregation, since a preponderance of alternative students are) of low socioeconomic status and minority classification (King et al., 1998; Gregg, 1999). Another factor highlighted by detractors of alternative education is the high cost of operating the programs. Many community members resent class size overload in traditional settings and alternative classrooms with low teacher: student ratios (Gregg, 1999).

Britt (1995) also noted several deficiencies in alternative school programming reported in the literature: many intervention programs were based on available funding rather than student need; many at-risk programs were designed as add-ons instead of being integrated within the traditional school environment; many intervention programs emphasized remedial instruction while ignoring the social and emotional needs of the student; few programs were in place to intervene with primary grade students; few programs focused on assisting students who had already dropped out of school; and few programs worked with students' poor perceptions of learning.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Wehlage's (1989) theory of School Membership (SM). High school graduation is an event that signifies the positive beginning of adult life. Card (1999) described it as follows: "High school achievement represents a developmental indicator toward a productive adulthood" (p. 176). Even in the face of uncertain economic times and an increasingly competitive global economy, many students still rashly drop out of school. Educators must focus on identifying students with dropout risk factors as well as deploying appropriate intervention strategies to address the problem effectively. Even when educators adopt strategies capable of counteracting dropout factors, students must display a willingness and determination to work through the challenges they face in their journey to high school graduation.

Before aligning dropout intervention and prevention strategies with dropout factors, it is vital to determine which factors facilitate student persistence through graduation; Tinto (1975) and Wehlage (1989) developed theories of student persistence at their respective levels of education. Tinto (1975) developed a theory for the college level and Wehlage (1989) developed a theory for the high school level.

While focusing on the retention of postsecondary students, Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model (SIM) bears relevance to the study of the issue. Tinto's model focuses on the importance of integration to the prediction of a students' persistence or drop out from college. Tinto identified three key types of integration: background characteristics, academic integration, and social integration. Background characteristics include factors that impact the level of goal commitment; personal attributes, previous experiences, and family situations are examples. Academic integration can take the form of student grade

performance, satisfaction with courses and content, and acceptance of and compliance with institutional norms. Social integration involves students having groups of friends they identify with, staff members they connect with regularly, and extra-curricular activities which encourage their participation.

Similar to Tinto's (1975) post-secondary SIM, but focusing rather on school membership among high school students was Wehlage's (1989) answer to the problem of dropouts. In Wehlage's estimation, an important component of student persistence is individual student interaction with the school institution. He builds on ideas articulated by Tinto (1975), who firmly holds that voluntary student departure from college comes as a result of institutional experiences after a student arrives. This claim is powerful because it asserts that institutions are the active ingredients in encouraging or discouraging student persistence. Wehlage (1989) developed a theory of School Membership (SM) that hinged on four terms used by Tinto (1975): adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Wehlage's (1989) SM theory will serve as the theoretical framework for this study because it pertains to high school completion, whereas Tinto's (1975) SIM focuses on college student persistence.

Adjustment

In the lexicons of both Tinto (1975) and Wehlage (1989), adjustment refers to the transition that occurs generally between middle school and high school. As referenced earlier in the review of literature, the transition to high school is also referred to as the ninth grade hurdle. Transition is not merely a function of grade change; it also pertains when a student, regardless of the grade, enrolls in a new school or program. In order for successful adjustment to high school or an alternative program to occur, students need

personal and supportive relationships with caring adults at the school. Often, high school teachers distance themselves emotionally from students in an effort to encourage student independence. In reality, however, incoming and continuing high school students need teachers who value them and offer the necessary support to meet the increased expectations and standards of high school.

Difficulty

The second term in this theoretical framework, difficulty, refers to the struggle that many students at-risk of dropping out have with the academic rigor of high school. Academic failure often results from the increased difficulty of high school. Students must earn credit in many individual classes to meet graduation requirements in high school, whereas during their elementary and middle school years, they were either promoted or retained for an entire grade level. Often, the difficulty students experience in high school has as much to do with relevance as it does with the level of rigor. Students might disengage mentally if the material they are expected to learn has no ostensible connection to their lives. Some high schools offer students modified pacing through the curriculum and also package subject matter in novel ways to facilitate acquisition of knowledge and to render academic success more attainable. Responsive high schools make accommodations to help sustain student effort instead of simply attenuating the curriculum.

Incongruence

A third term, incongruence is concerned with the cultural compatibility between the student and the institution. Students who find themselves at-risk of dropping out often feel disconnected from the schools they attend. The disconnection is particularly

pronounced in reference to students of low SES; such individuals make astute judgments about whether they are valued by the school institution. If students do not feel they possess traits likely to earn the respect of school stakeholders, they often concede to being defined as outcasts. The social integration component plays a vital role in students persisting through graduation. Responsive high schools provide opportunities for students to become part of the school culture.

Isolation

Isolation focuses on the disconnectedness many high school students feel from adults. Tinto (1975) proposed that isolation was one of the most powerful predictors of student retention at the postsecondary level. High school students need to have frequent, high-quality interactions with caring adults at their schools to feel that they are cared for by the adults charged with supervising and instructing them. Staff in responsive high schools must show interest in the academic and social areas of their students' lives. When students feel that they are worthy of the attention of adult staff, their feelings of isolation are minimized, if not eliminated. Since many students lack strong connections to positive adult influences outside of school, it is imperative that they have them with the staff at the high schools they attend.

An alternative education program can address the four areas of Wehlage's (1989) SM theory to increase the chances of student persistence through graduation. To address the adjustment component, students must feel that they are welcome and wanted in the school or program. School staff must budget individualized time with students to explain the expectations for their behavior and participation as well as the supports that are available to students for their success. Finally, alternative school staff apprise incoming

students of staff confidence in the students' potential to be successful in their school or program.

To address the difficulty component, alternative school staff must explain the academic supports in place to assist students. A diagnostic assessment of students' academic strengths and weaknesses must be performed to provide accurate data for the school staff. Finally, an individualized plan must be created to ensure a match between student need and interventions provided to improve the performance of the student.

To address incongruence, alternative school staff must create opportunities for students to interact with one another to form meaningful relationships. Social skill-focused group sessions can assist students in interacting more comfortably with their peers. Social skill instruction that educates students on the value of diversity and the dignity of the individual is important as a means of breaking the low self-esteem cycle. Also essential are opportunities for students to engage in non-academic activities with their peers, which can make school a place they enjoy spending time.

Finally, alternative school staff must address feelings of isolation by forming meaningful relationships with the students. Many students feel disconnected from adults in educational settings because of negative past experiences, which might have been student-motivated or staff-motivated. Regardless of the origin of their disconnects, students must feel that the alternative school staff respect them as individuals and honor the fact that they have unique personal stories to tell. By spending time getting to know each student as an individual, alternative school staff can decrease student feelings of isolation, perhaps for the first time in the student's life.

The primary gap in the literature that this study may help fill is determining if and how a dropout prevention classroom (HSSC) can increase student persistence through graduation. Additionally, this study may fill another gap in the literature by determining if an alternative program such as the HSSC produces student outcomes greater than those achieved by similar students lacking access to that alternative program. The next chapter will provide background information on the HSSC, North Carolina graduation requirements and dropout initiatives, and the ISS response to the problem of student dropout.

CHAPTER 3: DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

The nationwide problem of student dropout is also felt at state and local levels. To address student academic needs in ways that increase graduation rates, local school districts are directed by states to devise intervention continuums to help meet the needs of diverse learners. In recent years, the Iredell-Statesville Schools (ISS) have remained among the top 10% of North Carolina school districts in terms of having a low dropout rate. One possible factor contributing to the low ISS dropout rate is the school system's commitment to alternative learning placements for students in need. This chapter will provide a clear description of the bounded system under investigation: the HSSC, based in ISS in North Carolina.

Dropout Data

In North Carolina, dropout data are tracked by Local Education Agency (LEA), school, student subgroup, and reason for dropping out. Data for this chapter focuses on the 2009-2010 school year, the year the study was conducted. However, when data was available for multiple years and entities, it was included to provide a comparative perspective and to build context for the case. As presented in Figure 3.1, which displays North Carolina dropout rates by race and gender (NCDPI, 2011), certain trends emerge. Notable among the data points is the tendency of male students to drop out more frequently than female students and also of minority students to dropout more than non-minority students (with the exception of Asian students).

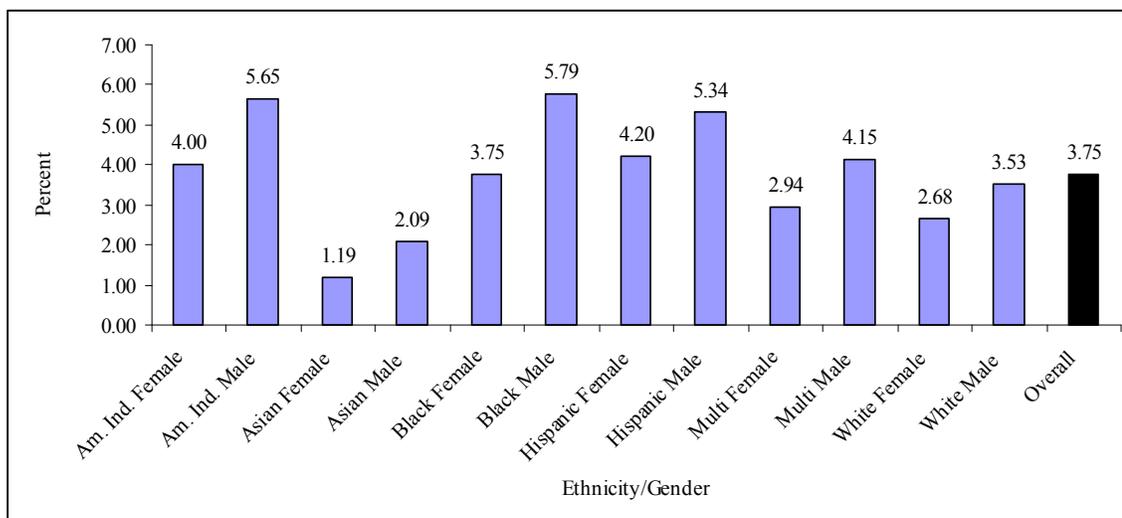


Figure 3.1. North Carolina dropout rates by race and gender 2009-2010

The data presented in Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2 provide school leaders with generalized student data while awaiting individual at-risk students to emerge. Figure 3.2 provides a grade distribution of dropouts in North Carolina during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years, demonstrating the ninth grade hurdle over a two-year period (NCDPI, “Dropout Prevention and Intervention,” 2010). This figure represents student dropouts by grade level and in terms of the total number of dropouts in North Carolina in 2009-2010.

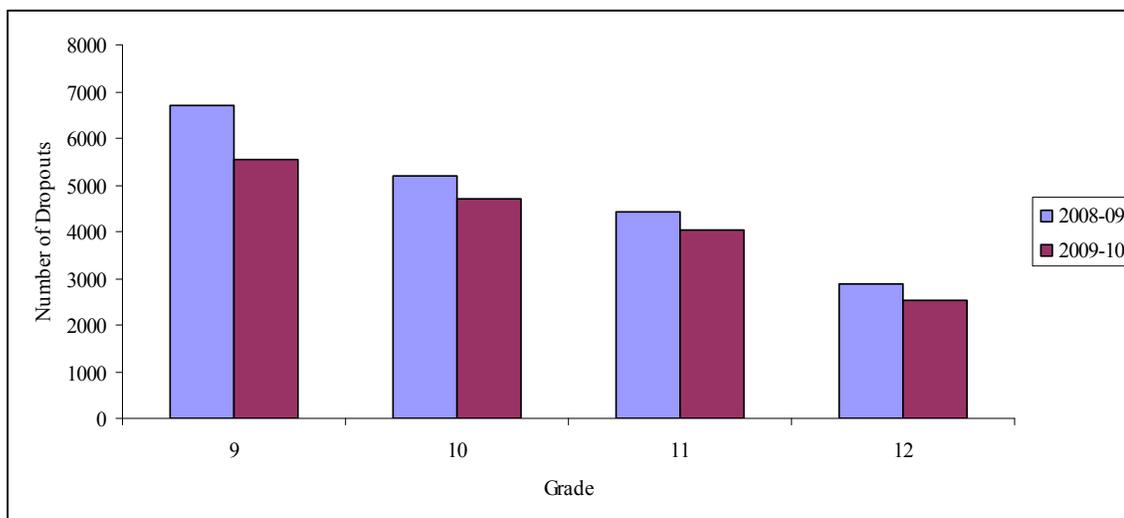


Figure 3.2. North Carolina dropout grade distribution by grade level 2008-2009 and 2009-2010

Even though no list could be exhaustive, Table 3.1 provides data detailing the reasons North Carolina dropouts of various ethnicities gave for leaving school in the 2009-2010 school year, according to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, “Dropout Prevention and Intervention,” 2011). Students who formally drop out report their reasons during the exit interview. When students simply stop coming to school and cannot be located, a school official supplies a reason for state reporting purposes. Typically, “other/unknown” is the reason supplied by school officials in this case. However, since the school official may not know why the student left school but may have supplied a projected reason anyway, the data in Table 3.1 are estimates.

A few of the reasons listed in Table 3.1 require explanation. “Enrollment in a community college” indicates that the dropout chose to enroll in a GED program. “Moved, school status unknown” is utilized when a student has left school because of a reported move but records have not been requested from a school receiving the student. “Expectations of culture, family, and friends” is a reason sometimes given by male

students when they have gotten someone pregnant since “pregnancy” is typically reserved for female students who are pregnant. “Suspected substance abuse” indicates a guess on the part of school staff based on observations of the student and his or her behavior.

As evidenced in Table 3.1, the primary reason for dropout in 2009-2010 in North Carolina is “Attendance.” There is a significant dip in the percentage of students who dropped out for the reason to “Enroll in a Community College.” All of the remaining reasons for student dropout combined totaled less than 10% of the population of North Carolina dropouts in 2009-2010.

Table 3.1

Grade 9-12 Dropout Reason Codes Reported in North Carolina 2009-2010 (N= 19,184)

Reason	Percent
Attendance	41.1
Enrollment in a Community College	22.1
Unknown	8.9
Academic Problems	4.7
Moved, School Status Unknown	4.4
Lack of engagement with school and/or peers	3.5
Failure to return after a long-term suspension	2.9
Choice of work over school	2.7
Incarcerated in adult facility	1.9
Discipline problem	1.6
Unstable home environment	1.3
Pregnancy	1.3
Health problems	.9
Need to care for children	.8
Runaway	.7
Employment necessary	.5
Expectations of culture, family, friends	.3
Suspected substance abuse	.3
Marriage	.1
Difficulties with English language	0

While it is important to understand why North Carolina students choose to drop out of school, it is equally important to understand the state requirements for high school graduation. The requirements to graduate from a North Carolina high school differ from those of other states because the requirements are determined at the individual state level.

North Carolina Graduation Requirements

NCDPI provides guidelines for local boards of education to determine graduation requirements. Appendix A shows the various programs of study from which North Carolina students can choose. Students choose their graduation paths based on future educational and career goals, as made available locally. In general, the North Carolina diploma consists of 21 total credits. Students are required to pass three end-of-course tests as well as the eighth grade end-of-grade tests for reading and math.

Students graduating in the 2009-2010 school year had to obtain four credits of English; three credits of math, with Algebra I as the required initial math credit; three credits of science; three credits of social studies; one health/physical education credit; and six elective credits from the fine arts, second languages, and career and technical education (CTE) areas of study. Students who entered high school during the 2009-2010 school year are required to complete a Future-Ready Core course of study. The Future-Ready course of study strongly resembles the college and university courses of study that have existed in North Carolina for quite some time; moreover, it includes an additional math credit and different math options. With the new Future-Ready Core requirements including an additional math credit, students graduating in 2013 or later will need 22 credits for graduation.

NCDPI gives authority to local school boards to determine their own requirements for graduation, provided they meet or exceed the credit requirement set by the state. The ISS Board of Education has set the number of credits required for graduation at 28. The 28-credit diploma allows students to be competitive for admission to a state university or other postsecondary institution. The state university system sets its own requirements for admission, clearly denoting the number of credits and types of credits students need to be accepted to a state school. Individual universities within the state then emphasize different aspects of student performance in high school in determining student acceptance.

North Carolina Dropout Initiatives

North Carolina has made decreasing the rate of student dropout a priority. The NCDPI website (www.ncpublicschools.org/dropout) provides useful information related to dropout prevention. Along with a public service announcement by North Carolina Governor Beverly Perdue, there are links to different recommended initiatives designed to increase student engagement and decrease student dropout. The initiatives are separated into two primary categories: instructional/classroom level initiatives and district/school level initiatives. The instructional/classroom level initiatives include cooperative learning activities, educational technology, individualized instruction built around student support plans, and career and technical education. District/school level initiatives include professional development focused on at-risk students, school-community partnerships, safe schools focus, family engagement with the school, early childhood education programs, early literacy development programs, mentoring programs, focused tutoring, service-learning opportunities, after-school activities,

summer enrichment, and alternative education programs. The state devotes both resources and personnel to support these dropout initiatives (NCDPI, “Dropout Prevention and Intervention,” 2010), and districts, in an effort to lower dropout rates, develop mechanisms to support their at-risk students. The ISS school district in which this study takes place has its own approach to address student dropout.

The Iredell-Statesville Schools’ Response to Student Dropout

According to NCDPI (2011), the ISS dropout rate in 2009-2010 decreased by .6 percentage points from the 2008-2009 school year to 2.36%. In ISS, the 2009-2010 dropout data indicate 166 total dropouts. These 166 dropouts began the school year in ISS but did not finish the school year with a high school diploma. Of the 166 dropouts, 103 (62%) were male, 63 (38%) were female, 108 (65%) were White, 33 (20%) were African-American, 20 (12%) were Hispanic, and 5 (3%) of other ethnicities (NCDPI, 2011).

By a multitude of indicators including dropout rate, ISS compares itself with the North Carolina average, school districts with similar numbers of students and similar demographic composition, and the in-county sister school district, the Mooresville Graded School District (MGSD, 2011). MGSD is comprised of eight schools and approximately 5,500 students. Even though MGSD is a significantly smaller district, it is still located within Iredell County and is viewed by ISS as a competitor. By comparing performance with a variety of indicators, ISS is able to determine opportunities for improvement.

One of the indicators for comparison is dropout rate. Dropout rate is calculated annually and has been reported consistently in North Carolina across years even though

methods for calculating cohort graduation rates have changed. Cohort graduation rates are calculated over the course of multiple school years. Cohort graduation rates were calculated based on four-year cohorts and now are reported based on five-year cohorts (NCDPI, 2011). In the 1998-1999 school year, ISS had a dropout rate of 9.1%, one of the highest dropout rates for a school district in North Carolina. In 2008-2009, ISS had a dropout rate of 2.96%. This represented the first time in the history of ISS that the dropout rate fell below 3%. As stated above, in 2009-2010 the dropout rate decreased again to 2.36% (NCDPI, 2011). One possible explanation for the dramatic improvement in dropout rate is the high standards ISS set for its students. The ISS Board of Education (BOE) tasked then superintendent Dr. Terry Holliday with increasing ISS' student performance to a Top Ten ranking among North Carolina Public Schools. As indicated in Figure 3.3, the dropout rate in ISS has dropped in each of the past ten years, with the exception of the 2006-2007 school year when it increased .52 percent. While the other agencies in Figure 3.3 are self-explanatory, the peer district group is made up of school districts within the geographic region as determined by North Carolina. A study to determine factors that improve graduation rates takes on added urgency and significance given of the district's lofty goals for extending current trends in student persistence through graduation.

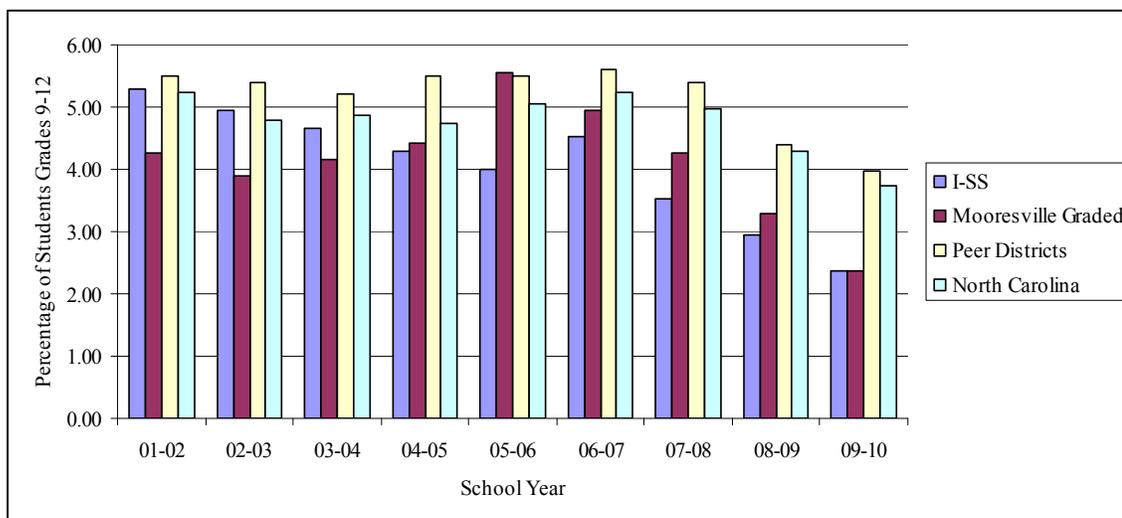


Figure 3.3. Dropout rate comparisons by year and agencies

Iredell-Statesville Schools Dropout Interview

During the 2006-2007 school year when the dropout rate increased, I served as an alternative school principal in ISS and was asked by district officials to develop an interview instrument for students withdrawing from school after the age of 16. The purpose of the interview was not to dissuade students from dropping out of school; rather, its purpose was to ascertain the reasons students chose to drop out and what actions the district could take to lessen the likelihood of future students following the same course of action. I performed basic Internet research to determine causes of student dropout and developed questions centered on finding out the cause of dropout for the individual student.

The interviews provided useful information; however, one piece of data I initially failed to appreciate later became the impetus of this study, i.e., the number of credits each student had completed prior to dropping out of school. The majority of dropout interviews I analyzed from schools in ISS were for students who had already earned 13 or

more credits. By North Carolina standards, students with 13 credits are considered juniors in high school. I discovered that 47% of ISS dropouts in 2006-2007 were in the 11th or 12th grades when they withdrew. Since research has documented that the largest proportion of students drop out during the ninth grade year (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007), it was perplexing that so many students were surviving that pivotal ninth grade year, only to drop out later.

Further inspection of the interview data revealed that, for some students, circumstances outside the realm of school precipitated the decision to drop out. The external circumstances noted in the interviews included (a) health issues on the part of students or their immediate family members, (b) financial obligations associated with students living independently of their family, and (c) issues stemming from teenage parenthood. The interview data also revealed school-related reasons for dropout: (a) lack of connection with school staff or peers, (b) lack of perceived relevance of curriculum to future vocational goals of the student, and (c) inability of the school to provide instructional assistance needed to succeed academically. Interview responses reinforced (a) the value of positive relationships between staff and students, (b) the types of relevant courses the students enjoyed while in school, and (c) their levels of school engagement prior to dropping out. Based on the anonymity of the dropout interviews, it is uncertain whether the students providing the school-based reasons for dropout had more or fewer than 13 credits. However, the reasons for dropping out of school provided by dropout interview participants soon led to changes in alternative school programming in ISS.

For the past decade, the ISS BOE has made high student performance a priority. Performance composites are developed to combine multiple performance indicators for

comparative purposes to rank school districts. Since 2003, ISS's performance composite—comprised of multiple data points including student academic performance, behavior, and attendance—has improved from 88th in the state to 5th in the state (NCDPI, "Data/Reports," 2009). Beginning in 2003, ISS revamped its school programming to be responsive to the needs of the students not being successfully served in their traditional schools. Prior to 2003, one alternative school served the needs of students with extreme behaviors, whereas multiple alternative options are now available for students with diverse needs. The alternative programs include a day treatment program, two alternative schools, a visual arts early college, a traditional early college, a vocational center, and an International Baccalaureate (IB) Program. In addition to the alternative programs listed above, all five of the ISS traditional high schools have freshman academy programs.

The information obtained in the ISS dropout interview was helpful in designing programs to meet the needs of students at risk of dropping out of school. The variety of educational offerings in ISS allows students of various learning preferences to find their individual niche, potentially lowering the incidence of drop out for some students.

Alternative Programs in Iredell-Statesville Schools

ISS developed programs targeting the needs of students underperforming in the areas of attendance, discipline, and academics. The school district provided new options for students in need by replacing the Mulberry Alternative School with two larger alternative schools: Springs Academy and Monticello School. The district also changed the format of its alternative schools. Instead of students being placed on homebound study or being sent to the alternative setting when they had been long-term suspended, students were now able to come to an alternative setting for a variety of reasons. The

district maintained classrooms for long-term suspensions, but also added short-term holding centers for students serving suspensions from 2-15 days, longer-term community classrooms for students with various social issues, day treatment classrooms for students with assorted mental health and behavioral issues, and credit recovery classrooms for students wanting to reclaim credits without having to retake entire classes. Referral to alternative school programs are handled by counselors and administrators from traditional school settings. A referral committee reviews applications for alternative school placement, discusses the school-level interventions that have taken place, and determines the appropriate placement for the student. Table 3.2 provides information regarding the location and description of the various intervention programs employed by ISS.

Table 3.2

Iredell-Statesville Schools Non-Traditional Programs

Program Location	Name of Intervention Program & Description	Population Served
All 5 Traditional District High Schools	Freshman Academy (focused transition strategies; clustered ninth-grade classrooms; weekly advisory sessions; ninth-grade administrator)	All grade 9 ISS students
Mitchell Community College and Statesville High School	Early College (students may earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree in 5 years). The Collaborative College of Technology and Learning (CCTL) is a traditional Early College program on the campus of Mitchell Community College. The Visual-Performing Arts Center (VPAC) is a school-within-a-school located on the campus of Statesville High School and designed for students with a desire to pursue careers in the visual or performing arts	Grade 9-12 ISS students interested in earning a high school diploma and an associates' degree in 5 years

Pressly School	Community School (students are served for 6-12 months; emphasis on social skill teaching; small learning environment of fewer than 15 students; daily/weekly privileges based on a point system)	Grades 6-12 students with social anxieties or issues; used as a step-down program for Day Treatment
	High School Success Classroom (HSSC) (students work on the credit needed for graduation; social skill/life skill teaching; Internet-based instruction; classroom serves up to 25 students at a time)	Grades 11-12 students that are at risk of dropout/current dropouts
Monticello School	Long-Term Program (students served for 6-12 months; emphasis on academics, behavior, and attendance; class size maximum is 15 students; Internet-based instruction)	Grades 6-12 long-term suspended students; students with a variety of academic, behavioral, and attendance issues
	OSS Holding Center (students may serve their suspensions without an absence; students complete work submitted by their teachers)	Grades 6-12 students suspended up to 10 days
	SAVE Program (Students work to recover credits; students must attend the program until 11 th grade; program runs after the traditional school day has ended)	Grades 9-10 students that are dropouts
Barium Springs Home for Children	Day Treatment (daily therapeutic journaling; daily recreational therapy; daily group therapy; 6:1 student to mental health staff ratio; daily/weekly privileges based on a point system; monthly review of student progress; students typically served for 6-12 months)	K-12 students with a mental health diagnosis and funding source

Student's Home and/or Hospital	Homebound (one-on-one instruction for up to five hours per week; student's placement is reviewed every 30 days)	K-12 students with severe medical or behavioral needs
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ISS has a number of educational offerings for its students. The HSSC is the most recent addition to ISS's continuum of alternative programs.

High School Success Classroom in the Iredell-Statesville Schools

The program under investigation in this case study is the HSSC at Pressly School, which targets 11th or 12th grade students who have either dropped out or have indicated their desire to drop out of high school. The HSSC allows students to pursue a 21-credit differentiated diploma.

The Differentiated Diploma

Local school districts mandate how many credits their students have to obtain in order to become high school graduates, as long as local requirements meet or exceed the minimum number required by NCDPI. The Iredell-Statesville Schools require 28 credits to graduate from high school since that is the number of credits required by the North Carolina College and University System. The differentiated diploma is the 21-credit diploma required by NCDPI for graduation from high school. Students graduating with a differentiated diploma are eligible for the same post-high school opportunities except for private college/university, public college/university, or trade/business school. I became aware of the differentiated diploma during a visit to an alternative school in Hendersonville, NC. I went to this particular school to discuss best practices in alternative schooling with its principal since both her school and Springs Academy were

two of only eight North Carolina alternative schools to make AYP during the 2006-2007 school year. The host principal mentioned a newly initiated program known as the 21 Plus diploma, which would potentially lower the rate of student dropout in her district. The school board in the Henderson County Schools approved the diploma as a tool for use by the alternative school to encourage former dropouts to return and complete their education. As a result of my interest in the diploma program, I was directed by the principal from Hendersonville, NC to the curriculum director from Transylvania County, NC who had informed her about the differentiated diploma. With the support of this director, I was able to develop a plan to present the differentiated diploma to the ISS Board of Education (BOE). The data from my dropout interview instrument provided the foundation for the development of the formal proposal to the BOE.

At the April 2008 BOE meeting, I presented the differentiated diploma proposal and advised that the recommendation came to the board with full support from the curriculum division, student services division, all high school principals and high school counselors. BOE member Mr. Bill Brater made a motion, which was seconded by Mr. Keith Williams, to approve the differentiated diploma recommendation as presented for the two ISS alternative schools: Springs Academy and Monticello. The April 2008 BOE minutes indicate the motion carried unanimously (Iredell-Statesville Schools Board of Education, 2008).

The differentiated diploma was approved by the ISS BOE as a means of assisting upperclassmen who are actual or potential dropouts in meeting North Carolina's minimum graduation requirements. Although ISS BOE policy requires 28 credits for graduation, district leaders recognized that some upper classmen faced significant—and

in some cases insurmountable—obstacles to completing school. To avoid lowering the ISS BOE standard for graduation at all of the district's high schools, the board decided that offering the differentiated diploma (21-credit diploma) at the alternative schools would fit nicely within existing dropout prevention programming. Students in attendance at either of the district's alternative schools are eligible for the differentiated diploma.

In June 2008, three students graduated from Springs Academy with the differentiated diploma. By June 2009, 78 students graduated with the differentiated diploma. The differentiated diploma program became a factor in assisting students who might otherwise have otherwise have dropped out to become high school graduates.

Early HSSC implementation. The HSSC, which allowed students to pursue the differentiated diploma, was first housed at Springs Academy. From 2005 to 2009, ISS and Barium Springs Home for Children (BSHC) had a partnership school (Springs Academy) that provided day treatment mental health services as well as academic services to students with severe emotional and/or behavioral issues. BSHC provided a fully-equipped school campus as well as certified mental health services during the school day. Students living residentially at BSHC, as well as students from the rest of ISS, were eligible to attend Springs Academy. Students who were unresponsive to school-level and residential interventions were referred to the ISS Alternative Referral Committee by BSHC or ISS schools. The classroom expectations for the HSSC centered on three tenets: academics, attendance, and self-control.

At the end of 2008-2009, Springs Academy became Pressly School. The change came as a result of the dissolution of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between ISS and BSHC. The HSSC was the lone classroom on the Springs Academy campus that

did not require a BSHC mental health evaluation for admission. As a result of the unique nature of the HSSC, there were no programmatic changes made to it as a result of the closing of Springs Academy and the opening of Pressly School. Figure 3.4 provides a display of the HSSC process used to foster student persistence through graduation. The process will be described in the upcoming section on the current HSSC.

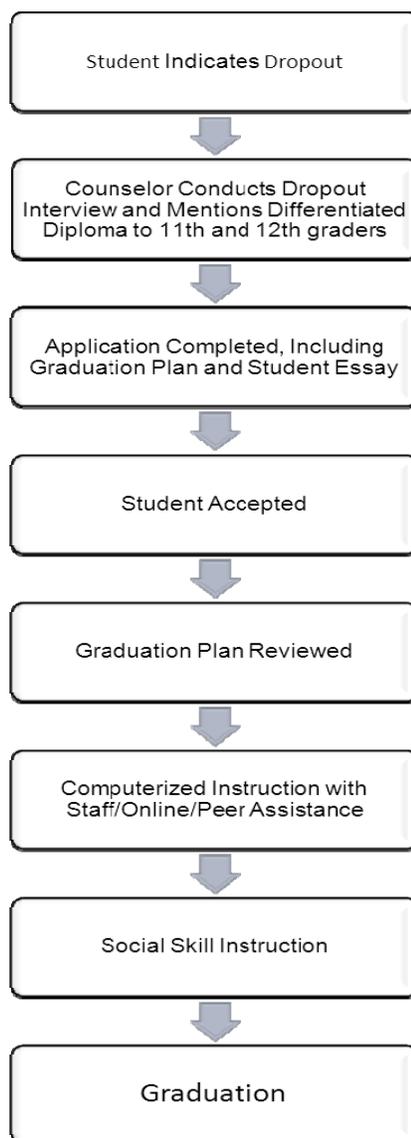


Figure 3.4 HSSC process

Current HSSC. Since 2009-2010, two campuses—Pressly School and Monticello School—have served all ISS elementary and secondary students in need of an alternative approach to learning. Pressly offers a traditional academic program in a long-term setting. The school also offers the HSSC, which allows students at risk of dropping out and former dropouts to receive their high school diplomas in an environment designed to support student persistence.

Students are admitted to the HSSC through an application process involving a counselor or administrator from the students' home schools. The application requires students to write two essays detailing (1) why they have dropped out of school or are considering this as an option, and (2) the steps that will be taken to improve academic outcomes if admitted to the HSSC. The application also requires the counselor or administrator from the home school to review student transcripts and testing records to determine what needs to be completed for graduation. Applications are submitted to the principal of Pressly School. Bi-weekly alternative referral committee meetings allow various stakeholders from the alternative education community to review the applications. The alternative referral committee members include (a) principals from both alternative schools in ISS; (b) counselors from both alternative schools; (c) an ISS behavioral specialist; (d) the director of educational services from BSHC; (e) the ISS assistant superintendent of school operations; and (f) rotating principals from elementary, middle, and high school levels. The BSHC educational services director serves on the committee because the referral committee reviews applications for all alternative programs offered by ISS, not just ones for the HSSC.

Students exhibiting a substantiated need for a differentiated diploma track to avoid dropout and who are classified as juniors (13-19 credits) or seniors (20 + credits) in high school may be granted admission to the HSSC. The classroom physical space allows for only 25 students to work at any given time. Flexible scheduling allows for maximum usage of the classroom's capabilities as some students need to be in attendance for only half of a school day because of a low number of credits left to complete. Students are placed on a waiting list in the event the classroom exceeds its 25-computer limit. However, during the 2009-2010 school year, no students were wait-listed.

HSSC curriculum offerings. The HSSC is staffed with one teacher and one teacher assistant at all times. The HSSC teacher, a certified high school English teacher, was selected because of her ability to motivate and support students and not on her specific teaching certification. The teacher's assistant for the HSSC was similarly selected for her organizational ability and nurturing nature. Both individuals have worked in the HSSC since its inception.

Because of the varied credit needs of the HSSC students, the primary mode of instructional delivery is computer-based learning. Contingent on their ability to learn independently, students also receive direct instructional assistance from the HSSC staff as well as other Pressly School high school staff who rotate into the classroom. Each student has his or her own computer work station. Instructional programs Nova Net (2010) and EPIC Learning (2010) are employed to provide students with content aligned to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) for each subject. Students work at their own pace and in a program of study designed specifically to meet their learning and required credit needs.

Nova Net (2010) involves modules for subjects in the four core areas: English, math, science, and social studies. Learning modules are also offered in several elective areas such as Computer Applications, Digital Communications, Medical Terminology, Drafting, among others. Students should be able to read on an eighth grade level to comprehend the material in the Nova Net format. The format includes a bank of multiple choice questions at the end of each unit and students demonstrate an 80% mastery level to continue to the next unit.

EPIC Learning (2010) utilizes a format similar to Nova Net but includes an interactive feature. EPIC provides a brief narrative at the beginning of each unit to familiarize students with the learning objectives. Students then click on an interactive link to pull up a virtual instructor, who teaches the lesson's content much as a traditional instructor would in a face-to-face setting. At the conclusion of the instructional presentation, students answer five multiple choice questions dealing with the content covered. Incorrect answers may be corrected. Once students have shown 80% mastery, they proceed to the next learning objective module. Students who are not on grade level in terms of reading comprehension often favor EPIC Learning (2010) because of the instructor component of each unit module. Both EPIC (2010) and Nova Net (2010) allow students to work at a pace that is comfortable for them.

Social skill teaching. As stated previously, students in the HSSC generally come to the program because of struggles outside of school affect their ability to earn their high school diplomas. Along with helping students persist through graduation, another goal of the HSSC is to build up students' social skill sets to enable them to function successfully in the adult world. The premise for social skill teaching in the HSSC is to give the

students a competitive edge when they leave the classroom. If the students are capable of interacting respectfully and functioning in a variety of social situations, their chances of being able to function in a dynamic academic or work setting is increased. The model of interaction utilized in the HSSC and in all of Pressly School is the Teaching Family Model (TFM). The TFM (2010) is modified in all of Pressly School's classrooms to meet the specific ages, developmental levels, and social needs of the students. In this model, non-confrontational statements are used to correct inappropriate actions, thus helping students to address their social deficits without engaging in power struggles with staff or classroom peers. The goals of the TFM are clear communication and mutual respect. The social skills reinforced by the TFM, HSSC equip students to interview for jobs, interact with adult populations outside of the school setting, and maintain appropriate relationships with their peers.

At the beginning of each day, students receive point cards that involve goal setting. Student goals may involve academic or interpersonal objectives. When students interact or participate inappropriately, staff provide an instruction to correct the misstep. If students disregard feedback provided by staff, they receive negative point consequences for their decisions. The point totals for each day must equal a predetermined number in order for HSSC students to receive privilege time. Privilege time may consist of listening to music, playing basketball, going for a walk on campus, eating snacks, playing board games and/or video games. Students do not earn the privilege continue working on academic tasks while their classmates engage in privilege activities. Peer accountability is employed in the classroom as a mechanism for building a cohort mentality among the HSSC students. HSSC students are encouraged to keep all

class members persisting through graduation. Guest speakers, self-government, and group counseling sessions are also fixtures of this classroom and provide the additional support and guidance these students need.

The HSSC approach is holistic; its classroom focuses on various facets of students' lives while assisting them in graduating from high school. Only one of a variety of ISS non-traditional programs designed to serve students needing of specialized education, the HSSC meets the needs of students in the 11th and 12th grades who otherwise might not have graduated

CHAPTER 4: METHODS

Research Purpose and Questions

The purposes of this study were to determine what effect the HSSC has on student outcomes and how the HSSC assists students in persisting through graduation. The research questions guiding this study included

1. Do HSSC students attend school more frequently than non-HSSC students?
2. Do HSSC students graduate more frequently than non-HSSC students?
3. Do the HSSC students have different post-graduate intentions than the non-HSSC students?
4. What factors do HSSC graduates and instructional staff believe encourage student persistence through graduation?

A case study approach was used to examine the effectiveness and the educational delivery of the HSSC. The methodology of a case study is to focus on an in-depth analysis of a particular case or issue to develop a richly detailed understanding (Creswell, 1998). The first three research questions were addressed through quantitative methods. The case includes an *ex post facto* component to compare the HSSC and non-HSSC students in the 2009-2010 school year. The fourth research question was answered through qualitative methods. Interviews were conducted with instructional staff (n=2) and 2009-2010 HSSC graduates (n=8) to determine how the HSSC assists students in persisting through graduation.

In this study, persistence is defined as the ability of students with multiple risk factors associated with dropping out to continue their education and graduate from high

school. The framework for investigating the HSSC is based on four components of Wehlage's (1989) School Membership theory. This chapter will provide information about the case study design; describe the effect of the HSSC on student outcomes; detail the quantitative and qualitative methods of the study; and describe the sample, matching variables, outcome variables, data collection methods, and the data analysis methods.

Research Design

The focus of the research question should be a determining factor in the choice of research design (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 1994). Since my first research purpose involves asking a comparative "how much" question, I conducted an archival analysis (Yin, 1994) to compare the absenteeism rate, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions of the comparison (non-HSSC) and focal (HSSC) groups.

Both the alleged cause and the effects of this research have already occurred and must be studied in retrospect. *Ex post facto* design is an appropriate choice when the phenomena being studied occurred prior to the study, experimental methods are not possible, and control of variables beyond a single independent variable is unrealistic (Isaac & Michael, 1971).

Ex post facto design is not without its limitations. The main weakness of this design is the lack of control over independent variables. The facts in the study are obtained with no opportunity to arrange the conditions or manipulate the variables that may have influenced the facts in the beginning, because the independent variable has already occurred. Understanding that no single factor is the cause of an outcome and ensuring that the relevant causal factors are included in the factors in the study is also challenging with *ex post facto* design. If the relevant causal factors in an *ex post facto*

study are included, determining which variable is the cause and which variable is the effect may sometimes prove impossible (Isaac & Michael, 1971). This study involves two groups that are similar in several respects, except in exposure to the HSSC.

In an effort to bolster my research, I investigated how the HSSC assists student persistence through graduation using qualitative methods. Along with the analysis of HSSC student performance data, this study involves using the interview guide approach to elicit the participant's worldview. Rossman and Rallis (2003) provide reasons for a qualitative approach to research that lend support to my study. First, I studied the topic of student persistence in the HSSC in the natural setting with actual participants. Second, a close-up view of the HSSC or similar programs does not exist in the literature, thus findings from this study could augment the existing body of knowledge. Third, multiple methods were used to understand the HSSC, including face-to-face interviews and quantitative data analysis. Fourth, I understand that my views and opinions of the HSSC impact the entire research project. A fifth characteristic of qualitative inquiry important to this study involves its emergent nature; allowing themes to emerge from the research provides depth and richness to the understanding of the phenomena being studied.

Both the *ex post facto* quantitative and qualitative components of this research are subsumed under the case study concept. Since my second research focus involves asking a "how" question, the case study approach is the preferred research design (Yin, 1994). Additionally, since I have limited control over events and also chose to focus on a contemporary phenomenon, the case study design is appropriate. While the case study is appropriate for this undertaking, some scholars have expressed concerns about lack of rigor in case study research and the significant potential for bias to impact its findings.

Other researcher concerns involve a lack of scientific generalization and the extensive amount of time required to conduct case study research (Yin, 1994).

To support the integrity and value of case study research to existing literature, Yin (1994) provides the criteria for creating an exemplary case study:

1. *The case study must be significant.* As reiterated in the review of literature, student dropout is a significant problem because of its impact on both individuals and society as a whole. The HSSC is a program specifically designed with the intent of lessening the likelihood of dropping out on the part of its students. The unique focus of the HSSC on juniors and seniors in high school adds to the significance of the study to the existing literature.
2. *The case study must be complete.* Since there are multiple elements to this bounded system, this case study does not provide complete coverage. I compared the graduation status, post-graduate intentions, and absenteeism rate of the control (non HSSC) and experimental (HSSC) groups with similar academic performance on the eighth grade reading EOG test and similar SES to determine the effectiveness of the HSSC on its student outcomes. I also interviewed HSSC instructional staff and HSSC graduates in an effort to provide a complete representation of this particular case. These individuals are closely linked to the HSSC and can describe the functions of the classroom they feel are integral to promoting positive student outcomes.

3. *The case study must consider alternative perspectives.* While I believe that the HSSC is an integral factor in student persistence through graduation, the reality of competing explanations must be considered to increase the credibility of the findings. Data from the various interviews that were conducted helped form alternative explanations for student persistence. Additionally, data from the qualitative portion of this study provide key insights into factors impacting student persistence.
4. *The case study must display sufficient evidence.* A consumer of research should feel confident that the researcher is knowledgeable about the case being studied. Although I am not currently involved with the HSSC, I spent four years as principal of the alternative school that housed the HSSC. I also researched, proposed, and implemented the program from the beginning. My emic perspective should enhance the depth of data analysis because I have had extensive contact with the HSSC. The reader should also feel free to arrive at his or her own conclusions based on the detail and supporting evidence provided in the case study.
5. *The case study must be composed in an engaging manner.* A consumer of case study research should sense the enthusiasm of the researcher toward the topic being described.

HSSC Effect on Student Outcomes

Setting

This case study is bounded by location and time. It focuses on the 2009-2010 school year in the HSSC, based in the two-year-old Pressly School in Statesville, NC. The 2009-2010 school year was selected because it was the first school year after I left Pressly School for another principalship. The gap of time between the school year and the study was not significant; graduates could recall specific information but the time gap provided enough time for reflective distance.

The ISS district serves over 21,000 students, grades K-12, and is located at the intersection of NC Interstates 40 and 77. The district boasts affluent communities in the southern end of the county, encompassing numerous Lake Norman neighborhoods and bordering Mecklenburg County. The district also envelops the city of Statesville, which represents an eclectic socioeconomic mixture: the country club which is home to many professional class individuals as well as a high proportion of government-subsidized housing where many individuals of low SES reside. The remaining 40% of the district is rural farmland with small residential developments interspersed.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) "Current Population Reports," Iredell County has a total population of 159,437 and covers 573.83 square miles. Statesville and Mooresville are the largest municipalities. The Census reports that 80.7% of the county is White, with African-American persons being the second-largest group at 11.9%. The Hispanic community is the third largest ethnic group (6.8%). The rate of persons living in poverty, 12.4%, is slightly below the North Carolina average of 15.5%. Iredell County has a .9% edge over the North Carolina graduation rate at 84.5%, and

21.6% of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher, which is about 5% below the North Carolina average. Chapter 3 provides more detail on the North Carolina context and ISS alternative programs including the HSSC.

Sample

The sample for determining the HSSC effect on student outcomes included the entire available population of students who were enrolled in the HSSC during the 2009-2010 school year. This group of students served as the focal group in this study. The sample of HSSC students were matched with a comparison group of purposefully selected students using the matching variables described below. The comparison group of non-HSSC students is not an intact group; these students were selected individually from other district high schools based on compatibility of match with a student from the HSSC. There were 112 participants in the quantitative portion. Of the 56 HSSC students, 6 were retained and 3 were placed in an alternative setting at some point in their academic careers prior to coming to the HSSC. The comparison group of non-HSSC students had 2 students who were retained, but no students who were placed in an alternative school during in their academic careers.

Matching Variables

HSSC and non-HSSC students were grouped based on various combinations of characteristics, including eighth grade reading scale score, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Literature provides support for the selected matching variables as having an impact on student graduation from high school (Hammond, 2007; Kearney, 2003; Rumberger, 1983). Attendance and student discipline were rejected as matching variables because of the difficulty in finding identical matches.

I was supplied with two non-HSSC students for each HSSC student. Stripped of identifiers, I had to decide which of the non-HSSC matches I would include in the study. I used specific criteria to determine which non-HSSC student would be included in the study in the following order based on my review of the existing literature regarding dropout characteristics: socioeconomic status, eighth grade reading scale score, gender, and ethnicity. When I encountered non-HSSC matches with characteristics identical to those of the HSSC student, I flipped a coin to determine which student to include. All but 4 (92%) of the pairs matched on the basis of three or more variables with 40 pairs (71%) matching on 4 variables. The variables—ethnicity, gender, scale score, and SES—have been explained previously in this study. The characteristic of no scale score is not an additional variable. It indicates that the HSSC student did not have an eighth grade reading scale score for an undetermined reason. When that occurred, a non-HSSC student lacking a scale score was found for comparison purposes. Table 4.1 displays the combinations and the frequency with which they occurred among the matched pairs.

Table 4.1

Matched Pairs Combinations (N= 56)

Combination of Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Scale Score/Ethnicity/Gender/SES	31	55
No Score/Ethnicity/Gender/SES	9	16
Scale Score/Ethnicity/Gender	7	13
Scale Score/Ethnicity/SES	3	5
Scale Score/Gender/SES	2	4
Scale Score/SES	2	4
Scale Score/Gender	1	2
Gender/SES	1	2

Academic performance. The eighth grade reading EOG scale score was selected as an indicator of students' prior academic performance, since students' ability to comprehend and analyze the written word impacts their ability to succeed in the majority of coursework (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005). The eighth grade reading EOG is given to all eighth grade students in North Carolina middle schools and yields a scale score. Students taking this exam receive a score on a scale of I to IV. The scale scores for each performance level on the 8th grade reading EOG fall into the following categories: level I (≤ 349), level II (350-357), level III (358-369), and level IV (≥ 370).

Student SES. SES provides a glimpse into students' home financial situations. Students from the focal and comparison groups were paired based on their free or reduced (F or R) lunch status. Students receive free school lunch, reduced school lunch,

or regularly priced school lunch. According to the U. S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (2011), the income level that qualifies a family for reduced lunch is based on size of household and annual income allowance as shown in Table 4.2.

Household size is defined as the number of members living in a particular household.

Table 4.2

Reduced Lunch Determination

Household Size	Annual Income
1	\$20,036
2	\$26,955
3	\$33,874
4	\$40,793
5	\$47,712
6	\$54,631
7	\$61,550
8	\$68,469

As the table indicates, each additional household member increases the income allowance by \$6,919.00.

Ethnicity. One of the matching strategies involved pairing HSSC and non-HSSC students based upon their ethnicity. Student ethnicities in this study fell into the categories of White, African-American, Hispanic, and Multi-racial. According to the review of literature for this study, a student's ethnicity is a predictive factor related to likelihood of high school graduation. One study from the review of literature estimated

that nearly 30% of students who enter high school this year will not graduate in four years and nearly half of all African-American and Latino students entering high school will not graduate in four years (Greene & Winters, 2005).

Gender. The final matching strategy involved the pairing of students from the HSSC and non-HSSC groups based on gender (male and female). In a report produced by NCDPI (2011), certain trends related to the gender of student dropouts emerge, including the tendency of male students to drop out more frequently than female students, regardless of ethnicity. This makes the accurate pairing of HSSC and non-HSSC students by gender important.

Outcome Variables

Absenteeism. Absenteeism is a data source used as a key predictor of dropout as it involves the students' level of ownership of their education (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Student attendance rate is the number of days a student actually attends of the possible 180-day school year. Students must be in attendance at least 85% of any given semester (roughly 9 absences allowed) or year (roughly 18 absences) to be eligible for course credit. The number of absences allowed depends on whether a course is year-long or semester-long. This study incorporated absenteeism for the 2009-2010 school year as an outcome variable.

Graduation status. Student graduation status is a source of data used to gauge the effectiveness of the HSSC in getting students to persist through graduation. Student graduation status falls into two distinct categories: graduate in 2009-2010 and non-graduate. For the purposes of this study, a non-graduate is a student who did not graduate from high school in the spring of 2010 after entering high school for the first

time in 2005-2006. All of the HSSC students had the possibility of graduating within the 2009-2010 school year.

Post-graduate intentions. Prior to graduating, all ISS students complete a brief student survey, which includes a question regarding their post-graduation intentions. Students may pick from the following options: private college/university, public college/university, trade/business school, community college/ technical college, employment, military service, or other/unknown. Students complete the survey only in the spring of their senior year. Student responses are then analyzed to determine future aspirations of HSSC graduates in relation to their comparison group.

Data Collection Methods

The data used to determine the effect of the HSSC on student outcomes were collected using the NCWISE data management system. Many districts in the State of North Carolina utilize this data management system to track student grades, attendance, and behavioral performance. The HSSC student roster from the 2009-2010 school year, HSSC student eighth grade reading End of Grade (EOG) scores, the SES, student absenteeism from the 2009-2010 school year, GPA of the HSSC students, and the matching comparison group of non-HSSC students were extracted from NCWISE. Student absenteeism, graduation status, and post-graduation activities were analyzed through reports produced by the ISS Director of Technology and Accountability in the NCWISE system. The data sources were matched without identifiers before I received them.

Data Analysis Methods

I used data from NCWISE to determine student absenteeism, graduation status, and post-graduation intentions for both HSSC students and the comparison group of non-HSSC students. In 2009-2010, there were 56 HSSC students. Each of the HSSC students was matched with a non-HSSC student who had similar characteristics in the following categories: ethnicity, gender, eighth grade reading scale score, and socioeconomic status. Although I used a matching process to create the non-HSSC sample, the data were analyzed as if there were two independent groups.

To review student absenteeism, I used an independent samples t-test to determine if there were differences in the rate of absenteeism (dependent variable) between the HSSC graduates and the non-HSSC students.

Graduation status (dependent variable) was compared to determine the percentage of students from each group that graduated from high school. The total number of graduates in each group ($n = 56$) was divided by the total number of students in each group to determine the graduation rate for the overall groups. A chi-square was used as an inferential test to determine if a difference exists between the graduation status of the HSSC and non-HSSC students.

Post-graduate intentions of the students were analyzed to determine HSSC and non-HSSC students' future plans prior to their graduation. A chi-square was used as an inferential test to determine if a difference exists in post-graduate intentions between HSSC and non-HSSC students. Analyzing these sources of data provided a perspective of the similarities and differences of HSSC and non-HSSC students.

HSSC Assisted Student Persistence

Sample

The interview participants included two selected staff from the HSSC and eight graduates in 2009-2010. There were five other HSSC graduates who were selected but did not appear at the focus group interview session. The instructors were selected for their emic perspective of the HSSC. The instructor interviews involved both of the staff members who worked in the HSSC during the 2009-2010 school year but were conducted individually. One of the instructors, Mrs. S, is the certified teacher of the classroom. The other instructor, Mrs. L, is a teacher's assistant. My descriptions of these instructors come from a combination of interviews and my personal knowledge of each of them.

Mrs. S worked as both a teacher and house parent at Barium Springs Home for Children for 17 years prior to the formation of Springs Academy. She has also served as the minister for a small congregation for the past 15 years to present day. Mrs. S was responsible for teaching students from elementary through high school in all core content areas. Since Barium Springs was not a public school, Mrs. S had to locate or develop her own curricular resources to teach what she felt was essential. She received little guidance in the area of academic instruction. Instead, the majority of her training was in the use of different models of interaction and social skill teaching. Mrs. S became a public school teacher when Springs Academy was formed and was assigned to one of the high school classrooms because she was licensed to teach grades 9-12, she was able to handle student behavior issues, she was able to teach multiple subjects, and she demonstrated resourcefulness in developing lessons. Mrs. S's defining attributes were her positive attitude and contagious enthusiasm for learning. For these reasons, she was a solid choice to serve as teacher for the HSSC.

Mrs. L worked for a number of years in private industry prior to her employment at Springs Academy. She worked at Springs Academy in both elementary and middle school day treatment programs as a teacher's assistant for three years prior to being placed in the HSSC. She also assisted with the complex task of alternative student transportation and continues in that capacity at Pressly School. Mrs. L also served frequently as a substitute house parent in the multiple group homes on the BSHC campus. Mrs. L had been trained in the use of TFM upon her induction to Springs Academy. She was fluid in her use of TFM from her experiences as a house parent and a teacher's assistant in the day treatment classrooms. She possessed the ability to remain calm during intense student behavioral episodes and in dealing with difficult adults. Mrs. L also was very intelligent and diverse in her areas of academic interest. Because Mrs. L was a solid compliment to Mrs. S and had strong social and academic skills, she was chosen to serve in the HSSC.

These two educators have been in the HSSC since the classroom first opened in 2008-2009 and have developed the procedures that exist. They were promised that their input would be confidential in that their names would not be attached to their specific responses. Their perspective of the classroom differs from that of the students who were interviewed in the focus group and individual interviews.

Reputational case sampling was utilized to determine student interview participants. While individual situations vary, students who came to the HSSC only needing one credit to graduate or needing to recover credits were excluded from the study. The recovered credits are generally non-EOC in nature and require either time

make-up or the successful completion of a teacher-made final examination for credit to be obtained. Many of these students enter and attend the HSSC for less than a semester.

I gave the names of the selected HSSC graduates to the Pressly School data manager, who in turn employed NCWISE to obtain phone numbers of the graduates, to make initial contact with selected graduates, and to confirm their initial interest in participating. Once she confirmed initial interest, I contacted the potential participants for final confirmation of their informed and consent to participate in the study.

There were 11 HSSC graduates confirmed for the focus group interview but only six students were present the night of the interview. The six HSSC student focus group participants were selected by the HSSC instructors in 2009-2010 as typical graduates from the HSSC. The HSSC staff selected two individual HSSC student interview participants because the circumstances surrounding their placement were typical of HSSC students. The names of students who met the criteria were provided by the instructors. In the focus group interview, there were five other selected students who were unable to participate in the study because they did not attend the interview after confirming their intentions to participate.

No students declined to participate in the study, but several did not come to the focus group interview. Using case sampling for the two individual typical student interviews provided a balanced perspective coupled with the HSSC student focus group interview since those students represent typical cases from the classroom.

Data Sources

Data used to determine how the HSSC encouraged student persistence were collected in an interview with the two instructors in the HSSC, a formal, semi-structured

focus group interview with HSSC students, and individual interviews with two students from the HSSC.

The instructors' interview was conducted first in order to determine the methods used in the HSSC to promote student persistence through graduation. Questions were focused on developing an understanding of the curriculum incorporated in the HSSC, the differences between HSSC students and the other students attending Pressly School, the instructor's perceptions of the HSSC graduates, the methods employed to acclimate new students to the HSSC, methods of assisting struggling students, non-academic HSSC student activities, the manner in which staff-to-student relationships were forged, and the characteristics of a typical HSSC graduate (see Appendix D). The instructors' interview also provided an opportunity to identify 2009-2010 HSSC graduates who would constitute a typical sample of the overall population as well as two HSSC graduates who are typical and suitable for individual interviews.

The student focus group interview (see Appendix E) centered on the functions and processes of the HSSC that, according to typical graduates' perceptions, increased the likelihood of their persistence through graduation. The focus group participants were questions to determine if the components of Wehlage's (1989) SM theory (adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation) were addressed in the HSSC. Questions elicited responses on past educational experiences, factors participants deemed integral to their persistence through high school graduation, their current educational and/or vocational setting, advice to students contemplating dropping out of school, and advice to school district personnel regarding strategies to increase the likelihood of at-risk student graduation.

The two individual HSSC graduate interviews (see Appendix F) focused on obtaining a deeper understanding of how the HSSC assists students at risk of dropping out. The individual HSSC graduate interviews were conducted after the instructors' interview and separate from the HSSC graduate focus group interview to provide a means of triangulating the data obtained in the student focus group interview. The questions for these interviews were similar to those in the focus group, but were open to change due to emergent ideas. I presented the HSSC graduate interview questions to the HSSC staff members for feedback before interviewing the students (see Appendix E). No changes were suggested.

Data Collection Methods

As chief gatekeeper, the Pressly School principal granted permission for me to speak with the HSSC instructors and the Pressly School data manager. I contacted the HSSC instructors to provide information about the study and to obtain verbal informed consent to participate in the study.

In order to conduct effective interviews for this case study, the interviewer must be able to (a) ask good questions and interpret the answers accurately, (b) use good listening skills, (c) be adaptable and flexible, (d) have a firm grasp on the issues being studied, and (e) not allow preconceived notions to bias his/her interactions (Yin, 1994). An individual trained in methods of conducting focus group interviews was hired to conduct the student focus group interview. This individual has multiple years of experience conducting focus group interviews and was recommended by my dissertation chair. I conducted the HSSC instructors' interview and the two individual HSSC graduate interviews because of my experience conducting individual interviews. For my

interviews, I clarified with the participants that while I am a high school principal, for the purposes of this study I am a researcher studying the question of how the HSSC impacts student persistence through graduation. A digital recorder was used to capture the responses of the individuals participating in the interviews. All of the interviews used interview guide questions and lasted around 60 minutes.

By followed ethical treatment guidelines outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Western Carolina University and obtaining IRB approval, I was better able to safeguard against potential ethics violations. Optional participation was emphasized with all participants. I asked the Pressly School data manager to call prospective participants to protect individuals from feeling pressured to participate. After she made the initial contact with the participants, verified interest in participating in the survey, and obtained contact information, I followed up with phone calls to schedule the interviews. While I provided \$10 Subway gift cards to all participants, the nominal compensation should not have pressured potential participants.

Creswell (1998) provides guidance for researchers to prevent ethical improprieties in research. One safeguard I implemented to protect the identity of the interview participants was to replace participant names with assigned numbers. When I spoke with the research participants over the phone to obtain verbal informed consent, I provided general information about the research study. When the interviews actually took place, participants signed paper copies of the informed consent.

I interviewed the HSSC staff individually on separate occasions. Mrs. S was interviewed in May. Mrs. L was interviewed in June. Both of the staff members were informed of their roles as participants in my study and of the study's intent. While I had

worked with both women for four years, I reminded them that my role was that of researcher and not their former supervising principal. The two individual HSSC staff interviews were conducted in my office at South Iredell High School, after the school day had ended. The staff signed informed consent documents prior to the interviews and I reminded them that they could drop out at any time during either the focus group or individual interviews.

Even though I did not conduct the student focus group interview, I was present at the beginning to collect the informed consent of each participant. The HSSC graduate focus group interview occurred in July. After collecting the forms, I left the Pressly School media center where the interviews were conducted so students would feel comfortable speaking freely.

The two individual HSSC graduate interviews were conducted in August, some weeks after both of the HSSC staff and the HSSC graduate focus group interviews. The students were interviewed individually at Pressly School. At the outset, I reminded the two graduates of my role as researcher and not as high school principal. The graduates signed informed consent forms prior to the interviews.

In implementing the data collection process, I followed Yin's (1994) three principles of data collection: using multiple sources of evidence in the form of the different interviews conducted, creating a data base for the case study, and maintaining a chain of evidence to support reliability of the case study. The chain of evidence allows the consumer to follow the progression from initial research questions to the formation of conclusions.

Data Analysis

For the interview portion of this case study, I followed the qualitative data analysis process detailed by Rossman and Rallis (2003). Their process requires organization of files for management of interview data. Next, I analyzed the raw data by making notes and coding on the transcript. Finally, I wrote a narrative analysis to establish how the data address the purpose of determining the factors that encourage student persistence through graduation.

After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed by a paid transcriber. I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy while listening to the recorded interviews and subsequently provided participants with transcript copies of their respective interviews.

Data from all interviews were organized into the four areas of Wehlage's (1989) School Membership Model: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Data from the interviews were also compartmentalized in terms of staff characteristics, student background characteristics, and individual student persistence characteristics. Emergent themes also helped address the research purpose.

I used bubbling, coding, and narrative summary approaches to analyze data from the interviews in an attempt to observe patterns in and derive meaning from participant responses. Bubbling also allowed the central concepts of adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation to be connected with participant responses in a visual manner. In bubbling, the central concept is placed in a bubble at the center of a page and interview data form smaller bubbles linked to the central bubble. Coding allowed me to categorize the various strategies employed by the HSSC to assist students in persisting through graduation. The narrative summary approach allowed for in-depth discussions of

key themes while protecting the individual identity of research participants. To allow myself reflective distance, I analyzed the interview transcripts on several occasions over the course of several weeks. After the data had been analyzed and compiled, each participant received a copy of the transcript obtained from their respective interview as a means of member checking to increase credibility. I have received no feedback from the participants regarding the research process or the information contained in the transcripts.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study of the HSSC and its impact on student persistence through graduation is that of interviewer/evaluator. I used my interpretive knowledge of the research topic and the particular responses of participants to derive meaning from the interview question responses. I also examined documents related to the HSSC as well as data points related to student absenteeism, graduation status, and future intentions of graduates.

I currently serve as principal of South Iredell High School in Troutman, North Carolina, and have been in this capacity since July 2010. I have chosen to work in education because I believe in the power of an education to change the course of a human life. I view alternative education as a bridge to help disconnected students reconnect and earn their diplomas. Having worked first-hand with alternative school students and seen the positive impact diplomas can have on their lives, I am passionate about determining and promoting graduate success factors for all of my students.

While I viewed the HSSC from an outsider's perspective (etic) in terms of never having graduated from such a program and not having any direct involvement with the program since June 2009, I have the benefit of having inaugurated the program (emic) at

Springs Academy two years before this study commenced. My background in the development and implementation of the HSSC provides bias towards my view of the effectiveness of the program in nurturing student persistence through graduation.

Excellent working relationships with the staff at Pressly School characterized my tenure there; however, being nearly two years removed from working at Pressly School, I am not as attached to the program as I was when serving as principal there. None of the students involved in the study attended the HSSC when I was principal at Springs Academy. Additionally, the quantitative data analysis helped offset my personal biases towards the HSSC.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

The purposes of this study were to determine the effect of the HSSC on student outcomes and how the HSSC facilitates student persistence through graduation. The research questions answered in this study include the following:

1. Do HSSC students attend school more frequently than non-HSSC students?
2. Do HSSC students graduate more frequently than non-HSSC students?
3. Do the HSSC students have different post-graduate intentions than the non-HSSC students?
4. What factors do HSSC graduates and instructional staff believe encourage student persistence through graduation?

This chapter will provide information about both the HSSC and non-HSSC students as well as data analysis for both the quantitative and qualitative research portions of the study.

HSSC Effect on Student Outcomes

Group Demographics

The HSSC student group was composed of 56 students enrolled in the HSSC during the 2009-2010 school year who began high school as ninth graders in the 2005-2006 school year. The non-HSSC student group was composed of 56 students who were enrolled in an Iredell-Statesville school other than Pressly School and the HSSC during the 2009-2010 school year and who began high school in 2005-2006. The students fell into several demographic categories: White, African-American, Hispanic, Multi-racial, male, female, free or reduced lunch, and non-free or reduced lunch. Table 5.1 provides

the group demographics for both HSSC and non-HSSC students. There were slightly more HSSC students (46%) than non-HSSC students (41%) classified as economically disadvantaged. There were no multi-racial non-HSSC students compared to 4% of the HSSC students. The gender of both HSSC and non-HSSC students were exact matches.

Table 5.1

Group Demographics

Demographic Feature	HSSC %	Non-HSSC %
Ethnicity		
White	66	64
African-American	25	29
Hispanic	5	7
Multi-racial	4	0
Gender		
Male	54	54
Female	46	46
Free or Reduced Lunch Status		
Free or Reduced Lunch	46	41
Non-Free or Reduced Lunch	54	59

Effect of the HSSC

The study analyzed three outcome variables: student rate of absenteeism, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions. The outcomes were analyzed to

determine if a difference existed between the HSSC and non-HSSC groups, and if so, what type of difference.

Absenteeism. The HSSC and non-HSSC student groups were compared to see if there was a difference in the average rate of student absenteeism. The student rate of attendance is defined as the number of days a student attends of the possible 180 days of the school year. The results for this outcome variable are expressed in terms of numbers of days missed in a 180 day school year.

An independent samples t-test determined differences in mean absences (dependent variable) between the HSSC students and the non-HSSC student pairs. On average, HSSC students had more absences ($M = 19.89$, $SD = 12.9$, range = 0 to 44) than non-HSSC students ($M = 10.29$, $SD = 8.1$, range = 0 to 32). The mean difference of absences between HSSC and non-HSSC students was statistically significant ($M_D = 9.6$, $SD = 2.04$, $t(55) = 4.72$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.19$). As a result, I can be reasonably confident that there was a difference in absenteeism between the HSSC and non-HSSC in 2009-2010.

However, this analysis did not account for potential differences in absenteeism rates at the students' initial school before enrolling in the HSSC, and absenteeism after enrolling in the HSSC. Prior to enrolling in the HSSC, students often come from other high schools during the same school year in which they graduate. During the 2009-2010 school year, there were 56 students enrolled in the HSSC. Of those 56 students, 42 (75%) students attended one or more schools prior to enrolling in the HSSC and only 14 (25%) students spent the duration of their enrollment in the 2009-2010 school year in the HSSC. Students had an 82% attendance rate while enrolled in the HSSC (missing an average of

11 days) and an 80% attendance rate in their previous school setting (missing an average of 16 days) during the 2009-2010 school year. Students attended the HSSC an average of 56 days and their previous setting (if they had a previous school setting that year) an average of 94 days.

Graduation status. The second quantitative outcome analyzed in this study was graduation status. Graduation status is simply defined as whether or not a student graduated from high school during the 2009-2010 school year. Of the 56 students in each group, 55 of them graduated (representing a 98% graduation rate). Based on the outcome of the chi-square, the difference in graduation rates was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 1, p > .99$.

Post-graduate intentions. Post-graduate intentions of the students were analyzed to determine HSSC students' and non-HSSC students' plans. Students in the HSSC group only had four options: community college/technical college, employment, military service, or other. Only 1.8% of the HSSC graduates selected the option of "other/unknown," and the lone HSSC graduate who did so neglected to fill in a post-graduate intention. This oversight was not caught at the school or district level before being sent to the state level. Once the data were sent to the state level, the blank selection automatically became other/unknown. Due to the reduced number of credits they earned, HSSC graduates did not have the option of selecting private college/university, public college/university, or trade/business school. The non-HSSC graduates had the same options available to them plus private college/university, public college/university, or trade/business school. Table 5.2 displays the frequencies with which the four post-graduate intentions were selected by students in both groups.

Table 5.2

Post-Graduate Intentions (N= 112)

Post-Graduate Intention	Both	Both	HSSC	HSSC	Non-	Non-
	Groups Frequency	Groups %	HSSC Frequency	HSSC %	HSSC Frequency	Non- HSSC %
<i>Community/Technical</i>						
College	48	42.9	22	39.3	26	46.4
Employment	40	35.7	30	53.6	10	17.9
Military	7	6.3	3	5.4	4	7.1
Other/Unknown	17	15.2	1	1.8	16	28.6

Note. The differentiated diploma (21 credits) does not allow a student to attend a 4-year university (public or private) or trade/business school upon obtaining a diploma. The post-graduate intention labeled other includes the college/university and trade/business school options that were available only to non-HSSC students.

A chi-square was used to determine if a difference existed in the post-graduate intentions selected by both groups. Based on the outcome of the chi-square, I can assume that the four post-graduate intentions were not equally selected by both groups of students: $\chi^2(3, N = 112) = 23.71, p < .001$. Employment was selected most frequently by HSSC students (53.6%) while Community/Technical College was selected most frequently by non-HSSC students (46.4%). A large discrepancy also existed between the selection of other/unknown between the two groups. Since private college/university, public college/university, or trade/business school were included in the selection of other/unknown for non-HSSC students (28.6%), this may explain the discrepancy since those post-graduate options were not available to HSSC students (1.8%).

The two groups had different absenteeism rates and post-graduation intentions while having the same graduation rate. Along with these data points regarding the impact of the HSSC on its students, a working knowledge of how the HSSC assisted students in persisting through graduation is essential. This working knowledge comes from the staff and students who were part of the HSSC during the 2009-2010 school year.

HSSC Assisted Student Persistence

The fourth research question involved the determination of the factors that HSSC graduates and instructional staff believe encourage student persistence through graduation. Before engaging in an analysis of the factors that assist HSSC graduates in their persistence, it is important to have information about the graduates who participated in this portion of the study.

Post-graduation Activities

Three White males, two White females, and one African American female participated in the graduate focus group interview, and an African American male and a White female participated in the individual graduate interviews. Two of the graduate interview participants were currently employed. One graduate was employed as an installer of hardwood flooring, a position he has held since he was 15 years old. One of the HSSC graduates had been working at a local restaurant and started attending the local community college during the summer session in the hopes of graduating with an associate degree and then transferring to a four-year college.

A single mother indicated that she had worked in several restaurants since graduation but was currently unemployed. She had attended the local community college for a semester after graduating, but stopped going as her pregnancy progressed. She is

currently re-enrolled in the local community college and plans to work toward a general associate's degree and transfer to a four-year institution. Another HSSC graduate is currently looking for a job and eventually wants to attend the local community college and major in early childhood education. She would like to work in either a nursery or elementary school. Another graduate, a single mother, indicated that she would be attending the local community college in the fall to begin an associate's degree program in phlebotomy.

HSSC Graduate Characteristics

The HSSC graduates and the HSSC staff identified a variety of characteristics that epitomize the HSSC graduate. There was not one common characteristic among all interview participants, but many of the characteristics were agreed upon by the majority of group members. This section includes a list and a description of these characteristics.

Non-school Related Graduate Characteristics

Factors exist in the lives of the HSSC graduates that do not directly involve the classroom itself. Five HSSC graduates indicated they were first generation high school graduates. Over half of the graduate interview participants shared proudly that they accomplished something that neither their parents nor siblings accomplished.

Two graduates who participated in the focus group were mothers and one male graduate indicated that he was the father of a young child. This same man had been working since he was 15 years old laying hardwood flooring. Another graduate had been working at a local restaurant for nearly two years.

One of the HSSC graduates indicated that she had experienced significant health issues related to Crohn's Disease, a condition she developed the condition in first grade.

A result of her illness was poor attendance throughout her academic career. One of the counselors at her high school told her about the HSSC and assisted her in completing the application for admission. The graduate stated:

I've had Crohn's disease from the time I was in first grade, and it faded for a while and came back in the 8th grade. And ever since it came back I have struggled with it. I was missing a lot of school and was in and out of the doctor's. Had colonoscopies, endoscopies, you name it. That's what made me come here.

The HSSC staff members indicated that the one external characteristic that HSSC graduates have in common is strong family support. The parents supported the efforts of both their children and the HSSC staff, but were often not a strong enough presence in their children's lives to curb behaviors that lead them to consider dropping out. The two graduates with children identified as very important the financial support their own mothers provided, which paid for part/all of their childcare expenses while they finished their diplomas. They also indicated they were able to remain living at home as they pursued their diplomas.

HSSC Graduate Character Traits

A number of characteristics of HSSC graduates surfaced over the course of each set of interviews. Through the triangulation process, I noted how both HSSC graduates and HSSC staff members were able to identify many of the same graduate internal characteristics in separate interviews. While there are individual HSSC graduates who possess different characteristics or in different proportion to the general population of 2009-2010 HSSC graduates, the following characteristics represent what the staff and graduates reported.

Self-motivated. The internal characteristic noted by both HSSC staff and HSSC graduates as the key indicator of whether a HSSC student graduated or dropped out was the ability to self-motivate. As one of the female HSSC graduates surmised:

You have to just have the drive and be headstrong to be able to graduate. Another big thing I think is that everybody that was in the HSSC were there by choice.

Nobody made them come to the program. It was their choice to do so. I think that was a big part of us graduating.

The nature of the HSSC requires that individuals are motivated to be independent workers and thinkers. The majority of instruction is self-paced, online instruction through the programs Nova Net and EPIC Learning. The staff members are facilitators and supporters of learning rather than leaders of learning.

Individuals who lacked the fortitude to keep working steadily toward completing their coursework often chose to quit school. As one of the HSSC staff reported:

A graduate, to me, is motivated. I'm comparing this to a dropout we had. No motivation. Wants things given to him. Don't want to work for anything....

Because the graduates, to a degree, believed in themselves....Because it's a commitment.

HSSC graduates did not want to have the reputation of being quitters and also believed that attaining their diplomas would set a positive example for their younger siblings. The two single mothers indicated that by persisting through graduation they would be setting a good example for their own children. As one young woman stated, "I want my baby to know he can accomplish anything he sets his mind to."

The two HSSC graduates who were also single mothers believed that getting a high school diploma would be a step in the right direction toward creating a better future for themselves and their children. One of the single mothers was a first-generation high school graduate.

One student revealed that, to his knowledge, he had never completed anything worthwhile after he began trying to accomplish it. He broke that pattern and persisted in graduating from the HSSC because he was determined to finish at least one worthwhile thing in his life. Although currently still searching for a job, he hopes that graduating from high school will be the first of many goals that he will persist in accomplishing.

A HSSC staff member stated, “Once a kid decides they want to be there, I think that's the most important variable.” This implies that HSSC students who eventually graduated were motivated to finish school and made the conscious choice to continue their education. While the graduates may have entered the program motivated to earn their diploma, the HSSC staff nurtured their motivation. Without the motivational support of the HSSC staff, the self-motivated graduates may still have been unsuccessful in graduating.

Self-confident. Another internal characteristic closely linked to self-motivation was self-confidence. Many HSSC graduates came to the classroom after dropping out of school. They returned because they believed that they were able to do the work required of them. The hurdles involved in the initial decisions to leave school often had little to do with the work itself. Consistent with previous research (Suh, S. et al., 2007), the individuals’ belief in their ability not only to do the work but to complete all of the courses required to graduate was a key in their persistence.

Closely aligned to the internal characteristic of motivation, the self-confidence of the HSSC graduates sometimes had to be strengthened by the staff. As one graduate surmised, “Sometimes I didn’t think I could do it. I was so tired I didn’t think I could make it another day. Mrs. S would tell me that I could do it and to give it just one more try.” Without the support and encouragement of the HSSC staff, the self-confidence of some of the graduates may have been tested by challenges in the classroom or in their lives.

Accountable. HSSC staff and graduates reported that accountability was a common characteristic of the HSSC graduate. Some of the HSSC graduates initially needed the additional assistance of the HSSC staff and their classmates to understand the level of performance expected of them. While graduates received constant supervision, the classroom environment was not confining. HSSC graduates made a conscious choice to attend and work towards graduating. The common understanding in the classroom was that individuals were there because they chose to be there, so student accountability was not as difficult to maintain because of the element of choice. If individuals displayed poor attendance, poor academic performance/work ethic, or negative behavior, they were reminded in one-on-one conversations that the privilege of attending the HSSC was just that: a privilege that could be revoked. While these of conversation did take place, they were infrequent because individuals understood what the alternative was to persisting through the program. According to HSSC staff, the characteristic of accountability was one that often separated a graduate from a non-graduate in the HSSC.

Hard-working. HSSC staff indicated that hard-working individuals were more likely to graduate. Some individuals would arrive 30 minutes early to begin work, and

others would continue to work through breaks and privilege times during the day. Closely aligned to work ethic is self-motivation, a characteristic mentioned in interviews with the HSSC graduates.

HSSC staff reported that two graduates had to work to assist in paying bills so that their families could survive. One of the graduates worked a full-time job at night, would take a nap in the morning, and then come to the HSSC around mid-morning. After the school day ended, she went to MCC to take nursing classes before going back to work again that night. A HSSC staff member recalled:

There is one young lady that comes to mind.... And she never said this, but I think that her mother was part of the reason why she was in the success class. And I came to learn later on that her mother was in a wheelchair, required a lot of oxygen. But she wanted to get out (of school) so that she could go to work....But while she was with us in the success program, she also went to Mitchell and got a CNA license.

Another student had an identical work schedule but did not take any classes outside of the HSSC.

Grateful. The final HSSC graduate characteristic noted in the interviews was a sense of gratitude. The HSSC graduates were thankful that they were given another chance to get their high school diplomas and appreciated efforts made on their behalf by the school district and the HSSC staff. The HSSC staff did not note any sense of entitlement on the part of the individuals who came to their classroom. Quite the contrary, graduates were mature enough to realize that this program had not been in existence very long and that they had been given another chance to graduate.

The HSSC and Student Persistence

An important component of student persistence is the individual student interactions with the school institution. This claim is powerful because it suggests that the institution plays an active role in encouraging or discouraging student persistence. Wehlage's (1989) SM theory hinged on four terms used by Tinto (1975): adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Wehlage's (1989) SM theory pertains to high school completion. In the interviews, the HSSC graduates and staff were asked to discuss how the HSSC fostered persistence through graduation.

Adjustment

Adjustment, the first component of Wehlage's (1989) theory, involves the process of a student becoming acclimated to the learning environment. Adjustment provides the structure inside which a student will operate while a part of the academic program. Individuals entering the HSSC made both formal and informal adjustments. Acclimating to the HSSC involved social, academic, and physical adjustments. The induction process included the following steps: classroom expectations, graduation planning, curriculum and instruction, and environmental acclimation. The process is also an ongoing one involving interactions between staff and potential graduates. When new individuals came into the HSSC, the HSSC staff members were very purposeful in how they helped acclimate them to their surroundings

In an initial conversation, HSSC staff members outlined the expectations of the classroom, centering on three areas: regular attendance, excellent behavior, and a solid academic work ethic. One of the HSSC staff members offered her basic agenda for getting individuals acclimated to the HSSC: "...explain to them the expectations, what

they needed to do in each class...through Nova Net and what they needed to get through to complete the class...I stressed attendance to them very much.” She continued, “We did not want the kids to come in thinking that this is a social hour. So we tried to engage them into school, and then when we got them engaged, we allowed time during the day...[to socialize].”

HSSC staff communicated the important expectation of personal and corporate accountability. Corporate accountability involves the responsibility of the individual to the entire group. The HSSC graduates recalled being told that they were going to be treated like young adults and not children. The final step of the initial conversation involved the student(s) providing the HSSC staff members with their cell phone numbers. This was a voluntary accountability measure in which HSSC individuals complied without exception. The HSSC staff members commit in the opening conversation to do everything they can to help the student be successful. In getting accurate contact information, the HSSC staff are better able to contact HSSC students to help them wake up when they have overslept or have been absent from school altogether. One HSSC staff member commented, “They gave us their personal cell phone numbers. A lot of it was befriending the kids. So it wasn't a problem for us to ...call them...”

After class expectations were communicated, the HSSC staff shared the new students' individual graduation plans with them, including classes they would need to pass in order to receive diplomas. The graduation plans were developed by the Pressly School counselor prior to the new students arriving on campus and were based on an audit of the individuals' transcript. One HSSC staff member noted, “...we would take a look at their transcript and we would have a list of their classes that was needed...and put

them on a note card so it was visible for them to see.” As individuals completed classes, they put a checkmark on the note card beside the course they had completed to provide a clear indication of how close to finishing high school they had come.

Academic adjustment was an important step; students who struggle to work independently or to comprehend what they read will have a difficult transition into the HSSC and will need additional support. New HSSC students were trained in Nova Net and EPIC. Early on in the individuals’ time in the HSSC, staff members checked their progress towards course completion in order to gauge the pace at which each individual was comfortable working. This baseline understanding of new students’ work habits assisted the HSSC staff in knowing when they were not utilizing class time efficiently. Staff also identified subject areas in which the individuals exhibited strengths or gaps.

One of the HSSC graduates remembered having to spend a couple of days making the physical adjustment to doing all of her coursework on the computer. She had to get used to working quietly and staring at a computer screen for extended periods of time. She commented, “You could get a break from the computer screen, because I had a headache my first week. I had to get away from the screen sometimes.” She continued, “If you're in the middle of the day and you get a headache, they'll let you lay your head down; which is a problem when you stare at a computer screen for three or four hours at a time.” She had never been exposed to computer-led instruction prior to the HSSC.

This same graduate mentioned adjusting to the dress code as part of her acclimation into the HSSC. She recalled having to go shopping to purchase collared shirts to meet the Pressly School dress code policy. The purpose of the collared shirts requirement was to encourage individuals to represent themselves respectfully through

their choice of clothing. The dress code was based on the premise that if individuals dressed respectfully, they were more likely to behave respectfully. As another component of Pressly School policy, individuals were not able to wear the colors red or blue because of the gang associations, which had caused problems in other classrooms on campus. A male graduate from the HSSC expressed similar frustrations with the dress code: “You can't have the color in your shirt. . . . I got sent home a lot, because I just got a blue stripe or a red stripe in my shirt.” Collared shirts were a dress code requirement for all days of the week but Friday. Having instituted the dress code employed at Pressly School, I can state that the purpose of the dress code was to emphasize a systematic approach to attending Pressly School and a no-tolerance policy toward gang affiliation.

HSSC graduates noted that their adjustment process involved overcoming stereotypes they had formed about alternative schools. One graduate mentioned her initial apprehension about going to school with perceived “trouble makers.” She implied that the dress code actually made her more fearful about her new school because she thought there would be many gang members on campus. She commented that her concerns were unfounded and that she never saw any fights or physical confrontations. She stated, “I was scared I was going to see fights break out, but I've actually never seen any type of fight. I've seen one person get mad and backtalk a teacher and that was it.” She also reported feeling unnerved by one of the school’s safety measures. She stated, “I had never been wanded before in my entire life. I was scared to death to be honest with you.” Incoming HSSC students had to ignore the stigmas about alternative schools to give the classroom a chance. Many of the stereotypes incoming HSSC graduates held dissipated within days of their arrival.

Another graduate knew many of his HSSC classmates from middle school and high school, so the social adjustment was a smooth one. Self-regulation was, however, an adjustment issue for him; he struggled to focus on his class work even in the absence of distractions. He recalled working extremely hard for the first month and managing to complete a large amount of work in that short time. He stated that the following months were more challenging; he realized he was nearing the completion of his courses and lost focus on completing the coursework.

The insulated setting of Pressly School was both a help and a hindrance during the adjustment phase. When the graduates were new to Pressly School, they recognized that learning in the smaller, distraction-free, regimented environment contrasted with their previous school settings. They had to adjust to being part of a cohort in which individuals from different backgrounds and parts of Iredell County were brought together by the pursuit of one common goal: graduation.

Individuals who were able to adjust to the HSSC often graduated as evidenced by the low dropout rate (1.8%) during the 2009-2010 school year. The acclimation process involved the initial step of graduates understanding the expectations of the classroom. After the graduates understood what was expected of them, they had to adjust to the different type of learning environment the HSSC offered. They often had to adjust their expectations of the purpose of classroom staff. Some of the graduates indicated a lower level of academic support but an increased level of emotional support.

Difficulty

Difficulty, the second component of Wehlage's (1989) SM theory, involves the process by which individuals receive instructional support in their academic program.

The majority of HSSC graduates did not come to the HSSC because they were experiencing problems in their traditional setting, as their ability to make it through the first two years of high school, when many drop out decisions are made, demonstrates. Instead, many of the graduates interviewed came to the HSSC because they were experiencing struggles external to the school setting that were impeding their ability to continue pursuing a high school diploma in the traditional fashion. The HSSC provided different mechanisms for individuals to receive academic assistance including instructor assistance, Internet-based assistance, and peer assistance.

Individuals in the HSSC work towards a 21-credit diploma. Many of the courses taken were core classes. Core classes fall under the department headings of English, math, science, social studies. While HSSC graduates appreciated not having to take courses that bore no relevance to their obtaining a high school diploma, one student did note that she missed being able to take a particular elective course as she had enjoyed in the traditional setting. She stated, “The only thing I missed was chorus.”

One way that HSSC graduates indicated they were able to receive support in completing their school work was through teacher-facilitated assistance. There were two HSSC staff in the classroom for the majority of the school day. There were two other Pressly School high school teachers who rotated into the HSSC for an hour per day each to assist individuals with English, science, and social studies. Mrs. S, HSSC teacher, provided assistance for individuals in all of their instructional areas, but her specialty was math. HSSC graduates noted the one-on-one assistance they received from their instructors as a component missing from their traditional high school experiences, one that helped them progress through their coursework at Pressly more quickly. One HSSC

graduate declared, "...I don't think I would've graduated without this program, because it's just a more personal, one-on-one setting, where you work at your own pace, you have people there if you need them....". Another HSSC graduate elaborated, "Students drove the pace of the learning, but teachers provided lots of one-on-one attention." One HSSC student noted that the HSSC staff tried to provide real-life applications for academic course work, which made the curriculum relevant.

Teachers had to be resourceful to help struggling individuals find the information they needed. One HSSC graduate described how he worked on most of his coursework:

Um, we have the books...and the chapters went along with the Nova Net questions...so you could just download the chapters that went along with the lesson and just read up on it...you could just sit down with the teacher and she would use pencil and paper and work out problems with us....She would like put it into day-to-day life for us.

This HSSC graduate emphasized the attention to relevance building on the part of one of his instructors.

Since HSSC graduates completed the majority of their coursework on Nova Net and EPIC Learning, they also utilized Internet-based assistance. Each Nova Net and EPIC Learning course requires individuals to take a baseline test. The baseline test data provide a starting point for individuals in that particular subject area. If individuals perform very well on the baseline assessment, they may not have to complete all of the coursework modules in areas of proficiency. Nova Net also provided HSSC staff with a report of the number of times individuals attempted a question before they answered it correctly. One HSSC graduate explained, "Teachers would try to find out how much you knew and start

you off from there.” Nova Net also contained an element of student accountability.

Because Nova Net courses use questions with multiple choice answers, a student could conceivably have four attempts to get every question correct. The HSSC staff are able to determine if individuals are guessing on each question or if they are trying to answer the questions correctly.

Peer assistance also helped graduates as they adjusted to the difficulty of their coursework. Since individuals have to be in their 11th or 12th grade years to be admitted to the HSSC, the majority of the HSSC graduates were taking identical courses. This allows the individuals to help each other when they are having difficulty. The HSSC staff noted that some individuals preferred to work independently and others preferred to sit near peers taking the same courses so they could work together. A HSSC graduate provided an example of how they would pair up to offer mutual assistance: “If a small group of students were taking the same subject (biology for example), they would sometimes group us together (within the classroom) to work through the assignments.”

Some of the HSSC graduates indicated that academic assistance was a key factor in their success in the HSSC. One graduate indicated that he often solicited assistance from his peers to complete his work. He indicated also that he would wait for Mrs. S to rotate back through the class or would request her return to the HSSC to help him. Sometimes the HSSC staff would go and get other staff members that were able to help him in the particular area that he was struggling with. Several HSSC graduates indicated that not always having in the classroom a teacher highly qualified in a particular content area was sometimes frustrating and kept them from being as efficient as they would have been at a traditional high school. One HSSC graduate explained, “Sometimes I got

frustrated because the teacher you needed to get assistance from is not able to help because they had rotated to another classroom. Sometimes... I would just give up on it.”

This statement speaks to the importance of being an independent learner in the HSSC. Graduates who were not independent learners found the academic work in the HSSC very difficult. At the same time, the graduates noted they eventually received the help they needed to learn the material. This graduate mentioned that one of the teachers who rotated to the HSSC created Power Point presentations (built off district-created predictive assessments) that helped him study for his exams. He felt the Power Points helped him pass his End of Course test in U. S. History.

Some of the HSSC graduates indicated that they did not need assistance in all of their content areas. One graduate stated that the only content area that she had difficulty with was math. The young woman mentioned that her teachers at the traditional high school she formerly attended were willing to assist her with her work and were able to do so during class time. She noted that on many occasions a staff member who rotated into the HSSC sat down beside her and helped her with any work that she was struggling with. She stated, “...when I needed help...(the teacher) would walk around and help you for a certain amount of time, and then she'd sit back down. And if anybody needed help they could just go up to her desk.” While acknowledging that independent learning skills were important for success in the HSSC, she felt she received adequate assistance with her class work.

Graduates indicated they were provided instructional assistance using multiple methods. Ultimately, the classroom fostered the sense that they were responsible for not

only their learning but also their graduation. Staff provided support throughout the academic process, even when not providing instructional assistance.

Incongruence

Incongruence, the third component of Wehlage's (1989) SM theory, involves the process of nurturing a student's relationship to the institution and to his or her peers. Addressing this component of Wehlage's (1989) SM theory is difficult because of the transient nature of the HSSC. Individuals come to the HSSC from around the school district and the HSSC staff had to be purposeful in building a community within the classroom. Much of the interactions were informal but occurred regularly due to the proximity and the amount of time spent working toward a common goal.

As a positive by-product of the de-centralized nature of the HSSC, the graduates agreed that there was much less social drama in the HSSC than in the traditional high school. However, they also identified fewer opportunities to interact socially. HSSC graduates indicated they were in that particular classroom because they had a desire to graduate and were more focused on their schoolwork and graduating than on social concerns.

HSSC graduates indicated they had opportunities to connect with their peers in non-academic sessions. They were given 15 minute breaks after every 60-75 minutes of work during which time they were able to listen to music, talk to their peers, or get a cup of coffee. One of the HSSC staff members expressed:

I never knew coffee was such a big thing.... if they were getting tired or something, they'd get up, go over to the other side, and there would always be a fresh pot of coffee going in there. Then they'd go back, sit down, and go to work.

The break times allowed graduates to take their eyes off their computer screens for a while and interact as traditional high school kids would during a class change. The HSSC staff said the coffee breaks had the added advantage of helping individuals stay focused and energized to continue working after the breaks ended. Graduates indicated they were also able to interact with each other during daily 35-minute lunch periods, during which time they could sit with anyone they wanted to from the HSSC. In addition, HSSC graduates indicated they were able to interact socially with each other during Thursday and Friday afternoon privilege times. These times would occur the last 30-45 minutes of the school day. Graduates indicated they were able to take walks, play basketball, or go to the privilege room where board games, an air hockey table, and a Wii game system were available for use. One HSSC graduate stated, "We were able to go to the Priv Room on Thursday and Friday afternoons. We had to be good the whole week to be able to earn that privilege. I liked to shoot pool and play with the Playstation."

HSSC graduates worked independently on their coursework on the Nova Net system and on EPIC Learning. They were able to speak with their fellow classmates provided it was about the subjects they were working on. Individuals taking the same courses were able to form a bond as they tried to complete the classes together. HSSC graduates noted that the close proximity they shared with their peers for six hours every day encouraged them to form of strong bonds that extend to the current day.

While most student work was completed individually with verbal communication held at a minimum, there were opportunities for interaction. One of the HSSC graduates indicated that at times they were able to interact freely with each other. The graduate reported that she liked to work for an extended amount of time until she began to get a

headache from looking at a computer screen. At that point she would take a five minute break and talk quietly with friends around her who were also taking a break. On occasion they would share a snack with each other or take a trip to the restroom. One young man indicated that he and his classmates spoke informally throughout the school day. Multiple HSSC graduates spoke of being able to talk freely at lunchtime. The ongoing conversations and interactions between the individuals forge a bond between them that translated into a classroom that resembled, as one HSSC graduate stated, "...a family sometimes." Both graduates also noted the positive impact of calling each other to encourage them to attend when they were absent. One HSSC graduate commented:

I called a lot of people. I called one like every other day. Saying, 'You know what, you ain't at school'. He say, 'because I worked last night'!...Hey, they said if you could get here in 10 minutes they'd let you in. He said, okay I'm on my way.

HSSC graduates felt that the class needed them. A few of the HSSC graduates indicated that before attending the HSSC they did not feel that they were missed when absent from school. A HSSC staff member mentioned that kids would call or text each other when someone was absent: "Students would text. And if we asked a question, our students could basically tell where someone was at. They could basically give us the information." The designated time for student interaction and the importance of each student's contribution to the group were vital constructs in addressing incongruence.

Graduates' engagement was increased by peer connections, reinforced through the purposeful and naturally occurring interactions between individuals; acclimation to the classroom's pace and atmosphere; and the group's common focus on graduation.

Isolation

The fourth component of Wehlage's (1989) SM theory involved graduates connecting to the adults in their school program. This component plays a vital role in individuals remaining a member of a school program and was pronounced in graduate responses related to their persistence through graduation. The interview data indicated the key relationship was that of the HSSC staff and the HSSC graduates. These relationships were fostered through prolonged engagement between staff and graduates and their common focus on graduation. The HSSC staff had great relationships with the graduates built on mutual respect, trust, and caring. As a result of these strong relationships, HSSC staff were able to nurture, challenge, and motivate individuals to persist through graduation.

Ongoing conversations occurred between HSSC staff and graduates, providing insight for the staff member into the individuals' lives. Since the HSSC graduates trusted the HSSC staff, they were willing to open up and express their innermost thoughts. One HSSC staff member remarked, "I like the word "family"....Because they became, I'm not going to say comfortable, but they felt they could come to you and talk to you. A trusting thing I felt like a lot of them had here."

Through the simple act of listening, the HSSC staff communicated to the graduates that they mattered, that they were unique individuals, and that they had the ability to graduate from high school and meet any other challenges in their lives. As the HSSC staff members got to know their kids better, they were able to be more perceptive in determining when one of them was having a tough time with either school work or life outside of school. This perception also gave the HSSC staff the benefit of intervening

appropriately to help in a timely manner without individuals always having to verbalize that they were struggling with something. One male HSSC graduate remarked, “You had a problem, then they'll come talk to you. They see something wrong, they'll come talk to you, ask you what's wrong.”

While academic activities offered opportunities for interaction between HSSC staff and the graduates, the HSSC graduates noted that privilege time was a great way for them to connect with their staff members. The graduates noted how their staff members would take walks with them, play games with them, or simply sit around and talk. The HSSC graduates were also able to have conversations with the HSSC staff during the daily lunch time. These times communicated to the HSSC graduates that they were not an inconvenience to the HSSC staff. Rather, they were individuals worth getting to know. One HSSC graduate interpreted the HSSC staff approach in this manner: “Yeah, and here they treat you like young adults. I mean, they treat you with respect here... When I came here, they respected your wishes and they cared about your opinions.” The HSSC staff were able to let the graduates know more about their own lives during these informal periods of interaction.

HSSC staff and graduates worked closely with each other for the majority of the school day. The graduates were in the classroom for six hours per day with one of the HSSC staff and four hours per day with Mrs. S, since she rotated to the other two Pressly high school classrooms. The amount of time the HSSC graduates were able to spend interacting with the staff and simply observing them was valuable in building trust and lasting connections. Once trust was established, the HSSC graduates were more likely to believe the staff when they told them they were going to graduate.

One of the HSSC graduates noted positive relationships with the HSSC staff and the more relaxed structure of the school day as being key to success in the program. The graduate referenced the medical condition (Crohn's Disease) she has struggled with for a number of years. She almost got into trouble when she was at a traditional high school for walking out of class without permission as she was having a sudden powerful stomach pain. She liked the way her HSSC classroom staff respected the fact that she had this illness and devised a system that allowed her to use the restroom as needed. She would simply wave her hand quickly to the HSSC staff and leave class for the restroom. She did not have to interrupt the teachers from their tasks, nor did she have to call excessive attention to herself. She perceived that the HSSC staff truly cared about her feelings, and felt she could leave the stresses of her life at the door of the classroom until it was time to go home. She also liked the fact that she did not feel judged by the HSSC staff. She believed the HSSC staff understood that the HSSC attendees were in the classroom to graduate and that they took the necessary steps to ensure that it happened. She felt more relaxed in the HSSC, which helped her deal with her medical condition. She stated:

It was more stress in regular school, and more stress means sicker. And the more I went to school, the more stress I had. I'd either get sick at school and have to go home or tough it out and it wouldn't make my mind be concentrated. When I got here, I just kind of calmed down.

Another HSSC graduate noted that he and the HSSC staff shared an interest in sports. He felt a connection to the HSSC staff because they proved knowledgeable in an area that strongly interested him. He also referenced the fact that individuals were allowed to rest their heads if they were not feeling well, and relax until they were ready to

work without being reprimanded by the HSSC staff. He expressed, “You don't feel like doing no work, you got a good reason, they don't have no problem just letting you sit there with your head down.” He felt that was an indication of respect that went beyond the normal boundaries of a teacher/student relationship. He, in turn, would come to the aid of staff members if a student were giving them a hard time because of the level of respect his staff had earned. He took an interest in staff members, because of the empathy they had demonstrated in their dealings with him.

Because of the solid relationships between the HSSC staff and graduates, the staff members were able to take on a variety of roles that helped encourage student persistence. Each of the roles filled by the HSSC staff helped fill particular voids the graduates experienced. By filling these roles, the HSSC staff addressed the isolation graduates may have otherwise felt.

Both the HSSC graduates and staff agreed that the primary role of the HSSC staff is to motivate. Individuals come to the HSSC from variety of backgrounds and with different needs, but they share the desire to graduate from high school. When fatigue and frustration set in, the HSSC staff members act to address Wehlage's (1989) model of difficulty and isolation to provide encouragement and goal reminders.

HSSC staff members also solidified their relationships with the graduates by serving in the capacity of unofficial counselors. HSSC staff and graduates spoke of the challenges of leaving life at the doorstep of the classroom. Since many of the graduates faced outside challenges that had prevented them from being successful in their previous school, they needed to talk to someone non-judgmental and trustworthy. HSSC staff made a practice of observing their students' expressions and mannerisms to determine

which individuals were in need of a one-on-one conversation. The staff would simply to listen to individual concerns, giving advice only if asked. One staff member felt that the HSSC offered a sanctuary of sorts for their students to express their concerns to someone who cared about them. The staff member stated:

And for a few hours a day they had somewhere they could come and it was like a safe haven. I'm going to do my work, I feel comfortable, and everything's going to be all right. I can share my thoughts. I can dump all my garbage on you, and it's going to be all right.

HSSC staff members also provided a parental influence for the graduates, which helped address the isolation many individuals feel from the adults. Many of the graduates in the HSSC had strong family support, but some did not. Regardless of which position individuals found themselves in, the HSSC staff had to provide parental nurturing on occasion. One HSSC staff member spoke of a student who needed regular phone calls to make sure he got up on time. Most often, the HSSC staff would serve as the neutral third party to support directives being given but not heeded from parents. Regardless of the topic of conversation, HSSC staff were comfortable providing nurturing guidance to their students.

HSSC staff members served as resource centers for their students and showed special concern for those who lived on their own. On occasion, those individuals needed financial assistance to cover basic necessities. The HSSC staff members connected them with agencies within the county that could assist with paying bills, finding jobs, and even locating places to live. Transportation was the most common need indicated. HSSC attendees were provided bus transportation to and from school. Depending on where they

lived, they may have a bus ride of up to two-and-a-half hours one way. This could mean a bus pickup time of 6:00 a.m. or earlier. If attendees missed the bus but desired to come to school, the HSSC staff members would, after the school day commenced, pick them up in a car provided by the district.

The strong relationships between the HSSC staff and graduates addressed the Wehlage (1989) component of isolation. The HSSC staff were constant figures in the academic lives of the graduates. As the HSSC graduates progressed through their academic credits, the HSSC staff began to fill other vital roles in their lives.

HSSC Staff Characteristics

The HSSC staff members possessed certain characteristics that enabled them to encourage student persistence through graduation. Both staff members are caring towards their students, are relationship builders, possess a calm demeanor, show respect for their students, and are trustworthy.

Caring

The HSSC graduates understood that staff members cared about them and saw them as more than potential high school dropouts. The HSSC staff members would get to know them, find out where they lived, determine what their family situation was, and ask if they needed any help with anything. One of the HSSC staff members described the approach she took in building caring relationships with her students: “Even when they would leave on Friday afternoon, our thing was stay safe, stay out of trouble. Say those things to let them know you cared about them... It's like they didn't want to disappoint you.”

The HSSC staff were non-judgmental and focused on helping individuals move forward regardless of past behaviors or experiences. One of the graduates indicated that in the HSSC for the first time he did not feel like he was a marked man because of his past behavior. He was given a clean slate and allowed to create the image of himself he wanted to project instead of having judge his poor past choices. The graduates indicated that the HSSC staff made the class feel like a family.

Relationship-builders

HSSC graduates indicated that they had strong relationships with the staff. The HSSC graduates felt that the staff were perceptive and looked out for individuals who were having a rough day. One of the HSSC staff members alluded to the perceptiveness that helped her know when the kids were struggling and needed a change of pace:

Sometimes you would even see where the kids were just tired, and maybe frustrated...we would go out and walk on the field. Let the guys throw the football for a while. Then we'd come on back to the classroom....You can see when they're a little off. And just letting them go walk on the field and throw a football made a difference.

Calm

One of the reasons given by a HSSC graduate as to why the staff were so good at building relationships dealt with the staff members' ability to remain calm even when individuals were upset. The same graduate also felt that her respect level for the staff members grew over time as she saw their consistently calm demeanor. Other graduates echoed the sentiment expressed by this graduate that the ability of the staff to remain

calm provided a positive example of how they should conduct themselves in and out of school.

Working in the HSSC could be challenging due to the varied number of credits and types of courses individuals needed to graduate. The nature of the TFM requires staff members to de-personalize language when an individual is exhibiting negative behavior or speech. This de-personalization of language requires the instructors to eliminate person-first language and instead focus on the behavior or pattern of speech that is not in accordance with the norms of the classroom. A difficult aspect of the de-personalization process in the TFM is the ability to remain calm and not internalize the actions or words of the student when an attempt is made at a power struggle. The ability of the HSSC staff to remain calm may be a by-product of working under this model of interaction for a number of years prior to the 2009-2010 school year.

Mutually Respectful

The HSSC graduates felt that their staff respected them as young adults and not just as a group of high school kids. One of the graduates spoke about how upset she would get sometimes when she struggled with her school work. She remembered one of the HSSC staff members taking a walk with her and reassuring her that she would be fine if she kept trying. The graduate did not feel she was taking a walk with her teacher. She reflected that she felt like she was walking with a friend instead. She had never felt that level of mutual respect before from one of her teachers.

As noted under the characteristic of “calm demeanor,” the TFM provides a structure in which the authority figure models the appropriate methods of acting and interacting with individuals. While the HSSC graduates reported the instructors to be

respectful by nature, this characteristic may have been strengthened through the language of the TFM.

Trustworthy

Similar to mutual respect, trust is a reciprocal characteristic between the HSSC staff and graduates. While the HSSC staff members proved themselves trustworthy to the graduates, they also had to extend trust to them as partners in persistence. The HSSC graduates expressed their certainty that conversations had in private would remain in confidence. They also knew that they could trust the HSSC staff members not to look down on them if they said something that most school staff members would take offense to. One HSSC graduate recalled, "...they (HSSC staff) don't judge you. They just know that the reason you came here is to graduate. They do anything and everything to help you make that come true." The graduates were able to leave their problems at the door and concentrate on the task at hand. The graduate continued, "Like anything outside of school, like stress and everything, you pretty much left it at the door and you focused on graduating." Another HSSC graduate indicated that he found a sense of peace in the HSSC that he had never experienced in a school setting, and that peace was due to trust. The high levels of trust lead the HSSC graduates to feel comfortable showing up to class each day even if they knew they would be facing hard work all day.

Summary

This chapter provided information about both the HSSC and non-HSSC students as well as data analysis for both the quantitative and qualitative research portions of the study. The effect of the HSSC on its students was measured and analyzed. On average, HSSC students were absent more than non-HSSC students. HSSC students graduated as

frequently (55/56) as did the non-HSSC students. HSSC students tended to select employment as their most likely post-graduate intention while the non-HSSC students selected Community/Technical College most frequently.

In the HSSC assisted persistence portion of the study, different factors were attributed to the impact of the HSSC on its attendees. The non-school related variables of the HSSC graduates varied. The HSSC graduates success began with the element of student choice to be in the program. Once the graduates made the decision to continue their education in the HSSC, the other key student characteristics of self-motivation, self-confidence, and strong work ethic (among others) were able to be nurtured by the HSSC staff to foster persistence. The HSSC staff were factors in the graduates' persistence. The staff were effective at building and nurturing relationships with their students. They also provided a safe-haven where the graduates found trust and caring in abundance. The upcoming chapter will focus on concluding the study and providing insight for future researchers.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This chapter provides an overall analysis of the study and its findings. First, the limitations and delimitations are discussed. Credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study are also discussed. The HSSC effect on student outcomes is analyzed by absenteeism, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions. HSSC assisted student persistence is analyzed through the lens of Wehlage (1989) School Membership theory. Student and staff characteristics are detailed to provide a summary of the intangible elements of the study. Finally, the implications of the study and recommendations for future researchers are provided.

Analysis of Study Findings

HSSC Effect on Student Outcomes

HSSC students were matched with non-HSSC students in an effort to remove potential differences between the two groups. The variables used to establish the matches included absenteeism, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions.

Absenteeism. Student absenteeism was a key outcome indicator of this study. The connection between poor student attendance and likelihood of dropout is prevalent in the literature (Kearney, 2003; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). The number one reason given for student dropout in North Carolina in 2009-2010 was poor attendance (NCDPI, 2011). Identifying of the cause of student absenteeism is central to applying the appropriate strategy to addressing dropout effectively (Kearney 2003). Schools must monitor student attendance rates closely, since poor attendance is linked to course failure and course failure is in turn associated with dropout (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Next to academic

achievement, the rate of school attendance has the strongest relationship to dropout of any variable (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

As stated in Chapter 5, there was a mean difference between the HSSC students and the non-HSSC students of 9.60 absences. The following estimate is feasible with 95% confidence: the population of HSSC students miss 6-12 more days on average than the non-HSSC students.

The pronounced difference in absenteeism may come as a result of the HSSC students either dropping out of school at some point during the school year or contemplating dropping out. A student is withdrawn from school after 10 consecutive absences. Some students drop out of school by ceasing to attend without formally withdrawing from school. However, until the 10th consecutive absence, they are still enrolled. If they re-enroll or come back to school prior to the 10th day window being closed, the absence count continues to increase.

Another factor that may have lead to the higher number of absences is the life situations of the HSSC students. Since the HSSC was designed to help upper classmen who were contemplating dropping out or had already done so to persist through graduation, many of these students faced barriers to regular school attendance. On average, the HSSC students missed more school and that the truancy may be related to issues external to the school setting.

In comparing attendance data from the period of time students attended the HSSC and their previous setting during the 2009-2010 school year, the data indicate that students miss fewer days on average (11) in the HSSC than in their previous setting (16). This finding is supported by interview data as many of the HSSC graduates indicated a

life circumstance that lead them to contemplate dropping out of school or to actually drop out. The focus on student attendance in the HSSC may have fostered the improvement noted in the data.

Graduation status. Ultimately, the primary measure of the success of the HSSC was the data related to the graduation status of the students who attended the program. The importance of student persistence through graduation and the benefits of graduation to the individual as well as society have been well documented in this study.

The graduation status outcome is an extremely important one in this study in that the founding purpose of the HSSC was to facilitate student persistence through graduation. With a graduation rate of 98.2%, the dropout rate of both study groups would be calculated at 1.8%. This is well below the 2009-2010 ISS dropout rate of 2.36%. Since both samples of students had dropout rates that were lower than that of the entire district student population, one conclusion could be drawn: the HSSC made no significant statistical difference in terms of reducing dropout because non-HSSC students with similar demographics had the exact same graduation rate/dropout rate. By matching students on the basis of demographics to form the comparison group, I was able to control for many variables except life situations, which may or may not have been similar. The fundamental strength of the HSSC is that it is designed specifically to provide interventions when situations largely external to school threaten student persistence. The HSSC provides better options for certain students. In this respect, the dropout rate of the HSSC students, had they not received the intervention, might have been higher than the 1.8% reported in this study.

In the 2009-2010 school year, there were 166 students who dropped out in ISS. If the 55 HSSC students had not graduated, the number of ISS dropouts could have risen to 221 for that same school year. Based on the literature, it can be inferred that a significant cost savings to the 55 individual HSSC graduates and to society occurred as a result of the HSSC. The average high school dropout is associated with approximately \$240,000 worth of costs to society in terms of lower tax contributions, higher Medicaid and Medicare reliance, higher reliance on welfare, and higher rates of criminal activity (Levin and Belfield, 2007). Based on the estimated costs associated with a high school dropout, the additional 55 graduates yield society roughly \$13,200,000 over the course of their lives. Because high school graduates are less likely to commit crimes, increasing the high school completion rate by just one percent for all men ages 20-60 would reduce costs in the criminal justice system by \$1.4 billion per year (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006).

Post-graduate intentions. The final quantitative outcome measured in this study was post-graduate intentions. As stated in Chapter 5, students in both groups were not able to select the same post-graduate options on the survey. However, for the comparative purposes of this study, the options of trade/business school, private college/university, public college/university, and other/unknown were included under the single option of other/unknown.

Both samples of students were similar in their expressed intentions to enroll in a community college upon graduation from high school. For the HSSC students (39%), a community college was the only post-graduate option related to higher learning. While the non-HSSC students had other higher learning options after graduation, nearly half

(46%) still chose this path. For both groups of students, the community college option could indeed lead to enrollment in a four-year college or university.

More HSSC students (54%) selected employment as their post-graduate intention than non-HSSC students (18%), and employment was the option most commonly selected by HSSC students. In referencing the qualitative portion of this study, some HSSC students were contemplating dropping out due to financial hardship brought on by the recent birth of a child. When students completed the post-graduate intentions survey, they may have been reporting only their short-term rather than their intentions a year or more in the future. This is understandable since a lack of money may have been an issue they were dealing with at the time of the survey. Since the HSSC students only had three other options, many of them may have chosen employment due to a lack of specific ideas of what they wanted to do upon graduating. Fewer of the non-HSSC students selected the option of employment, possibly because they had three additional options available to them in the survey.

The post-graduate intention of military enlistment was the least selected option for the non-HSSC students (7%) and the second-to-lowest selected option for HSSC students (5%). One possible explanation for the low selection of this option by both samples of students may be the current military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. With military casualties being reported daily on the evening news, this option has a low rate of endorsement compared to the other options on the survey.

The final post-graduate intention provided on the survey is other/unknown. As stated previously in the findings section, this option for non-HSSC students also included private college/university, public college/university, and trade/business school. None of

the HSSC students selected the option of other/unknown. One HSSC student (representing the 2% noted in Chapter 5) neglected to choose a post-graduate intention and was assigned the option of other. The non-HSSC students selected this option as the second-highest post-graduate intention of the options available to them (29%). It is uncertain as to whether or not several HSSC students that selected other post-graduate intentions would have been included in this option if they were eligible to attend a four-year college or university immediately upon graduating from high school. Also, one possible explanation for the large discrepancy between the two groups is the fact that there were multiple options within the category of other/unknown for the non-HSSC students (including four-year college and university and trade/business school) and basically one option for the HSSC students.

According to the NCDPI (“Graduate Data Verification System”, 2010), North Carolina post-graduate intentions data from the 2009-2010 graduating class indicate similarities and differences to the data from this study. The post-graduate intention of “other,” which includes attending four-year colleges and universities and trade/business school was selected by 48% of North Carolina graduates in 2009-2010, 38% selected enrollment in a community college, 8% selected employment, and 4% selected military service. Military service was selected in similar fashion by the HSSC (7%) and non-HSSC (5%) students in comparison to the rest of North Carolina. Community college was also selected by HSSC (43%) students and non-HSSC (46%) in similar fashion to the rest of North Carolina. The biggest gap between what North Carolina graduates selected in 2009-2010 occurred in the selection of employment. While North Carolina graduates selected this option only 8% of the time, 18% of the non-HSSC students and 54% of the

HSSC students selected employment as their post-graduate intention. This indicates that both HSSC and non-HSSC students selected employment more often than the rest of the state's graduates that year. The data also indicate that North Carolina's 2009-2010 graduates selected the components that comprise the selection "other" nearly twice as often as the non-HSSC students who had the same options available to them.

While effort was expended to mitigate these differences, other variables determined in the study were not as simple to control. For instance, many of the HSSC graduates were first-generation high school graduates. Also, some of the graduates had been retained (six students) previously while others had prior placements in alternative schools (n=3, 5%).

HSSC Assisted Student Persistence

Adjustment. The classroom expectations centered on the three fundamental tenets that Pressly School was founded on: attendance, academics, and self-control. Graduates indicated they were expected to attend school daily and were held accountable by both the staff members and their peers. Possible explanations for the focus placed on student attendance at HSSC stemmed from the dropout literature that details the detrimental effects of poor attendance on school completion or from the ISS emphasis on student attendance (Christle et al., 2007; Kearney, 2003; NCDPI, "Dropout Prevention and Intervention", 2010).

Graduates recalled that as incoming students they were reminded that they were responsible to stay focused on their work. The graduation plan served as a visual roadmap HSSC attendees had to follow in order to graduate from high school. The graduates were thus able to monitor their success or lack thereof in order to draw

conclusions about what they should do to finish their programs on time. In order for graduation to remain an attainable goal for the HSSC graduates, providing tangible evidence of progress was an essential step. This step in the adjustment phase also contained the first seeds of HSSC staff-fostered motivation. The graduation plan, though unique to the individual student, provided common ground for all of the individuals in the HSSC as it was an instrument to mark progress towards graduation.

It took HSSC graduates time to adjust to working on a computer due to the individualized nature of the program. Many graduates had to learn how long they could work on a computer without taking a break to relieve headaches. Graduates also learned how to budget sufficient time to ensure that each subject could be completed. They also had to adjust to the HSSC model of “expectation coupled with support.” Graduates were provided with the expectations for their performance, are making the physical adjustment to independent learning, and are provided with a HSSC staff-developed roadmap to graduation.

Difficulty. The HSSC graduates indicated the period of academic adjustment increased the level of difficulty they experienced initially. The academic difficulty component of Wehlage (1989) is extremely important to address because of the connection between academic difficulty and dropout documented in published literature (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005; Garnier et al. 1997; Hess & Copeland, 2001; Kaplan et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1983). HSSC graduates indicated they received help in three ways: instructor assistance, peer assistance, and online-based assistance. The assistance the graduates received from their instructors seemed general in nature. Even though there were multiple instructors with varied areas of academic expertise rotating through the

classroom for at least a portion of the day, the instructors still were not always skilled in every course that fell under their subject area of focus. Instructor academic assistance was more valuable as a support mechanism than in terms of specific pedagogical applications. Graduates did not receive the specialized assistance they may have received in a traditional setting. However, they learned to be resourceful alongside their instructors to find the answers they were seeking. Instructor support and communication was more important than specified academic assistance. Because the graduates had persisted through the typical academic risk factors for dropping out, their needs tended to be more emotional than cognitive in nature.

Peer assistance seemed to be a valuable tool for graduates in the HSSC. While the HSSC instructors felt that some classes were more willing to work cooperatively than others, some of the graduates interviewed indicated that peer assistance was their preferred way to obtain help. Graduates were able to learn from peers who had already completed the coursework or to work alongside peers taking the same subjects for academic support.

Computer-based assistance was useful in that it provided initial, ongoing, and summative data to indicate individuals' areas of strength and weakness within each subject. Graduates were able to by-pass objectives they showed mastery of and simply focus on areas in which they struggled. Computer-based assistance also taught HSSC graduates to use the Internet as an instructional resource. While receiving assistance from the sources listed, graduates learned to obtain information resourcefully.

Incongruence. An important factor in a student at-risk persisting through graduation is the formation and maintenance of close peer friendships (Doll, Jew, &

Green, 1998). The HSSC offered the graduates a small, distraction-free classroom in which all of the members were working toward the same goal. The shared purpose provided opportunities for meaningful relationships among classmates.

Nonetheless, the structured, graduation-focused HSSC was a double-edged sword for HSSC graduates. Based on the interview data, graduates avoided the drama that accompanies traditional high schools, which was seen as a benefit. One less favorable aspect of the structured environment was a reduction in the amount of peer interaction time the HSSC graduates were allowed. The HSSC graduates' formal interaction time was a privilege earned by working diligently on their academic coursework. The informal interaction time of the HSSC graduates came as a result of discussions about their coursework and the inevitable breaks they took from the computer screen.

United by a common goal of graduation, the graduates soon forged bonds of camaraderie, despite the fact that they came from widely divergent backgrounds. The bond the graduates formed with each other helped address the variable of student engagement and connection to the institution that is a feature of dropout prevention literature (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Fredericks et al., 2004; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Isolation. Croninger and Lee (2001) suggest that positive staff-to-student relationships can help reduce the dropout rate. In order for these meaningful relationships to form, persisting graduates had to be open to receiving help from caring staff. On the other end of the relationship continuum, school staff had to communicate empathy, know about the lives of their students, set high behavioral and academic standards for their students, and provide safe havens for these at-risk students. Personal relationships

between staff and students are important in establishing an environment of mutual respect (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

The isolation component of Wehlage's (1989) Theory of School Membership was the one area that seemed to be the most pronounced in the HSSC. Because of the small student membership in the HSSC, the staff were able to get to know all of their students individually as both learners and persons. HSSC staff members acquired many insights into individuals' backgrounds and the factors that contributed to their choice of attending HSSC. HSSC staff were also able to provide emotional support as the graduates grew to trust them. While HSSC graduates respected their staff as education professionals, they were more impressed by staff perceptions of them as individuals worthy of attention and even empathy. Graduates allowed themselves to be vulnerable in sharing their struggles and voicing their aspirations in conversations with staff members. The trust factor was key to HSSC staff members being able to adopt different motivational approaches aimed at helping HSSC graduates persist through graduation.

The strong relationships between the HSSC staff and graduates addressed Wehlage's (1989) component of isolation, but it also addressed much more, including the graduates' need to have an adult figure to "walk alongside them" as they progressed toward graduation. Graduates entered the HSSC equipped with a variety of character traits that enabled them to persist through graduation. In this sense, the HSSC and its staff cannot be credited with creating features in the lives of the graduates that otherwise would not have existed. Instead, the HSSC staff fostered the traits already present in the graduates to assist their persistence through graduation. The significant transformation the HSSC and its staff fostered was changing HSSC students into graduates. Figure 6.1

provides a display of the Wehlage (1989) School Membership theory as it relates to student persistence in the HSSC.

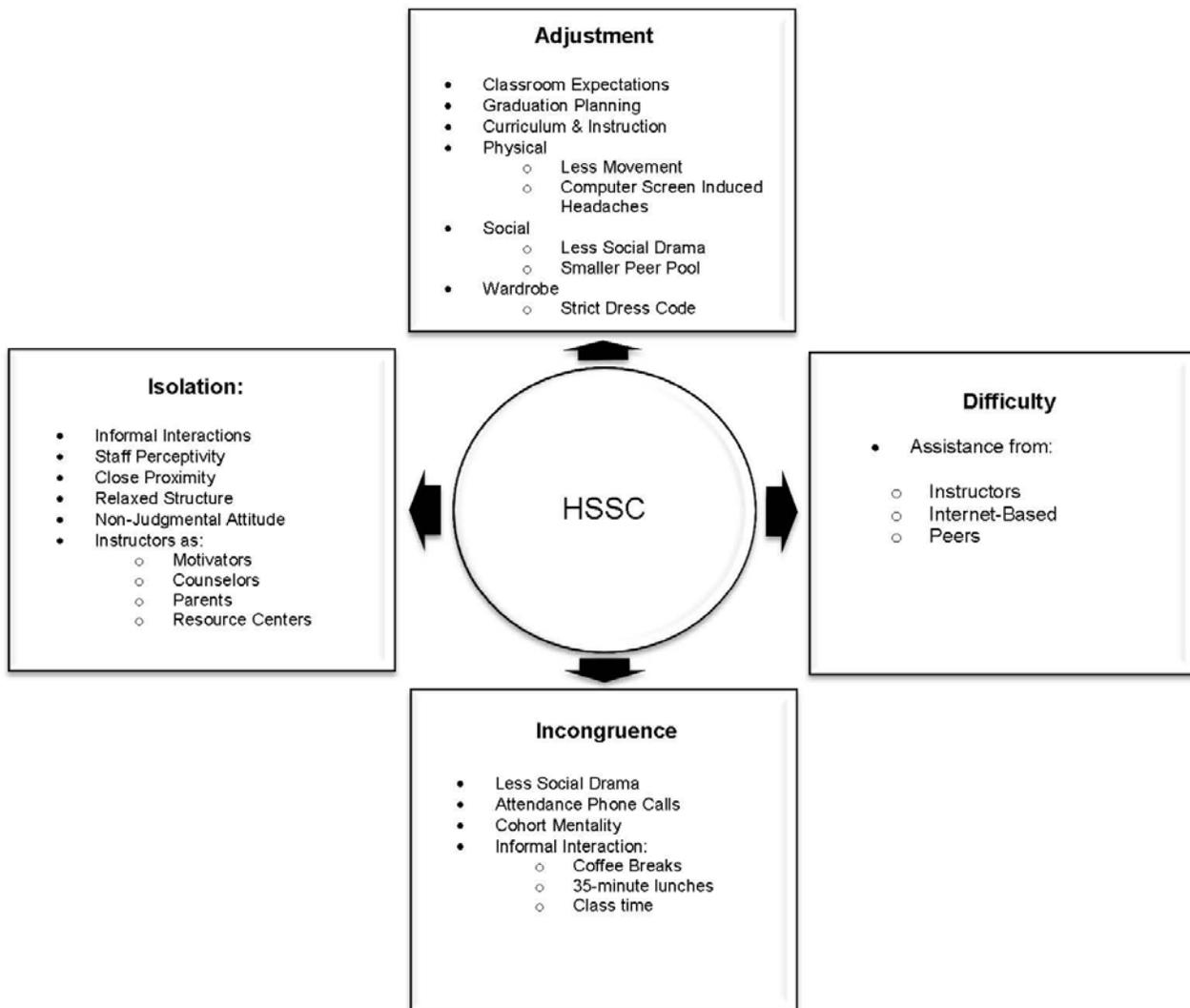


Figure 6.1. Wehlage (1989) and student persistence

HSSC Program Features

This study explored a variety of features of the HSSC that fostered student persistence through graduation. Many of the features were related to the instructional staff. Instructional staff members in the HSSC were committed to the success of their students and understood that their daily approach to supporting their students could be the difference between the individuals graduating or dropping out. This commitment to individuals and the manner in which the HSSC staff treated their students had a positive impact on student engagement (Kortering & Braziel, 1999). The HSSC instructional staff accordingly built positive relationships with their students based on mutual respect and accountability. Both mutual respect and accountability are pillars to a solid relationship between staff and students (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002). The HSSC staff felt that working in this classroom was a calling, not simply a job. Indeed, a hallmark of alternative school staff is their profound sense of mission in working with students whose needs are not met in traditional settings (Aron, 2006).

The HSSC staff filled diverse roles in the process building solid relationships. The Without their astute and sensitive perceptions of student needs, the HSSC staff would not have been able to establish appropriate intervention strategies. Staff members' ability to recognize HSSC graduates' needs was acquired experientially, through forming solid relationships with the students. The HSSC members provided emotional support, motivated individuals to stay focused on the task at hand, and allowed frustrated attendees to take a break. If HSSC staff members were focused simply on outcomes and were unconcerned with the graduates themselves, a different graduation outcome may have occurred. The element of caring was essential in HSSC graduate persistence. Even

with caring staff, it was important that HSSC graduates possess certain characteristics that predisposed them to graduate from high school.

Because attendees worked on computers to receive the majority of their instruction, they lacked consistent direct instruction and group learning activities. Because of the diverse nature of each individual's graduation plan, it was difficult to find more than a few peers at a time who were able to work together or have teacher-lead direct instruction. The quality of learning was compromised in an effort to streamline individual attendee efforts as they worked to master NCSCOS objectives in the form of tests at the end of each instructional module. If these students had dropped out and instead earned their GED, they would have been achieving the same outcome, but without the positive relational components of the HSSC.

Resilient Student Characteristics

The graduates in this study are a unique group in that they successfully surpassed the ninth grade or tenth grade when the majority of students who drop out choose to do so (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). They graduates had either dropped out of school or were contemplating dropping out prior to their enrollment in the HSSC as upperclassmen. While all of the HSSC graduates may not have had overall positive experiences in high school, the majority expressed that school itself was not the reason they had originally dropped out of school or contemplated it. The majority of HSSC graduates had their lives interrupted by adult issues at a premature age. The HSSC allowed them to address their life issues without sacrificing their desire for a high school diploma.

The graduate interview participants in this study were representative of the typical HSSC graduate. They were selected by the HSSC staff because they were representative

of the types of graduates that have come through the program. Also, in my interactions with the HSSC graduate participants in this study, they seemed very similar to the HSSC graduates from the first two years of the program when I served as principal.

The HSSC graduates who participated in the qualitative portion of this study had supportive families and displayed determination and a strong sense of self. Many of the HSSC graduates had an issue external to the school setting that led to their lack of school completion in the traditional setting. The HSSC offered an option for individuals to attend to their life circumstances while they continued to work towards graduation. Additionally, in the midst of the life circumstances experienced by the HSSC graduates, both HSSC graduates and staff indicated a strong family support structure that assisted in their persistence. Without family support, the efforts of the HSSC staff still may not have been enough to encourage student persistence.

The HSSC graduates and staff identified a strong sense of motivation as being key to persistence through graduation. Part of that motivation was evidenced by their willingness to step out of the traditional setting and into an alternative one. Another part of that motivation was evidenced in their persistence through both personal and academic struggles to graduate. A closely associated factor was the HSSC student belief that graduation was possible for them. In the midst of the life circumstances and academic challenges, student self-confidence was a guiding force that could well become the determining factor in graduation or dropping out.

The literature identifies many characteristics associated with student persistence. Students' ability to set goals for themselves, their willingness to play the game, and their willingness to form meaningful connections are all crucial to their persistence (Knesting

& Waldron, 2006). Peer relationships and student-staff relationships were an important element of student persistence. According to the literature, persisting students tend to have more positive attitudes towards school and have optimistic views of the future (Worrell & Hale, 2001). HSSC graduates seemed to enjoy their school experience once they became part of this classroom. The interplay of both staff and student characteristics, in concert with the structure and processes of the HSSC, lead to the outcomes revealed in this study.

Delimitations/Limitations

There are three primary delimitations in this particular study. The first delimitation involves the nature of the study being an *ex post facto* case study without any prior observations of the graduates in the Pressly School setting. With *ex post facto* design, there is a lack of control over independent variables. Student persistence is likely caused by multiple factors instead of a single factor. It is difficult to evaluate whether the HSSC or other factors had a stronger causal influence on student persistence. Researching in natural situations makes the controlled selection of research subjects more difficult (Isaac & Michael, 1971).

A second delimitation involved the selection of one alternative school, classroom, and school year as the context of the study. While there are many alternative schools in the United States and North Carolina, this study focused on graduates from Pressly School, one of the two Iredell-Statesville alternative schools. Further, the only alternative program being evaluated at Pressly School is the HSSC. The setting is also delimited in terms of time (2009-2010 academic year) and the gap of time since graduation. This study is also delimited to one stage in the HSSC's maturity. Fortunately, the 2009-2010

school year was not a pilot year for the HSSC. This study commenced during the second full year of the HSSC, which allowed HSSC staff to provide information both about the 2009-2010 HSSC graduates, but also about three years' worth of program experience.

Another delimitation of the study involves the similarities and differences of the HSSC graduates from the 2009-2010 school year as compared to other classes of HSSC graduates. The group of students in the HSSC during the 2009-2010 school year were the focus of the study. It was not determined from interview participant responses whether or not the 2009-2010 HSSC graduates were similar or different than the other classes of HSSC students. It cannot be assumed that the outcomes in this study would be similar to those of other classes of HSSC graduates. It is not known if the findings of this research would be different if the study were conducted with other classes of HSSC graduates.

There are a few known limitations in this study. The first limitation of this study involves my reliance as a researcher on HSSC staff recommendations of HSSC graduates for participation in the qualitative portion of the study. While I feel the HSSC staff provided me with a sample of typical graduates from the HSSC, there may have been other graduates who could have made up this sample who were overlooked or neglected for reasons I am not aware of.

Another limitation of this study involves the key facts that graduates may have forgotten from their time at Pressly School that could have added to the findings of the research. Graduates may also have more favorable views of the program since departing than when they were in the HSSC. A professional interviewer may help mitigate the impact of this delimitation through the use of strategies to obtain honest responses from the participants. This limitation is also mitigated due to graduation occurring within the

last year. Since the graduates' experience in the HSSC was recent, their memories of the specifics of the program should be accurate due to the short time lapse.

Another limitation of this study involves my inability to confirm the truthfulness of the information provided by the respondents. Having no prior knowledge of the participants, it is difficult to make an assessment of the responses. This particular limitation was addressed through triangulation. There were two individual interviews with graduates after the focus group interview has been conducted. The information obtained from the focus group interview was compared with the individual graduate interviews for similarities and differences.

Another limitation of the study involved the brevity of the interviews. While I feel that the data provided by the interviews was rich, the depth of my findings may have been enriched if the interviews had lasted longer. Possible factors impacting the length of the interviews were participant willingness to elaborate or participate fully, interviewer skill in getting participants to elaborate, and the dynamics of group and individual interviews.

A final limitation of the study involves the uncertainty of whether or not the HSSC graduates would have graduated from a traditional program if the HSSC did not exist. Some of the HSSC graduates may have chosen to stay in or return to the traditional setting if the HSSC were not an option. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to know whether or not it was the HSSC or the impact of student choice and student persistence that lead to graduation.

Strengths of the Study

This study added to the existing literature regarding dropout prevention programs (Johnston et al., 2004; Nowicki et al., 2004). The unique feature of the graduates served in the HSSC is that they had already completed their first two years of high school in which the higher number of dropout occurrences typically happen (NCES, “Fast Facts/Dropout,” 2005; NCDPI, “Dropout Prevention and Intervention,” 2011). This unique feature makes this study a compliment to the existing dropout prevention literature. This study provides data regarding the positive direct or indirect impact of the HSSC on the dropout rate in ISS (NCDPI, 2011). The close proximity of time to the topic being studied (a little over a year removed) is another potential strength. Ultimately, the topic of this study represents the opportunity at higher learning, military enlistment, and improved potential for employment (Amos, 2010) that did not exist for many students in ISS prior to the development of the HSSC.

Another potential strength of the study is related to the methodology employed. The validity of a qualitative inquiry depends on the interview skill level of the researcher, since the data collection instrument is the researcher (Patton, 2002). As a public school administrator, I have extensive experience interviewing job candidates, staff members in evaluative conferences, and students in school disciplinary issues. Nonetheless, a professional interviewer was employed in an effort to improve the quality of the HSSC student focus group interview conducted in this study. I conducted the two individual HSSC student interviews after the HSSC student focus group and HSSC instructors’ interviews occurred.

The study is a case study utilizing a mixed-methods approach. Multiple sources of evidence were integrated to address the study’s construct validity. The quantitative

portion of the study provided evidence as to the effectiveness of the HSSC, and outcomes (attendance, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions) were analyzed to compare HSSC students and non-HSSC students of similar academic ability on the eighth grade reading EOG and similar SES. By using multiple sources of evidence to compare the focal and comparison group, construct validity was addressed.

Participants were not randomly assigned to focal and comparison groups, therefore threats to internal validity were present (Creswell, 2008). To ensure that selection bias is mitigated, HSSC students and non-HSSC students were equal in terms of eighth grade reading EOG score and of a similar SES. The primary difference between the two groups is that HSSC students received an intervention while the non-HSSC students did not. Utilizing this strategy protected against potential selection effects. Because not all of the HSSC students had a complete set of data, another threat to validity for this study, missing data, had to be addressed. The validity of the findings of this study rests on having a complete set of test data for the HSSC students from 2009-2010. Missing data did not impact the number of overall matches between HSSC and non-HSSC students, but there were nine HSSC students (16%) who did not have an 8th grade reading EOG scale score. While a match was found for each of the HSSC students with the missing scale score, it may impact the findings of the study. This is a concern because the outcome variables—absenteeism rate, graduation status, and post-graduate intentions—may have results that are different from a full compliment of data. To address history, both the HSSC students and non-HSSC students were evaluated from the same time frame (2009-2010 school year).

The credibility of the qualitative portion of the study is supported through the implementation of strategies provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985). First, I exercised triangulation to promote a more comprehensive view of the HSSC through focus group interviews and individual interviews. Second, my unique perspective as founder of the HSSC in ISS provides a prolonged engagement with the topic of study. This enabled me to informally assess the interview data from HSSC staff and graduates for comparative purposes from the time I was principal over the HSSC. At the same time, I had no prior knowledge of the graduates who were interviewed for this study. Instead, I had to rely on the recommendations of the HSSC staff to provide graduates who were typical of the graduates from the 2009-2010 school year. Third, member checking was utilized by having interview participants review interview transcripts for accuracy. Fourth, I implemented peer examination of the qualitative data by having my chair and committee members review the data to obtain their interpretations. I established my biases at the beginning and throughout the study.

To enable future researchers and consumers of research to evaluate the extent to which the findings of this study can be transferred to their own, detailed description of the case was provided. The dependability of the study was enhanced by utilizing my dissertation chair and committee to examine the research process to evaluate whether or not the findings are supported by the data obtained. As the individual who researched, founded, and implemented the HSSC in ISS, I am able to confirm interview data as either affirming or altering the original intent of the classroom.

Implications for Practice

This study provided insight into the effectiveness of the HSSC and the factors that fostered student persistence through graduation. The findings from this study can impact student outcomes in a positive manner if used by law makers, researchers, and practitioners.

One group who can use the findings from this study is the staff of ISS. With their increased knowledge of the HSSC's potential to assist at-risk students in persisting through graduation and their comprehension of the program's cumulative effects, personnel at Pressly School and throughout the ISS will be equipped to assist students at risk of dropping out. One possible strategy could include the development of an alternative classroom for students contemplating dropping out of school who have not yet reached their junior or senior years of high school. While the two ISS alternative schools serve students from kindergarten through 12th grade, the students served in the HSSC often have not been typically served in alternative education classrooms. The findings of this study may also inform practitioners in other schools and districts who seek to reduce incidences of high school student dropout.

Public education is an enterprise instituted by people (law makers), implemented by people (educators), for the growth of people (students). Because the "people" element is so prevalent in education, dropout prevention programs must have the right people in place to serve students not successfully served in the traditional setting. Since the importance of caring staff with strong relationship-building skills who are perceptive to student needs was reported by the HSSC graduates and staff, the development of training mechanisms to strengthen these attributes is vital to fostering student persistence. The

social skills teaching ability developed by the TFM would help foster relationship-building skills and enhance listening skills of school staff.

Policy-makers will also have the necessary data to support further initiation of similar classrooms in other parts of the state and nation. When data reveal a deficiency such as the ISS dropout interview presented, policy-makers may be more inclined to pursue solutions after reviewing the impact, direct or indirect, the HSSC had on the dropout rate in ISS. Policy-makers may also consider qualifications for instructors in alternative school settings. While a current teaching license specific to the particular grade levels in which an instructor will be working is important from a pedagogical perspective, it is more important that a teacher cares for the students. As noted by Noddings (2005), the element of caring is essential to the academic growth of students. She noted that listening to students, engaging in dialogue with students, and learning about their needs is what inspires teachers to increase their own competence. Lifting the highly qualified requirement for teachers in alternative schools would provide the flexibility principals need to hire the best “people” for the classroom instead of having to consider the most highly qualified “teacher.”

In time, if dropout prevention programs such as the HSSC increase the percentage of high school completers, there are a few possible implications. This decrease in number of dropouts may impact the data associated with the negative outcomes positively or negatively. Currently, a person is classified as a high school graduate or dropout. As the number of graduates who earned their diploma in an alternative pathway or received a diploma with a reduced number of credits increases, the positive outcomes associated with being a high school graduate may change due to an increase in number for that

population (increased opportunities for employment, increased salary, greater life expectancy). If positive outcomes associated with high school graduation are not related to this event but are a result of other factors, this could alter the literature on this topic significantly.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided useful data related to the HSSC. However, it was the first study of its kind in examining this particular alternative classroom. As a result, there are insights I have that may assist future researchers with an interest similar to mine.

I encountered difficulties in locating and confirming HSSC graduates as interview participants. This particular group of students (2009-2010 HSSC graduates) was transient. One method for mitigating the challenge of locating interview participants involved setting up interviews with the graduates on the day of the graduation ceremony, because they are at the graduation site for most of the day.

Another recommendation for future research may be a longitudinal follow-up study to check on the post-graduate activities of the HSSC graduates. Since the literature is clear about the societal and personal benefits of student graduation, it would be useful to determine how earning a high school diploma has provided opportunities for the HSSC graduates. It would also be interesting to determine if the HSSC graduates have followed discernable academic, vocational, or familial tracks.

Future researchers may want to consider studying how the characteristics of resilient graduates and their teachers were developed. This would involve in-depth interviews with staff and students to determine the specific paths their lives have followed. This research may help identify educators with a skill set for fostering student

persistence. This may also help in the development of activities that enhance resilience in students.

Conclusion

Based on 2001 U.S. Census data, if 78 % of 18-24 year olds have a high school diploma or its equivalent, yet the graduation rate nationwide is 68 %, something must be occurring between the dropout event and the GED obtainment. Upper-grades students who have dropped out of school or are contemplating dropping out must have alternative options when the traditional track to a high school diploma is not working for them. The HSSC provided an alternative to dropping out and later pursuing a GED to obtain high school diploma equivalency.

This study examined the HSSC in 2009-2010 to determine its effect on student outcomes and how the classroom fostered student persistence through graduation. The theoretical framework was Wehlage (1989) School Membership theory which lists components of student retention: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation.

Student outcome data to determine the HSSC effect indicated the following: non-HSSC students had better attendance than HSSC students, the graduation rate of both the non-HSSC and HSSC students were identical, and that the non-HSSC and HSSC students had different post-graduate intentions. Interview data from both HSSC staff and graduates indicated that the HSSC had processes in place to address individuals' adjustment to their learning environment, provided academic support when it was needed, and allowed for interactions which fostered connections to each other and to the HSSC. Interview data also indicated that the connection between HSSC staff and students was a key factor in persistence through graduation. HSSC staff were caring, able to build

relationships, possessed a calm demeanor, were mutually respectful, and were trustworthy. HSSC graduates were motivated, self-confident, accountable, hard working, and were grateful for the opportunity they had been given to obtain their diploma.

If the HSSC were not an option for the graduates, it is uncertain as to whether or not they would have dropped out. ISS data supports the assertion that the HSSC is valuable to the district, regardless of the strategies used by the HSSC staff. The dropout data improved in ISS to 2.36% in 2009-2010 due in part to the influence of the HSSC (NCDPI, "Dropout Prevention and Intervention", 2010). Individuals in the HSSC came to the classroom seeking a second chance at a high school diploma. The importance of the element of alternative options should not be understated.

While the HSSC does assist students in persisting through high school graduation, students on the verge of dropping out or who have already dropped out must choose to continue their education. Without this initial choice to attend the HSSC, none of the interventions mentioned in this study would have worked. If the classroom were set up differently, the HSSC staff were not supportive and nurturing, and the HSSC graduates were not equipped with characteristics predisposing them to persist through graduation, different outcomes may have occurred.

The HSSC was staffed by instructors who were able to perceive their students' needs. The staff were caring, built solid relationships, possessed calm demeanors, were respectful, and were trustworthy. The structure of the HSSC was another key element in graduate persistence. The graduation plan, the cohort mentality, the informal periods of interaction, the physical and emotional proximity to the HSSC staff, and the streamlined method of content delivery were all key features. The HSSC graduates were also

equipped with characteristics that predisposed them to persist. They were self-motivated, self-confident, accountable, hard working, and grateful for the opportunity they were given. If any of the graduates were lacking components of the characteristics of success, the staff members were there to fill the gap and foster the development of that characteristic.

If the staff did not possess the characteristics noted in the interview data, the structure of the HSSC were different, or the graduates did not possess the noted characteristics noted, it is not known if they would have graduated. As committed as the student had to be to graduating from high school, the HSSC staff had to be equally if not more committed to fostering student persistence. If the structure of the HSSC allowed the staff member to be in the room only for a small part of the day or if there was no social skill teaching, the outcomes may have been different. If the graduates were not committed to graduating, the structure of the HSSC or the fostering skills of the HSSC staff may not have been enough to produce a successful outcome of graduation. It is the interplay of all three features—the HSSC, the HSSC staff, and the HSSC graduates—that lead to the positive outcomes noted in this study.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

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Appendix A

NC STANDARD COURSE OF STUDY, GRADES 9-12

For Ninth Graders Entering Between 2000 – 2008-09				Available for Ninth Graders 2000 – >	For Ninth Graders Entering in 2009-10 and Later
CONTENT AREA	CAREER PREP Course of Study Requirements	COLLEGE TECH PREP* Course of Study Requirements	COLLEGE/ UNIVERSITY PREP Course of Study Requirements (UNC 4-yr college)	OCCUPATIONAL Course of Study Requirements (Selected IEP students excluded from EOC Proficiency Level requirements)	FUTURE-READY CORE
English	4 Credits I, II, III, IV	4 Credits I, II, III, IV	4 Credits I, II, III, IV	4 Credits Occupational English I, II, III, IV	4 Credits I, II, III, IV
Mathematics	3 Credits Including Algebra I This requirement can be met with Integrated Math I & II when accompanied with the Algebra I EOC.	3 Credits* Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, OR Algebra I, Technical Math I & II, OR Integrated Mathematics I, II, & III	4 Credits Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, and higher level math course with Algebra II as prerequisite OR Integrated Mathematics I, II, III, and a credit beyond Integrated Mathematics III	3 Credits Occupational Mathematics I, II, III	4 Credits (Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II) OR (Integrated Math I, II, III) 4th Math Course to be aligned with the student's post high school plans <i>A student, in rare instances, may be able to take an alternative math course sequence as outlined under State Board of Education policy. Please see your school counselor for more details.</i>
Science	3 Credits A Physical Science course, Biology, Earth/ Environmental Science	3 Credits A Physical Science course, Biology, Earth/ Environmental Science	3 Credits A Physical Science course, Biology, Earth/ Environmental Science	2 Credits Life Skills Science I, II	3 Credits A Physical Science course, Biology, Earth/ Environmental Science
Social Studies	3 Credits Civics and Economics, US History, World History****	3 Credits Civics and Economics, US History, World History****	3 Credits Civics and Economics, US History, World History**** (2 courses to meet UNC minimum admission requirements – US History & 1	2 Credits Social Studies I (Government/ US History) Social Studies II (Self-Advocacy/ Problem Solving)	3 Credits Civics and Economics, US History, World History****

			elective)		
For Ninth Graders Entering Between 2000 – 2008-09				Available for Ninth Graders 2000 – >	For Ninth Graders Entering in 2009-10 and Later
CONTENT AREA	CAREER PREP Course of Study Requirements	COLLEGE TECH PREP* Course of Study Requirements	COLLEGE/ UNIVERSITY PREP Course of Study Requirements (UNC 4-yr college)	OCCUPATIONAL Course of Study Requirements (Selected IEP students excluded from EOC Proficiency Level requirements)	FUTURE-READY CORE
Second Language	Not required	Not required*	2 Credits in the same language	Not required	Not required for graduation. Required to meet MAR (minimum application requirements) for UNC.
Computer Skills	No specific course required; students must demonstrate proficiency through state testing.	No specific course required; students must demonstrate proficiency through state testing.	No specific course required; students must demonstrate proficiency through state testing.	Computer proficiency as specified in IEP	No specific course required; students must demonstrate proficiency through state testing.
Health and Physical Education	1 Credit Health/Physical Education	1 Credit Health/Physical Education			
Electives or other requirements***	2 Elective Credits and other credits designated by LEA	2 Elective Credits and other credits designated by LEA	3 Elective Credits and other credits designated by LEA	Occupational Preparation: 6 Credits Occupational Preparation I, II, III, IV** Elective credits/ completion of IEP objectives/ Career Portfolio required	6 Credits required 2 Elective credits of any combination from either: – Career and Technical Education (CTE) – Arts Education – Second Languages 4 Elective credits strongly recommended (four course concentration) from one of the following: – Career and Technical Education (CTE) – JROTC – Arts Education (e.g. dance, music, theater arts, visual arts) – Any other subject area (e.g. mathematics, science, social studies, English)

For Ninth Graders Entering Between 2000 – 2008-09				Available for Ninth Graders 2000 – >	For Ninth Graders Entering in 2009-10 and Later
CONTENT AREA	CAREER PREP Course of Study Requirements	COLLEGE TECH PREP* Course of Study Requirements	COLLEGE/ UNIVERSITY PREP Course of Study Requirements (UNC 4-yr college)	OCCUPATIONAL Course of Study Requirements (Selected IEP students excluded from EOC Proficiency Level requirements)	FUTURE-READY CORE
Career Technical	4 Credits in Career/ Technical Select courses appropriate for career pathway to include a second level (advanced) course; OR	4 Credits Select courses appropriate for career pathway to include a second level (advanced) course.	Not required	4 Credits Career/ Technical Education electives	
JROTC	4 Credits in JROTC; OR				
Arts Education (Dance, Music, Theatre Arts, Visual Arts)	4 Credits in an Arts Discipline Select courses appropriate for an arts education pathway to include an advan				
	Recom- mended: at least one credit in an arts discipline and/or requirement by local decision (for students not taking an arts education pathway)	Recom- mended: at least one credit in an arts discipline and/or requirement by local decision	Recom- mended: at least one credit in an arts discipline and/or requirement by local decision	Recom- mended: at least one credit in an arts discipline and/or requirement by local decision	
Total	20 Credits plus any local requirements	20 Credits plus any local requirements	20 Credits plus any local requirements	22 Credits plus any local requirements	21 Credits plus any local requirements

*A student pursuing a College Tech Prep course of study may also meet the requirements of a College/University course of study by completing 2 credits in the same second language and one additional unit in mathematics.

**Completion of 300 hours of school-based training, 240 hours of community-based training, and 360 hours of paid employment.

***Examples of electives include JROTC and other courses that are of interest to the student.

****Effective with ninth graders of 2003-2004, World History must be taken to meet the requirements of World Studies. Note: This information was retrieved on August 25, 2011 from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website

(www.ncpublicschools.org/curriculum/graduation).

Appendix B

Graduate Recruitment Script

Upon my receiving approval from the Pressly School principal who serves as the school's gate keeper, I will instruct the Pressly School data manager to contact the list of students supplied by the HSSC instructors. The purpose of the contact is to inform each of them of the study and gauge their interest in participating. I will then contact the potential participants to obtain informed consent. When the Pressly School data manager contacts the potential participants, she will say the following:

Hello, this is K_____ C_____, data manager from Pressly School. I want to let you know about an opportunity to express your thoughts about the High School Success Classroom (HSSC). Aron Gabriel, a researcher from Western Carolina University, is conducting a case study of the HSSC and would like to invite you to participate. As a former HSSC student who graduated, your input is especially valuable. Data will be collected in the form of (indicate whether the student will be asked to participate in a focus group or individual interview) that will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. There are no known risks to your participation in this research study. You will be provided with the summary of the findings upon completion of the study. You will receive a small compensation for your participation in the form of a \$10 Subway Restaurant gift card. The information you provide as part of this study is confidential in that your name will not be attached to your responses when the data is reported. However, since this is a focus group interview, confidentiality will also depend on the other participants. The information collected through this study will be reported to interested districts in Western North Carolina to inform practice with regards to dropout interventions. Districts outside of Western North Carolina will also be able to use the findings from this study to inform their practice.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please indicate so at this time _____ (individual will either confirm or decline interest in participating). If you are interested, please provide the preferred method of communication for Aron Gabriel to use in contacting you (email, phone, letter) as well as the preferred time of day for him to contact you should you request a phone call. Mr. Gabriel will be contacting you in the next few days about setting up a (indicate which type of interview they are being asked to participate in: focus group or individual interview). Thank you for your time and consideration.

Appendix C

Informed Consent: HSSC Graduate Focus Group Participants

Prior to being interviewed as part of a focus group, HSSC graduate participants were presented with the following statement of informed consent:

This study is intended to understand how the High School Success Classroom (HSSC) works and to learn about the experiences of HSSC graduates. As a HSSC student who recently graduated, your input is especially valuable. The results of the study will be provided to the Iredell-Statesville Schools and other school systems to inform their work in assisting students at-risk of dropping out of school to persist through graduation.

Data will be collected in the form of a focus group interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. There may be questions that you are unclear about. You may ask for clarification of such questions, and assistance will be provided.

Only HSSC students that graduated in the 2009-2010 school year will be invited to participate. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time or choose not to answer any particular items that you do not wish to answer. There are no known risks to your participation in this research study. You will be provided with the summary of the findings upon completion of the study. You will receive a small compensation for your participation in the form of a \$10 Subway Restaurant gift card. The information you provide as part of this study is confidential in that your name will not be attached to your responses when the data is reported. However, since this is a focus group interview, confidentiality will also depend on the other participants. The information collected through this study will be reported to interested districts in Western North Carolina to inform practice with regards to dropout interventions. Districts outside of Western North Carolina will also be able to use the findings from this study to inform their practice.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any aspect of the study, then please contact Mr. Aron Gabriel, at (704)902-0435. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Meagan Karvonen, at (828)237-3323 for assistance. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant then you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board Chair at 828-227-7212.

By signing this consent form, you indicate your informed consent to participate in the study. You are signing this form with the full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the study. You are acknowledging that you are at least 18 years of age. You are agreeing to be audio-recorded in this interview. The audio-tapes will be locked in a filing cabinet owned by the researcher in his home. The tapes will be destroyed within five years of the research study completion. A copy of this form will be given for you to keep. Thank you for your willingness to participate and contribute to the ongoing interventions provided by alternative schools.

 Signature

 Date

Aron Gabriel, Researcher, Western Carolina University

Informed Consent: HSSC Graduate Individual Participants

Prior to being interviewed individually, HSSC graduate participants were presented with the following statement of informed consent:

This study is intended to understand how the High School Success Classroom (HSSC) works and to learn about the experiences of HSSC graduates. As a HSSC student who recently graduated, your input is especially valuable. The results of the study will be provided to the Iredell-Statesville Schools and other school systems to inform their work in assisting students at-risk of dropping out of school to persist through graduation.

Data will be collected in the form of an individual interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. There may be questions that you are unclear about. You may ask for clarification of such questions, and assistance will be provided.

Only HSSC students that graduated in the 2009-2010 school year will be invited to participate. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time or choose not to answer any particular items that you do not wish to answer. There are no known risks to your participation in this research study. You will be provided with the summary of the findings upon completion of the study. You will receive a small compensation for your participation in the form of a \$10 Subway Restaurant gift card. The information you provide as part of this study is confidential in that your name will not be attached to your responses when the data is reported. The information collected through this study will be reported to interested districts in Western North Carolina to inform practice with regards to dropout interventions. Districts outside of Western North Carolina will also be able to use the findings from this study to inform their practice.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any aspect of the study, then please contact Mr. Aron Gabriel, at (704)902-0435. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Meagan Karvonen, at (828)237-3323 for assistance. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant then you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board Chair at 828-227-7212.

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Signature

Date

Aron Gabriel, Researcher, Western Carolina University

Informed Consent: HSSC Staff Participants

Prior to being interviewed, HSSC staff member participants were presented with the following statement of informed consent:

This study is intended to understand how the High School Success Classroom (HSSC) works. As a HSSC staff member, your input is especially valuable. The results of the study will be provided to the Iredell-Statesville Schools and other school systems to inform their work in assisting students at-risk of dropping out of school to persist through graduation.

Data will be collected in the form of a small group interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. There may be questions that you are unclear about. You may ask for clarification of such questions, and assistance will be provided.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time or choose not to answer any particular items that you do not wish to answer. There are no known risks to your participation in this research study. You will be provided with the summary of the findings upon completion of the study. You will receive a small compensation for your participation in the form of a \$10 Subway Restaurant gift card. The information you provide as part of this study is confidential in that your name will not be attached to your responses when the data is reported. However, since this is a small group interview, confidentiality will also depend on the other participant. The information collected through this study will be reported to interested districts in Western North Carolina to inform practice with regards to dropout interventions.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any aspect of the study, then please contact Mr. Aron Gabriel, at (704)902-0435. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Meagan Karvonen, at (828)237-3323 for assistance. If you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study, then you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board Chair at 828-227-7212.

By signing this consent form, you indicate your informed consent to participate in the study. You are signing this form with the full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the study. You are acknowledging that you are at least 18 years of age. You are agreeing to be audio-recorded in this interview. The audio-tapes will be locked in a filing cabinet owned by the researcher in his home. The tapes will be destroyed within five years of the research study completion. A copy of this form will be given for you to keep. Thank you for your willingness to participate and contribute to the ongoing interventions provided by alternative schools.

Signature

Date

Aron Gabriel, Researcher, Western Carolina University

Appendix D

High School Success Staff Interview

1. What other educational settings have you worked in prior to the HSSC?
2. What were your initial thoughts about the HSSC?
3. What curriculum is taught in the HSSC?
4. Describe your role in the HSSC.
5. Describe a typical graduate of the HSSC.
6. What are the elements of the HSSC that you feel help students graduate?
7. Are the students in your classroom different from other students at Pressly School? If so, how are they different?
8. What are some of the educational and career aspirations of HSSC graduates/ students that you are aware of?
9. What are the personal characteristics/ factors that separate HSSC graduates from HSSC dropouts?
10. How were students inducted into the HSSC?
11. What do you do to provide academic assistance in the HSSC for students that were struggling?
12. What non-academic activities do HSSC students engage in during the school day?
13. How did you build relationships with the students in the HSSC?

Appendix E

HSSC Student Focus Group Interview

1. Tell me about what you have been doing since graduating from high school?
2. I am trying to get a better understanding of the HSSC. Tell me about your experiences in the HSSC.
3. How did you learn about the HSSC?
4. Tell me about your first few days in the HSSC.
5. In the HSSC, if you were having a difficult time completing your coursework, what steps were taken to provide assistance?
6. Describe the ways you were able to interact with your classmates. What types of activities did you participate in with your HSSC peers?
7. I want to know more about your classroom staff. Tell me about your relationship with these individuals.
8. In what ways were your experiences in the HSSC similar to your experience in traditional high schools?
9. In what ways were your experiences in the HSSC different than your experience in traditional high schools?
10. What is it about you that helped you deal with any struggles you had on your way to graduating?
11. Are there things that did not happen that you wished had happened in the HSSC?
12. As high school graduates, what advice would you give students who are thinking about dropping out of school?
13. As high school graduates, what advice would you give school districts and school staff to help more students graduate?
14. Are there any things that I did not ask you that you would like to share with me?

Appendix F

High School Success Individual Graduate Interview

**The participants in this interview are outliers to the norm of the HSSC graduates from the 2009-2010 school year.

1. In an effort to get to know you better, tell me about your background in relation to your:
 - family
 - friendships
 - school experiences
2. Tell me about what you have been doing since graduating from high school?
3. I am trying to get a better understanding of the HSSC. Tell me about your experiences in the HSSC.
4. How did you learn about the HSSC?
5. Tell me about your first few days in the HSSC.
6. If you were having a difficult time completing your coursework, what steps were taken to provide assistance?
7. Describe the ways you were able to interact with your classmates. What types of activities did you participate in with your HSSC peers?
8. I want to know more about your classroom staff. Tell me about your relationship with these individuals.
9. In what ways were your experiences in the HSSC similar or different than your experience in traditional high schools?
10. What is it about you that helped you deal with any struggles you had on your way to graduating?
11. As a high school graduate, what advice would you give students who are thinking about dropping out of school?

12. As a high school graduate, what advice would you give school districts and school staff to help more students graduate?

 13. Are there any things that I did not ask you in this interview that you would like to share with me?
- **Questions may be altered to reflect information obtained in the HSSC Student Focus Group Interview session.