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# School Related Factors and Experiences that Influence High School Graduation Rate

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SCHOOL RELATED FACTORS AND EXPERIENCES  
THAT INFLUENCE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Patricia T. Mulroy

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December 2008

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## ABSTRACT

Title: School Related Factors and Experiences that Influence High School Graduation Rate

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The purpose of this case study was to understand the school-related factors that influence a student's ability to persist in high school despite having the characteristic risk factors of students who typically drop out of high school. This study explored stakeholder perceptions of two questions regarding student persistence: first, how social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration affect students' decisions to stay in school until completion, and second, what school-related factors were associated with why students decide to stay in high school until graduation. In order to garner answers to these questions, interviews and focus groups were conducted with six at-risk students, two counselors, four teachers, and three school administrators. The study took place in one school where the graduation rate for students was consistently 95%; this rate was higher than other high schools locally, in Pennsylvania, and nationally.

Focus group and interviews were conducted with all participants to explore perceptions of student persistence. The interview and focus group questions were based on the theories of Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987). Brofenbrenner (1979) described a school environment where adults care and spend meaningful time with students as paramount to success. Additionally, Tinto (1987) described that in order to persist students must recognize that expectations are high and that there is support and

feedback for performance. It is also critical that students see themselves as part of the school community.

The findings of this study indicated that positive adults being involved with students in both formal and informal ways is vital to at-risk students graduating. Programs and practices that encourage a systemic culture of caring, support, and accountability also appear to promote student persistence. District policies and other formal documents are a valuable guideline for the enculturation of caring. Interestingly, large school size and standardized testing were not seen as negative factors. The large school size could apparently be mitigated by personalizing the school environment and the negative impact of standardized testing with the use of varied and alternative assessments, as well as multiple vehicles for students to meet graduation requirements.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

*“[F]or the school year now ending, an estimated 1.2 million U.S. students will fail to graduate with their peers...”* (EPERC, 2006, executive summary).

Students who do not complete high school earn lower wages, are under-prepared for the demands of a highly skilled work force, and are at-risk for increased health problems (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001). The negative impact of students not completing high school is universally acknowledged and has connections to juvenile crime, low paying jobs, and unemployment (Lee & Burkham, 2001). “Each year’s class of dropouts drains the nation of more than \$200 billion in lost earnings and taxes every year” (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001, p. 8). As the levels of accountability increase, educators are focusing more intense efforts and resources on ways to meet the goals of recently enacted federal law, *H.R. 1 No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB)*, which tracks dropout rates and compels the educational community to find ways to keep at-risk students in school. As stated by Blank & Shah (2004), obstacles in meeting accountability mandates of *NCLB* include engaging students, involving parents, and providing meaningful programs that motivate students to stay in school. Additionally, helping students and parents deal with the issues outside of school, such as housing, health care, transportation, and immigration, are important considerations for students at-risk of dropping out of high school (Blank & Shah, 2004).

#### Statement of the Problem

Each year many students stop attending high school, and the effect of such students leaving school is magnified as the need for highly skilled workers increases (Hall, 2005). Early student departure is generally linked to poor academic performance,

deviant behavior, affiliation with students who exhibit deviant behavior, poor family socialization, and structural strain (e.g. single-parent families, poverty) with poor academic achievement being a mediating factor in all predictors of leaving school. In fact, poor academic achievement typically assessed by high-stakes testing or grade point average (GPA) has been a strong indicator of student dropout rate (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). Additionally, the governance structure of schools may play a part in why students leave some schools in higher numbers than in other schools, despite having similar demographics (Lee & Burkham, 2001).

A disproportionate percentage of students leave school prior to completing the rigorous requirements needed to graduate. The National Center for Educational Statistics' most recent data report that 10.3% of the population between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in school and have not completed high school (Kaufman, 1999). As the college diploma supplants the high school diploma with regard to hiring decisions, it follows that students with a high school diploma outperform nongraduates in a variety of social and economic indicators (ACT, 2004). Faced with stagnant achievement in the secondary grades, declining academic standards, and students inadequately prepared for the work force with poor reading and computational skills, the nation's leaders have turned their attention to reforming secondary schools (Hall, 2005).

*NCLB* has provided guidelines for state governments to address the problems that have plagued education and the dilemma of high school dropouts, but these guidelines to date have not demonstrated promise in preventing students from dropping out of school (Hall, 2005). When exploring reasons that students drop out of high school, many questions regarding high school completion surface. In reviewing the literature, the

inconsistent reporting of the dropout rate has created difficulty in identifying dropouts. Additionally, the focus on increasing academic achievement has yet to improve the rate at which students complete high school. The mandates of *NCLB* bring to light the importance of identifying what keeps students in school until completion.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to identify and understand the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until completion. Because the literature has few studies that explore in detail why students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school remain at certain high schools until graduation, a case study focused on understanding what keeps students engaged in high school until completion was the best qualitative study tradition for examining this phenomenon. It was the intent of this study to uncover the perceived school-related obstacles and motivating experiences for completion of school. Without a comprehensive study of student and other stakeholder perspectives of the issues surrounding high school dropout prevention initiatives, it would be difficult to determine the appropriateness of the solutions or treatments.

### Research Questions

The overarching question of this study was to ask what keeps students from dropping out of high school prior to graduation. Additionally, it was the intent of this study to identify and describe the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until graduation. Naturally, these questions led to others: For example,



- How do social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration impact students' decisions to stay in school until completion?
- How do the pressures of standardized testing influence students' decisions to stay in school until completion?
- How does required remedial course taking impact students' decisions to stay in school until completion?
- How does the structure of the curriculum relate to students' decisions to stay in school until completion?
- How does the increase in graduation requirements affect students' decisions to stay in school until completion?
- How does the size of the school influence students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

These issues are critical due to the social, political, and educational ramifications of students not completing high school (Lee & Burkam, 2001).

According to Creswell, (1998), "...case analysis requires the researcher to state his or her assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation and then bracket or suspend these preconceptions in order to fully understand the experience of the subject and not impose a priori hypothesis on the experience" (p. 277). To understand what factors keep students in school until graduation, it was important to explore characteristics that keep students engaged in their schooling. Because the rate of unemployment for high school dropouts was 30% higher than that of those who graduate from high school (Hall, 2005), and 70% of the 30 fastest-growing jobs require students to have an education beyond high school, the long-term prospect for high school dropouts is

bleak (ACT, 2004). Considering these statistics, this study attempted to provide solutions for the school, the teacher, and the students to increase the rate that students graduate from high school. This study also sought to discern those factors that contribute to students in this single, rapidly-growing school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania completing high school at a higher-than-average rate than students locally, in Pennsylvania, and nationally. Yet, since no two at-risk students can have identical reasons for completing school due to the variety of factors that face noncompleters, it was the goal of this study to inform the school, teachers, students, and community of the support students need in their quest to graduate from high school.

#### Theoretical Perspective

It is difficult to find a critical social or economic concern that is not impacted by students who drop out of high school (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Dechamps, 1992; Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992; Hoffer, 1997; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001; Roderick, 1993). Low paying jobs, poor reading skills, and unemployment are just a few of the obvious negative effects of dropping out of high school (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001). Since the high school diploma represents a minimum level of acceptable achievement for employment, the lack of a diploma represents a critical problem for individuals and society.

In the review of literature, several theories have emerged in the study of high school dropouts. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a link between student interactions and experiences in school and their learning, which can create either a positive or a negative climate for completion. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identifies the development of individuals in a caring community as essential to students'

abilities to persist in difficult situations. He describes two basic needs for students to be successful. First, students must know that one or more adults love them unconditionally. Second, students must spend time with these adults engaged in meaningful activities to promote positive social development.

Tinto (1987; 2003) focused his work on the incongruence between the needs of students and their interests. In his research, Tinto (1987) found five conditions that promote persistence in continued schooling. He discovered that students are more likely to persist until completion if:

- expectations are high,
- students are given academic, social and personal support,
- students are provided frequent and early feedback regarding performance,
- students are involved in the institution with support from faculty and staff,  
and
- most importantly, learning is perceived as important.

Tinto's (1987) theory that connects student interaction in the social and academic community with promoting attachment to the institution for the goal of continued schooling has implications for students who leave high school prior to completion.

Roderick (1993), in her early work on the relationship between dropping out of school and low school performance, found that students being connected to school through participation in activities or working with a caring adult were factors in students' persisting in school. Connection to the academic community, as well as positive school interaction, demonstrates a profound effect on students completing high school. In her research, Roderick cited the theories of Tinto (1987) and Brofenbrenner (1979) on

student attrition and on the ecology of human development, which associated interactions and experience in school as promoting or inhibiting positive development and influence the connection to school. Additionally, positive interactions with adults assisted in students persisting through high school.

In addition to the theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987) that connect student interaction in the social and academic community, Griffin (2002) identified two models of students who drop out of high school in his research. The first was the participation-identification model, which holds that students who are more involved in school activities are more likely to be successful in school. He also found that students who do not participate in school or school activities were not usually successful in school. Additionally, he describes the frustration self-esteem model that connects student academic identification (seeing themselves as good students) and self-perception as important factors in academic success. This model describes students who are unsuccessful as devaluing school and adopting negative behaviors, such as being oppositional, truant, or withdrawing from school, in order to deal with the frustration.

These theories are supported by longitudinal data from a variety of studies using the NELS:88 data (Rumberger, 1995; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003) that describe early dropout behavior beginning in middle school. Research in the NELS:88 study cited specific factors such as demographic composition of the schools, the school structure, the school organization, and school climate as reasons that disparities exist in facilities and services for students already at-risk of dropping out of high school (Lee & Burkham, 2001). Additionally, the potential to provide programming that encourages students to

stay in school must consider the structure and size of the school, as well as a positive climate with supporting relationships between students and adults.

With the implementation of new educational policies focusing on student achievement, remedial courses and programs have been put into place to address poor test scores and student achievement. The result of implementing these programs has yet to demonstrate whether the increased assistance encourages students at-risk for leaving school before completion to persist or become the final struggle students cannot manage (Lin, 2002).

### Overview of Methodology

In conducting this case study, evidence was gathered in a variety of ways in one high school in order to study the characteristics, culture, climate, and motivating experiences that may relate to student graduation and may help keep students from leaving school. This study utilized the methodologies inherent to case study in qualitative inquiry. The researcher conducted an immersion study using a single high school, which was chosen based on its higher-than-average graduation rate despite the presence of certain high-risk factors, such as increased growth, change in demographics, and a transient population. Additional examination of the characteristics present in the population targeted for this study include, poverty, large school size, multiple transition grades, and a diverse ethnic, racial, and social student body.

This study included the analysis of pertinent documents, interviews and focus groups, and observation in an attempt to determine why students at that school, who are at-risk of not graduating, persist until graduation. Students, faculty, guidance staff, and administration participated in interviews and focus groups in the school setting. Selected

students were interviewed in structured focus groups to gather additional information, and follow-up interviews were utilized as warranted.

The researcher assumed the role of interviewer, recorder, data organizer, and data analyst, obtaining written consent of the superintendent, applicable school administrators, student participants, and their parents before data was collected. Questions were developed using the literature review, an analysis of the school documents, and the researcher's observations. Case study research was particularly fitting for this study because it helped uncover student perceptions through interviews and focus groups, discerning the reasons that students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school chose to persist until graduation. The data was collected and analyzed in the qualitative tradition of coding, selecting themes, and identifying categories, patterns, and relationships in the responses (Berg, 2004).

### Definitions

The following terms are defined according to their usage in this study:

4-Sight Test© – State standards-aligned formative assessment which is congruent with the tasks required by the state standardized test.

Academic mediation – Poor academic achievement in grade point average and achievement scores (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) - The required levels set for student achievement, graduation rate, attendance, safety, and highly qualified teachers on an annual basis established by the federal mandate *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2006).

Applied Curriculum – The lowest course content delivered to the lowest academic track of students in the high school in this study.

At-risk youth – Students who demonstrate characteristics that place them in jeopardy of not succeeding in school (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001).

Constrained Curriculum – A less elaborate and differentiated set of course offerings (Lee & Burkam, 2001).

Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) – This approach measures the holding power of a school system as it measures the probability of a student entering ninth grade completing school within four years, by conceptualizing high school completion as a stepwise process of three grade promotions, in addition to graduation at twelfth grade. The concept of three grade promotions as the ultimate promotion is conceptualized as students moving from ninth-tenth, tenth-eleventh, eleventh-twelfth, and twelfth to graduation (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

Deviant affiliation – Bonding to anti-social peers (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000).

General deviance – Anti-social negative behaviors, such as being oppositional, truant, or withdrawing from school, and sexual involvement (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000).

Graduation requirements – The compulsory course work, credits, and standardized testing needed to complete high school developed on a local level with recommendations from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE, 2004).

Greene Method – Cohort graduation rates – This approach estimates a cohort graduation rate based on information on the number of high school graduates in a given year and the size of the ninth grade cohort four years earlier (Greene, 2002b).

High school dropout – Noncompleters; students who do not receive a regular high school diploma (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). Individuals who complete one year of school but

fail to enroll in the beginning of the subsequent year are counted as dropouts from the school year and grade in which they fail to enroll (NCES, 2006).

High school graduation rate – The rate at which students complete high school with a regular diploma. Therefore, students who receive a GED or other state-issued credential are not counted as graduates (NCES, 2006; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

Longitudinal graduation rate – The method of tracking individual students who begin school in ninth grade to completion of twelfth grade and graduation in four years (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) School Completion Rate – The method of tracking the number of students who begin ninth grade and complete school in four years. This formula does not account for individual students (NCES, 2006; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* - The federal law, *H.R. 1 No Child Left Behind of 2001*, initiative to improve student achievement. All students are intended to be proficient in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, and science at grade level by the year 2014 (NCLB, 2006).

Pathways – An internal set of options for students in this school to meet the graduation requirements if they were not proficient on the PSSA test.

Pennsylvania System of Student Assessment (PSSA) – The standardized assessment of students in Pennsylvania in grades three through eleven to measure academic proficiency in reading and mathematics (PDE, 2004).



Poor family socialization – Low parental expectations and parents’ lack of education (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000).

Remedial classes – Classes intended to bring students who have fallen behind in targeted areas, such as math and reading, to grade level performance (PDE, 2006).

Social Relationships between Adults and Adolescence – The portrayal of relationships in this study are consistent with the Pennsylvania Code of Conduct which states that professional educators must exhibit appropriate, consistent, and equitable behavior toward students, as well as fellow educators and parents (PDE, 2004).

Structural strain – Gender, ethnicity, and low socio-economic status (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000).

### Limitations

Limitations in this study reflect several factors. First, the nature of the transience of students in Northeastern Pennsylvania makes it difficult to discern the difference between the dropout and the student who transfers to another institution. Additionally, students are, as per the School Code of 1949 (Levin, 2006), dropped from the rolls of the school after ten consecutive days of absence, and despite the efforts of the school, the reasons they leave may remain undiscovered.

In addition, due to the limited population of this study, the generalization of data gathered was only linked to this specific population due to the characteristics of this school experiencing unprecedented growth and a rapidly changing, transient population. This case study encompasses one high school during a defined period in order to explore the phenomenon of why students at this particular high school have chosen to stay in school rather than drop out.

## Significance of the Study

This research attempted to uncover which school practices contribute to at-risk students staying in school until they graduate. This study was particularly significant, since the dropout rate both in Pennsylvania, as well as nationally, has not decreased. The findings from prior research and the implementation of increased academic accountability mandated by *NCLB*, have centered on the importance of high school graduation for all students. The impact of a stronger focus on academic achievement with increased accountability, including more remedial courses and other supportive programs, such as tutoring, has not been thoroughly studied. Prior research on increasing academic achievement through mandates and policy reform movements have not demonstrated improvement on standardized test scores or student achievement (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). Additionally, the impact of increased course requirements for graduation and the focus on core academic courses mandated by national, state, and local reform associated with *NCLB* were explored.

The school chosen for this study has found success in graduating students despite the presence of a high number of risk factors as identified in the literature. The student population of this school was rapidly growing, had a high rate of transience, and was ethnically diverse. Thirty-three percent of its students were identified as low socio-economic status (SES), and experience multiple transitions throughout the high school years. However, despite the obstacles this school faces, it consistently graduated ninety-five percent of its students.

Limited research has pointed to the impact of positive personal relationships between adults and students, as well as positive teacher attitudes on the dropout rate of

schools. Nonetheless, there are few studies showing the impact of positive relationships and other school factors in influencing students completing high school (Lee & Burkam, 2001). Student ability to persist and demonstrate the skills needed to cope with increased academic pressure and exhibit resilience, despite other mediating factors, such as high numbers of single-parent families, low SES, and increased growth, has not been well established in research or addressed as part of the accountability movement.

In order to gather rich data to fill the gap in the field of knowledge regarding why students at-risk of dropping out of high school stay until completion, the qualitative method of case study was chosen. The literature was abundant as to the social factors connected to students dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Dechamps, 1992; Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992; Hoffer, 1997; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001; Roderick, 1993); yet each year many at-risk students complete high school and are able to successfully negotiate the workforce or continue their education. Hearing the stories of these successful young men and women and the adults who work with them could have implications for future students and lead to suggestions for further study.

New governmental mandates, such as *NCLB*, emphasize student achievement on standardized tests. Research on dropout prevention indicates that students need an environment that encourages learning and provides students with multiple opportunities for success (Lin, 2001). In turn, increased pressure to perform for mandates translates to less relevance and engagement in the classroom (Lin, 2001). Without exploring what keeps students in school, obstacles presented by schools may make persisting until graduation more difficult for the at-risk student.

## Organization of the Study

This dissertation was organized into five chapters. Each chapter contained specific information describing the study. The introduction was an overview of the study with special emphasis on the significance of the issue of high school dropouts. The second chapter provided a review of the literature, illustrating the relationship among legislation, curriculum, assessment, remediation, student engagement in the curriculum, social aspects of the school, and patterns of success in school. Without exploring what works for an at-risk population under these new conditions, students could continue to leave school under-prepared to meet the demands of the highly skilled work force. The review of literature encompasses several categories. The first two sections deal with defining dropout rate at the state and national levels and the problems associated with the calculation method and definition. The next sections deal with the current educational issues associated with the dropout rate and the risk factors associated with students leaving high school prior to completion. Finally, a review of studies analyzing the current trends and programs to prevent dropping out, as well as support for the methodological tools are presented.

The third chapter of this study specifically identifies the methodology of the study, which was a case study. Case study was particularly fitting for this research because it allowed the researcher to become immersed in the school and culture, which assisted in building trust to uncover student perceptions through interviews and focus groups. The purpose of the interviews and focus groups was to discern through probing questions the deeper reasons that students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school choose to persist until graduation. Collection and analysis of data were reflective of the

qualitative tradition through the use of coding, selecting themes, and identifying categories, patterns, and relationships in the responses (Berg, 2004). Chapter four provides the results of the study. Finally, Chapter five provides a discussion of the findings, an overview and summary of the research findings, a discussion of the meaning of the findings, and implications of the study, as well as recommendations for further research.

### Chapter Summary

It was the intent of this study to uncover the strategies used by a single high school that demonstrated a higher than average graduation rate for at-risk students. A detailed, descriptive study of the policies, attitudes, and practices associated with at-risk students successfully completing high school could provide meaningful recommendations to educational and legislative stakeholders who are capable of making changes that support graduation as a realizable goal for all students.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“High school dropouts constitute a serious public policy problem for the American education system and society in general” (Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992, p. 357). The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that 10.3% of the population between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in school and have not completed their high school education. Others claim that the actual numbers of students who do not complete high school is much higher (Greene, 2002b; Kaufman, 2001; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

Although accurate data of the number of high school dropouts was important in studying the factors that influence the rate and reasons that individuals leave high school, there is currently no direct and common measure of high school graduation rate (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Thus, when states use different graduation measures, it makes it difficult to use common state level data to identify on a nationwide basis which high schools have high dropout rates. Without accurate accounting of the dropout rate, it is difficult to target the factors that make high school completion a local, state, and national problem.

Graduation is an important predictor of employment and an individual’s ability to succeed in the workforce. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the 2001 unemployment rate for adults over 25 years of age without a high school diploma was 7.2%. Further, the unemployment rate for high school graduates without any college was 4.2% and 2.3% for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Men and women aged 25 to 34 who dropped out of high school earned 27 and 30% less respectively, than their peers

who had a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate (Moyers, 2003). With 70% of the 30 fastest growing jobs requiring an education beyond high school, and 40% of all new jobs requiring at least an associate's degree, the prospect for high school dropouts has become bleaker (ACT, 2004).

Recently, state and local governments have presented the option to make standardized test scores a component of a student's eligibility to graduate. The policy-driven initiatives for graduation at the state and local level have created complex problems for schools in meeting the demands of the initiatives and the needs of the students. To prevent students from dropping out of high school, Battin-Pearson and Newcomb (2000) have found that course work must be relevant and students invested in the school and the community.

The transient population of Northeastern Pennsylvania makes relevance, sequential instruction, and mastery of content difficult for students and teachers. As described by Gufstafson (2002), many students feel very little connection to their schools and communities, and when the confinement of academia becomes too stringent and difficult, students drop out. These students have been a concern for secondary educators and community leaders for many years (Lee & Burkam, 2001; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

#### General Theoretical and Historical Basis for the Topic

Much of the literature on high school dropouts and low school performance has examined the connection to school and the academic community and positive interactions in school as having an impact on high school completion. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory has investigated the link between student interactions and experiences in school to student learning with regard to creating a positive climate for school completion. Bronfenbrenner (1979) connects the development of individuals in a

caring community as an essential characteristic in students' abilities to persist in difficult situations. He describes two basic needs for students to be successful. First, students must know that one or more adults love them unconditionally, and second, students must spend time with these adults engaged in meaningful activities to promote positive social development.

Additionally, work on the incongruence between the needs of the students and their interests was studied using college students and could be applied to students leaving high school prior to completion (Tinto, 1987; 2003). In his research, Tinto (1987) found five conditions that promote persistence in continued schooling:

- high expectations of students,
- academic, social, and personal support,
- frequent and early feedback regarding performance,
- involvement in the institution with support from faculty and staff, and
- learning being fostered.

Although the focus of Tinto's (1987) research was college students, it may have application to students who leave high school prior to completion.

Roderick (1993) in her early work on high school dropouts outlined the theories of Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987) as they influence leaving school prior to completion. She cited Tinto's (1987) theory connecting student interaction in the social and academic community as promoting attachment to the institution for the goal of continued schooling. She also cited Brofenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which associates positive interactions and experiences in school as promoting or inhibiting positive school outcomes. In fact, Roderick asserted that in examining attempts



to keep students connected to school and to develop policies to prevent dropping out of high school, elements of the theories of Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987) might have application to improving retention of high school students.

Griffin (2002) in his review of literature on high school dropouts reviewed the impact of the frustration self-esteem model in relationship to school success. The frustration self-esteem model describes the connection to academic success and frustration with school that a student demonstrates based on his/her perception of the feasibility of success. Griffin found this connection was an important factor in whether students remain in school or withdraw. Students who had impaired perceptions of their abilities were often frustrated and adopted negative social behaviors, such as absenteeism and truancy. He also found that students who participated in more school activities were more likely to stay in school and that the more success a student experienced, the more positively s/he identified with the school. Thus, according to Griffin (2002), both academic identification and self-perception are important factors in preventing students from leaving school prematurely. Similarly, Deschamps (1992) had found that high school completion was more likely for students who have a dependable family environment, sufficient income, a stable home, success in school, and success in standardized testing.

The central theme of early high school leaving was focused on five main threads in the empirical research:

- Academic mediation – poor academic achievement as measured by grade point average and achievement scores,
- general deviance – anti-social, deviant behavior and sexual involvement,

- deviant affiliation – bonding to anti-social peers
- poor family socialization – low parental expectations and parents’ lack of education, and
- structural strain – gender, ethnicity, and low socio-economic status.

These trends are prevalent in most studies of why high school students drop out (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), and more recently, *NCLB* (2002), many stringent, business-like educational policies have been implemented to improve student achievement. However, little research has been devoted to finding programs that can keep at-risk and disenfranchised students in school until graduation. Risk factors associated with high school dropouts, such as poor family socialization, structural strain, general deviance, deviant affiliation, and academic mediation, have been overlooked (Lee & Burkam, 2001). Increases in course requirements, graduation requirements, and the importance of standardized testing have created an atmosphere that overlooks the complex factors of students leaving prior to graduation (Hall, 2005). Much of the reform of the late eighties and nineties has centered on increasing academic competency, while the problems of deviance, deviant affiliation, socio-economic status, family structure, and engagement in school may have yielded a more significant outcome (Deschamps, 1992). Tools to assist in decreasing deviance, such as alternative school structures, have not been well explored, in part due to local school issues such as budgetary constraints. Instead, tools, such as increasing credit to graduate, more stringent grading and attendance policies, and remedial programs, have been identified, focusing on factors that many of those at-risk of not graduating may have little ability to control (Moyers, 2003). The use of a single test to measure student

academic achievement has placed an additional burden on students and schools to perform well.

Further, current educational policy emphasizing student academic achievement, such as *NCLB*, requires additional remedial courses and programs to correct the problems identified through poor test scores. The intention of such policies was to improve student performance in specific content. However, the method by which remedial courses have been developed and implemented to address the areas of student weakness as identified by the mandated testing may not actually meet the needs of the students who are struggling. In fact, in order to improve student achievement, additional research regarding human differences and learning styles must be considered in the development of programs which highlight concerns in the research on student retention (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Finn, 1989; Griffin, 2002; Ogbu, 1992; Steele, 1992; Tinto, 1987).

The public lobbies for more rigorous programs, the effectiveness of which are in turn assessed by a single standardized test score. This results in children being overly affected by a single measure of their abilities, which could precipitate their self-removal from a standard of rigor they do not believe they can accomplish. Engaging in high-risk behaviors highlights the lack of didactic thinking that occurs when students navigate the difficult questions they face each day. Sadly, educational programs that emphasize inquiry and discovery learning and provide the tools for students to explore important issues are left behind in the wake of high-stake assessment (Lin, 2002).

Some of the characteristics of high school dropouts that have been defined in the literature and studies indicate that positive relationships and academic success keep students in school, but there has been a limited focus on the impact of such factors since

the initiation of the increase in academic standards through *NCLB*. Thus, the purpose of this case study was to understand and identify the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until completion in the era following the passage of *NCLB*.

### Defining High School Dropout Rate

High school graduation rates are an important measure of the performance of the economy and public school system (Greene, 2002a). In his research, Greene described the confusing, inconsistent, and sometimes misleading way that the high school completion and dropout rates are measured. In addition, Balfanz and Legters (2004) reported that there is currently no direct and common measure of high school dropout or graduation rate. In fact, under *NCLB*, states may use different graduation measures, which makes it difficult to use state level data to identify nationwide which high schools have high dropout rates. Hall (2005) suggested that state graduation rate data grossly underestimates the problems students face in finishing high school. She went on to question the definitions some states use to define a dropout and reported that in states where students face the greatest challenges in completing high school, a lack of accurate data collection from the individual schools and the states created additional problems in assisting students and schools.

There are four methods for measuring the drop out or graduation rate commonly found in the literature. First, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) uses data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) to track the number of students who begin ninth grade and complete high school in four years (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). A second method cited in the literature was the longitudinal graduation rate, which tracks

individual students from ninth grade through twelfth grade and graduation in four years (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). In another method Greene (2002b) estimates a cohort graduation rate based on information on the number of high school graduates in a given year and the size of the ninth grade cohort four years earlier. Lastly, the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) conceptualizes students as they move from grade to grade. This calculation compares each grade's completion rate as a portion of the total number of students over each of the four years. Each of the defined rates of dropout calculation or graduation rate are used to inform local, state, and/or national agencies about the specific population of students who do not complete high school, but not one was a standard for state level calculations.

Many researchers discuss the problems associated with inconsistent measurement and the methods of reporting the dropout rate (Greene, 2002b; Balfanz & Legters, 2000; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). Due to the ramifications of dropping out, including decreased potential of students being poorly prepared for the workforce and college, as well as their potential for future earnings, consistent and accurate measures of students successful completion of high school are critical (Balfanz & Legters, 2000; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). Given the strength of the relationship between high school graduation and students' life prospects, graduation from high school was as important as the measures implemented since *NCLB* to assess the success of the educational systems.

#### *National Dropout Rate*

NCES (Kaufman, 2006), which uses a status dropout rate as well as a cohort model defines a dropout as a person enrolled during the previous year and not enrolled at the beginning of the subsequent school year. In the 2004 school year, the most current

data available, the national dropout rate for 16 to 24 year olds was 10.3% (Kaufman, 2006). This statistic includes students who have dropped out of high school and gone on to complete a GED certificate. However, research by Greene (2002b) reported the national graduation rate for the class of 1998 as 71%. Similarly, Swanson (2004) reported the graduation rate for 2001 at 68%. Alone, these statistics are alarming; yet the rates of graduation for ethnic and minority groups are even more startling. For example, Greene reports a 56% graduation rate for Blacks and 54% for Latino students. Likewise, Swanson and Chaplin (2003) found low graduation rates for Blacks at 50% and Latinos at 53%. Similar to Swanson and Greene, the Editorial Projects in Educational Research Center (EPERC, 2006), found the graduation rate nationally to be 70%, with numbers of 50% for Blacks and 52% for Latino students. EPERC used the CPI calculation, which, unlike other methods, accounts for students who drop out of school beginning in the ninth grade.

#### *Dropout Rate in Pennsylvania*

In its publications, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) defines high school dropout as a student, who for any reason except death, leaves school before graduation without transferring to another school/institution (Hruska, 2005). PDE has reported the annual dropout rate since the reporting became mandated in 1987. In Pennsylvania the rate at which students drop out of high school was calculated by counting all students who dropped out during the twelve-month period from October 1<sup>st</sup> of the current school year through September 1<sup>st</sup> of the following school year. The dropout rate in Pennsylvania was calculated using a total number of dropouts over a twelve-month period divided by enrollments on a single day, October 1<sup>st</sup>. The dropout

rate reported by PDE on October 1, 2003, for the 2003-04 school year was 1.9%.

Additionally, the PDE report states that the dropout rate has decreased by two tenths of a percentage point, while secondary enrollments continued to rise statewide.

Yet, research by other entities, such as the EPERC (2006) for the 2003-04 reporting year, reported Pennsylvania's dropout rate as 20%. The dropout rate for Black students was reported at 58% and 49% for Latino students. Such differences in calculations are likely the result of the EPERC's use of the CPI dropout calculation. Swanson (2004) in his research for the Urban Institute reveals an overall graduation rate in Pennsylvania of 68%. Even more troubling was the statistic that minorities and at-risk students in Pennsylvania and nationally only have a fifty-percent chance of finishing high school (Swanson, 2004).

#### *Importance of a Common Definition of Dropout Rate*

Dropout rates are difficult to quantify due to the variation in reporting by national, state, local, and research agencies. Researchers highlight the incomplete and inaccurate data that under-represent the number of students who do not meet their full potential by completing high school (Greene, 2002b; Swanson & Chaplin, 2003).

Swanson and Chaplin (2003) reviewed the use of the Common Core of Data (CCD), the U.S. Department of Education's census of local education agencies, and individual school dropout reporting to look empirically at the calculations and accuracy of the reporting of high school dropout rates. Through their research Swanson and Chaplin (2003) have sought to inform the debate surrounding high school graduation rate calculations, since, as noted previously, *NCLB* has redirected attention to graduation rate. To this end, they found two areas particularly troubling. First, missing data from states

makes it difficult to calculate the number of students who dropped out of high school. Second, there was an overestimation of the number of students who actually graduate from high school. Further, Swanson and Chaplin found bias in completion rates, whereby students who completed a GED were counted as graduates, incarcerated youth were not counted as dropouts, and the self-reporting process by local education agencies varied depending on local interpretation.

Joint research by the Business Round Table (BRT) and Center for Labor Market Studies (CLMS) at Northeastern University revealed that 25% to 30% of students do not graduate with a high school diploma (BRT, 2003). Additionally, the study noted the inconsistent reporting and lack of common definition and data collection standards as the rationale for the fluctuation in accurate dropout calculations. For example, in the current NCES definition, GED completers and incarcerated students are not counted as dropouts, and poor and minority teens are not always counted in household surveys due to transient living conditions and employment status (Black Issues in Higher Education, 2003).

In summary, many researchers have reported that there was no direct and common measure of high school dropout rate. Greene (2002b) described the confusing, inconsistent, and misleading way that graduation rates are measured, and Hall (2005) discussed the inaccurate and incomplete state graduation-rate data after review of the state level data on graduation rate. Additionally, Hall (2005) recognized the inaccuracies in reporting for students and school districts with the greatest challenges. To calculate accurately and consistently the number of students who do not complete high school, a common definition of high school dropout rate can assist local, state, and national agencies. This finding confirmed that researchers state that a uniform definition of



dropout does assist in the accurate study of and programming for high school dropouts (EPERC, 2006; Greene, 2002b; Hall, 2005; Swanson & Chaplin 2003).

### Dropout Factors Identified in the Research

In addition to the calculation of the dropout rate, early identification and intervention programs for students at-risk of dropping out of high school are seldom mentioned in the current research. Dechamps' (1992) meta-analysis of data from thirty-two empirical studies provided her findings on high school dropouts. She found the common characteristics of high school dropouts fell into three categories: demographics, social and family structure, and deviant behavior in society and in school. Ethnicity, low SES, single-parent families, absenteeism, disciplinary problems, grade retention, and low academic performance were also found to be important indicators of leaving high school prior to graduation.

Deschamps (1992) also found in her research that school policy, such as attendance and graduation requirements, had an impact on students who were at-risk of dropping out. However, the ability to quantify the variation in policy was difficult due to inaccuracy in local, state, and national data. She also found that further investigation of the role of family, peers, and special education in a student's decision to drop out of high school could make significant contributions to the literature.

Students consistently referenced as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, low SES, single-parent families, defined as deviant in school, ethnically diverse, and low academic performance are at-risk for dropping out of high school. Donlevy (2002) reported that as standardized testing becomes part of the graduation requirement further sorting, tracking, and dividing of students who do not have the advantage of a privileged

social class might increase the risk and dropout rate of lower SES students. Houchens (2004) studied background factors, such as demographics, student mobility, and academic achievement, as they related to student retention. The analysis revealed that relationships exist between minority status, SES standing, academic achievement, and the opportunity to earn a standard diploma.

Poor school performance was a strong indicator of whether students become involved in high-risk behaviors. Hubner and Wolfson (2001) in their compilation of research on juvenile delinquency indicated that the most common denominator among students who participate in deviant behavior was school failure. The research directs attention to programs for at-risk youth and suggests that the earliest interventions are most effective.

Identifying characteristics that place students at-risk of leaving school prior to graduation can aid schools and school districts in helping students to persist until graduation. In her review of the literature, Dechamps (1992) found that the common characteristics of high school dropouts were mitigated by low academic performance in school and on standardized tests. This finding was seen as an accurate predictor of dropping out among high school students, although course grades were considered to be more accurate in predicting high school success.

In a study relating to school structure (the school size, budget, and socio-demographic factors) and dropout rate, Fitzpatrick and Yoels (1992) investigated the school system as it related to demographic composition and school structure as a function of student retention. Analyses included state policy and socio-demographic composition in relation to student retention. This research considered educational expenditures by a

district and the average daily attendance as having significant indirect influences on student retention. Among the socio-demographic factors considered, this research found family structure, specifically single-female parent households, as a critical predictor of both school structure and dropout rate. There was a direct connection between poor urban schools and the socio-demographics of the constituents of a school and school systems. The research found a direct connection to the socio-demographic factors of a school system as a predictor of the ability of a school system to provide a quality education. These factors, as measured by the ratio of adults to children in a supportive role in the school and the amount of money spent per child, were a reflection of the commitment to a quality educational program.

#### *Socio-economic Status*

Students who are in the lowest socio-economic status are judged by a school system with which they have little input or control. Consequently, students at-risk of dropping out of high school due to socio-economic status have a greater risk of dropping out when the requirements become too rigorous and a single high-stakes test becomes a measure of graduation (Hoffer, 1997; Lillard & DeCicca, 2002). Additionally, Donlevy (2002) reported that as graduation requirements and single test scores determine graduation, many students are not eligible for higher education or future learning opportunities.

Hubner and Wolfson (2001) in a comprehensive national report of youth that were in the juvenile justice system, found that students from low-income families are 2.4 times more likely to drop out of school than students from middle class families and 10.5 times more likely than students of high-income families. Although policy makers throughout

the years have expressed interest in the individual characteristics of dropouts, others have looked at the prevalence of schools that report low-SES students and minority populations (Lee & Burkham, 2001). In fact, Lee and Burkham (2001) found that despite the socio-economic distribution, schools with a more constrained curriculum had fewer students who dropped out of high school.

Data for this study was collected from two sources. The researchers used the Annual Digest of Educational Statistics (NDES) from 1978 and 1996 and the State and Metropolitan Area Data Book to measure the regions of the country, percentage of non-White students, percentage of female-headed households with children under eighteen, and urban populations. The analysis was divided into two parts. First, the trend in dropout rate for the fifty states was studied. Second, the study examined the direct effect of state policy and variables of school structure and the effect on state dropout rate.

Traditionally, such studies have used individual schools or districts as a unit of analysis. Fitzpatrick and Yoels (1992) demonstrated that aggregate models could make significant contributions to the existing literature. Policy discussion from this research can help shape school structure, as well as socio-demographic factors in creating policy. Findings from this research suggest that state-level policymakers should pay attention to the demographic composition, especially in urban areas due to the presence of at-risk student groups that are affected by public spending and programming decisions. The study suggests that efforts to correct the dropout problem may be more effective if efforts to retain students in school until completion focus on younger children from single-parent families and low-income racial minorities.

Houchens (2004) studied dropout factors in the Broward County (FL) Public School System to look at the different high school academic outcomes of students who entered the ninth grade as a cohort for two years. This research attempted to determine if students who earned a standard diploma or an alternative completion document left the district or were otherwise retained. Background factors, such as demographics, mobility, and academic achievement, were examined as they relate to high school outcomes.

An analysis revealed that relationships existed between socio-economic status, mobility, test scores, and high school outcomes (Houchens, 2004). After the third year, the enrollment from each cohort dropped. The study counted students who withdrew from school as having left the district and not as dropouts. Data demonstrated that between 8 and 11% of retained students, and between 49% and 52% of students who were not retained received a standard diploma, 2% in each cohort received a GED, and 3% in each cohort received a special diploma or certificate of completion. Between 20% and 36% of students left the district, while greater than 11% in each cohort were enrolled in adult education.

### *Ethnicity*

The dropout rate of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds was well-documented and discussed in the literature. Greene (2002b) described the large gap between White and minority dropout rates as alarming. In fact, “[t]he national graduation rate for the class of 1998 was 71%. For White students the rate was 78%, while it was 56% for African-American students and 54% for Latino students” (Green, 2002a, executive summary). Greene describes the large gap between White and minority dropout rates as alarming and further states that additional outcomes associated with minorities

not completing high school included increased risk of becoming single parents, having children at a younger age, becoming dependent on public assistance, or being in prison. He stated that high school graduation was an important predictor in the lives of young people.

Griffin (2002) studied fourteen school districts in Florida to determine if race and identification with school were predictors of dropping out. Race and academic performance were evaluated through the relationship between grade point average and persistence and the effect on students dropping out. Other indicators of dropout were students' ages in relation to their grades and behavior problems in school. Griffin (2002) found that 7% of Black male students and 6.1% of Latino male students dropped out. His study found that Black and Latino students demonstrated detachment from academics without exhibiting negative behavior in the school system unlike their white and Asian counterparts.

Albert (1999) studied the effect of individualized attention to Latino students at-risk for dropping out of high school. In her study, Albert provided supports and interventions for students who demonstrated alienation from school. The results of this small-scale study indicated that higher academic performance and engagement have a positive impact on student high school completion. This study used a small sample of 14 students in a single, comprehensive high school to explore strategies for keeping Latino students in school due to their high risk for dropping out as well as alienation from school.

Albert's (1999) study noted the differences between culture of the home and school, low academic and career aspirations, lack of cultural literacy, and low

expectations from both parents and schools as factors that place Latino students at-risk. Albert's (1999) study provided a program for at-risk Latino students to gain individualized attention beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The goal of the program was to decrease alienation from school and increase the opportunities for the students to stay in school and earn their diplomas. The program included meetings twice a week in a one-on-one setting and a regular group session over a period of three semesters. Interventions and supports for students were put into place, and the group provided peer support and guidance. The results of this study indicated improved academic performance over time for these Latino students. The study also bolstered the findings that individualized attention can be effective in combatting dropping out in at-risk Latino students. Ten of the 14 at-risk students who participated in Albert's program persisted in school until graduation. Also noted was the importance of peer relations as a factor in students helping to inspire each other to persist in school. Therefore, Albert suggested that dropout prevention programs should be designed to span several semesters, possibly beginning in the ninth grade, in order to gain the most benefit.

Griffin's (2002) study of academic disidentification, race, and high school dropouts also attempted to discern whether Black and Latino students, when compared to White and Asian students, demonstrated evidence of disidentification from academics. Using Steele's (1992) disidentification theory, Griffin explored the difference in students' abilities to see school as useful in the decision to dropout of high school. This study included 132,903 students from 14 Florida school districts. The results of this study were consistent with the disidentification hypothesis, finding that both Black and Latino students placed less importance on academic achievement than their Asian and White

peers. In addition, alienation among Black high school students was stronger than that of Latino students. Suggestions for reversing disidentification were:

- altering teaching practices,
- creating more optimistic relationships between teachers and students,
- eliminating belittling and/or using negative reinforcement in the classroom, and
- setting realistic goals for students.

Both Black and Latino students did not identify with academics, although alienation was stronger for Black students. While drawn from a large population, this nonexperimental study produced results considered exploratory and tentative. Griffin (2002) stated that future studies that look at academic disidentification theory should attempt to draw causal comparisons, use a variety of other states or countries to generalize for the population, and control for variables such as peer pressure, SES, self-concept, and locus of control.

### *Deviance*

Deviance was the demonstration of anti-social behavior and other behaviors which cause harm to the individual or others. While dropping out of high school exists in every segment of the population, students at-risk of dropping out due to substance abuse and other deviant behaviors face different problems than other at-risk students.

The focus of a study by Aloise-Young and Chavez (2002) provided information on the reasons that adolescents give for dropping out of high school and how those reasons relate to substance use. This study examined four reasons cited in the literature that students frequently gave for dropping out of high school: family-related issues, low bonding with school, poor grades, and friends. Aloise-Young and Chavez (2002) studied



1,812 participants ranging from 13 to 21 years of age from three communities in the southwestern United States. The sample included 990 control students and 822 school dropouts. For the purpose of this study, student dropouts had not attended school for more than 30 days. Students completed a survey aimed at identifying reasons for dropping out and substance use.

Utilization of these factors tested the hypothesis drawn from strain theory and social control theory. Strain theory suggests that adolescents drop out due to frustration with academic failure and being alienated from school. Strain theory suggests students who demonstrate poor grades also exhibit a relationship of high levels of substance abuse that are related to dropping out of school. Social control theory suggests that lack of commitment to school and poor parent-child relationships lead to a weak bond to conventional structures such as school. This study by Aloise-Young and Chavez (2002) found that students who do poorly in school are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of substance abuse than students who drop out for other reasons.

However, Aloise-Young and Chavez (2002), found that students who left because of low bonding and poor grades did not demonstrate high levels of substance abuse. Alternatively, socialization theory suggests that adolescents who drop out with their friends should show the highest levels of substance use, and adolescents who leave school for family-related reasons should show a lower rate of substance abuse. Mexican-American dropouts demonstrated a pattern of substance use and dropping out of high school, while the non-Latino White dropouts did not. Therefore, in this study, social control theory and strain theory applied more to higher SES youth, as the research demonstrated higher numbers of non-Latino, higher SES youth participated with their

peers in substance use. In this study, Mexican-American students were more likely to leave school to assist their families. Additionally, friends played an important role in both educational attainment and substance abuse. The findings of this study provided practical implications that might help retain high-risk minority students in school, such as pregnancy-prevention programs and flexible scheduling. Additionally, the use of alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine was higher for dropouts than for students enrolled in school. This suggests that school-based drug-prevention programs are valuable for students' health and educational purposes.

In an effort to decrease the impact of deviance and prevent students from leaving school prior to completion, Hubner and Wolfson (2001) from the Coalition for Juvenile Justice compiled a list of traits of outstanding schools:

- challenging core curriculum,
- high standards and expectations (all are encouraged and supported in taking rigorous courses),
- highly qualified teachers with a willingness to adapt to students' learning styles,
- strong mentoring for new teachers,
- partnerships between parents and schools,
- safe and secure schools,
- administration and teachers know students and keep track of their progress;
- high attendance rates, and
- policies that reward high attendance.

Tools to assist in decreasing deviance, such as alternative school structures, have not been well explored, in part due to local school issues such as budgetary constraints

(Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992). Instead, districts have imposed policies, such as increasing credit to graduate, that add to the feelings of helplessness that many at-risk students experience (Hall, 2005).

### *Academic Identification*

Because students' school experiences and progress in school prepare them for transition to the adult world, leaving school is harmful to the long-term success of the adolescent (Lee & Burkam, 2001). The negative impact of students leaving high school prior to completion was acknowledged by most as a loss of human capital to the nation (Lee & Burkam, 2001).

Houchens (2004) studied dropout factors in the Broward County (FL) Public School System to look at the different high school academic outcomes of students who entered the ninth grade as a cohort for two years. This research attempted to determine if students earned a standard diploma or an alternative completion document, left the district, or were otherwise retained. Background factors, such as demographics, mobility, and academic achievement, were examined as they relate to high school outcomes.

The Houchens' (2004) study also reported that for both cohorts the completion and graduation rates reflected the initial population of the groups, not those remaining in the fourth year. This research found a relationship between students passing Algebra I, and other level II Math courses, English I, and the completion/graduation rate. Additionally, student mobility was associated with low achievement levels among high school students. Mobile high school students were more likely to drop out than non-mobile high school students. Further, changing schools during the school year may have a more detrimental effect.

Other consistent factors in Houchens' (2004) research on risk factors for high school dropouts included: students with minority status (especially Black males and Latino students), high rates of mobility, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), Exceptional Student Education (ESE), Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), and low academic achievement. These characteristics diminished a student's opportunity to receive a standard diploma after four years.

Battin-Pearson and Newcomb (2000) in their research looked exclusively at the consequence of students who leave school prior to the tenth grade. Most studies on high school dropouts focus on individual characteristics. This longitudinal study of 800 students from 18 schools in high-crime neighborhoods of Seattle over a four-year period beginning in fifth grade, examined the variables of grade point average (GPA) and the scores from the California Achievement Test in relationship to other mediating factors which included:

- dropping out by 10<sup>th</sup> grade,
- general deviance,
- bonding to anti-social peers,
- low school bonding,
- early sexual involvement,
- low parental expectations for school, and
- demographics (ethnicity, gender, and SES).

Identifying the predictors of students leaving prior to tenth grade and comparing the adequacy of five separate theories regarding high school dropouts was the purpose of this study. The theories studied by Battin-Pearson and Newcomb (2000) included full

mediation by academic achievement and the direct effects related to general deviance, deviant affiliation, family socialization, and structural strains. The study used a latent variable structural equation modeling to determine how the variables studied were related to achievement in predicting if students would drop out of high school.

While poor academic performance alone did not lead to dropping out, poor academic performance was the strongest indicator of high school students' rates of noncompletion when combined with low parental expectations, bonding to anti-social peers, and ethnicity. Additional factors that made a significant contribution to dropping out when combined with poor academic achievement included general deviance, deviant affiliations, and low SES (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000).

Through their research Battin-Pearson and Newcomb (2000) found that efforts to prevent high school students from dropping out should focus on increasing the academic success of students who are subject to the predisposing factors identified in this study. Based on the findings of this study, dropout prevention efforts should include programs that are focused on improving academic achievement at earlier ages. Special focus should also be placed on students who come from low SES backgrounds, students who have deviant affiliations, or those who participate in drug use and violence.

Additionally, Griffin (2002), as cited previously, used 14 school districts in Florida to investigate the effect of academic performance, race, and stay-in/dropout status. This research identifies two models of dropouts from high school. First, the frustration self-esteem model describes students who are not successful over time and suffer impaired perception of themselves. This devaluation could lead to frustration with school. Griffin identified at-risk students who may choose to vent frustration by adopting

negative behaviors, such as being oppositional, truant, or dropping out of school. The second theory Griffin explored was the participation-identification model developed by Finn (1989), which implies that students who participate in more school activities are more likely to be successful in school. This theory holds the inverse to be true as well. Students who do not participate in school activities, do not do well in school.

Griffin (2002) examined the relationships between academic achievement and dropping out for Asian, Black, Latino, and White students. The findings identified that both Black and Latino students demonstrated detachment from academics, or academic disidentification, at levels that exceed Asians and Whites. Academic disidentification related similarly to high school dropout rates with both Black and Latino students, although alienation was stronger for Black students (Griffin, 2002).

Further research by Roderick and Engel (2001) discussed that providing incentives for students to take tests and school more seriously resulted in greater student efforts and motivation. Opponents argued that policies implemented to retain low-achieving students set them up to fail. Roderick and Engel (2001) revealed that motivation theory points to extrinsic, negative incentives undermining engagement in school. In this study students in grades six and eight who were retained in Chicago's effort to end social promotion were evaluated.

Roderick and Engel's (2001) study found that those students who put forth effort generally had better-than-average learning gains and positive promotional outcomes. One-third of the students, despite not wanting to be retained, demonstrated little or no effort toward promotion. These students demonstrated larger-than-average skill gaps and barriers to learning than their peers who demonstrated concerted effort. The importance

of family and school support for students was found to be a significant factor in student success in this study.

### *Retention*

There was no more controversial policy in education than retaining students and the connection between retention and high school dropouts (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). Retention is currently one of the most divisive practices being used to bring students to grade level and was especially pertinent with the new mandates for increasing high-stakes standardized testing (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). The retention studies of the Chicago Public Schools, which began in 1996, were used in an effort to end social promotion. Chicago instituted a promotional requirement based on students' scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Findings from these ongoing longitudinal studies cited several connections to retention and its influence on high school dropout rate. Factors cited as having caused disengagement for students from school and an impact on their dropping out of school included:

- the perception that teachers did not believe students were capable of the work,
- remediation did not improve student performance, and
- being overage for the grade level during adolescence. (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005).

Opponents of retention point to research that provides evidence that retaining students does not increase their achievement and negatively affects their self-esteem. Additionally, research has shown that retention was connected to students dropping out of school. Roderick and Engle (2001) cited professional organizations, such as the

National Association of School Psychologist and the American Educational Research Association, as having taken a strong stand against retaining students, particularly when retention decisions depend upon standardized test scores. In their research Roderick and Engel (2001) found that negative incentives undermine motivation for students to succeed. In their longitudinal study of student retention in the Chicago Public Schools, they found that students with large skill gaps, especially in the area of reading, had difficulty with motivation despite their desire to be promoted to the next grade.

Roderick and Engle (2001) looked at the social context of learning as the most important factor in determining how students respond to the social pressure of not being promoted. The study drew from a qualitative component of a multi-year evaluation of Chicago's initiative to end social promotion. The study followed 102 low-achieving Black and Latino sixth-graders and eighth-graders from five Chicago Public Schools.

Students' patterns of behavior fell into four categories:

- students who were working intensely in school in response to the policy,
- students who were working on skills in relation to the policy outside of school,
- students who were worried about the policy but not doing much work, and
- students who were not worried about the policy and not increasing their work effort.

The research found significant differences in the reasons for the students' responses. Differences among the group of students included:

- the skill gaps students were expected to close,
- the external supports and stressors,



- the age and gender of the student, and
- quality of the teacher.

Students with the lowest skill set were the least able to appropriately respond and may have felt that their increased work could lead to success. Many of the students with low effort also had a lack of external support. Many of these students had significant learning difficulties or problems at home. In this study the eighth grade students who did not meet the cut-off scores and who were 15 in eighth grade were sent to transition centers, creating a greater motivation for them to achieve than their sixth grade counterparts. Lastly, the impact of the teacher effect when comparing two schools was significant. The school where teachers adopted new strategies, valued student achievement, and adopted success as an important goal made an impact on student success.

In yet another study of retention, Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) measured the impact of the use of the short-term effect of retention on improving students' reading achievement. They examined three questions: first, did the extra year of instruction allow students to raise test scores the second time in the grade? Second, how did retention provide students with multiple opportunities to pass through remediation and summer programs? Third, did retention lead to higher achievement than if the students had been promoted to the next grade?

Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) found little to support the contention that retaining students actually improved long-term educational outcomes. Additionally, the research found that many of the previous studies had not used matched comparison groups, which provide a view of students of similar age and grade level, as they tend to differ on the short term effects of retention due to:

- the point at which student achievement was estimated,
- the comparability of test scores across grades,
- the ability to construct adequate comparison groups of retained and promoted children, and
- accountability for students' prior characteristics.

Roderick and Nagoka (2005) addressed the need to use matched comparison groups and worked with same-age comparison groups to determine if after retention student achievement improved compared to a control group who were promoted within the same period of time. The purpose of using matched comparison groups was to find if two years of learning in the same grade could provide greater achievement than if a student was promoted to the subsequent grade despite not meeting the standardized testing requirement.

Roderick and Nagoka (2005) concluded that there was currently little guidance and support for teachers in diagnosing the problems of students who were retained and little or no training or additional resources to improve student achievement when a student repeats a grade. In theory, students were only given a second dose of the same material. Additionally, special education placement increased for retained students in an effort to assist them. Reading difficulties were identified as the main reason for being referred to special education; yet, little was done to provide alternative interventions the second time in a grade. Roderick and Nagoka (2005) found the strategy of retaining students made them overage for their grade and placed them at substantial risk for dropping out of high school.

Further, the research of Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) and Roderick (1993) found that not only were students who were overage for their grade more likely to drop out, but students who were overage for their grade and retained were also as likely to drop out. Factors that make retention more likely to have the effect of increasing dropout rate included teachers' perceptions that students were not capable of doing the work, that remediation by retention does not improve performance, and the result of being overage during adolescence causes frustration and disengagement.

#### *School Structure/ Size*

School structure refers to the organizational make-up of a school and the school system. The characteristics of school structure encompass funding, leadership, social relations, school size, and curriculum. Recent literature has reported a relationship between school structure and a student's educational success (Lee & Burkham, 2001). Findings show that social attachment to the school, when school size allowed for relationships among the students, teachers, and the community, increased student investment, and encouraged students to perform at or above their level of talent (Finn, 1992). School structure also has an impact on students dropping out of high school (Lee & Burkham, 2001).

Lee and Burkham (2001) exhaustively studied the difficulties encountered within the school structure rather than the societal factors of students dropping out of high school. This study focused on three key elements in the secondary school system: the curriculum, school size, and social relations. In order to analyze the impact on school organization and structure, a sample of over 3000 students in 190 urban and suburban high schools from the High School Effectiveness Supplement (HSES) of the NELS:88

study were included. Lee and Burkham (2001) employed a hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) methodology to explore individual school data as well as differences between schools as they factored size, low-level course offerings, and student-teacher relations. Factors contributing to students dropping out included students being overage for the grade level, achievement in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, grade point average (GPA), coursework, as well as race/ethnicity, social class, and gender.

In schools with constrained curricula with few nonacademic courses, students were less likely to drop out. Students who had a tendency to drop out did not complete any upper level math courses, attended larger high schools, and had negative interactions with teachers in their schools. Additionally, students in schools of less than 1500 students were more likely to stay in school until graduation as well. Lastly, the study found that positive relationships between students and teachers were a predictor of students successfully completing high school.

In a study relating to school structure and dropout rate, Fitzpatrick and Yoels (1992) investigated the school system as it related to demographic composition and school structure as a function of student retention. Analysis included state policy and socio-demographic composition in relation to student retention. This research considered educational expenditures by the district and the average daily attendance as having significant indirect influence on student retention. Among the socio-demographic factors considered, this research found family structure, specifically single-female parent households, as a critical predictor of both school structure and dropout rate. This research found a direct connection between poor urban schools and the socio-demographics make-up of the constituents of a school and school systems. The research found a direct

connection to the socio-demographic factors of a school system as a predictor of the ability of a school system to provide a quality education. These factors, as measured by the ratio of adults to children in a supportive role in the school and the amount of money spent per child, were a reflection of the commitment to a quality educational program. In essence, the schools with less ability to financially support education were also the schools with students who had students with many risk factors for not succeeding in school.

Data for this study was collected from two sources. The researchers used the Annual Digest of Educational Statistics (NDES) from 1978 and 1996 and the State and Metropolitan Area Data Book (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990) to measure the regions of the country, percentage of non-White students, percentage of female-headed households with children under eighteen, and urban populations. The analysis was divided into two parts. First, the trend in dropout rate for the fifty states was studied. Second, the study examined the direct effect of state policy and variables of school structure on state dropout rate.

Fitzpatrick and Yoels (1992) demonstrated that aggregate models could make significant contributions to the existing literature. Traditionally, such studies have used individual schools or districts as a unit of analysis. Policy and research discussion from this research can help shape school structure, as well as socio-demographic factors in creating policy. Findings from this research suggest that state-level policymakers should pay attention to the demographic composition of school districts, especially in urban areas due to the presence of at-risk student groups that are affected by public spending and programming decisions. The study suggests that efforts to correct the dropout

problem may be more effective if efforts to retain students in school until completion focus on younger children from single-parent families and low-income racial minorities.

As with the previous empirical studies, The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL, 2005) in its review of research discusses school structure in the overall success of students completing high school. SEDL found that students do not fail simply based on their ethnicity, SES, or family structure; they fail due to schools' inability to be responsive to the conditions accompanying students' personal circumstances. Further, they support Lee and Burkam's (2001) findings that schools and teachers have a significant impact on students' abilities to persist in high school until graduation. SEDL (2005) research states different treatment of at-risk students in the classroom than their high achieving peers through:

- seat placement in the classroom,
- less direct instruction by their teachers,
- fewer opportunities to learn new material,
- less feedback from teachers,
- being interrupted more often by teachers,
- less eye contact by teachers, and
- less praise from teachers.

Finally, SEDL makes the point that policies, such as retention, out-of-school suspension, course failure, and ability grouping, intended to maintain high standards, exacerbate the dropout problem.

### *Transition Grade to High School*

Transitioning from school to school is a milestone in a student's educational career. Alspaugh (2002) studied the effect of the transition grade to high school and its connection to a student's decision to drop out of high school. The study explored the effect of gender, grade level, and transition to high school as it compares to dropout rate.

Alspaugh's (2002) findings support previous research that larger schools have higher dropout rates than smaller schools, as well as a decline in student achievement occurring in transition grades. This study selected 15 samples from a variety of common transitions from elementary or middle school to high school. The dropout rate from each category, seven-twelve, nine-twelve, and ten-twelve are studied. The dropout rate peaked in the eleventh grade for all three types of transition groups. The highest dropout rate occurred for boys in tenth and eleventh grade in schools that housed grades ten through twelve.

The implications from this study indicate that the transition grade has a significant impact on dropping out. The findings of this study indicated that high school dropout rates were lowest in districts without intermediate level or middle/junior high schools. This research suggests that lengthening the high school grade span and lowering the grade level of transition to high school may make students more likely to acclimate to the high school prior to being age appropriate to drop out. Grade-level configuration within the school district was controlled locally and was studied as a potential strategy for reducing the dropout rate.

### *Graduation Requirements*

As levels of accountability increase, educators are focusing more intense efforts and resources on programs to meet the goals of the federal mandate *NCLB*. Solutions to meet the mandates range from increasing remedial courses to increasing the number of core credits to graduate from high school.

Clune and White (1992) studied two high schools in four different states. The study used random samples of transcripts and found that the average credit per student increased for all nonacademic students. Clune and White (1992) reported that basic mathematics and remedial mathematics lost average daily membership, while the number of students completing Algebra and Geometry increased. The largest gains in English were in the advanced levels of English at the eleventh-grade level. Science had the largest gain in increased credit for any one subject area.

Clune and White (1992) found that increasing the number of credits to graduate did not increase academic performance. Hence, by increasing the number of courses students were required to take, academic performance was not necessarily increased. The state averages on test scores for heavily urban areas did not reach the averages of individuals in less populated areas of the states. Additionally, the percentage of students enrolling in college preparatory courses did not increase in the lower achieving, heavily urban schools with high numbers of at-risk students. Lower achieving urban students made little or no gain in achievement during the time period when academic standards were increased.

Clune and White (1992) found that increasing credits did not increase achievement for academically at-risk students. Increase in more rigorous requirements



came as a result of policy changes without considering factors that increase learning and motivation for students. Additionally, Clune and White (1992) made suggestions for a systematic study of course taking disaggregated by administrative units, such as individual schools, districts, states, and nationally, as a healthy and relevant issue for the study of reform for low-achieving, high-risk students. The difficulty of research using a large-scale study of transcripts was the burden and cost of individual transcript data recall, which highlights the difficulty of impacting policy reform by high cost, data-driven research.

Roderick (1993) also investigated whether state/course graduation requirements affect high school dropout decisions. In this longitudinal research, Roderick reviewed student transcripts from the fourth grade through graduation or to dropping out of school in the Fall River, Massachusetts school system, seeking commonalities among the students who left prior to graduation. The evidence and findings of this study indicated a need for analysis of state and local school policy. Size of the school, the student to teacher ratio, the grade level of transitions, attendance, and graduation policies had an impact on the dropout rate. Suggestions for improved completion in the system include, but are not limited to, adequate state spending in low-SES schools, increasing the average daily attendance of students, providing smaller student-teacher ratio, and implementing peer counseling. Additionally, suggestions indicated that the community be included by providing assistance and programming to the poorest families, single-parent families, minorities, and those who do not succeed by the fourth grade.

Hoffer (1997) studied the effect of student achievement on dropping out of high school. The purpose of this research was to look at the impact of graduation requirement

policies on those who are already at-risk of leaving high school prior to completion by examining the effect of increasing the math requirements for high school graduation. The premise of implementing the new policy was that students could increase scores in mathematics on standardized achievement tests by increasing the number of math classes a student was required to complete.

The data used in this study came from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). The case base for this analysis included 9,500 records of students who met the criteria for the study, which included completing an achievement test in 1988 or 1992 and the principals providing information on their schools' graduation requirements in 1990.

The results of Lillard and DeCicca's (2001) study indicated that increasing the math requirement had little or no effect on improving achievement on standardized testing in math. Additionally, the increased graduation requirement may have represented an insurmountable challenge for some students. However, schools that had an existing requirement of three math courses did not see an increase in the dropout rate. The increase in math credits did have a positive impact on the rates of completion of Algebra I and Geometry; yet, the increase in math courses did not translate into higher scores on standardized achievement tests. This study suggests that just increasing numbers of courses students are required to take does not increase performance. Lillard and DeCicca (2001) suggested that schools create specific standards to improve learning outcomes.

Lillard and DeCicca (2001) found that after accounting for state-specific, fixed factors, changes in course graduation requirements did reduce the "on time" high school graduation rates. This study suggested that requirements have not changed significantly

over time, which suggested that they are not used to influence the decisions of students to drop out of high school. Also suggested in this study was that schools and states with historically low dropout rates may have less difficulty raising course requirements than schools and states with existing dropout problems.

Lillard and DeCicca (2001) also studied the net effect of higher requirements for high school graduation and its impact on the human capital. The authors used a mathematical regression to eliminate unobserved benefits or detriment to the effect of a variety of factors that preclude students from meeting graduation requirements. Data for this study was taken from a variety of national databases of the population and on education. This study concluded that increasing graduation requirements increased the number of dropouts and students' decisions about attending school. As evidenced from the trends from 1980 and 1990 census data (Lillard & DeCicca, 2001), the dropout rate increased from three percent in 1980 (prior to when course graduation requirements were more consistent) to 7.4% in the 1990 census report as states and local districts imposed increased course requirements. It was the conclusion of Lillard and DeCiccas' (2001) research that students with at-risk characteristics dropped out at a more frequent rate as graduation course requirements increased.

### Methodology

In order to discern the factors in the current literature that keep students from dropping out or encouraging them to stay in school, conducting a case study provided evidence of characteristics of at-risk students, motivating experiences in the high school setting, and the perceived culture of a school that graduates students at a higher-than-expected rate based on national and local data. Collection of data involved a variety of

techniques in order to study elements in one high school and its success in graduating at-risk students. This study utilized the methodologies inherent to case study research in qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research was more readily structured to be holistic and natural while looking at a larger scope of a question (Grady, 1998). The intended qualitative method employed examines a social setting and discovers answers through a systematic procedure (Berg, 2004).

This study involved immersion in a single high school to garner perceptions regarding the reasons that those who are at-risk of not graduating stay until graduation or leave prior to graduation. Immersion in a single setting was a key to high quality data analysis and allows the researcher to become immersed in information, human actions, interactions, and relationships that are inherently complex (Grady, 1998).

Interviews and focus groups provide an arena for researchers to tap the emotional and unconscious motivation not found within the structure of conventional survey research (Garson, 2004). Creswell (1998) states that when collecting information in a case study, interviews lasting up to two hours with at least 10 participants could represent a reasonable sample. Focus groups are also used to allow the researcher to clarify and learn more about the interview data (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). These discussions often lead to new ideas and insight into a topic. The focus group was typically purposively formed rather than randomly selected so that a targeted representative group could be interviewed (Patton, 2002).

#### *Document Review*

Document review, also described as content analysis, involves counting the frequency in which values of a variable occur (Crowl, 1996). The units of measure in the

content analysis in a qualitative study center on communication. Content analysis was used to look for insight and nuances to the key topics that were studied. In the document analysis, coding of themes to compare and contrast issues relevant to the categories affecting potential dropouts helped to guide the study (Merriam, 1998). In reviewing artifacts in the students' permanent records and the district-level policies and handbooks, themes and characteristics were noted. Additionally, the role and responsibility in implementing these policies was analyzed.

### *Interviews*

Traditionally the term survey refers to both interviews and pencil and paper questionnaires (Berg, 2004). In a qualitative study, the use of an interview was to garner the perceptions of the participants rather than to gather just numerical data. In building an interview protocol and developing interview questions, the researcher must determine the nature of his/her investigation and the objectives of the research.

In order to gather the most complete account of the participants' stories, the researcher must include four types of questions. The four styles of questions best suited to gather information include the essential questions, extra questions, "throw-away" questions, and probing questions. The essential questions are derived from the research questions; the extra questions are similar to the essential questions but worded differently to check the reliability of the response. The "throwaway" questions develop rapport and center on demographic information that has little or no use to the actual research question. Lastly, the probing questions provide the interviewer with a way to draw additional information from the subject. Frequently, phrases such as "Could you tell me

more about that?” or “How come?” help to trigger an additional response or an elaboration of the original response (Berg, 2004).

Interviewing students allowed them to self-report on their grades, attendance, retention, discipline, early school experiences, and successes. The interviewer must use care in the use of self-reporting. Through the interview process it was essential that the interviewer make use of social interpretation, through awareness of facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language to discern the truth in the complex presentation of the message (Grady, 1998). The qualitative process of interviewing allows for social interpretation, which leads to new questions being developed as the study is in progress. Well-developed interview protocol and questions lend rich and meaningful information to the exploration of the topic of high school dropouts (Grady, 1998).

#### Summary of the Literature

Presently, students are facing increased pressure in school due to the importance of standardized test scores and their influence on graduation, transcript data, and school accountability. The policy-driven initiatives have created complex problems of meeting the demands of both the present initiatives and the students (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003; Greene, 2002b; Lee & Burkham, 2001). To prevent students from leaving school before graduation, course work must be relevant, and the student invested in the school and the community. Student transience makes relevance, sequential instruction, and mastery of content difficult for students and teachers. Additionally, ethnic diversity, low socioeconomic status, single-parent families, retention, school size, and multiple transition grades pose problems for high school graduation in the setting studied. As described by Gustafson (2002), many students feel very little connection to their new schools and

communities and when the confinement of academia becomes too stringent and difficult, students drop out.

High school dropouts have been the subjects of studies by educators for many years. The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 10.3% of the population between the ages of 16 and 24 were not in school in 2004 and had not completed their high school education (NCES, 2006). The importance of the issues surrounding the high school dropout are more critical today as a larger segment of the population completes college and enters the workforce with a post-secondary degree (Swanson & Chaplin, 2003). The unemployment rate for high school dropouts continues to climb (Hall, 2005), and many of the fastest-growing jobs require education beyond the high school diploma (ACT, 2004).

Policies regarding dropouts are difficult to quantify due to the variation and inaccuracy of local, state, and national data. A uniform definition of dropout may assist the study of high school dropouts. Deschamps (1992) found a need for further investigation in the role of the family, peers, and special education in a student's decision to drop out.

Traditionally studies have used individual schools or districts as a unit of analysis. Fitzpatrick and Yoels, (1992) demonstrated that aggregate models make significant contributions to the existing literature. Policy and research discussions can now move to focus on school structure, as well as socio-demographic factors in creating policy. The central theme of early high school leaving centers about five main threads in the empirical research. Academic mediation, general deviance, deviant affiliation, poor

family socialization, and structural strain theory are prevalent in any study of the high school dropout (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000).

The literature in relationship to the high school dropout rate was focused around demographics, social and family structure, deviant behavior in society, and in school (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). These characteristics have been studied heavily without making schools accountable to change the factors that affect dropout rate. In the study of school policy, the literature was rich in identifying retention, course-taking, academic performance, standardization, and attendance as influencing increased student dropout rate. In addition, factors such as ethnicity, the number of transitions prior to high school, SES, and relationships between types of classroom strategies, programs, and integration of minority students have been acknowledged as influencing and increasing the graduation rate.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this case study was to identify and understand the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until graduation. This study attempted to identify the precipitating experiences that serve as a catalyst for students persisting until graduation. These findings are particularly important in light of the new accountability requirements mandated by *NCLB* legislation. Because few studies have explored in detail what programs and interventions schools are implementing to keep students from leaving school prior to completion, a case study devoted to understanding what keeps students engaged in school was the best qualitative tradition for examining this phenomenon.

#### The General Perspective

The study was conducted in a large, comprehensive high school encompassing grades nine through twelve in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The researcher, guidance staff, and school administration through established criteria for participation in the study identified students at-risk for dropping out of school before graduation for participation in the study. In conducting this case study, evidence was gathered from the identified students during scheduled visits to their high school. The study took place during the students' senior year in high school with the permission of the Superintendent, the school administration, the students, the students' parents, and approval of the Institutional Review Board of East Stroudsburg University.

It was the intent of this study to uncover the perceived motivation that keeps at-risk students in school and to examine the school-related obstacles that place students at-

risk of dropping out. The identifying characteristics that were used to select students who were perceived to be at-risk based on the review of literature included the parents' education levels, single-parent family status, SES (as determined by free and reduced lunch status), referral to the Student Assistance Team, alternative education placement, transience, and academic achievement. Other factors explored for their impact on student persistence included increased graduation requirements and remedial course-taking, standardized testing, curriculum, school size, and social relationships. These factors are particularly significant in light of the demands of *No Child Left Behind*. The school in this study has maintained a high graduation rate despite increasing standards to meet the mandates, as well as having students with many of the other risk factors cited in the literature.

Recognizing the reasons students stay in school may provide recommendations for schools facing the social, political, and educational ramifications of students leaving school prior to graduation (Lee & Burkam, 2001). Without a comprehensive study of the students' and stakeholders' perspectives on the issues and initiatives that educators and policy-makers impose on students, it would be difficult to determine the effectiveness of the solutions or the treatments. In studying the students with many risk factors at one high school, stakeholders can identify successful programs that assist students in persisting until graduation.

Having clearly identified at-risk propensity through the empirical research, students with a high number of risk factors that were indicated in their school records were chosen to participate in the study. Gathering information from students who have been identified as at-risk of dropping out of high school provided evidence of the

differences between students who persisted until graduation and students who did not persist. The overarching question of this study was to identify which school factors keep students from dropping out of high school prior to completion.

Additionally, this research was intended to illustrate the relationship between course offerings and the rate of early departure in a school. Naturally, one question led to others:

- Why do you think students drop out of high school?
- What school factors might cause you to leave school before graduation?
- How do you think students who are held back/retained feel about school?
- Does the school offer courses and programming that will help you be successful in future schooling or work?
- How have remedial math or English classes helped you to learn?
- Are you aware of special programs offered to students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school?
- Do you think the size of the high school has an impact on a student's decision to stay in school?
- Are your parents and the community involved in your education?
- Are there special programs offered to help you through the difficult parts of school?

Getting to the core of why students leave high school or stay has become an issue that has received much attention in the popular media. The unemployment rate for high school dropouts was more than 30% higher than that of those who graduate from high school (Hall, 2005). With 70% of the 30 fastest growing jobs requiring an education

beyond high school and 40% of all new jobs requiring at least an associate's degree, the prospect for high school dropouts is more critical than ever (ACT, 2004). This case study sought to identify the role that a school or school system plays in keeping students in school until completion.

### The Research Context

The case study took place in a single, comprehensive, high school, including grades nine through 12, in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The school district, designated rural by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, was located in the center of a resort and recreation area. The district encompasses approximately 300 square miles and serves approximately 11,706 students in two high schools, three intermediate schools, seven elementary schools, and one alternative center. The ethnic distribution of the student body of this high school includes 62.6% White students, 20.1% Black students, 15.5% Latino students, and 4.5% Native American and Asian students. Thirty-five percent of students are identified as economically disadvantaged.

The population in the attendance area of the school district has changed dramatically over the past ten years. Much of the population moving into the area is from the middle to upper middle class with one or both parents/caregivers continuing to commute to New Jersey or New York for employment. In the county where the school is located, the population increased from 96,000 people in 1990 to 170,000 in 2000. The county has grown 44.9% from 1990 to 2000, compared to the state's growth of only 3.36% (R. R. Heath, personal communication, May 15, 2006). The school district has grown from just over 6,000 students in 1997 to 11,706 students in 2006.

In conducting this study, it was particularly interesting to note that while greater than 35% of the population came from a minority background and 35% of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged, the students in this high school graduated at a rate of 95%, far above the rates noted by Greene (2002b), Hall (2005), and Lee and Burkham (2001). Additionally, the increases in course and graduation requirements due to meeting the mandates of *NCLB* have placed an additional burden on students. As cited by Fitzpatrick and Yoels (1992) and Lillard and DeCicca (2001), increasing course requirements has often meant a decrease in success for the at-risk student.

#### Procedure for Selecting Participants

The criteria for selecting students to participate in the study were based on the students' propensities for leaving school based on the characteristics in the literature as cited by Fitzpatrick and Yoels, (1992), Deschamps, (1992), Lillard and DeCicca, (2001), and Houchens (2004). The primary characteristics of students at-risk of leaving high school prior to finishing include demographics such as social and family structure, deviant behavior in society and in school, ethnicity, low socio-economic status, single-parent families, absenteeism, disciplinary problems, grade retention, and low academic performance (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Dechamps, 1992; Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992; Hoffer, 1997; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001; Roderick, 1993). Using the Student Record Checklist, (Appendix A) enabled the researcher to create a list of seniors who had demonstrated the highest number of characteristics of students at-risk of dropping out of high school. Based on the number of students who were identified as at-risk, 85 students were asked to participate in the study, and a selected random sample was drawn from the

original list based on representation of different demographic characteristics such as gender, family structure, and ethnicity.

Permission to participate in the study was gained from the Superintendent and the High School Principal. A consent form and an invitation to participate in the study was sent to the students and their parents (Appendix E and F). The guidance staff, selected teachers, school and district administrators were asked to participate in interviews and focus groups to gather their perceptions as to the reasons that students choose to stay until graduation despite their risk factors. Follow-up letters were sent as needed to gain additional permission and engagement in the study (Appendix E, F, and G).

#### Instrumentation and Data Collection

In conducting this case study, evidence was gathered through a variety of techniques in order to study the factors contributing to the success of one high school in graduating at-risk students. This study utilized the methodologies inherent to case study in qualitative inquiry. The researcher conducted an immersion study using a single high school. This study included a document review, interviews, and focus groups to gather information on perceptions regarding the reasons these students did not leave prior to graduation.

Interviews and focus groups provide an arena for researchers to tap the emotional and unconscious motivation not found within the structure of conventional survey research (Garson, 2004). The interview protocol was developed using the review of literature for the initial interview questions (Appendix C and D). Prior to conducting the interviews and focus groups, a pilot study was conducted. The purpose of the pilot study was to clarify the questions that were developed from the literature to garner data for the

study. The pilot study took place in a neighboring rural school district with similar demographics. Eight students and three adults participated. Each participant read and answered the questions asked by the researcher in order to assure that the questions were clear and open-ended. Notes taken from these sessions were used to clarify the questions. Questions that yielded yes or no responses or short answers were reworded. An example of an original question was, “Do you participate in school activities?” Based on feedback from the pilot study, the question was rephrased to yield a more open-ended response. The new question was phrased, “In what school activities do you participate?” Changes made in the phrasing of the questions based on the pilot study results yielded answers that required little prompting to gather rich data in the interviews and focus groups.

For this study, purposeful sampling was used to insure that a representative group of participants was identified (Berg, 2004). Focus groups are also used to allow the researcher to clarify and learn more about the interview data (Bresciani et al., 2004). These discussions often lead to new ideas and insight into a topic. The focus group was purposefully formed rather than randomly selected so that a targeted representative group could be interviewed (Patton, 2002). An additional protocol was developed, using the review of literature as the basis for the questions (Appendix C and D). Interviews of the faculty and administration occurred in the school setting to garner follow-up information as needed.

### *Document Review*

A checklist (Appendix A) was used to record factors relevant to the categories affecting potential dropouts. The permanent records include information on age, retention

history, elementary and intermediate school success, number of schools attended, special education services, alternative education placement, parental level of education, ethnicity, academic history, attendance, discipline history, and teacher observations and recommendations.

As part of the document review, the student handbook, attendance policy, and other policies related to graduation, credit attainment, and high school completion were reviewed. The roles and responsibilities in implementing these policies was analyzed as well.

### *Interviews*

Students were interviewed and self-reported on their grades, attendance, retention, discipline, and early school experiences and successes. The students were interviewed throughout the school year using the original research questions in addition to the questions developed through the review of literature and the content and review of the interviews and focus groups as well. The following are a sample of the research questions that drove the initial interview questions of students:

- What school activities do you participate in?
- What types of work experiences do you have? Do you work after school?
- Why do you think students drop out of high school?
- Have you ever thought about dropping out of high school?
  - If so, why did you think about dropping out of high school?
- What made you stay in school rather than drop out?
  - What about this person or these activities helped you?
- What about school might cause you to leave school before graduation?



- How do you think students who are held back/retained feel about school?
- Describe any special programs offered to help you through the difficult parts of school.
- Is/was there a trusted adult who has been a positive influence/someone you could turn to when you were having problems in school?
- Describe any courses or programs that will help you be successful in future schooling or work.
- (If these programs do exist...), describe the ones you participated in.
- If you have taken remedial math or English classes that are meant to help you learn, how have they helped you to learn?
- How does the size of the high school play a part in a student's (your) decision to stay in or leave school?
- How are your parents and the community involved in your education?

### *Focus Group Interviews*

Focus group interviews were conducted as well with the faculty, guidance staff, and administration. The objective of focus group research was to draw responses from the participants regarding their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings in a way that was not feasible using other methods (Gibbs, 1997).

The focus groups were conducted in the same manner as the individual interviews. All data was recorded and transcribed. The researcher, school administration, and guidance department determined the initial setting for the interviews and focus groups. A “gatekeeper or key informant” (Creswell, 1998, p.125) was developed to work with the school to enhance the experience and data collected for the purpose of the study.

### Method of Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and continued throughout the study through transcription of notes, tape recordings of interviews and focus groups, analysis of documents, videotapes, and photographs. The researcher reviewed the collected materials and the documented notes with the participants to gain feedback on the interpretation and accuracy of the data as needed. Key words and phrases were identified in categorizing the data to make meaning of the data derived from interviews and focus groups.

The researcher worked in a manner that funneled the data from whole to part. Categories were identified to develop themes based on the participants' responses and the themes in the related literature. Through the analysis, the researcher attempted to discern common threads in the participants' interviews and the literature on the reasons that students choose to stay in school or leave prior to graduation. Thus, the researcher moved from a full description of the factors of the phenomenon of staying in school until graduation, despite being at-risk for not finishing, to cataloging the interview and focus group data of the participants who experienced the phenomenon. In order to validate the data, triangulation occurred through the comparison of the participants' responses, the current literature, and the review of the records and documents.

### Protection of Human Subjects

Because the study was conducted with high school students who are recognized as a vulnerable population, many of whom are minors, an Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to conducting the research. In the initial phase of the research, letters were sent to the Superintendent of Schools to ask permission to conduct

the study. Additionally, the High School Principal was sent a letter upon approval from the Superintendent.

Prior to the study, a letter of consent explaining the purpose of the research as part of a doctoral study at East Stroudsburg University was provided to the members of the guidance department, school administration, and faculty. Each group was asked to participate in making documents available for review and to participate in focus groups as determined by the researcher. The letter of explanation of the research also clarified that participation in the study was voluntary and that all information was kept strictly confidential. Additionally, the researcher has no connection to the district being studied and any family members or relatives in the population being studied. No identifying information was solicited from the participants in order to maintain confidentiality (Appendix G).

### Chapter Summary

The third chapter specifically identified the methodology of the study, which includes the introduction, description of the research, the context of the study, the participants, the instrumentation, the data collection, and the method of data analysis. Additionally, this chapter explored the development of the recording procedures, documentation of data gathering, and procedures for analysis of the data. Included in this chapter are safeguards, including the Institutional Review Board approval and the informed consent procedures to insure that the research was conducted in an ethical and safe manner, to protect the individuals involved in the study.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This qualitative study was conducted with the intent to answer the overarching question of why students at risk of dropping out of high school persist until graduation. In light of the correlation between students dropping out of high school and negative societal factors, such as poverty, crime, social status, homelessness, and transience, the effect of students not graduating from high school has a damaging impact on our communities, states, and nation. Students who do not complete high school earn lower wages, are under-prepared for the demands of a highly skilled workforce, and are at risk for increased health problems (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001). The negative impact of students not completing high school is universally acknowledged and has connections to juvenile crime, low paying jobs, and unemployment (Lee & Burkham, 2001). The intent of this study was to identify and describe the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until graduation in order to increase graduation rates.

The literature from which the interview questions evolved included Brofenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, which describes a link between students' interactions and experiences in school to their learning, and which can create either a positive or a negative climate for completion. First, students must know that one or more adults love them unconditionally. Second, students must spend time with these adults engaged in meaningful activities to promote positive social development. He describes two basic needs for students to be successful. Brofenbrenner (1979) identifies a caring community as essential to students' abilities to persist in difficult situations.

Additionally, Tinto (1987; 2003), whose work focused on the relationship between the needs of students and their interests to persistence with their schooling, described five conditions that promote persistence in continued schooling. He discovered that students are more likely to persist until completion if:

- expectations of students are high,
- students are given academic, social, and personal support,
- students are provided frequent and early feedback regarding performance,
- students are involved in the institution with support from faculty and staff, and
- students perceive learning as important.

These five factors provide insight to characteristics important in student persistence in school. The interview questions were derived from factors found in the literature. The critical social and economic concern created by students who drop out of high school is well documented in the literature (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Deschamps, 1992; Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992; Hoffer, 1997; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001; Roderick, 1993). Low paying jobs, poor reading skills, and unemployment are just a few of the negative effects of dropping out of high school (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001). Since the high school diploma represents a minimum level of acceptable achievement for employment, the lack of a diploma represents a critical problem for individuals and society.

Factors associated with students staying in school were specifically related to the theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987). The perception that a student is cared for in the school environment and that adults care and spend meaningful time with them

was paramount to their success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, the students must recognize that expectations are high, there is support and feedback for performance, and that students are a part of the school community (Tinto, 1987). These factors were an important part of the exploration in this study of why a student would choose to persist in school despite being at risk of leaving prior to graduation.

This study utilized the methodologies inherent to case study in qualitative inquiry. The research was conducted as an immersion study using a single high school, and included the analysis of pertinent documents, interviews and focus groups, and observation to determine why students at that school who are at risk of not graduating, persist until graduation. Students, faculty, guidance staff, and administration participated in interviews and focus groups in the school setting. The interview and focus group questions were developed using the key factors in the literature to determine what school practices encouraged students to persist until graduation. The questions for the students were piloted with students from surrounding districts who demonstrated the identified risk factors present in the students in the study. The questions for adults were also piloted with faculty and administration from another district with similar demographics. Fourteen open-ended questions for students and nine open-ended questions for the adult participants, with follow-up questions as appropriate, were aligned to the characteristics associated with student persistence. Questions for students (see Appendix C) varied slightly from the questions asked of the adult participants (see Appendix D) due to the different perspective adults have on student persistence.

Evidence was gathered in a variety of ways and from diverse sources in one high school in order to study the characteristics, culture, climate, and motivating experiences

that may relate to student graduation and may help keep students from leaving school. The target high school was selected based on its higher-than-average graduation rate despite the presence of certain high-risk factors. The characteristics present in the population targeted for this study included: poverty, large school population, multiple transition grades, an ethnically and racially diverse student body, increased growth, change in demographics, and a transient population. Students, faculty, guidance staff, and administration interviews and focus groups were conducted at the school.

This qualitative analysis regarding student persistence in one high school was conducted over the course of a year. Initial data from the school district were sorted and formulated to develop a list of potential students to interview who persisted into their senior year and to graduation. The initial data were extracted from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) results and demographic data. Utilizing the characteristics identified in the literature to describe students at risk of non-completion, the following factors were considered in selecting participants:

- students who were overage for their grade,
- students who were racially diverse,
- students identified as in need of special education,
- students who were economically disadvantaged,
- students who were English Language Learners (ELL), and
- students who did not attain advanced or proficient scores on the PSSA test in eleventh grade.

After identifying the characteristics of students at risk for dropping out of high school, a point designation was assigned to each category as risk being equal to one and no risk

being equal to zero. Students who had a score of greater than three points were mailed letters inviting them to participate in the study. Additionally, the Building Principal and Assistant Superintendent asked for volunteers from the teachers, counselors, and administrators to participate in the study.

### Research Questions

This qualitative study examined the following research questions:

Question 1: How do social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration impact students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

Question 2: What are the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until graduation?

Sub-question 2 a: How does the size of the school influence students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

Sub-question 2 b: How does an increase in graduation requirements affect students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

Sub-question 2 c: How do the pressures of standardized testing influence students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

Sub-question 2 d: How does required remedial course-taking impact students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

Sub-question 2 e: How does the structure of the curriculum relate to students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

This study examined the perceptions of students, teachers, counselors, and administrators regarding the perceived factors that keep students who are at risk for not graduating from high school from dropping out. The research was conducted through



interviews and focus groups of six students, four teachers, two guidance counselors, and three administrators. These individuals discussed questions related to the factors identified in the literature on student persistence by Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987).

The participants in this study were all a part of the same school community, which included 1,800 students in grades nine through 12. The school chosen for this study had demonstrated success in consistently graduating 95% of seniors, a higher than expected percentage of students, despite the presence of many risk factors identified in the literature. The student population of this school was rapidly growing, had a high rate of transience, and was racially diverse. The school district has grown from just over 6,000 students in 1997 to 11,706 students in 2006. The ethnic distribution of the student body of this high school included 62.6% White students, 20.1% Black students, 15.5% Latino students, and 4.5% Native American and Asian students. Thirty-five percent of its students were identified as low socio-economic status (SES) and experienced multiple transitions throughout the high school years. However, despite the obstacles this school faces, it consistently graduates 95% of its students.

The interviews were conducted in the library of the school. Students were interviewed individually, and adults responded in focus groups. The building principal was interviewed individually after the focus group of two assistant principals. Students were also interviewed individually to capture unique student responses because of their varied backgrounds and experiences. Adult interviews were conducted in focus groups based on the similar nature of their interactions with students. All interviews and focus groups were recorded, and the responses were transcribed. The interviews provided

insight into the perceptions of both adults and students of this school district regarding the reasons that students in this high school graduate at a higher rate than students from many other high schools across the country.

Initial consent to perform the study was gained from the superintendent of the school district as part of the Institutional Review Board process. Upon approval, the researcher contacted the building principal to gather the demographic data to begin sorting the students who could be identified as at risk for not completing high school. Upon identification of the potential student interviewees, a letter was sent to the parents with a description of the study and consent forms for the student and the parent. The students who responded to letters and postcard requests for participation in the study completed the consent forms prior to the interviews. The adult participants responded to an email from the assistant superintendent and principal asking volunteers to participate in the study. The adults were given a description of the study, as well as consent forms prior to the focus group or interview in which they participated.

Multiple attempts to recruit student participants to increase the interview pool were made through individual letters and postcards that were sent through the United States Postal Service. Six students participated. The student group was racially diverse. Two students were black, two students were Latino, and two students were white. Three students were economically disadvantaged, one student had an IEP, and only one student interviewed was proficient on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) on the first attempt.

All of the adult participants were white. Five of the participants were male and four were female. All of the participants had been working in the school district for more

than two years. Three of the participants had worked in the school district for more than 10 years. The participants of the study are described in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Participant's of the Study*

Group	Number of Participants	<u>Racially Diverse</u>			<u>Gender</u>	
		White	Black	Latino	Male	Female
Students	6	2	2	2	2	4
Counselors	4	2	0	0	0	2
Teachers	2	4	0	0	2	2
Administrators	3	3	0	0	0	3
Total	15	1	2	2	7	8

*Note n = 15*

The transcribed interviews, focus groups, and document review comprised the data for this study. The information obtained in the interviews was compared to the documents and the review of literature for comparison with the theoretical models described by Tinto (1987) and Brofenbrenner (1979) on student persistence.

## Qualitative Data

### *Analysis of Student Interview Questions*

This section summarizes the responses to each of the 14 questions as they relate to the school-related factors that are associated with students persisting in school until graduation.

#### *Question 1: In What School Activities do you Participate?*

All six students who participated in the study stated that they had taken part in one or more school activities during their time at this high school. One student was no longer involved in school activities during her senior year due to work commitments. The student had previously been on the spirit squad and took part in athletics.

A second student participated in varsity athletics, school fundraisers, and in school leadership and competitions at the Career and Technical School. She considered the activities “a break from her school and technical program.” Another student joined the Spanish Honor Society so that “(she) could have people to communicate with.” Under the direction of her English Language Learner (ELL) teacher, she also participated in peer support as a volunteer working with intermediate and elementary students in the ELL program.

A fourth student participated in varsity athletics throughout her school career. In addition, she was involved in volunteer activities and the Spanish Honor Society. The fifth student participant was also involved in athletics, the morning announcements, and Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD).

The sixth participant was involved in athletics and the after-school tutoring program. He continued to struggle academically in his senior year and sought private

tutoring. He wished he “could continue in track, but [his] academics were too important, and [he] need[ed] to graduate.”

The students’ participation in school activities described in question one are congruent with the theories of both Tinto (1987) and Brofenbrenner (1979). The importance of participation and being involved in the school, were demonstrated in each of the students’ responses. Tinto (1987) speaks of involvement in the institution as creating a positive attachment to the school. Each student participated in at least one club or activity to which they could connect in the school as well as a caring adult, which Brofenbrenner (1979) described as necessary for student success in school.

*Question 2: What Types of Work Experiences do you Have?*

The first student reported that she stopped participating in school activities so she could work. At the time of the interview, she was a cashier at a local grocery store working approximately 40 hours and was searching for another job more congruent with her interest in computers that would pay more. She stated, “It is kind of hard to work and do school at the same time, but you need the money and you need your education. That is how I see it. You still get money at the end of anything and if you are still in high school and you are still working, it is a lot better. Your day goes by faster.”

The second student had been working since she was fourteen. During the past year, her parents had become unemployed, and she worked three jobs in the summer to help her family make ends meet. She continued this schedule at the beginning of the school year in addition to her school activities and schoolwork. She said she “was tired and would sometimes miss school just to catch up.” In the literature Aloise-Young (2002)

described students who work to support their families during difficult times as a contributing factor in students leaving high school prior to completion.

The third student taught at a local dance studio. Her work schedule had little impact on her schooling because she arranged her hours to be outside of the school day. The fourth student was a server at a restaurant, and her schedule was also built so that she could would not be too tired to put effort into her school work.

The fifth and sixth students interviewed also worked. Each of these students worked at several different jobs that fit into their schedules of school and homework. They both lived in households where they were expected to both contribute financially and keep up with their schoolwork.

The students interviewed, except for one, chose to work in addition to keeping up with their full-time status as students. All the students had good family support and high expectations for their participation and success in school. Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987) cited the support of caring adults and high expectations in the literature as significant in student persistence.

While one student had to work in order to help support her family members who had become unemployed, she described other moral supports that she received from her family. The characteristics associated with this student's persistence, despite the risk factor of needing, not choosing to work, support the importance of support from her teacher who had high expectations of her and influenced her to persist despite the difficulty of working. She described that a variety of teachers noticed her uncharacteristic, poor work ethic and gave her strategies to overcome this difficulty. This

support helped her to attend school regularly and to work harder to meet her potential (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Tinto, 1987).

*Question 3: Why do you Think Students Drop Out of High School?*

The first student interviewed thought that students dropped out of high school "... because it was hard, or they can't stand the drama." She also thought that some students struggled with teachers they didn't like. The second student cited "not being involved in school" and lack of family support as reasons students would choose to drop out of high school.

The third student spoke about students dropping out because they "get into trouble." She also spoke about students not having family support to encourage them to stay in high school. The fourth student's viewpoint was that students feel a lot of pressure because classes are difficult; they get depressed and have negative attitudes about being able to catch up on the work. She also cited students who have troubled family lives as having more difficulty staying in school.

The fifth student said, "Some kids think school is a waste of time and that they will never pass. They think that they are too stupid." The sixth student stated that students "don't like the teachers and feel that school does not make sense."

While the six students who were interviewed stated that they knew very few students who thought about dropping out, they did discuss their perceptions of the few students they did know who thought about leaving or left school prior to graduation. The overriding element described in the answer to this question was that school was difficult. Additionally, students related the negative feelings for school, which included classes being too hard or overwhelming, students not "liking" the teachers, and students giving

up when it was hard or they did not feel support from the teachers. The students commented about a few of their peers' negative perceptions of teachers. Finally, the students described that some students did not see the value of school. The students interviewed described characteristics of students who left school as different than what they perceived to occur in this high school.

*Question 4: Have you ever Thought about Dropping out of High School? If so, Why did you Think about Dropping out of High School?*

*Question 5: What made you stay in School rather than Drop Out?*

While questions four and five were independent questions, during the interviews the students frequently answered both questions simultaneously. Therefore, in reviewing the transcripts, it seemed appropriate to combine the analyses of these two questions.

The first student stated, "School got hard in fifth grade." She spoke about the importance of her Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as giving her the support and time she needed to be successful. The second student stated that for her school had always been a place to relax. She always liked school and had good support from her teachers and family. The third student stated that she had thought of dropping out, but the support she received from her ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher and family helped her to persevere through the tough times. She had previously attended school in Florida where there was very little support. She thought about dropping out to just pursue a career in dancing. When she moved to Pennsylvania, her positive experience made her want to seek a high school diploma and go to college.

The last three students interviewed had never thought of dropping out. For one student "it was never an option; my parents made school mandatory." Another student



stated that he “likes school, and has a good crowd of friends. [I] get to see my friends in school.” These final three students also talked about letting others down if you do not show up for a sport or a project. The importance of the success of the academic project, club, or sport was highly valued by these students.

In response to these questions, all six students stated the importance of having caring adults and learning being perceived as important. Additionally, three students talked about the importance of seeing friends and participating in activities. Four of the students also identified the concept of responsibility to the success of academic pursuits, teams, and clubs as important. Tinto (1987) and Brofenbrenner (1979) stated that these characteristics, having caring adults and academics perceived as important motivated students to persist in school despite obstacles.

*Question 6: What about the Person or Activities Helped You?*

The first student described friends as the people who helped her to stay in school when she was “stuck” with a difficult teacher. She also spoke about guidance counselors helping with the difficult teachers and school situations. The second student said that she loved soccer, and it made her want to come to school. This student also spoke about having an older best friend who supported and motivated her to keep going through the tough times.

The third and fourth students spoke of both parents and teachers who encouraged them to continue with school through the difficult times. Neither of these students felt that not completing school was ever an option. In fact, these students' parents encouraged them to take classes that were more difficult, college preparatory, rather than applied classes, which the students, themselves, thought that they might not pass. However, each

of these students was successful in the college preparatory classes and was accepted at a college and university.

The final two students stated that good teachers, ones that helped students, made them feel that school was manageable. These two students claimed that teachers were always available to help with difficult work. These students stated there was always a teacher in each subject area that was available after school to help or tutor.

The students' responses to this question pointed to the importance of peers and caring adults in the school environment. Additionally, the students spoke about having caring adults at home to support and encourage them through difficult times. One student also described the importance of her after-school athletic activity. A second student cited the importance of friends in school for support when times were difficult. A third student spoke of her athletic participation as a motivation to come to school every day. Three students also discussed that having people who believed that school was important by being available when school or life circumstances were difficult made a difference. The importance of friends, teammates, counselors, parents, coaches, and advisors all affected the students' motivations to persist until graduation. These characteristics again demonstrate the importance of caring adults in a student's life (Brofenbrenner, 1979) and the connection to the school, as defined by Tinto (1987).

*Question 7: What about School might cause Students (you) to Leave School before Graduation?*

The first student stated, "Some students are told that they can't do it [finish school or pass the class]" by their teachers. The second student stated, "Some students get

frustrated with themselves. Why should I come?” She also stated that they should “... show the world that they can do it.”

The remaining students described possible reasons that their peers would leave school prior to completion as becoming frustrated by not having enough credits to be able to graduate on time, feeling pressure about their ability to pass, having more work than they can handle, and not receiving support from family and teachers.

The students during the interviews described the students who are not able to persist as people who did not connect to an adult in school or have the support of an adult at home. The students had difficulty reporting on specific students because they said they knew very few people who did not stay in school. In response to this question, the students discussed the importance of having a caring adult to spend time with them (Brofenbrenner, 1979) and having academic and social support (Tinto, 1987) as critical to persistence in school until graduation.

*Question 8: How do you Think Students who are Held Back/Retained Feel about School?*

The students interviewed did not know the impact retention had on other students. None of the students interviewed had been retained. The students who were interviewed only spoke about the prevalence of peer tutoring, tutoring after school, and other programs that help students to avoid retention in high school.

*Question 9: Describe any Special Programs Offered to Help you Through the Difficult Parts of School*

The first student interviewed described the guidance counselor and her IEP caseworker as the two people that helped her to get through the difficult parts of school. The second student talked about the after-school tutoring programs and teachers

volunteering to stay after school as important in getting her through the difficult parts of school.

The third student had moved to Pennsylvania from another country. She had attended school briefly in Florida before moving to Pennsylvania. She described her experience in this school as positive compared to her experience in Florida where she felt isolated most of the time. This student described teachers in this school as very helpful. In her native country she stated teachers just taught classes and did not stay after school to help students. She also explained that the tutoring and peer tutoring programs were perceived as a foundation of success for students. She described being able to retake the PSSAs, and she participated in the Pathways Program, a tutoring program, to complete her graduation requirements. This student also spoke of her ESL teacher as critical to her success in this school. When the student lived in Florida, no one helped her and she "... failed so bad[ly]." In Pennsylvania she received support, even "... study guides in Spanish."

The remaining students described peer tutoring, guidance, coaches, club advisors, teachers, and parents as important factors in their remaining in school through the difficult times. Each student indicated connections to caring adults, academic and social support, as well as a caring adult in the students' lives as factors that led to persistence throughout this part of the interview.

*Question 10: Is there a Trusted Adult who has been a Positive Influence/Someone you could turn to when you were Having Problems in School?*

The first student interviewed attributed the Career and Technical program as being the first program that connected her to school. She stated that participating in a

high-interest, hands-on program connected her to school. She talked about the difficulty of her freshman year and the many students who had committed suicide. She also spoke about the teachers and counselors helping students through this difficult time when many students were troubled by the suicides.

Initially, the second student was not able to identify a trusted adult. This student stated that she kept a lot inside and not until her grades dropped did anyone think to ask her if she was all right. Ultimately, her teacher at the Career and Technical School recognized that she was having trouble and became an important factor in her finishing high school. This teacher encouraged her to attend school. When she attended school on a regular basis, she was able to maintain good grades and school involvement as an officer in her career organization and in athletics.

The third student described her ESL teacher and her father as the two people who really made a difference when school was overwhelming. The fourth student named a particular teacher and her mother as the two people she could always count on when school was challenging for her.

The fifth student stated that his football coach and guidance counselor were two people who were always available to help him when school was overwhelming. The sixth student had two teachers and his parents when he faced difficulty. He thought it was amazing that his past teachers helped him even when he was no longer in their classes.

Of the six students interviewed, four students identified teachers as trusted adults who made a difference when school was difficult. One of the teachers was a general education teacher; the others who were identified were teachers whose roles involved specialized programming or special education. Two students identified guidance

counselors as important, and three students identified their parents as critical adults when they were faced with difficulties at school. One or more adults who love a child and spend meaningful time in positive ways (academic, social, and personal support), as well as involvement in the high school, were mentioned in these interviews and are consistent with the characteristics of developing successful school attachment for students (Brofenbrenner, 1979 and Tinto 1987).

*Question 11: Describe any Courses or Programs that will Help you be Successful in Future Schooling or Work Describe the Ones in which you Participated*

The first student said that Pathways, a tutoring program to help meet graduation requirements, was helpful. She said that you could go after school or on Saturday in order to meet the academic requirements for graduation. The second student felt very strongly about the Career and Technical School. She described the opportunity to see a variety of programs and pick one that met her career needs for the future. She stated that the program at the Career and Technical School provided her with hands-on learning and opportunities for leadership and work experience that she could not get her home school. Consequently, she believed that she could go right into the workforce, while continuing her college education in the medical field.

The third student believed that the ELL program made a real difference in her life. She described the help the teacher gave her stating, “My ESL teacher told me to go to lunch and meet people, and she would give me small books to help my vocabulary to grow. She gave me books to study for SATs and PSSAs and gave me study guides in Spanish so I could understand stuff.” She stated that the support she received helped her

to reach her potential and to participate in dual-enrollment courses at the local university. She spoke about being accepted in college and being able to study Biology in the future.

The fourth student did not describe any program. She felt her family members were most influential in helping her to be successful in the future. They encouraged her to participate in school and activities. The fifth student attended the Career and Technical School until this year. He believed that this program gave him skills that will make him successful in the future. The sixth student believed that teachers allowing him to experience a variety of activities and academic experiences led him to a career in film and video that he did not know about. He felt he was able to develop his talents and work ethic by participating in teacher-directed programs both before and after school.

Two students named the Career and Technical program as being critical in their remaining in school. The opportunity to choose a program that was of interest and to develop skill that would be beneficial in finding success in the future were important factors. Two students described supplementary programs as being effective in improving their academic ability. One student identified dual-enrollment at the local university as important to her future success, and one student discussed the before-school activity that allowed him to develop skills to pursue a career in film and video studies.

Students described the variety of programs and courses offered at this school as factors for their success. The students described tutoring, the Career and Technical School, teachers committed to helping students after school, and parent-teacher communication as important factors in their success in school and in the future. The importance of the variety of programs to meet students' needs is described in the differences that each program contributed to the success of the students. The consistency

with the connection to the theories of Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987) with regard to high expectations and programs to support students academically, socially, and personally were repeated in the students' answers to the question of programs that support student success.

*Question 12: If you have Taken Remedial Math or English Classes that are Meant to Help you Learn, how have they Helped you to Learn?*

The first student described the Pathways program as the program that she participated in, since she did not pass the PSSAs. She stated that, "everyone was so nice, boring when they teach sometimes, but they are really nice and try to help." She was not able to articulate how the program helped her academically. She focused on the patience in teaching her concepts that took her a long time to master. The second student also had to take Pathways for reading because she did not pass the PSSAs. The program only required her to take the four sections on which she did not do well. She felt determined to get the remediation finished. She believed the program helped her to gain the knowledge she needed to be a more thoughtful reader who was able to make more meaning of what she read.

The third student described ELL as a program that helped her learn. Although not a typical remediation program, it did help students who were attempting to master academic content before learning English. This student stated that her teacher stayed after school to help her master her classes despite her language barrier. The teacher provided her resources to help her communicate with other students in lunch, she provided her with study guides in Spanish, and she gave her resources to practice the SAT and PSSA



test. The teacher also involved her through the Spanish Honor Society and Peer Tutoring to tutor younger students who had difficulty in learning English.

The fourth student did not participate in any remedial programs. The fifth student participated in tutoring and homework club. He also participated in Pathways due to not passing the PSSAs. He described the program as reinforcing skills that he had difficulty mastering. He stated that teachers were available and their extra effort made it easier for him to be interested in and master the material. The sixth student was glad to have the Pathways program and the tutoring. This student stated after participating in the program that, “Now I understand the material.”

Students answered this question consistently by stating there was not “remedial course work” that they were required to take during the school day if they were not proficient in the PSSA test. The students listed a variety of after-school programs, such as Pathways, that were available for them to be able to successfully complete their requirements for graduation. Some of the activities in which they participated included peer tutoring, homework club, Pathways, and ELL. Four students completed the Pathways program, one student met IEP goals, and one student was proficient on the PSSAs. The students acknowledged these programs as important in the mastery of content they did not know or understand.

The connection to the adults who provided the support was also significant in the response to this question. All of the students had someone in the school that made sure that they succeeded. The students all described the staff that ran the programs as positive and caring.

*Question 13: How does the Size of the High School Play a part in a Students (your) Decision to Stay in or Leave School?*

All of the students who were interviewed stated that they did not believe the school was so big that students would leave prior to completing high school. On the contrary, the first student interviewed said, “Everyone was nice at the school, sometimes boring, but nice.” She continued that in the school all the adults are willing to help students.

The second student said, “Some of the class sizes are large which make it hard for teachers to get to know students. Some teachers are better at handling all kids; others need help.” She also stated, “The size of this school does not allow kids to fade away.” The third student stated that she “had been in schools that were bigger, and counselors in this school really stay in touch with you.”

The fourth student did not believe that the size of the school made a difference. She stated, “Teachers generally reach out to students in this school.” The fifth student agreed that the school was “not that big.” He also commented, “Teachers call parents and that keeps you accountable.” The sixth student said, “Teachers let you know if you need help, and they let you know they are available.”

None of the students perceived the size of the school as an influence on students leaving prior to graduation. One student did describe the negative impact of large class sizes. She made the point that it could be difficult “for some teachers to manage large classes,” which influences learning.

Students all believed that the staff did not allow the size of the school to, as one student stated, “Let students to slip through the cracks.” Students generally described the teachers as willing and available to help students succeed.

*Question 14: How are your Parents/Guardians and the Community Involved in your Education?*

The first student spoke about her mom being involved in the Football Mothers club when she participated in the spirit squad. Her mother also participated in the Booster club; therefore, people at school knew her. The second student spoke about how her parents took notice of who her friends were and what she was doing in school. She described her parents’ concerns when she was hanging out with others who were headed for trouble and would not let her “hang out” with them. She stated, “[My] parents always came to school for parent/teacher conferences and to watch [me] play sports. My parents knew my teachers.”

The third student said that her parents were involved through activities that the school hosted such as parent/teacher conferences, Honor Society induction, and the Honor Roll breakfast. She perceived the school to be good at connecting with parents. The fourth student said that her parents were involved in her life but that they worked in New Jersey and were not able to attend many school events or functions.

The fifth student said that his parents were highly involved in his school life. He claimed that his parents were well-known by the school and community. The sixth student expressed similar sentiments about parent involvement. He knew that teachers would call if he were not living up to his parents’ expectations for academics or behavior.

Every student interviewed spoke of the importance of teachers and parents working together in order for students to be successful. Each described the involvement and communication between the home and school as significant. Consistent with the literature, the importance of a caring adult in students' lives who values and appreciates the importance of education is critical in student motivation to complete school despite difficulty (Brofenbrenner, 1979 & Tinto, 1987).

#### *Analysis of Guidance Counselor Focus Group Questions*

This section summarizes the responses of the guidance counselors to each of the nine questions as they describe the school-related factors that are associated with students persisting in school until graduation. The guidance counselors were considered for this study due to the importance of their role in helping students to select classes, their day to day involvement with students, and their connection to the teachers and administration in assisting students in successful completion of high school.

##### *Question 1: Describe how Social Relationships with Peers, Faculty, and Administration Affect a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

During the focus group the counselors described the teachers and the administrators as important factors in providing support for students to complete high school. The counselors spoke about the importance of the individual attention the students received from the teachers and administrators. The counselors related the importance of individual attention of adults for preventive communication and helping students to find their "niche" as critical to student success.

The guidance counselors stated that the most difficult element of helping students was getting them to utilize the available resources. Both counselors believed that if

students had adults to talk to and support at home, they were more likely to be successful. The first counselor stated, “[They are more successful] if they have backing at home and family resources to help motivate them to help keep going. I also find some of mine are over the top, not shy, and very outgoing; they have a hard time because many of the kids think they [her students] are too much over the top. They don’t want to be associated with them depending on their personalities.”

The counselors also shared, “Some of the kids I have who can’t find their niche get into trouble. They seem to beeline right to a specific administrator because they know the administrator is going to hug them; they are going to talk about the problem; they will get the help from them [administration] they need.”

The second counselor stated, “I have a couple that go to teachers; some of the teachers have quite a few students who, if there is a problem, will go straight to the teacher because they are comfortable with that teacher. They have their [teacher’s] class and then they pick another class with her and they tend to go to the teacher. They find a relationship. Some of them [the teachers] are actually almost like parents to the student. They are always with them, help them after school.” This counselor continued saying, “I have heard a couple of teachers recently that have not had the student in class for a couple of years, but the student still went to them to get some help.”

The first counselor also found, “There are quite a few teachers who help our kids, especially struggling [students], even if it is not their area. The teacher will guide the student, help them to get set up with another teacher to get the academic support they need. Some of these kids go to them if they are in trouble, or they get help before they get in trouble.”

As described by Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987), caring adults engaged with students in school led to success and perseverance for students who face difficulty in completing school.

*Question 2: Communicate the Pressures of Standardized Testing and its Influence on a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The counselors spoke about students not realizing the importance of standardized testing until they are hearing from colleges who want better scores on the tests. The first counselor stated, "I really don't think it does [have an influence on students deciding to stay in school or not]. They are all applying to colleges and they are getting responses from the college that they needed to do better on the standardized test."

The second counselor spoke about the Pathways Program offered to students who do not perform at proficient or better on the PSSAs, stating, "Students who do not score have many teachers who provide tutoring with Pathways. Some of the students want to kick themselves because they were [scored] basic on the first attempt."

Both counselors spoke about how students recognize that they could have performed better if they had taken the initial test more seriously; yet the teachers who provide the tutoring make the students who complete the program feel as if they have accomplished their goal. The students are proud of their achievement toward graduation. The counselors did not believe the pressures of standardized tests are overwhelming for the students. Rather, the counselors spoke about the positive support students received from the teachers who delivered the instruction to help students complete high school.

*Question 3: Share how Required Remedial Course Taking Influences a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The counselors both stated that the only remedial course was Pathways, through which students who do not pass the PSSAs receive tutoring after school until they are proficient. The counselors stated, "Many students and parents request tutoring prior to the students taking the PSSAs." One counselor stated, "Even more kids are looking for that tutoring because they want to pass it the first time." She continued, "I have had a lot of phone calls when they have the first 4Sight test. The 4Sight tests are given at three intervals throughout the year to assess student progress in relation to the PSSA test. We also have prep classes for academic kids."

While the counselors do not describe students leaving school due to the pressure of testing, it is clear that students and parents see the need to take advantage of tutoring programs to attempt to pass the PSSAs the first time. The counselors' responses to the question regarding remedial course-taking implies the importance of the positive perception of school to the students in completing school. (Tinto, 1987). The counselors related that many students and parents requested support prior to the critical PSSA test, and this proactive behavior that has an influence on high school graduation at this school.

*Question 4: Describe how the structure of the Curriculum Relates to a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The counselors described students in this school as generally motivated to work up to their potential. They cited several cases where students had a goal to move from lower level, slower-paced applied classes to more challenging academic courses. One counselor stated, "I have quite a few students that change from applied to academic in the

spring semester. I try to encourage them when they come in to an applied class and don't want to be in that class to work hard to move up to academic classes. I can only see students every so often, but I try to encourage them to work and get into the academic classes. When the students do achieve moving to the higher level, I see it on their faces; they are scared to death that they are moving to academic classes. I think that if the teacher can keep praising them, it will keep them going."

The second counselor continued, "I think the academics are pretty strong with the college courses [dual enrollment] they are taking. I do know I have some applied kids who want to go to college. It can be a little frustrating for them because being able to take the college level courses when their high school classes do not always match the level they need to take the college classes. I think a couple feel like, 'I'm doing well on this track; why can't I take the college classes.' However, I don't know if they are necessarily at a rigorous enough level, not in all, but some of the classes. When you walk in[to] applied classes and the majority level [of the students] is low and maybe some of the kids in there are more capable of performing at a higher level, they get frustrated. I think that is why the more mature kids try to get into the academic classes because some of the applied kids can be very immature."

From the outset, counselors stated that in this school students were encouraged to take classes consistent with their ability levels. The importance of guiding students to take classes that challenge them is consistent with the theory of Tinto (1979) that students need high expectations. The difference that counselors cited between the applied and the academic classes was that students from the applied classes were not able to take college courses through dual-enrollment. Counselors stated that students did not always



understand that the rigor in the applied class would not prepare them for success in the college level classes. Therefore, while counselors perceive that teachers have high expectations for all students, this school offers classes that differentiate the level rigor based on ability.

*Question 5: What Might a Typical Day Look like for a Student in your Class who has Persisted in School Despite Facing Risk Factors of not Completing? What does a Typical Day Look like for Students in Honors or College Preparatory Classes?*

The counselors describe the typical day for students as rigorous. The difference that they described has to do with the attitude of some of the teachers and students. The counselors described their school as having teachers who had high expectations for students in the applied classes, much like their peers in the honors or college preparatory classes, but they described teacher frustration due to students who behave poorly or lack motivation to work, succeed, or study.

The difference they described for students in college preparatory and honors classes within block scheduling is that students had math and English for 90-minute blocks for half of a school year. Conversely, students in the applied level classes receive a 90-minute block of math and English for the entire school year. This means that students in the applied level classes lose four electives over the course of their high school career (see *Figure 1*).

Required Courses (Applied Academic Program)		Required Courses (Academic Program)	
English	8	English	4
Mathematics	8	Mathematics	4
Science	4	Science	4
Social Studies	3	Social Studies	3
*Electives	1	Electives	9

*Figure 1.* Core course requirements for graduation.

\*Students in the Applied Academic Program must take an extra block of Mathematics and English each year in place of an elective.

The counselors believed that the intent of the teachers in all courses was to provide rigorous instruction. The counselor described the rigor of the program as high; yet they acknowledged that some teachers did not deliver a rigorous program due to frustration with student apathy.

While the counselors described the intent of the program for all students to be rigorous and challenging, they related that the intent and reality of the formal and informal curriculum falls short in the delivery of a rigorous curriculum for all students. The counselors indicated that the curriculum was different for students in the applied level classes. Students who are in the applied level classes are required to take additional math and English in place of electives. Additionally, the counselors described the

inconsistency of delivery of the curriculum due to teacher frustration with student motivation and behavior.

During the discussion of a typical day, the difference in curriculum between the students in the applied track was described as different from the typical day for students in the college preparatory and honors track. Despite the differences in the two levels of curriculum, the counselors did not state that they perceived this difference to impact students' decisions to leave school prior to graduation.

*Question 6: What Type of Assessments do Teachers use in the Various Classes they Teach? Are they Different for Students in Honors/College Prep than for Students in Tech Prep?*

The guidance counselors seemed to think that teachers use varieties of assessments for students across the board. Writing assignments are required in every class. The first counselor stated, "I think the academic and honors level courses have more projects, like research projects, or hands-on stuff, or maybe more difficult labs. I see a lot of them doing a variety of different activities. I know in English with their posters they have to do. The business class has a lot of projects."

The second counselor stated, "I think the 90-minute classes kind of force the teachers to do activities like that [projects]. If they just did the rote lectures all the time, and had papers that would be due every Friday, if the instruction was not varied the students and teachers would both go crazy."

The counselors described their perception of student assessment as varied. Additionally, they spoke about the importance of students having multiple ways to demonstrate proficiency and multiple ways of learning content at each of the levels of

instruction. While neither counselor specifically described the scheduling process, both did talk about the importance of knowing the students and the classes they were able to handle academically.

*Question 7: Do all Students Receive a Challenging Rigorous Curriculum? Do At-Risk Students Receive a Challenging Curriculum?*

The first counselor responded, “I think teachers try to challenge, but I think there are kids that may be in the applied classes that aren’t content [with their class], who don’t have the ability to go into an academic classes and be further challenged.” She also related that students are sometimes just satisfied to get by and they do not accept the challenge.

The second counselor spoke about teacher frustration with students in the applied track. She said, “The teacher has a planned curriculum and goes at it with gangbusters for the applied level kids, and they do not get the excitement for the content they want from the kids when they have all these great projects, so the teachers just go back to rote teaching.” These comments demonstrate a frustration level in the curriculum that is evident from both the student and the teacher.

Both counselors commented that there are a combination of students who want to succeed and students who would just get by at all the curriculum levels. They described students in applied classes who make it difficult for other students to learn and for teachers to teach. The counselors stated that the curriculum was intended to be rigorous for all students. The counselors echoed that they perceived the professional staff as trying to deliver a challenging program for students.

*Question 8: Describe how Increasing Graduation Requirements Affect Students' Decisions to Stay in School until Completion*

The counselors described that the only increase in graduation requirements was that students were required to pass the PSSA test or complete the Pathways program to graduate. The counselors did not believe that the standardized testing requirement was a reason students would choose to leave school. The first counselor stated, “I don’t know of any kids threatening to leave because they didn’t pass the PSSA.” The second counselor who had been in the district for the past five years said, “I think I only had one student who was on my caseload [who left school prior to graduating]. A lot of them stick it out and want to graduate. A lot of them are sometimes the first one in the family to be graduating, the first one to be going to college, but it seems some of them stay motivated to stay in because they want to be the first in their family to graduate or go to college.”

The requirements of NCLB and the school district’s requirement of passing a standardized test is a factor the counselors had to face in their daily work with students. The counselors described the variety of programs and academic support available to assist students in meeting this requirement. The counselors stated that students were motivated to succeed and students asked for tutoring or other resources that are available in the school. Additionally, they related that students are motivated to be the first in their families to graduate from high school or go to college as a strong influence on student success and persistence.

*Question 9: How does the Size of the School Influence a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion?*

The counselors believed that the size of the school has very little influence on students leaving school prior to completion. When asked this question, the counselors spoke directly to the positive activities and adults in the school.

The first counselor stated, "I do see a lot [of students] getting involved, and I see a lot of the coaches encouraging, teachers encouraging, advisors working, and, if kids are interested in something, they put a proposal together if they want a different club and if they find a teacher who is comfortable with advising it." This counselor also stated, "A lot of teachers take on an activity after school to be with the kids and give them an outlet. As a coach, I have had many teachers encourage kids to come out for my team."

The second counselor looked at some of the reasons students were not able to participate. She stated, "The struggles they have are in transportation and not being economically able to participate in activities." She also observed a bright side connected to the large school and the many activities that were available due to the size. She spoke about an experience with one of her students doing better once he became involved in a sport. "Definitely you can see a change in the kids. I was talking to one of the teachers about a 10<sup>th</sup> grader who was suspended every other week last year, but when he tapped into the swim team, he became one of the top swimmers. Now his academics went whoosh! And you can see it. Just talking to him, he has a different look about him. He is confident. He is not getting in trouble."

Overall, the counselors described the large school setting as a positive place where students have many adults who care for them. As in the case with the young man

joining swimming, many of the students who participate have higher standards for behavior and academics placed on them by their coaches and advisors. The counselors also described the large faculty and visible administration as a factor that does not make the size of the school an issue for students in this school. The visibility of adults at the clubs, activities, and athletic events mitigates the large size of the school. Another area the counselors expanded on was the number of teachers who volunteer to stay after school just to help students. The counselors spoke highly of the teachers and the positive role modeling they provide for the students. During this focus group the counselors provided strong insights to the importance of the high level of academic expectation that this particular school and community provides for its students despite the large student population.

#### *Analysis of Teacher Focus Group Questions*

This section summarizes the teachers' responses to each of the nine questions as they relate to the school-related factors that are associated with students persisting in school until graduation. Teachers in this school teach in a ninety-minute academic block for three of four periods each school day. The teachers are responsible for teaching a variety of academic levels and providing support in assisting students to succeed in meeting the requirements of graduation, including passing the PSSA test.

#### *Question 1: Describe how Social Relationships with Peers, Faculty, and Administration Affect a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The first teacher said, "I think a caring faculty, and maybe that is one of the most important aspects in making a student to feel welcome and that they are important individually; they are not a number. That is important." The second teacher added that

she “take[s] time to meet each one of my [her] students and get[s] to know something about their families.” Each of these teachers spoke about the difficulty of the home life of some of their students. The second teacher added that it was important “to show some compassion when you come in each morning; it makes them [students] want to come to see you every single day.” The teachers also spoke about the importance of caring and good communication between teachers and students as being significant in promoting student engagement in school. The teacher also added, “treating students fairly and having high expectations of them contribute to a positive atmosphere at school.” Finally, she emphasized the importance of contact with the students’ parents in order for students to be accountable and connected to the school and community.

The third teacher mentioned that students who are disruptive and off-task often are having difficulty at home. This teacher described the communication with the administration and guidance counselors as helpful in understanding students’ situations. He continued by saying;

A counselor or administrator may have worked with a student in a way to try to keep the student in school. The administrator or counselor keeping in touch with those students because they are aware of their situations at home helps them handle a write up, where a teacher might want to give a student a disciplinary action and the administrator or counselor might intervene. The administrator or counselor may know that discipline for this student may not be the most appropriate consequence in this instance. I think there are certain students where that certainly keeps them in school because they don’t want those punishments and penalties.



In addition, this teacher described the lack of community outside the school. He believed that:

School itself is a place where the students feel like they are part of something, and they do feel a sense of community here; this is one place that brings them [the students] all together. I think a lot of students want to come to school because it gives them that place to get together and it gives them that feeling of community and belonging that they may not get outside of school.

The fourth teacher spoke about the importance of how teachers relate to students. He said he “makes it very personal. I think so many of these kids, especially the lower-end kids, it’s not about the grades, it’s about the way you relate to them. Treating them as equals with the academic and gifted, telling them when they have succeeded.” This teacher also described the importance of recognizing when students make the right choice. He talked about how it filters through the school when teachers, counselors, and administration focus on the positive behaviors of students.

In answering the questions about social relationships, many of the characteristics from the literature surfaced. The teachers described caring adults, caring community, and the importance of positive feedback surrounding student performance as important for student persistence. Additionally, the teachers described high expectations for students and teachers, the importance of good communication with students and families, and participating in the school experience as factors that influence student success (Brofenbrenner, 1979, Tinto, 1987, Lee & Burkham, 2001).

*Question 2: Communicate the Pressures of Standardized Testing and its Influence on a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The first teacher said, "There is no doubt about it; there is a tremendous amount of emphasis on the test. I think the teachers feel the pressure as well as the students." She thought that teachers try to encourage students by familiarizing them with the testing format to help them feel a little more comfortable. The second teacher spoke about the pressures for special education students. She stated, "I think it definitely impacts some students on whether they are going to stay or whether they are going to go. That is just what I see with the special education students." She described the overwhelming feeling students with disabilities face in trying to meet the standards of *NCLB*.

The third teacher described students having "added pressure and stress." He also stated:

From talking to the students, I have never picked-up or gotten a sense that they would consider not coming to school or dropping out because of testing. Some of the after-school programs we offer as far as tutoring and Pathways that are related to 4Sight testing and PSSA testing really help the students. We have a good turn-out. Students really show up for that stuff. It seems that they want to do well and care about doing well, so I don't know if that plays a part in whether they stay or not.

The fourth teacher stated, "There are support systems for many of the students. Students can receive academic help and can improve, so there is hope, a chance to improve and do better the next time around."

The teachers consistently voiced that academic, personal, and social support are afforded to students at this school. The students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate academic improvement and proficiency. The teachers described tutoring programs, informal tutoring by teachers, and a high level of care and concern demonstrated by teachers to help students succeed academically. The teachers' comments regarding student persistence are consistent with the theories presented in the literature on student success in school by Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987).

*Question 3: Share how Required Remedial Course Taking Influences a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The first teacher described the district's position on remedial programs and courses as a way of providing students with academic support. She said, "We are saying if you are having difficulty, we can support you. We can help you to understand concepts that you are going to be tested on. I think that we do a fairly good job of that and all the teachers who are dealing with that are dedicated to the student." The second teacher added, "We are also not saying if you don't pass, you're done. We are not ending it for students there [with one test]. If you don't pass the first time, there are supports that help you get what you need so you can graduate. Graduation is really, for a young person, a ticket to unlimited opportunities."

The third teacher described the programs as "beneficial for students. If they do not demonstrate proficiency in the PSSA, they can go to an after-school program in their senior year and go through a series of learning exercises and tests." He described it as "another way out." The fourth teacher expanded on this by saying "there are positive

opportunities in the remediation for the students. The teachers care about them finishing and contact parents when students fall behind.”

The teachers stated that remedial courses are not a part of the formal curriculum at this school. Rather, students are given opportunities throughout their years in school to be tutored both formally and informally by teachers. The teachers described specific programs for seniors who did not reach proficiency and added that caring adults (Brofenbrenner, 1979) who communicated with students and parents were the key to the success of the after-school program that is in place at this high school. The teachers consistently voiced the importance of the social, academic, and personal support (Tinto, 1987) provided by the teachers in these programs.

*Question 4: Describe how the structure of the Curriculum Relates to a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The teachers described the basic structure of the curriculum as a 90-minute block schedule; each day students have four blocks of classes. Within this structure, the first teacher described the curriculum as “a progression of steps toward the goals for later in life.” The second teacher stated, “It is important to teach students skills so that they could be independent in the future.” The third teacher described the curriculum as “varied and diverse.” The fourth teacher stated, “Making the material relevant, regardless of the subject area, is important.”

During the focus group the discussions varied, and one teacher said, “It is very difficult for a student to be in this school and not find some classes, especially electives, that they can find some personal connection to, or find the class [that] is going to be

relevant to them. The school does a really good job of providing the student with a good selection of classes and good curriculum as well as after-school activities.”

The second teacher stated, “I think we all differentiate; it has to do with the ability of the young person. Programs need to be challenging regardless of the level of the class.” The third teacher stated that most teachers “try to differentiate within the applied, academic, and honors classes as much as we can. The honors classes are intended to be much more challenging, a lot more writing, research, and higher level thinking.”

The fourth teacher spoke about parental involvement as an important part of student success in the curriculum. He reiterated the importance of parents being involved and pushing students, which is something some students do not have. He stated that in the applied level, students seemed have less academic support for the curriculum standards from parents/guardians than students in honors and academic classes.

The teachers suggested that students are being taught the same concepts in the curriculum areas with varying amounts of rigor based on their ability levels. The teachers also stated concern for students who “just cannot read.” Despite all their efforts, tutoring supplemental supports, and IEPs, the teachers worry about these students and their futures. The teachers described the need for the curriculum to be a “progression of steps” to an independent future. The teachers also described the curriculum as “varied and diverse” with many offerings in each subject area. Additionally, the teachers stated that students need high expectations to be successful regardless of the academic level of the student as stated in the literature (Tinto, 1987).

*Question 5: What Might a Typical Day Look like for a Student in your Class who has Persisted in School Despite Facing Risk Factors of not Completing? What does a Typical Day Look like for Students in Honors or College Preparatory Classes?*

*Question 7: Do all Students Receive a Challenging Rigorous Curriculum? Do At-Risk Students Receive a Challenging Curriculum?*

During the focus group the teachers' answers to questions five and seven became interrelated and are reported in the sequence which they were discussed to accurately reflect the contents of the interaction. During the focus group the teachers' responses reflected commonalities between a typical day for students and rigor of the curriculum in this high school.

The dialogue surrounding what a student's day looked like focused on the support of the school community to help students succeed. This conversation was not limited to students who are normally considered at risk; it characterized all students being disconnected from adults in general. These teachers spoke about students from the academic track having the issue of too much pressure. One teacher described a student he had that had a breakdown after first test she took [in high school]. As the conversation continued about a typical student day, another teacher said:

I have had students who not only haven't done work in my class, but I know they haven't done work in other classes. Whether it was appropriate or not, I have approached them and asked, 'Why are you here? What do you come to school for if you don't want to do anything?' For many of the students, their answers are, 'It's a safer place; it's a better place than being at home.' They get a decent meal here. People care about them here.

Yet another teacher continued, “So many of these kids are starving for direction and guidance and embracing by adults. They want to be heard, connected. They want to do it on their terms but they want that [to connect to adults].” The teacher stated that students want adults in their lives to provide structure, respect, and support. The students want good positive adult interaction, feedback, and involvement in their lives.

The teachers described academic pressure and rigor as occurring for all students. In addition, they described school as a safe place where people care. The teachers described the many people who care for students and support them through positive feedback and interactions. They also emphasized the extensive programming to support the students academically. Therefore, a typical day for students in this school is described by the teachers as being filled with individually challenging coursework delivered in a school that provides social, academic, and personal support for all students.

*Question 6: What Type of Assessments do Teachers use in the Various Classes they Teach? Are they Different for Students in Honors/College Prep than for Students in Tech Prep?*

The first teacher stated, “I do a variety of assessments, not just pencil and paper.” The second teacher also reported, “Much of my assessment is through hands-on activities.” She explained, “As a special education teacher, my students have to be able to complete tasks to be ready to go into the workforce.”

The third teacher stated, “I use a variety of assessments at all the levels I teach.” The fourth teacher said he did the same, but had high expectations for writing with the upper level students. He stated, “You’re going to face the SATs, PSSAs or when you get in the workforce you will be tested. So I give them that experience. I may just weight it

differently depending on who they are. Again, because my applied level kids are going to go out to the same world as my academic kids, I challenge them because I believe they can do it.”

The teachers' ideas in response to this question about assessment focused on two areas: First, the teachers reflected the need for a variety of assessments regardless of the students' academic level in order to be prepared for the challenge of the workforce or continued education. Second, the teachers reflected the importance of each student's worth and value and the need to assess each person to their individual ability level.

*Question 8: Describe how Increasing Graduation Requirements Affect Students' Decisions to Stay in School until Completion*

The teachers had very few comments when asked this question. The teachers did not believe that the requirements for graduation get in the way of a student completing high school. The teachers in this group again described the many supports and options for students to finish high school. The teachers found that students generally take advantage of the opportunities provided in this high school to complete their graduation requirements.

As reflected in the interviews with the guidance counselors, very few students leave school prior to graduation in this district. The teachers confirmed the guidance counselors' perspective that there are so many alternatives for students to be successful that persistence until graduation is the only feasible option for a student.



*Question 9: How does the Size of the School Influence a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion?*

The first teacher said, "While some kids can get lost in the shuffle, the staff really makes a difference. The whole staff, the principals, everybody is on board -- the nurses, the janitors, all walk through the halls and know everybody by name." The teacher continued speaking about other adults, such as the hall monitors, who are a huge part of these students' lives. The monitors are in the halls to provide visibility and safety. The hall monitors get to know the students on a first name basis, and it makes the kids enjoy coming to school, maybe not so much for the academics, but for the socialization. He continued stating, "There are a multitude of people that they can talk to. When they are sitting at home, who are they talking to? Their parents are working 15 hours a day, and at least here there is someone for them."

The next teacher described the size as an advantage. He said:

An unusual element that I have found here because it is so big and I think others do it, is carpooling. I carpool with two teachers from the Special Education department. They know many of my lower level kids, and they are case managers for them. Because of the carpool, we are talking about what students need. I may have a student in class, and he did something in another class, the case manager knows about it, and I get to hear about that and then I can contact the other teacher. You are in a carpool, and, I don't know if it is the same for others, but you hear all of these stories and you're connecting, I'm connecting to teachers and students. You compare notes and all of a sudden, you understand how to help

students and it starts to click and make sense. I found that to be actually very helpful in a large school setting.

The third teacher stated, “No one is isolated.” She continued by saying, “They [students] are helpful to one another, kind, and considerate; the human aspect of relating to other people is important. The second teacher said, “There are very friendly students in this school that will be friendly to my students [special needs], and that is nice to see because my students’ social skills are definitely lacking, so it is nice when some of those other students come over and want to be friendly toward them.”

The fourth teacher spoke about the diversity of the student body and how well students get along. He related it to neighborhoods and said, “There are these neighborhoods within the community here, so it is like everybody feels very comfortable and free to be themselves, but yet all within being part of something bigger.” The teacher spoke of the comfort in this school that is not present in other schools that he had been in. He stated that if a student is having problems, the staff and programs are in place. He describes a peer support program to help new students, tutoring, and other social/emotional supports students might need. For as big of a school as it is, the teacher described teachers knowing many students. He stated, “The size of the school doesn’t keep us from getting to know people, and it doesn’t keep the students from getting to know each other.”

The teachers viewed the size of the school as a positive for the students. Due to the large size of the school, the teachers believed the variety of programs and supports for students were better than they could be in a smaller school. The teachers also described the positive influence of diversity due to the large population. The teachers discussed that

student acceptance of each other, despite differences, helped to build a positive, supportive community. The teachers agreed that the size of the school did not negatively affect the students; in fact, they described the school as a safe and comfortable place for students where no one was isolated.

### *Analysis of Administrative Focus Group and Interview Questions*

This section summarizes the administrators' responses to each of the nine questions as they relate to the school-related factors that are associated with students persisting in school until graduation. The administrators were interviewed in two groups. The principal was interviewed individually, and two assistant principals were interviewed in a focus group. The principal has a long history at this school. He began as a teacher and assistant principal before taking over the role of principal that he has had for seven years. Of the two assistants, one had begun as a teacher, then a special education administrator, and for the last five years, his role was assistant principal. The other assistant principal had only worked in the district as an assistant principal for the past year and a half.

#### *Question 1: Describe how Social Relationships with Peers, Faculty, and Administration Affect a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The first administrator spoke about students feeling like school is a place where they feel very comfortable. He stated:

I think a lot of the kids who have been born and raised here and attended school here their whole lives have that sense of home, and they get that from their teachers and the administrators. For those students who move into the district from outside the area, they are not used to the hands-on approach. We are really

hands-on here, and a lot of times I get the look like 'you know me'. I think the kids are impressed when we know their first names.

This administrator also spoke about the importance of rules and expectations. He stated:

I think it is our personal approach and consistency. I tell kids all the time that you like the rules that we have here. They are like 'No, I hate the rules. I hate the rules.' However, they know what rules are, so they know what is around the corner. The students understand where the parameters are. In essence, it lowers the level of anxiety. Kids don't like to be surprised. They like to know what is around the corner. They like to know what is expected. They know if they are walking around the hallway and their pants are drooping, the assistant principal is going to nail them on it. They know if they are walking down the hall with a hat, I am going to nail them on it and the teachers as well. They know what to expect. I think that creates the environment that they feel comfortable in, and I think that is why they want to stay in school."

The second administrator spoke about students having difficult situations in their lives outside of school. He stated, "This is their happy place; this is their safe place. They are not afraid to get up in the morning and come to school because they do not want to stay home." He continued that students find school a place to participate in positive activities. He spoke about the lengths students would go to stay at the school after school hours. He stated, "I can't tell you how many kids we have had that accidentally miss the bus. They don't mind going and sitting in the detention room to get their homework done because that is safe. It is comfortable for them." He continued, "that being in school is

better than going to a bad home or an empty home. At school, they can talk to positive adults.”

He went on to say that the adults in school do not judge them. He stated that, “I call them by their first name. They are surprised, 'You know my name?' But you can see like a little smile on their face like, hey, they know my name, you know, that’s pretty neat.’ In a school this big, it is so easy to just get lost, to just become part of the crowd, but there are people here who actually know me.” The principal continued discussing the importance of having a very involved administrative staff, guidance counselors, and teachers who really do go out of their way not only teach but to get to know the students. He continued saying, “This attitude gives the at-risk students a good feeling about school.”

In describing the importance of relationships and school completion, the administration was very passionate regarding the importance of relationships between students and adults at the high school. “Comfortable” was a word all the administrators used frequently to describe how students perceived the atmosphere of the school. The individual attention given to students in knowing them by name and having consistent rules was the hallmark of their perception of why students felt both comfortable and safe in the school. In the literature, Lee & Burkham (2001) describe the importance of social attachment and positive relationships with adults as an important factor in students persisting in school rather than dropping out. While Lee & Burkham (2001) found large school settings a negative influence on student retention, this was not the perception of the administration in this particular school.

*Question 2: Communicate the Pressures of Standardized Testing and its Influence on a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The first administrator stated that he did think that testing added to the pressure in a student's life. He said:

It's not just worrying about your grade and getting a 70 in this class anymore because there are other supports; if they don't show proficiency they know there is going to be extra work involved. They are going to have to put in many hours their own time, to stay after school as a senior, so that they can demonstrate proficiency. The pressure is there, but I do not think it is to the point where somebody is dropping out because of it.

He continued by saying that students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade think about the importance of the test, but they know that if they are not proficient, they will have other opportunities to be proficient and graduate.

The second administrator agreed that it is not an all or nothing situation for the students. He stated, "There are so many safety nets built in that it is really hard for a student to say, 'I'm just dropping out.'" This administrator described, "options such as the transition program where students come to school two days a week after school for five hours, the Academy, an alternative school with a more hands-on curriculum, and the Pathways program for students who do not pass the standardized testing" as alternatives for students to be successful. He also said, "I think we use a different thought process, thinking outside the box to get it done. Regardless if it costs money, we justify it, and we

see what we can do. In this school district, we are very fortunate that we have a large school district and have the financial resources to fund special programs.”

The administrators described the variety of options and supports student in this school have to complete high school. The assistant principals described the programs and support of the faculty, guidance counselors, and the administration as an important part of students being able to persist despite obstacles. The administrators spoke of pressures that students face, such as difficult home lives, yet they focused on the support students receive and that students do not leave school due to the outside pressures. Roderick (2001) describes the importance of student motivation to perform and succeed in a high stakes environment. Further, Roderick (2001) focuses on the importance of positive adult support and systematic programs, such as Pathways, described by the administration as critical to student performance and persistence. The administrators during the interviews and focus group described the variety of positive alternatives, such as clubs, athletics, tutoring, and the Pathways program for students in this school which motivates students to complete school and succeed.

*Question 3: Share how Required Remedial Course Taking Influences a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The first administrator stated that students do not have remedial courses within the school day. He stated, “We do have supports built into our schedule with the applied section for those kids who are at risk.” The second administrator stated, “Students who are in the section of the applied math or English take that full year, even in block scheduling. The students have one course in the fall and one course in the spring. The applied courses take the place of one elective.”

The first administrator then said, “They lose out on their choice of electives if they are in the applied curriculum. The only requirement is the Pathways remediation for seniors who are not proficient in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. They have to go to the after-school tutoring program until they can demonstrate proficiency. We also have PSSA prep tutoring after school for 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders.”

The second administrator told a story about the cooperation of both parents and school personnel in supporting the importance of academic proficiency. He spoke about a very talented basketball player who did not do very well on the 4Sight test (state level practice test). The student’s parent, coach, and administrator worked out a schedule for the student to attend tutoring one day a week. This administrator cited this example of cooperation among the stakeholders in this community for student success as a common occurrence.

Again, the first administrator spoke about the importance of cooperation between home and school to make the extra help for students meaningful. He talked about the teachers calling parents when students were not attending tutoring and the importance of parents supporting and following up with their children. He believed that this communication and cooperation are part of the reason students in this district meet with success. He also made the important point that communication had to be positive. He stated:

You see the parents involved at home. They are checking up on homework, communicating with the teachers. Also with most parents, no news is good news. If the teacher is not calling home, that is good news and that is acceptable to most parents. The parents who are constantly getting calls are the parents we like to call



when we see something good. It also helps reinforce the child is making good choices.

Remediation, in this school, occurs outside the school day, and students can elect to receive extra help after school through other tutoring programs for underclassmen. The administrators described the many opportunities students have through both formal and informal tutoring any time in their high school career. The importance of communication between the parents and the school was a consistent topic during the discussion of remediation. The administrators tied the success of students to this communication. The importance of good communication in creating a positive community that supports the academic, social, and personal growth of students is demonstrated in these conversations and the literature (Brofenbrenner, 1979 and Tinto, 1987).

*Question 4: Describe how the structure of the Curriculum Relates to a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion*

The administrators believed that the school district provides curriculum and course work for all levels of students to graduate and be successful. The first administrator stated, “You have to demonstrate proficiency in some of the core subjects. I think that doubling up on the applied math and English is a good example of that. The applied students are probably the ones who are going to need to find the spark that gets them to say I want to go to school today because the applied class is not always a choice.” Students in the applied level do not get to choose electives; they are required to take English or math if they are not proficient instead of an elective. The assistant principal described that the district is trying to hold students accountable, to make sure they learn, so they can demonstrate proficiency in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

The administrators had addressed the question regarding structure of the curriculum when answering question two and three. When the specific question of curriculum structure was asked, they stated that the importance of motivation was particularly important for the applied level student. The fact that these students lost electives with the double block of math and English made these students the only group that did not have choices in the curriculum they pursued. While the administration viewed this lack of control for applied students as a negative, in fact, the literature describes the constrained curriculum (Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992) as a benefit for students. In their research, students who had a constrained or prescribed curriculum were more likely to complete high school.

*Question 5: What Might a Typical Day Look like for a Student in your Class who has Persisted in School Despite Facing Risk Factors of not Completing? What does a Typical Day Look like for Students in Honors or College Preparatory Classes?*

The first administrator stated that a student at risk of not completing who needs assistance would have a longer school day. He said:

Their day would be extended because they would, hopefully, if they are in 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade, take advantage of the tutoring program we have, PSSA prep. If they were seniors and struggling, they would be in Pathways. I would imagine that their guidance counselor would be more involved, and if the student is struggling and has an IEP, the case manager would be involved. We probably would be more involved as administrators as well. The teacher would be more accommodating and try to figure out a different way to help the student. I have seen many teachers

extend their days too; I think every department has somebody staying every week, if not every day to help [students] out.

The second administrator agreed and added that the teachers and staff work to meet the needs of the students. He stated, “There are so many different kids and so many different needs.” He went on to speak about the upper-level students and the supports that they receive:

I think for the college prep, honors, AP, they are looking for more academic supports and they find them. The ones that are at risk, not that we don’t have any at-risk academic kids--we do--but, the ones who are at-risk, are looking for supports and probably not placing as much importance on the academics. I think the system we have here is going to keep them focused on the academics while we are trying to help them out with whatever else is wrong.

The administrators described the typical day for an at-risk student as extended. In order for students to succeed, students could choose from a variety of the after-school programs offered in the school from peer tutoring to formal tutoring. The commitment of the staff to help students was also evident in this focus group and interview. The commitment of the staff to assist students with their academic, social, and emotional needs was seen as a strength that motivates the at-risk student to extend his school day (Tinto, 1987) and demonstrate success in persisting in school.

*Question 6: What Type of Assessments do Teachers use in the Various Classes they Teach? Are they Different for Students in Honors/College Prep than for Students in Tech Prep?*

The administrators all described a variety of assessments that they had seen in their observation of teachers. The first administrator stated, “I have seen more teachers using a variety of assessments over the last couple of years and that has been an initiative of ours [administration] to try to encourage them [teachers] to do that, but at the same time they are also focusing on PSSA type questions.” The second administrator agreed and stated, “Once a semester, every teacher has to submit a writing sample from his students. I guess it would be considered writing across the curriculum. We call it ‘Writing for Success.’ Everybody has to utilize writing skills in their subject matter. Our principal takes and reads the student writing every semester. He reports to central administration on it. It is a district initiative and this is something the district has thought is a good tool.”

The principal himself describes “writing as an important way for teachers and students to engage in a task that improves students higher-level thinking skills.” He, along with the other administrators, found that the team approach to student success begins with providing mentoring for teachers across departments, sharing ideas about strategies that work in classrooms, and communicating them to the whole faculty. He believes this initiative in his school has been a positive outcome of the high-stakes testing environment that was unintended.

The administrative team in this school works with the teachers to provide professional development and support to assist the teachers in meeting the needs of the many students at this school. The principal has set the groundwork and foundation for the

teachers to raise the standards and accountability for students. As with the graduation requirement of being proficient on the PSSA in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, options for students to become proficient and graduate occur in this school setting.

*Question 7: Do all Students Receive a Challenging Rigorous Curriculum? Do At-Risk Students Receive a Challenging Curriculum?*

One administrator stated, “It is as challenging as the students make it. You can have two students in an academic class and the one who aspires to get a good grade because it means something to them, they make it challenging, and the person who wants to skate will probably manage to skate by and not be challenged but still find a way to pass the course.” Another administrator agreed the curriculum was challenging for all students. He stated, “Students are influenced by how important schoolwork is in the home. Being the assistant principal in charge of seniors, I have students come to me frequently with ‘I want to change my class.’ When I ask them why they want to change the class, they have a variety of answers that don’t justify the change. The bottom line is the course is challenging and I am not going to approve [dropping a class].”

As with assessment, each of these administrators observes a connection between the relationships of adults and students. Whether it is with a parent, teacher, or staff member who supports the student, each administrator spoke of the importance of adult support for students to meet rigorous goals (Tinto, 1979).

*Question 8: Describe how Increasing Graduation Requirements Affect Students' Decisions to Stay in School until Completion*

The first administrator did not think that students looked at the requirements in terms of the percentages students need to pass the PSSA but more as part of the process

of how they can finish. He said, “If you focus on how a kid learns and make accommodations, it changes the mindset from the old school mindset of ‘I am the teacher; you do it as I say and that’s it. If you don’t like it you get out.’ We have changed, and I think it is for the better because I think gone are the days of fitting a square peg in a round hole. It is not acceptable.”

The second administrator spoke about helping students who are at risk of not being able to finish. He said:

I think the fact that we have alternative ways to get to a diploma has really helped. I am thinking of a student that I am sending to the Academy right now. I just signed the paper work. The student should be half-way through 10<sup>th</sup> grade and have about 12 credits, but the student currently has about six credits. The student is not on target to graduate on time as a 15-year-old. If we didn’t have any alternative and said you’re staying until you get your 28 credits, the student would most likely fail, but because we are getting him to a place where he can make up credits, there are other ways for the student to show that he can be proficient and successful. I would like to think that we are not lowering any standard but just giving the students an alternative means to graduate. I really think that it is kind of taking these increased graduation requirements and not making it like the kiss of death.

He went on to discuss that the school was not a "one size fits all" when it comes to completion.

All of the administrators described the numerous ways the school and district had worked to put safety nets into place so students can succeed. They each spoke about the

importance of changing the mindset of public education and the numerous ways that many students can succeed in this system.

*Question 9: How does the Size of the School Influence a Student's Decision to Stay in School until Completion?*

None of the administrators believed that the size of the school had an impact on the students' decisions to stay until completion. One administrator believed:

Trying to get to know them [the students], learning their first names, having teachers get involved, making referrals to Student Assistance Program (SAP), because of the size of the school there is a big budget, and we are able to provide additional supports to students. I think as long as you don't let the size allow students to hide somewhere in a corner, it is a benefit to have a large school because you have more people who can care about the kids.

The second administrator stated, "Diligence and consistency!" He spoke about the importance of relationships, not only with the staff of this particular school but also in the community. He stated:

We have a very good relationship with the building administration in the intermediate school and elementary school. We will frequently communicate with one another because our kids share busses. Many of the kids already know who we are because we are visible when we assist the other administrative staff. We work together on that, and it helps out in a way because I know I was walking through another building yesterday and a couple of kids said 'that's my sister's assistant principal.

The assistant principal described the importance of building these relationships prior to the students coming to the high school. He continued by talking about the importance of prior relationships, which lowers the students' anxiety toward school. He stated, "I guess just being visible, having a high profile, and having a personable demeanor, while being consistent with the rules, makes the students feel safe."

The third administrators spoke about setting boundaries for students as a way of making them feel safe. He discussed the importance of "students knowing what is expected of them" and the adults caring enough to hold the students accountable. Each administrator was sure that it could be easier at times for staff, teachers, or administrators to look the other way, but they believed that in this school everyone does his/her part to keep kids safe.

In the interviews and focus groups with administrators, the size of the school did not present as a negative issue. The administrators did not believe the size of the school would keep students from completing school. The mutual respect among administration, staff, and students came through repeatedly in these interviews and focus groups. The importance of respect among all the stakeholders and support from administration was very clear. The administrators believed that the respect the teachers and leadership demonstrate for students carries over to a high level of student accountability and promotes a safe, comfortable atmosphere in the large school setting.

Two main elements regarding the reasons school size did not negatively impact students were gleaned from the interviews and focus groups with the administrators. The first can be attributed to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, which was the existence of a caring community in the school and the school district. The second discussion point by



the administrators was that the students' needs for academic, social, and personal support to be successful in school were met in this school (Tinto's, 1987 and Lee & Burkham, 2001).

### Discussion of the Interviews and Focus Groups

The analysis and evidence presented in this chapter were taken from the interviews and focus groups of the students, faculty, counselors, and administration in one high school. The themes of caring adults and community, high expectations, frequent early feedback on performance, academic, social, and personal support, students being involved in the institution, and learning being perceived as important will be explored and examined. In the analysis themes, factors, and elements noted in the interviews and focus groups were presented to provide examples and to offer student, teacher, counselor, and administrative perspectives on why students persist until graduation at this school.

### Themes Identified in the Interviews

#### *Student-Identified Themes*

In the analysis themes evident during the interviews with students demonstrated connections to the research as well as persistent themes related to positive school climate studies (Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992, Lee & Burkham, 2001, Roderick & Engle, 2001). As described in Table 2, with regard to themes identified in the theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979), the students repeatedly spoke of one or more adults who were involved in their lives, cared for, and loved them.

Table 2

*Themes that Improve Persistence During Interviews Using Bronfenbrenner's Theory*

Persistence Themes (student identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
Caring Community	12
One or More Adults Who Love the Child	25
Spending Time with Adults in a Positive Way	5

*Note n = 6*

Twenty-five notations related the importance of parents, teachers, counselors, coaches, advisors, and administrators to students in their pursuit of success and completion of school. The students described these caring adults as people who supported them both academically and socially. Students made clear that these caring adults were important in their persistence when they had difficulty with course work, language barriers, or family problems. Students viewed the adults as going out of their way to ensure their personal success. The students stated that the teachers often stayed after school, parents provided transportation, and coaches and advisors motivated them by setting high expectations.

Additionally, the students identified the school as a caring community. Examples included teachers providing tutoring after school hours for struggling students, the school district allowing students to form new clubs to meet their interests, and programming, such as the Pathways program, to help students meet proficiency in order to graduate.

The interviews with students also reflected themes identified by Tinto (1987) regarding persistence. These themes are identified in Table 3.

Table 3

*Themes that Improve Persistence Identified in Interviews Using Tinto's Theory*

Persistence Themes (student identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
High Expectations	9
Academic, Social, and Personal Support	28
Frequent Early Feedback About Performance	7
Involved in the Institution	17
Learning is Perceived as Important	7

*Note n = 6*

Students repeatedly spoke of academic support from teachers both in the classroom and outside the school day. Students described teachers as available for both formal and informal tutoring. Student interviews also revealed that teachers were willing to sponsor clubs and act as advisors for activities. Each student interviewed was able to identify an adult who was connected to him or her in school who provided him or her with motivation to succeed.

School activities were also important to the students who were interviewed. Students spoke about clubs, peer tutoring, and athletics as ways to identify themselves as part of the school community. Students revealed that there were a variety of activities in their school to meet almost any interest a student may have. During the interviews,

students said that they saw adults who supervise these activities as positive role models who created high expectations for students both in the classroom and in the school and community.

As reflected in Table 2 and Table 3, many themes in the literature were supported by the interviewees. Each of the six students interviewed repeated the element connection to caring adults in a supportive school environment where academics were perceived as important. Additionally, the students identified a caring adult in the home who supported the school by having high expectations for student success. These interactions among the student, family member, and the school community were important in the students' perceptions of the value of success in school.

#### *Guidance Counselor-Identified Themes*

The guidance counselors had perceptions that were similar to the students in their interviews. The interviews with the counselors revealed themes associated with students persisting in school congruent with Brofenbrenner's (1979) theory. Table 4 provides a summary of the themes identified by the counselors.

Table 4

*Themes that Improve Persistence Identified in Focus Groups Using Brofenbrenner's Theory*

Persistence Themes (counselor identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
Caring Community	10
One or More Adults Who Love the Child	2
Spending Time with Adults in a Positive Way	4

*Note n = 2*

The most frequent response in the focus group with the guidance counselors related to student persistence was a caring community in the school. The guidance counselors gave multiple examples of teachers meeting with students after school to tutor or to advise a new, student-initiated club. Counselors also identified staff knowing students by name and administrators having knowledge of students who faced difficult circumstances outside of school as important.

The counselors also identified the importance of spending time with adults in a positive way as a factor in student success. One counselor highlighted a student's academic and behavioral success after becoming involved in athletics. The previous year the student was failing classes and having discipline issues. Once the student spent positive time with a respected adult who had high expectations, the student had no behavioral problems and became an honor roll student.

The expectations of adults play an important role in the success of a student. In Table 5, the themes identified by Tinto (1987) are summarized from the focus group with the guidance counselors.

Table 5

*Themes that Improve Persistence Identified in Focus Groups Using Tinto's Theory*

Persistence Themes (counselor identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
High Expectations	9
Academic, Social, and Personal Support	6
Frequent Early Feedback About Performance	1
Involved in the Institution	4
Learning is Perceived as Important	6

*Note n = 2*

In this school, the guidance counselors viewed the high expectations of the adults in this school as an important reason students were successful and persistent in completing school. The counselors identified learning as being perceived as important by the students, parents, and teachers. The connection to the strong academic, social, and personal support provided by adults to students was viewed as having a positive impact on student completion. In addition to the clubs and activities, the counselors described the dedication of the teachers to the students' academic successes as demonstrated by the effort the adults made to volunteer their time outside the school day to help students succeed. Adult engagement in student success at this school was echoed by each of the counselors in the focus group in this study.

### *Teacher-Identified Themes*

The teacher focus group also described relevance regarding the importance of a caring community as described by Brofenbrenner (1979). In Table 6 a summary of the themes identified by the teachers is presented.

Table 6

*Themes that Improve Persistence Identified in Focus Groups Using Brofenbrenner's Theory*

Persistence Themes (teacher identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
Caring Community	14
One or More Adults Who Love the Child	8
Spending Time with Adults in a Positive Way	10

*Note n = 4*

The idea that the school was a safe place where adults care for students and listen to them resonated with the teachers. During the focus group with the teachers, many of the responses centered on the availability of teachers, counselors, and administrators for students after school hours. The teachers felt strongly that communication and feedback from these individual adults helped to build the positive community that presently exists in their school. Whether it was cheering a student on at an athletic contest, sponsoring a club, mentoring, or coaching, the teachers viewed the adults as a caring community that supported children.

The accessibility of many positive, caring adults in this school spending time with students demonstrated the support that was provided to students specifically through

tutoring, advising clubs, and sponsoring and chaperoning many of the activities offered in the school. The teachers stated repeatedly that even though the school was large, the adults made sure that no student was left behind. In fact, the teachers believed that the size of the school was a benefit to the students in that many diverse activities and adults were available for the students. The teachers related student success to the numerous opportunities provided for students to achieve.

Student achievement was perceived as important in the teacher focus groups as identified by the themes outlined in Table 7.

Table 7

*Themes that Improve Persistence Identified in Focus Groups Using Tinto's Theory*

Persistence Themes (teacher identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
High Expectations	5
Academic, Social, and Personal Support	15
Frequent Early Feedback About Performance	5
Involved in the Institution	3
Learning is Perceived as Important	13

*Note n = 4*

The teacher focus groups described academic, social, and personal support as a factor the teachers believed was present in this school. The numerous opportunities and programs provided for students, as well as the alternative ways to achieve success, were important to student persistence. Teacher availability to aid students in their academic pursuits also led teachers to identify the learning elements as being perceived as



important. When teachers spend their own time after school to assist students, they create an atmosphere and attitude that suggest that adults believe that each student's success was important. During the focus group, the teachers described the importance of the positive attitude and atmosphere in the school. The importance of policies that promote community involvement in the process of educating students in this school reinforces the value of learning and importance of high expectations for both the staff and the students.

As identified in Table 6 and Table 7, the teachers' responses reflected the value of spending positive time with adults in a caring community. The teachers believed that these themes were important to student persistence and success. Additionally, the teachers tied these themes to learning being perceived as important by the students and the staff, as well as the importance of programs being provided to support student success. The teachers in this school believe that the caring community atmosphere, combined with the supportive academic and social programs, make this school successful in helping students to graduate from high school.

#### *Administrator-Identified Themes*

The final interview and focus groups were conducted with administrators, who also reflected that the school provides students with a caring community. A summary of the themes the administrators discussed are reviewed in Table 8.

Table 8

*Themes that Improve Persistence Identified in Interviews and Focus Groups Using Brofenbrenner's Theory*

Persistence Themes (administrator identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
Caring Community	26
One or More Adults Who Love the Child	5
Spending Time with Adults in a Positive Way	9

*Note n = 3*

The administrators spoke freely about the importance of students feeling safe and comfortable in the school atmosphere. The frequency of this response signals the perception that school is a place where students are able to learn and to be accepted by their peers, teachers, counselors, and administrators as individuals. Responses during the dialogue focused on the importance of positive adults in the school, recognizing students by name, having consistent rules, using a personal approach, and providing a place to participate in positive activities and to be safe. The importance of students having a caring community is reflected in the positive attitude that the administrators describe that students have for their peers and adults in the school. The administrators described school as a place where the students feel confident and safe, and in turn, the students are successful.

The presence of a community that cares provides an environment where all stakeholders have expectations of success. The positive atmosphere creates a “can do” attitude that is pervasive in this high school. In Table 9, additional themes garnered in the focus groups and interview with administrators and their impact on persistence are described.

Table 9

*Themes that Improve Persistence Identified in Interviews and Focus Groups Using Tinto’s Theory*

Persistence Themes (administrator identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
High Expectations	14
Academic, Social, and Personal Support	23
Frequent Early Feedback About Performance	12
Involved in the Institution	5
Learning is Perceived as Important	2

*Note n =3*

As discussed by each of the participants, there are many resources available for students to receive academic support. The administrators in their focus group frequently spoke about many of the supports that were available for students. The administrators described not only the tutoring and after-school programs available, but they also described the many alternative, “out of the box” ways that students could graduate from this high school. The principals described programs such as their “Academy,”

“Transitions Program,” and individualized alternatives to graduation created by the administration to help non-traditional or at-risk students complete school.

Additionally, the principals described high expectations for student success and behavior as important themes for student success in school. The principals described the consistency of the expectations and communication of these expectations as part of the fabric of this school community. In describing high expectations, the importance of communication between the home and school was discussed. The principals cited numerous examples of teachers, tutors, counselors, and administrators calling and emailing parents when students needed help or had succeeded. These positive relationships, as well as the communication within the staff, were examples that the principals believed contributed to the success of students in this setting.

As reflected in Table 8 and Table 9, the administrators’ responses echoed the importance of a caring school community and availability of teachers and others to provide programs that support academic, social, and personal success for students. The administrators believed that these themes were critical to the development of a positive atmosphere where students feel comfortable and safe. Therefore, the administrators communicated that when students believed that the adults and others cared about them and their success, they were motivated to live up to the expectations set by the family and school and, in turn, were confident and succeeded.

#### Elements Identified in the Interviews and Focus Groups

The elements that were discovered during the interviews and focus groups of selected students, counselors, faculty, and administrators were similar. The results of elements from the student interviews are reflected in Table 10.

Table 10

*Elements Noted in Student Interviews That Increase Persistence*

Elements (student identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
<i>Caring Community/Adults</i>	
Support Adults at School	14
Supportive Parents/Family	10
<i>Spending Time with Adults</i>	
Many Activities for Students	8
Programs to Support/Help Academics	6
Positive Motivation	5
Positive Role Models	3
<i>Academic, Social, and Personal Support</i>	
Committed Teachers	9
Support of Peers/Friends	8
Hands-on Learning Opportunities	1
Alternative Ways to Succeed/Graduate	1
People at School are Nice	1
<i>Involved in the Institution</i>	
Many Activities for Students	8
Parents Support School	1
<i>High Expectations/Learning is Important</i>	
Education is Valued/Important	2

*Note n = 6*

As depicted in Table 10, students reported supportive adults in the school to be important for them to be able to persist in school. Additionally, students described parents/family and peers as important sources of support. The students also described teachers as being committed to student success through the many activities and after-school programs that supported students both socially and academically.

The academic, social, and personal support needed for student success was also found in the focus group with the guidance counselors. The elements described by guidance counselors regarding student persistence are represented in Table 11.

Table 11

*Elements Noted in Guidance Counselor Focus Groups That Increase Persistence*

Elements (guidance counselor identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
<i>Caring Community/Adults</i>	
Support Adults at School	4
Supportive Parents/Family	4
<i>Spending Time with Adults</i>	
Many Activities for Students	3
Positive Motivation	3
Programs to Support/Help Academics	3
Committed Teachers	2
Positive Role Models	2
<i>Academic, Social, and Personal Support</i>	
Alternative Ways to Succeed/Graduate	2
Support of Peers/Friends	1
School Personnel are Visible	1
<i>High Expectations/Learning is Important</i>	
Education is Valued/Important	1

*Note n = 2*

The counselors described supportive adults and parents to be key elements in a student's ability to persist until completion of high school. The counselors described parents encouraging students to take higher-level classes, students receiving tutoring

prior to the PSSA test, and teachers and coaches helping to keep students on the path to success as important to student persistence. Additionally, the counselors also stated that the number of available activities students could participate in after school, as well as the positive motivation and support of academics by committed teachers, were important elements in students' persistence. The counselors gave numerous accounts of coaches and club advisors providing the needed guidance and support for students to be successful.

The focus groups with the teachers identified different elements than guidance counselors attributed to student success. The elements identified as important for student persistence by the teachers are described in Table 12.



Table 12

*Elements Noted in Teacher Focus Groups That Increase Persistence*

Elements (guidance counselor identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
<i>Caring Community/Adults</i>	
Support/Caring Adults at School	8
Supportive Parents/Family	4
School is Safe/Comfortable for Students	3
Parents Support School	2
<i>Spending Time with Adults</i>	
Programs to Support/Help Academics	8
Positive Role Models	5
Many Activities for Students	5
<i>Academic, Social, and Personal Support</i>	
Alternative Ways to Succeed/Graduate	8
Committed Teachers	7
People at School are Nice	4
Positive Motivation	2
<i>Involved in the Institution</i>	
Many Activities for Students	5
<i>High Expectations/Learning is Important</i>	
Education is Valued/Important	7
Good Communication	4
School Needs to be Relevant	3
Positive School Leadership/Professionalism	3
Consistent Rules	1

*Note n = 4*

The elements that teachers described as important for students' persistence in high school included supportive adults and alternative ways for students to succeed/graduate. The teachers described many programs adults were involved in and the visibility of the faculty and staff at student events and performances as an important factor in students making positive connections to the school. The teachers also stated that education needs to be valued and programs to support academics must be provided by teachers committed to supporting student academic success. The partnerships with parents and administrative support was also clearly identified as a factor in students meeting the expectations of the adults, in addition to the students taking pride in their work and success in school. Finally, teachers related the importance of positive communication and the many opportunities for students to participate and be involved in the school as positive factors contributing to student persistence.

The administration, like the teachers, had a different perspective on what elements in the literature that they perceived as significant to student persistence in school despite obstacles. The elements elicited for the administrative group regarding student persistence until graduation are described in Table 13.

Table 13

*Elements Noted in Administrative Interviews and Focus Groups That Increase Persistence*

Elements (guidance counselor identified)	Number of Times Referenced in the Responses
<i>Caring Community/Adults</i>	
Support/Caring Adults at School	9
Supportive Parents/Family	2
School is Safe/Comfortable for Students	5
Parents Support School	2
<i>Spending Time with Adults</i>	
Programs to Support/Help Academics	4
Positive Role Models	2
<i>Academic, Social, and Personal Support</i>	
Alternative Ways to Succeed/Graduate	5
Committed Teachers	3
Hands-On Learning Opportunities	2
People at School are Nice	2
Positive Motivation	1
<i>Involved in the Institution</i>	
Many Activities for Students	2
<i>High Expectations/Learning is Important</i>	
Consistent School Rules	6
Education is Valued/Important	5
Good Communication	2
School Needs to be Relevant	1
Positive School Leadership/Professionalism	2
School Personnel are Visible	3

*Note n = 3*

The elements identified by the administrators included the importance of supportive adults at school, alternative ways for students to succeed and graduate, and education being important and valued. These factors were frequently cited throughout the interview and focus groups. Additionally, the administrators identified the importance of consistent rules, programs to support students academically, knowing students individually, and providing schools that are safe and comfortable for students as essential to student persistence and success.

The overriding element in all four groups' interviews and focus groups was the importance of supportive adults for students in the schools. Students and counselors identified supportive parents and families as the primary aspect of student success; teachers and administrators described alternatives to succeed in school and meet graduation requirements, as well as committed teachers to support academic success as valuable assets to student persistence.

#### Review of Policies and Documents Related to Graduation

A review of documents pertinent to high school graduation was conducted as a part of this study. The documents that were reviewed included:

- Policy 204, Attendance,
- Policy 208, Withdrawal from School,
- Policy 217, Graduation Requirements, and
- Board Approved Student Handbook.

Policy 204, Attendance, reflects the standard state policy in Pennsylvania as required by PA School Code 1327 and 1330, as well as the recent Basic Education Circular (BEC) [24 PS § 13-1327](#) distributed by the Pennsylvania Department of

Education (PDE). In the district attendance policy, the important elements related to student graduation are reflected in a student's ability to attend a post-secondary school full-time prior to graduation in lieu of regular school attendance. Additionally, students who are seniors, who can complete requirements by attending school part-time, may be excused if they are attending a post-secondary school or are legally employed.

Policy 208, Withdrawal from School, reflects the PA School Code 1326. The policy states that students between the age of 8 and 17 must attend school. In this policy, the local school board directs the school officials to make every effort to determine the underlying reason a student wishes to withdraw and makes every effort to use the resources of the district to assist the student to reach his or her career goals.

The PA School Code 1603 governs policy 217, Graduation Requirements. The district policy requires a student to complete 28 specific credits but does not require a student to complete a fourth year if they have met the requirements and are enrolled in an accredited institution of higher learning approved by the principal. Additionally, students must complete a graduation project. Alternatives to the required credits are offered through tutoring and summer school. The policy also offers a diploma for successful completion of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Diplomas are also granted to Veterans of World War II and the Korean War.

The Student Handbook, which is board-approved, provides a specific description of the policies outlined above for student graduation requirements. The district philosophy, guided by the strategic plan, is written in the handbook and provides valuable insight into understanding the climate and culture created by the district.

The philosophy of the school district (see Appendix I), which supports “academic, personal, and social skills,” provides a foundation for the positive culture in the school. In addition, the philosophy states:

We enable students to work toward accessible goals and endeavor to ensure that each student reaches those targets. Through their efforts in the pursuit of these objectives, our students learn to measure their progress and skills. We seek to identify those areas where our students require assistance in order to achieve a goal. In all areas -- from instruction to assessment -- we offer the tools and strategies needed to assist each student in meeting the district outcomes.

The reinforcement of providing structure and guidance for students to have accessible goals and the tools and strategies to meet those goals reflects the strong sense of community that this school creates.

In addition to the philosophy, the handbook provides specific requirements for graduation relating to attendance, withdrawal from school, and graduation requirements. Attendance is described in detail in the handbook. The handbook states that attendance is a critical component in a student’s success in high school. Attendance is part of the student’s permanent record. The attendance policy in the handbook describes the guidelines for excused absences and the procedure for submitting excuses. Additional elements that are attendance-related and described in the handbook are Loss of Course Credit for Unexcused Absences and Educational Trips/College Visits. The policy on student withdrawal from school is not outlined in the handbook.

The handbook has very specific language for completion of high school. The handbook outlines the number of credits required in each subject area, the graduation

project requirements, the promotion requirements for each grade, the PSSA/Pathways proficiency requirements, and IEP guidelines. Each of these areas offers students and families specific guidelines to complete the requirements and offers suggestions for assistance and alternatives through meeting with building level administration and the guidance counselors.

Table 14 provides an overview of the relationships between student, counselor, teacher, and administrative perspectives relative to the documented policies and documents associated to students completing high school.

Table 14

*Review of Documents and Policies Related to School Completion*

Source	Brofenbrenner Elements Identified	Tinto Element Identified	Other	Comments
Policy 204 Attendance	0	4	Flexibility in ways to complete school	Academic, social and personal support (T).
Policy 208 Withdrawal from School	2	1		Caring Community (B).
Policy 217 Graduation Requirements	0	5		High Expectation, learning perceived as important, and academic support (T).
Student Handbook	1	8	School philosophy	Learning perceived, as important; high expectations; academic support (T). Caring Community (B).
Totals	3	18		

The Board Policy and Student Handbook provide consistent guidelines for students and families to assist in the successful completion of high school. As in the Board policy on graduation requirements, the Student Handbook offers alternative for students who have difficulty meeting all of the outlined requirements. As in the focus groups and interviews, this flexibility is an important reason students succeed. The school philosophy and policy reflect the commitment of the district to provide students multiple opportunities for future success in the workforce or post-secondary education.

#### Results in Terms of the Literature

In the literature related to students dropping out of high school, several areas surface that identify characteristics of students at risk for dropping out of high school. Studies by Deschamps (1992) and Battin-Pearson & Newcomb (2000) summarize a body of research on characteristics of students who drop out of high school. Deviance, deviant affiliation, socio-economic status, family structure, as well as absenteeism, truancy, and academic success have been well documented. These characteristics are demonstrated through student use of drugs and alcohol, teen pregnancy, and high school non-completion.

The research has identified alternatives to elements that influence student retention in high school until completion. The gap in the literature that this study contributed to satisfying is exploring student and other stakeholder perceptions of what keeps them in school when they are at risk for dropping out. Question one asks: how do social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration impact students' decisions to stay in school until completion? Question two asks: what are the major school-related themes that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until



graduation? The students and adults who participated in the study provided insight regarding the importance of social relationships within the school and factors that help these students to graduate at a higher rate than other schools with similar demographic make-up.

Table 15 describes the five most frequently cited elements identified by students in the interviews regarding why students succeed in school despite being at risk for not graduating.

Table 15

*Clusters of Top Five Common Elements Identified During Interviews*

Elements (student identified)	Number Noted
Supportive/Caring Adults at School	14
Supportive Parents/Family	10
Support of Peers/Friends	9
Many Activities for Students	8
Committed Teachers	8

*Note n = 3*

Students overwhelmingly cited a number of adults who were available to help them persist in school throughout the interviews. Students described adults providing academic, social, and personal support to all students. Students described the support of these teachers as critical to student success in this school. Lee & Burkham (2001) in their research found that positive relationships between students and teachers were a predictor of students successfully completing high school. As described by the students in this

study, when adults are positively involved in students' lives and demonstrate caring, students are more likely to be connected to school and the institution and complete school (Brofenbrenner, 1979 & Tinto, 1987).

Additionally, Albert (1999) studied the effect of individualized attention to Latino students at risk for dropping out of high school. In her study of Latino students at risk for dropping out of high school, Albert provided supports and interventions for students who demonstrated alienation from school. The results of this small-scale study indicated that higher academic performance and engagement have a positive impact on student high school completion. As in the school in this study, students described the school as a place where adults consistently cared for students and provided them with support.

In addition to the adults at school caring about students and their success, the students also described their parents and family as a critical factor in their success. Battin-Pearson & Newcomb (2000) in their research indicated that low parental expectations, as well as families who do not connect to the school, were strong indicators of students not completing high school. Albert (1999) noted the differences between culture of the home and school, low academic and career aspirations, lack of cultural literacy, and low expectations from both parents and schools as factors that placed Latino students at risk. In research by Aloise-Young and Chavez (2002) the common reasons students drop out of school were described as lack of family support, low bond to school, poor grades, and friends who were not interested in school. The research focused on students in the Latino community. The findings in the research indicated that students needed family support to value good grades and to persist in school when it is difficult (Tinto, 1987).

In addition to family support, students in their interviews also described peers and friends as important reasons that they were able to be successful in school. The students interviewed described many instances where their peers were the people who encouraged them to continue with school when it was difficult. Students who were interviewed made use of peer tutoring and peer counseling in their school. In addition, these students also became part of the support for other students once they were able to find success.

The final two areas that students indicated as important in successful completion of high school were the many activities available at the school and the committed teachers who were available for students. During the interviews, students described athletics, clubs, tutoring, counselors, and the availability of teachers, counselors, and administrators and encouragement of students in academic, social, and personal matters. In reviewing the significant factors identified by students, it is important to recognize that students identified both adults at school and parents and family as critical to their success. Additionally, students identified friends, the activities in which they were able to participate, and the committed teachers who were available to make these activities possible.

Table 16 describes the five most frequently cited elements identified by counselors during the focus groups regarding why students succeed in school despite being at risk for not graduating. The counselors' focus group data was not able to identify elements as specifically as each of the other groups. The counselors' common elements were clustered similarly to the students.

Table 16

*Clusters of Top Five Common Elements Identified During Focus Groups*

Elements (counselor identified)	Number Noted
Supportive/Caring Adults at School	4
Supportive Parents/Family	4
Many Activities for Students	3
Programs to Support Academics	3
Positive Motivation	3

*Note n =2*

Counselors identified many of the same elements for success that students described. The counselors in their focus group spoke about the importance of supportive caring adults in school. The counselors identified numerous examples of faculty starting new clubs or activities to engage students in the school. The counselors described the adults as positive role models who provided motivation and support for students to continue trying when school became difficult. Roderick and Engel (2001) revealed that motivation theory points to extrinsic, negative incentives undermining engagement in school. Because students' school experiences and progress in school prepare them for transition to the adult world, supportive adults in the school and at home are important for future student success (Lee & Burkam, 2001). The guidance counselors noted the strong ability of the adults in this school to motivate students to be successful by including them in positive school activities.

The counselors also believed that parents play an important role in the success of a student. The number of requests to counselors from parents for students to participate in tutoring prior to PSSA testing, to have students take higher level classes, and to prepare students for careers and higher education were noted. In the research poor academic performance alone did not lead to dropping out; yet poor academic performance was the strongest indicator of high school students' rates of noncompletion when combined with low parental expectations (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). The counselors related the importance of parental support, of tutoring and other school activities, as does the literature, with motivating adults in the school as a reason that students in this school meet with success in completing high school.

Finally, the counselors spoke about the importance of programs to support academics. The counselors believed that teachers and administrators provide a strong program of tutoring for underclassmen, as well as the Pathways program for seniors, to meet their graduation requirements. Counselors stated that teachers were available to help with academics both formally and informally throughout the school year.

The elements identified by the teachers varied slightly from the elements identified by the students and the guidance counselors. Table 17 describes the five most frequently cited elements identified by teachers during the focus group regarding why students succeed in school despite being at risk for not graduating.

Table 17

*Clusters of Top Five Common Elements Identified During Focus Groups*

Elements (teacher identified)	Number Noted
Supportive/Caring Adults at School	8
Alternative Ways to Graduate	8
Programs to Support/Help Academics	8
Education is Valued/Important	7
Committed Teachers	7

*Note n = 4*

Battin-Pearson and Newcomb (2000) found that efforts to prevent high school students from dropping out should focus on increasing the academic success of students who are subject to the predisposing factors described both in the literature and in this study. In the focus group with teachers, supportive, caring adults, programs to support academics, and alternative ways to graduate were noted frequently as reasons that students in this school persisted until graduation.

During the focus groups teachers related that they stayed after school to help students, that each department had one person available each day to help students, and that there were formal programs in place in the school for students to become academically proficient. In addition to the tutoring programs, the district also provides several alternatives for students to complete their high school education. The teachers believed that students in this school have many safety nets and programs to help them meet with success in completing their education. Students who do not meet with success

in the typical school program may participate in “The Academy” or “Transitions” programs, as well as other alternatives provided by the administration in the student handbook.

The teachers described the high standards and expectations as increasing the perception that students in this school value education. In the focus group with the teachers, they gave several examples of students wanting to prepare for the PSSA test by taking after-school tutoring or participating in academic classes, rather than applied classes, in order to avoid having to participate in the Pathways program during their senior year. Research by Roderick and Engel (2001) found that providing incentives for students to take tests and school more seriously resulted in greater student efforts and motivation.

The administrators provided yet another perspective on why students in this school are motivated to persist in high school until graduation. Table 18 describes the five most frequently cited elements identified by administrators in the interviews and focus groups regarding why students succeed in school despite being at risk for not graduating.

Table 18

*Clusters of Top Five Common Elements Identified During Interviews and Focus Groups*

Elements (administrator identified)	Number Noted
Supportive/Caring Adults at School	9
Consistent School Rules	6
School is Safe/Comfortable for Students	5
Alternative Ways to Graduate/Succeed	5
Education is Valued	5

*Note n = 3*

While identifying a student at risk for dropping out of high school is difficult to quantify due to the variance in reporting at the national, state, and local levels (Greene, 2002b), the administrators during the interview and focus group identified the importance of positive adults in helping students to persist in school. The administrators spoke about the importance of the adults in the school knowing students by name and how this made students feel connected to the adults and the school. Roderick & Engle (2001) described the difficulty for students who give low effort in school and also lack support outside the school setting. Many of the students in their research had significant learning difficulties or problems at home. With this in mind, the importance of adults providing students with support in the school setting becomes even more critical to students' persistence.

The three administrative participants described different elements and characteristics than students, counselors, and teachers, during the interview and focus groups as important to the students' success in school. The administrators described



consistent rules as an important way to make students feel safe and comfortable in school. While students did not identify this in their interviews, they did describe school as a comfortable place. The administrators described rules and “knowing what to expect” as critical to student success in school. The administrators recognized that students might not acknowledge that the consistent rules help them to be successful; yet on numerous occasions, students and teachers would rely on the administration to help students negotiate difficult situations. The administration had provided a consistent structure in the school for students, and the students were comfortable with them because they knew what to expect. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL, 2005), in its research, stressed the importance of consistent rules and positive relationships with adults as critical in at-risk students completing high school.

Additionally, the administrators described alternative ways to graduate, education being valued, and school as a safe and comfortable place for students as important elements for students to persist in school. The counselors and teachers, in their focus groups, also described alternative ways to graduate and education being valued as important for student persistence.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter attempted to answer two research questions that framed this study by presenting qualitative data and a review of pertinent documents. That data came from four sources:

- Interviews with students,
- Focus groups with counselors, teachers, and administrators,

- Interviews with an administrator, and
- Review of policies and the student handbook.

In the data analysis the characteristics of student persistence identified by Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987) were compared and contrasted among the students, counselors, teachers, and administrators. Additionally, the student handbook and school policy documents were also linked to the characteristics in the literature as well.

The interview and focus group questions were derived from the review of the literature. Student questions varied slightly from adult questions. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Following transcription, the interviews and focus group questions were analyzed and coded according to methodology consistent with qualitative inquiry (Berg, 2004). Themes related to the literature were classified and analyzed to find congruence with current literature on student persistence. Additionally, common elements and characteristics were documented and synthesized. The process included a review of the student handbook and school board policy as it related to student persistence in completing high school.

Table 19 provides an overview of the common elements described in the interviews and focus groups by the students, counselors, teachers, and administrators.

Table 19

*Clusters of Common Elements During Interviews and Focus Groups*

Elements	Number Noted			
	<u>Students</u>	<u>Counselors</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Administrators</u>
Supportive/Caring Adults at School	14	4	8	9
Committed Teachers	8	0	7	0
Supportive Parents/Family	10	4	0	0
Alternative Ways to Succeed/Graduate	0	0	8	5
Education is Valued	0	0	7	5
Many Activities	8	3	0	0
Programs to Support Academics	0	3	8	0
Supportive Peers/Family	9	0	0	0
Consistent School Rules	0	0	0	6
School is Safe/Comfortable for Students	0	0	0	5

n = 15

The most frequently cited element in the interviews and focus groups was that students had supportive, caring adults in this school. Each stakeholder noted this element more frequently than any other element or factor having an impact on student success.

The next most frequent elements described in the interviews and focus groups by

students, counselors, and teachers were committed teachers and supportive parents/family. The fourth most commonly cited element identified was that students in this school were provided alternative ways to graduate or be successful in school. Both the teachers and the administrators discussed the importance of the number of opportunities students in this school have to succeed.

The fifth most noted element identified by teachers and administrators in the interviews and focus groups was that education was valued. Although the value of education was not in the students' or counselors' most noted elements, in the focus groups and interviews the teachers and administrators spoke of the pride students had in being the first in their families to graduate from high school or go to college. The importance of education is identified in the literature through relationships that exist between minority status, SES standing, academic achievement, and the opportunity to earn a standard diploma (Houchens, 2004).

Other elements that were identified as important in the interviews and focus groups were the many activities provided for students by the school and programs that supported academic success. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, as well as in the document review, the degree of consistency of philosophy was apparent and demonstrated the same supportive structure for students that the participants in the interviews and focus groups provided. Many descriptions and accounts of positive adult support in a caring environment were garnered in each group. Students in this school receive structure and support both academically and socially by both the adults at school and at home. Consistent with the written policies and the literature, this school district

provides an environment where students consistently complete high school at a higher rate than other schools with similar demographics.

The most common characteristics within the themes identified by students during the interviews were as follows: the presence of supportive adults at school, supportive parents or family, supportive peers, many activities at the school, and teachers that are committed to the students and the school. The counselors described in the focus group the presence of supportive adults at school, supportive parents, and family, many activities for students, programs to support academic success, and positive motivation. The teachers identified the presence of supportive adults at school, programs to support academic success, alternative ways to graduate, teachers that are committed to the students and the school, and education being valued. Finally, the administrators identified the following: the presence of supportive adults at school, consistent rules, alternative ways to graduate, and teachers committed to the students and the school, and a school that is safe and comfortable for students.

During student interviews and counselor focus groups, two elements consistent with the themes were identified, supportive adults in school and supportive parents/families. The students and the counselors also identified the many activities available for students at this school. The students and the teachers commonly identified that teachers were committed to students and the school. Students also identified support of peers/friends as important to student persistence in school.

The counselors and students both described supportive adults in school and supportive parents/families and many activities for students as important to student persistence. The counselors and the teachers both described programs to support

academics as a valuable tool for students to complete school. Finally, the counselors identified positive motivation critical for students to succeed until graduation.

Other than the presence of supportive adults at school, teachers identified elements during focus groups that differed from the students and counselors. The teachers and the administrators found alternative ways to graduate and education being valued as important to student persistence. Finally, the teachers and the counselors identified programs to support academics as a valuable tool for students to persist until graduation.

The administrators also identified supportive, caring adults at school as a primary element in student success. Additionally, the administrators and the teachers identified alternative ways to graduate and education being valued as factors that increase student persistence. Only the administrators identified consistent rules, and the school perceived as a safe and comfortable place for student as important to student persistence and success.

All four groups identified caring adults at school as the most important element. While each focus group and interview provided its own perspective, there were many consistencies in each group which were connected to the themes in the literature that were frequently described as well. The student handbook and school board policy also connected the themes and elements described in the interviews. In Policy 204, Attendance, the allowance for flexibility in completing school is clearly defined by the academic, social, and personal support that the school policy stated it would provide for students who faced difficulty in attending school. Policy 208, Withdrawal from School, stated that students should be afforded any resources to achieve their career goals prior to their withdrawal from school.

This policy demonstrates the community's commitment to provide support to students to achieve success in the workforce or additional educational pursuits.

Additionally, Policy 217, Graduation Requirements, while flexible for students, still had specific standards and competencies that students must complete to graduate from high school. In concert with the school administration, the policy provides many opportunities for students to complete coursework and graduate from high school. Finally, the student handbook provided the framework for students and families to understand the expectations of students in the school, as well as setting the expectation that students would succeed in the school, academically, socially, and personally. The handbook is a reflection of the caring community that this school embodies. The written documents reflect the district and school philosophy that support student success through flexibility and compassion for student differences and talents.

In analyzing the data from the interviews, focus groups, and the document review, the consistency with which each of the stakeholders viewed students and the learning environment was clear. The intersection of the data in this study identified that the stakeholders' perceptions of what the school provides for students to persist until graduation and the school district policy were consistent except for one element described by the administrators: consistent rules and a safe school as important to students' success. No other group related this as important.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine how social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration, as well as other school-related factors, affect an at-risk student's decision to stay in school until completion. There were two goals for the study, first, to uncover the factors within a school's control that encourage at-risk students to complete high school and second, to identify supports and strategies schools can provide to mitigate factors that may keep at-risk students from persisting until graduation from high school.

The literature related to students at risk of dropping out of high school prior to graduation generally focuses on factors such as general deviance, deviant affiliation, poor academic achievement, family structure and support, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). The critical social and economic concern created by students who drop out of high school is well documented in the literature (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000; Deschamps, 1992; Fitzpatrick & Yoels, 1992; Hoffer, 1997; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001; Roderick, 1993). Issues external to the school that have related to early student departure have generally been linked to the factors beyond the control of the school.

The issues of students leaving school prior to graduation have manifested themselves in discipline and attendance issues, violence, depression, and poor student achievement. This study arose in response to this researcher wanting to discern the factors that contribute to students in this single, rapidly growing school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania completing high school at a higher-than-average rate than



students do locally, in Pennsylvania, and nationally. The school chosen for this study has found success in graduating at-risk students despite the presence of a high number of risk factors identified in the literature. The student population of this school was rapidly growing, had a high rate of transience, and was ethnically diverse. Thirty-three percent of its students were identified as low socio-economic status (SES) and had experienced multiple transitions throughout the high school years. However, despite the obstacles this school faces, it consistently graduated 95% of its students.

With the implementation of new educational policies focusing on student achievement, remedial courses and programs have been put into place to address poor test scores and low student achievement. The visible frustration of students taking standardized tests and remedial courses begs for an answer to the question regarding the impact of these programs on student persistence. Whether the increased focus on academic success encourages students at-risk for leaving school before completion to persist or whether the increased focus on testing becomes the final struggle students cannot manage has not yet been determined (Lin, 2002).

The theories of Brofenbrenner (1979) and Tinto (1987), along with other characteristics identified in the literature related to student persistence, were used to frame the questions for students and school personnel used in this study. Through interviews and focus groups, along with the analyses of the district policies and student handbook, the responses of the fifteen participants were examined in relationship to the factors that exemplify student persistence. The following characteristics were analyzed during this study:

- the presence of caring adults in a students' life;

- spending time in school with caring adults;
- high expectations for students;
- academic, social and personal support;
- frequent and early feedback regarding performance;
- being involved in the institution with support from faculty and staff; and
- learning was perceived as important.

This study attempted to determine factors associated with the school setting that could influence an at-risk student's motivation to persist in school, such as social relationships in the school setting, school size, graduation requirements, standardized testing, remedial course-taking, and the structure of the curriculum. In an effort to gain a variety of perspectives, the researcher interviewed students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. Additionally, a review of the school policies and pertinent documents, such as the student handbook, was completed.

The data were analyzed to answer the following research questions:

Question 1: How do social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration affect students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

Question 2: What are the major school-related factors that are associated with why students' decide to stay in high school until graduation?

Qualitative methodology was employed to address the two research questions. The data were gathered from interviews with six students and focus groups or interviews with nine adults including counselors, teachers, and school administrators. The students who participated in this study had a variety of risk factors, including five of the six not scoring at the proficient level on the PSSA test. Students with more than three risk factors

were considered for the study. For example, one student was identified as ELL, Latino, and not proficient on the PSSA, and another student had an IEP, was economically disadvantaged, and was older than expected for the grade level. The adults who participated represented a variety of disciplines and years of experience in this school district.

## Discussion of the Research Questions

### Discussion of Question One

#### *Students' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question One*

In response to the first question regarding how social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration influence a student's decision to stay in school, all six students described the importance of relationships with peers and teachers in their efforts to succeed despite difficulties they faced either at school or at home. The adults most often identified were teachers and coaches, who provided the students with expectations that sometimes exceeded what the students themselves thought they were capable of accomplishing. In addition, one student identified a case manager and a guidance counselor as always being available. The students reported the impact of adults being available after school hours, supporting new clubs and activities, and finding ways for them to participate in the school and school community. It seemed that the positive relationships that the adults forged with the students while participating in these activities provided the students with a sense of connection to the school, the feeling that an adult valued their efforts, and that their success in school made a difference to an adult. The data suggested these actions were important in helping them to be successful academically and in making connections that led to positive social relationships.

In addition to the caring adults, students described the importance of strong peer relationships. The students spoke of the strong motivation that came with the expectation of their attendance for participation in their projects, school activities, and athletics and how their absence would affect their friends. Students specifically identified participation in athletics as having a positive impact on their school success and that athletics was an influence in maintaining a high level of academic achievement. The students described the high standards and self-discipline that coaches expected of the student-athletes in all aspects of the students' lives. The students stated that coaches talked with their teachers and parents, required them to go to tutoring if they were falling behind, and did not let them participate if they were not good citizens in the school community. Furthermore, positive peer influences also seemed to help them stay active in clubs, tutoring, and other activities within this school. Students described how their friends who participated in clubs and tutoring depended on them to complete projects and activities and to deliver service to the community which required them to be present in school. These friendships contributed to making this school a positive place.

The positive impact that comes with students participating in some form of activity at school has implications for the hiring of teachers who will provide guidance outside the school day and teacher role. Additionally, the importance of budgeting money for clubs, activities, and athletics needs to be considered in the formula for student success. Students in this school described adults as an important factor in their success. Having an adult who holds the students accountable, supports them when they face difficulties, and encourages them to push themselves beyond what they think they are capable of made a difference for the students who were interviewed in this study.

### *Counselors' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question One*

In response to question one regarding social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration, and the influence on an at-risk student's decision to stay in school, the guidance counselors identified teachers and administrators as key people in providing these at-risk students with support to complete high school. The counselors related the importance of individual attention by adults as having a strong influence on students connecting to positive school activities. The guidance counselors gave multiple examples of teachers tutoring students after school, both formally and informally, sponsoring new clubs, and encouraging students to participate in school-sponsored activities. One counselor cited a particular teacher as having success in encouraging a troubled student to participate in athletics. The impact of this teacher's influence on the student was demonstrated through improved academic performance and a decrease in behavioral problems.

The counselors recognized the role of the school administrators and the importance of their support for students to persist in school. Both counselors stated that the administrators knew students by name. Additionally, the counselors discussed that administrators took the time to know the background of individual students and used this information to motivate students during difficult times, as well as modify consequences for students when circumstances warranted.

The counselors provided a perspective that was not revealed by the other participants. The insight the guidance counselors provided about the individual relationships among students, teachers, and administrators was reflected in the focus group. The counselors were able to identify many individual examples of teachers and

administrators who had gone above and beyond the daily requirements of their roles to assist students academically or to make disciplinary consequences appropriate for the individual student's circumstances. The counselors' examples of coaches, teachers, and administrators making personal connections with students crossed all teaching disciplines and athletic teams, clubs, and other co-curricular activities.

### *Teachers' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question One*

The teachers' responses regarding the impact of social relationships with peers, faculty, and administrators on a student's decision to stay in school reflected both the importance of the school programs for students, as well as a caring faculty who personally knew students and fostered students' successes.

In addition, during the teacher focus group the commitment to student success by adults and the specific behaviors associated with that belief were described. The teachers spoke of the numerous after-school academic opportunities, as well as the commitment of the teachers to deliver these programs to the students in both formal and informal ways. The teachers described informal tutoring that was delivered within each subject area by teachers on a rotating basis without compensation as indicative of the effort of teachers who were willing to give their time to assist students academically. Teachers also discussed the importance of learning about each individual student, the significance of treating students fairly and with compassion, and the value of relating to students in a positive way. Teachers acted on the belief that students can succeed by being willing to go beyond the school-day instructional role, which may have contributed to the students' persistence because students perceived that teachers cared about their individual accomplishments.

### *Administrators' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question One*

When describing the importance of social relationships with peers, faculty, and administrators on a student's decision to stay in school, the administrators' described the many adults and programs that were available for students in this school. The administrators described that many students came from backgrounds where there were few rules, consequences, or expectations for student achievement and behavior. During the discussion the administrators related that the adults knowing students and setting boundaries for students both academically and socially were important to student success.

The administrators described school rules as a way for students to know boundaries and expectations, which contributed to their feeling safe in school, which in turn allowed them to focus on learning. The administrators also described that adults knowing students individually helped the students to feel comfortable in approaching these adults in the school for assistance academically, socially, or personally, which led to success for students. The administrators were the only participants who described the phenomenon of students feeling safe. The perception of the administrators may be different due to the types of relationship they have with students who present with a variety of needs. The administrators found that students connected to school in a positive way due to the combination of holding students accountable to a clear set of rules and providing consistency. This may have increased the students' chance of persisting and completing school.

### *Summary of Responses and Perceptions to Research Question One*

In response to question one, regarding social relationships with peers, faculty, and administrators affecting student persistence to graduation, each group reported the

importance of caring adults. All groups recognized that teachers contributing beyond the classroom instructional role were vital to student persistence. The adults who forged these relationships came from diverse roles, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, advisors, and administrators. Throughout the interviews and focus groups positive adults were recognized for providing academic support beyond the normal school day, utilizing strategies to motivate students to succeed, providing individualized attention to students, setting and enforcing consistent rules, and establishing and communicating high expectations. The teachers in this study demonstrated their caring and support for students in concrete ways that connected with at-risk students. Student success in completing school for the participants of this study seemed to be linked to the positive role that adults in this school played in students' lives.

The students, teachers, counselors, and administrators viewed the role of the teacher in this school as more than just a person who delivers content. In this school, the expectation that teachers would contribute to tutoring after hours without compensation, initiate new clubs with students, and attend student performances and events was part of the culture modeled by the building principal and administration. The philosophy and policies to assist students in completion of school acknowledge the need for multiple and varied vehicles to help students achieve their academic and personal goals. The indication from the conversations with both students and adults in this study, as well as the supporting policies, reinforces the concept that if a culture of caring exists within a school students can meet with success.



## Implications of Question One

The key finding described in the compilation of the interviews and focus groups during this study was the importance of positive adults being involved with students to encourage persistence despite being at risk of not completing high school. Based on the finding there are several implications for schools.

Clearly, the relationships adults build with students involved more than just token acts of caring. When administrators select their staffs it would make sense to recognize more than technical skill in the hiring process. Therefore, when adding staff a factor that should hold equal weight for consideration during the hiring process might be the disposition of the candidate. Screening candidates with a selection process that identifies individuals that go beyond the prescribed role of a school employee and who are willing to work beyond the school day should be considered.

Additionally, these findings imply that once administrators hire and secure teachers who have the characteristics of passion for education and caring for children, building leaders must sustain the culture of caring. Administrators must find ways to support veteran teachers in maintaining their energy and enthusiasm for students, as well as nurturing new teachers through professional development. The mentoring and induction process should include strategies for new employees to develop respectful, caring relationships with students. In addition, there are implications for university teacher preparation programs. Pre-service teachers need to understand that caring about students and their individual academic achievement is connected to student success.

Furthermore, providing opportunities for staff to build relationships with students through developing programs within the school that promote collaborative efforts in

sustaining a positive culture should be considered a vital part of the school experience. Awareness of the infrastructure of the school in creating a caring culture is important. Through student scheduling, matching students and teachers by style and strength, and support, both morally and financially, for programs that provide opportunities for teachers and students to work with each other may contribute to a systemic culture of caring and accountability.

In this study the staff was not willing to excuse at-risk students for poor performance. Instead, the adults linked caring for students to a high level of accountability for achievement. To provide students with academic supports, the adults in this school demonstrated that they would go the extra step to help students, even if it meant that they had to stay beyond the school day. This would suggest that finding congruence of beliefs to support this culture is an important factor and should be considered in all aspects of a school's infrastructure: recruiting and hiring staff, development and deployment of curriculum and resources, and the delivery of professional development. Additionally, the value of the written policy supporting the implementation and funding of these programs appeared to be a critical factor. Further, the designation of staff to monitor student attendance and intervene in cases where non-completion may occur seemed to encourage persistence. Finally, providing rigorous academic alternatives for students to meet graduation requirements was a factor that seemed to have a strong influence on persistence.

## Discussion of Question Two

### *Students' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question Two*

Students' responses concerning the major school-related factors associated with why students stay in school until completion revealed that students overwhelmingly perceived that adults were available for academic, social, and personal support in this school. This echoed the results of question one. Evidence of this support in the student interviews revealed that teachers were available for both formal and informal academic support through voluntary tutoring and structured school-sponsored tutoring programs. In addition to tutoring, students identified these school-related programs as important to their success: the Career and Technical School, ELL support programs, and dual enrollment at the local university. Students described these programs and the adults who worked with them as a factor that motivated them to succeed academically and to complete high school. Each of the programs described were motivating because a positive adult was involved in that program or an adult had encouraged a student to participate in a program.

Additionally, the requirement of passing the PSSAs, the standardized test required in Pennsylvania, was not seen as an obstacle to graduation for these students because the students knew that this school would provide them with opportunities to demonstrate proficiency and thereby graduate. The students described the only required remediation in this school as the Pathways Program, or for students in the applied level classes, mandatory 90-minute English and math courses in place of four electives. The students did not perceive these programs as punitive but as a way that they could learn the content prior to leaving high school.

Finally, while the students realized that some teachers were better at managing students than others, none of the students believed that the school would allow students to fade away or slip through the cracks. The students recognized that at this school the counselors, teachers, and administrators communicated with parents and families regarding their success in school. Students saw the importance of the positive relationships and communication between the home and school as an important factor in minimizing the impact of the size of this school and as being supportive of their ability to succeed.

#### *Counselors' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question Two*

Counselors' responses regarding school-related factors associated with students' staying in school until completion revealed that adults in the school had high expectations for students, and they believed students were capable of success. Although the counselors described teacher inconsistency and frustration in delivering instruction to some of the students, the counselors identified learning and achievement being perceived as important by students, parents, and teachers.

The factors described by the counselors were indicative of adult engagement in the academic success of students and after-school programs. The counselors stated that parents called to request tutoring when 4Sight, results were sent home, demonstrating additional adult support for student academic success. The counselors described this important communication as contributing to the high academic standard shared by adults for student success in this school. In addition to the programs offered after school, the counselors described the 90-minute class requirement for students who took applied level classes. These students participated in math and English classes in place of electives. The

counselors described frustration from both teachers and students regarding some students' lack of motivation in these classes and the impact of that on being able to deliver a rigorous curriculum to all students; yet the counselors stated that teachers worked hard to motivate students in the applied track, particularly those who wanted to succeed. They also encouraged students to work hard in order to be eligible to move to college preparatory classes.

The concerns identified by students, teachers, and counselors were not consistent and raised questions about the delivery of applied level classes which might lead to the consideration of exploring alternative scheduling, reviewing the tracking process, and delivering courses that provide all students with an academically rigorous curriculum. The potential of differentiating the instruction rather than offering a low-level, tracked course becomes an important consideration when developing curriculum, professional development programs for teachers, and challenging student schedules.

In discussing the pressures of the PSSAs and the size of this high school, the counselors did not report that either stressor was a reason that students at this high school did not persist. The counselors described that students did not perceive standardized testing or PSSAs as roadblocks to persistence because of the variety of programs that dedicated teachers and administrators provided so that students at this school could demonstrate proficiency. The counselors related that despite the size of the school, teachers, coaches, and advisors provided many opportunities for students to be an active part of the school community, which may have mitigated the anonymity or isolation that can come with a large school.

### *Teachers' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question Two*

The teachers identified programs to support academics, alternative ways to succeed and graduate, and education being perceived as valuable as factors that helped students persist. The teachers described the Pathways Program and the 90-minute classes as school-related supports that encouraged academic success and provided needed assistance for student success. Additionally, the teachers described that many of them were available after school for either formal or informal tutoring. In describing availability outside the school day, the teachers stated that each academic department created a rotation so that each day a teacher would be available for students who needed subject specific support. This voluntary activity by the teachers demonstrated a commitment to academic achievement for students as well as positive modeling regarding the importance of academic success.

The teachers also described the high expectations for academics in this school as an important factor in student persistence. As evidenced by the commitment of the teachers to student academic success, the teachers also frequently emphasized the importance of a high school diploma to students. Teachers described that many of the students were proud to be the first in their families to graduate from high school, and they recognized the dedication many students demonstrated by participating in tutoring prior to taking the PSSA. Additionally, the teachers stated that while students wanted to pass the PSSA test, they were also interested in taking higher-level classes, not only to meet graduation requirements but also to prepare themselves for success in the future.

Finally, teachers stated the importance of positive adult relationships in mitigating the large size of this high school. Teachers described the availability of both academic

and/or social programs with adults, which as described previously, were in place for any student at this school. In addition to the available programs, teachers did not perceive that the size of the school would keep the adults in this school from getting to know each other or the students. Teachers described communication among one another and across departments regarding student progress as occurring both in and outside the school day. Carpooling was identified as an informal way in which adults communicated with each other regarding student progress. The administration was also credited with providing opportunities for planning and staff development within the school day that allowed teachers to work together to achieve student success.

#### *Administrators' Responses and Perceptions to Research Question Two*

Administrators' responses concerning major school-related factors that were associated with why students stay in school until completion indicated that consistent and fair school rules were important for student success. Given this school's success with at-risk students and its high numbers of transient students, it appears as though having an administration willing to develop clear rules and enforce them consistently, to reach out to absent parents in a variety of ways, and to know individual circumstances when applying consequences is critical.

The administrators also cited the importance of providing students with alternative ways to demonstrate proficiency in order to graduate. In addition to the Pathways Program for students who did not score at the proficient level on the PSSA, students in this school could also attend the Academy or collaborate with the administration to find a way to demonstrate competency and graduate. The stated philosophy and policies of this district supported the belief of differentiating the models

available for students to meet their academic goals and graduate. The administrators described that they were proud that this school community accommodated the diverse needs of student learners.

The administrators identified programs, such as the Student Assistance Program (SAP), for providing positive support to engage students in school. The administrators described that if a student had an idea for an activity and an adult to supervise it, the possibility of adding the activity to the school program was very high due to the sizeable budget. Given this school's success with at-risk students and its high transience and minority population, the step of creating a budget that has the flexibility to add activities and programs based on the needs and interests of students appears beneficial. In addition to the programs provided for students, the administrators described the comfortable atmosphere of the school and the adults being involved with students at school as significant factors in student persistence until graduation.

#### Summary of Responses and Perceptions to Research Question Two

The participants of this study revealed several school-related characteristics that contributed to student persistence in this school. The students perceived that support for academic, social, and personal issues was readily available and made a difference in their school experience. The students stated that teachers and other adults in this school were available for them not only for formal academic tutoring but also for informal support for both academic and personal reasons. The counselors identified high expectations for students from adults and adults believing students were capable of success as positive factors in student persistence. The teachers identified programs to support academic achievement, and the administrators described consistent rules and expectations



contributing to a safe and consistent environment as important to student success and persistence in school. Additionally, administrators stated that alternative ways to graduate or meet graduation requirements had a positive impact on student persistence in this school.

The availability of programs in this school seemed to be a function of the culture of this school. The adults readily participated in programs designed to assist students academically, socially, and personally. The informal tutoring that teachers provided for students without compensation was one of the examples of the ways that the adults in this school stepped out of the prescribed role of an employee to show students that they cared about their academic success, to be engaged in their academic program and be successful. Conversations within the interviews and focus groups repeatedly came back to the availability of adults for students. Whether the adults mentored students on their own time or within the confines of a school-sponsored activity, the culture of this school encouraged and supported the positive relationships between adults and students.

Additionally, responses regarding the impact of standardized testing were not found to have a negative impact in this school as might have been expected. When speaking about the impact of standardized testing, all participants conveyed that while there was pressure associated with testing, because of the programs in place at this school and the alternative ways to demonstrate proficiency and gain academic competence, students at this school persisted. The literature associated with standardized testing, described in Chapter 2, stated that standardized testing could be an obstacle that causes many students not to persist in school until completion. However, in this school none of

the participant groups perceived standardized testing as an obstacle due to the safety nets provided for students to demonstrate proficiency.

The second finding that was not consistent with the literature, described in Chapter 2, was the impact of the large size of the high school. The students, counselors, teachers, and administrators all recognized the school as being large but felt that because of the positive relationships with adults, the academic, social, and personal support, and the influence that positive adults have on delivering consistent rules and high expectations for student achievement, the school size was not a factor.

While much of the research on high school drop-outs indicates large school size is a negative factor in student persistence, the participants in this study did not believe that the large size of the school kept students from persisting until completion. Surprisingly, the participants in this study described the positive characteristics associated with student success that were usually identified in smaller schools. The constituents described two characteristics found in smaller schools. First, there were many activities for students to participate in within the school, and second, a constrained curriculum for students who were academically at-risk was in place. In fact, the impact of the many activities, the high expectations from adults, and positive, caring adults in this school community were as identified as key factors in student perseverance in this school.

### Implications of Question Two

When analyzing the data about school-related factors that encouraged students to persist to graduation several implications surfaced. The first two findings in particular were not consistent with the current body of literature, first, school size, and second, standardized testing. Additionally, the importance of funding programs and practices that

encourage the systemic enculturation of caring and accountability as described in the implications of question one was identified by the participants and the written philosophy and policy of the district.

The factor of personalization seemed to mitigate the negative impact of the large size and the isolation and anonymity that comes with a large school. Contributing to the personalization were the following elements: clear rules that were consistently enforced, multiple and varied co-curricular programs, additional programs focused on academic achievement, pride in receiving a high school diploma, and multiple vehicles for students to complete their academic requirements.

Another element of personalization that surfaced was communication with parents. The communication with parents in this setting was contrary to practices in many schools. The staff in this school reached out through phone calls, e-mails, and personal communication at school activities and events. It appears that having clear guidelines about the type of parental communication that is expected by the school and which is stated and modeled by administrators is beneficial. An additional implication garnered from this study was the importance of facilitating communication by making the use of phones and communication technology easy and accessible. The presence of effective communication among the stakeholders may have decreased the anonymity in a large school.

Additionally, the impact of standardized testing was diminished by the multiple vehicles put in place, for students to demonstrate competency and meet the requirements for graduation. This further reflects the implications in the discussion of question one regarding programs that support student achievement. The alternative ways students

could meet graduation requirements through The Academy, alternative school programs, and tutoring when they did not pass the PSSA test provided a “safety net” for students. Undoubtedly, the practice of having a “safety net” in place for students led to the belief that graduation was not an unattainable goal. Eliminating the obstacle of one type of assessment as the only way for demonstrating proficiency appears to be a critical element for student persistence. Schools can benefit by recognizing the value of varied assessment and multiple pathways to meet graduation requirements.

A finding that was not specifically identified in the literature but for this school was an important factor was adequate funding for student programming. Additionally, this funding should be agile. The findings of this study demonstrated that adequate funds were not only available but also flexible in instituting student-identified activities and programs. The importance of this implication in a school with a transient, at-risk population indicated that instituting programs when they were needed rather than having to wait for a new budget year would aid in connecting students to school and academics.

Additionally, funding to support programs and training for the staff cannot be ignored. The collaboration and communication among adults was identified as an important factor for student success in this high school. The value of identifying time within the school day for staff to communicate with each other regarding educational practices as well as student achievement should be considered in the budget and funding process. Funding to support the scheduling of common planning time and staff development should be included if a culture of adults communicating about student learning and achievement is valued.

Administrators are often reluctant to build in time for this type of informal communication, but the responses from this study would indicate they should.

#### Limitations of the Study

An inherent weakness of this study was the small sample size of the interviews and focus groups. The small number of participants would make it difficult to generalize this data to any other population. This school included over two thousand students in grades nine through twelve. The ethnic distribution of the student body of this high school included 62.5% white students, 20.1% Black students, 15.5% Latino students, and 4.5% Native American and Asian students. Thirty-five percent of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged. The demographic composition of the students could present a limitation due to differing cultural expectations regarding education. In addition, the population of students who were targeted for this study included the most at-risk population in this school. This could be a limitation because students and parents who have risk factors, such as ELL and Special Education, may have difficulty in reading the invitation due to language or learning barriers. An equally limiting factor could include deliberately involving students from single-parent households.

This small-scale study included 15 participants: six students, two counselors, four teachers, and two administrators. While 155 letters were sent to students asking them to participate in interviews on persistence in school along with a description of the research and parental consent forms, only two students responded. As a follow-up 153 postcards were then sent to students who did not respond to the initial mailing, this step provided two additional students. Finally, the principal assisted in making phone contact which yielded the final two student participants. Despite numerous attempts to enlist student

participants, only six responded. Though there were only six student participants, they did represent different risk factors that were identified in the literature describing students who were at-risk of not completing high school.

While this qualitative study led to rich responses, the nature of qualitative research and its probing methodology may not have been the best approach to work with students at-risk of dropping out of high school. Students and families who face day-to-day struggles may not wish to personally share their stories with an unfamiliar researcher; therefore, they may not respond to a letter from a researcher who is a stranger.

Additionally, researcher/respondent bias could be a limitation because students may not have been honest or forthcoming with the researcher. Factors that might contribute to this bias could be the gender, ethnicity, or attire of the researcher. Additional respondent bias could be found due to the time of day the interview was conducted or the location of the interview.

Finally, while support was obtained from the central administration in this school district, the building level administration was cautious in providing information that could compromise the school district or the students, such as single-parent households, discipline records, and involvement in the Student Assistance Program. After several meetings and discussions, the researcher and the administration were able to work through details that satisfied the building administration and allowed the researcher to proceed with the study.

#### Recommendations for Further Study

This study sought to discern the factors that contribute to students in this single, rapidly growing school district in Northeastern Pennsylvania to complete high school at a

higher-than-average rate than students do locally, in Pennsylvania, and nationally. Risk factors inherent to students dropping out of high school were considered in this study. Students with the typical risk factors of high school drop-outs were analyzed. The following characteristics were found in the students who participated in this study: poor academic performance, deviant behavior, affiliation with students who exhibit deviant behavior, poor family socialization, structural strain (e.g. single-parent families, poverty), special education, English Language Learner, and overage for grade, with poor academic achievement being a mediating factor for all but one students. In order to generalize the findings of this study to other schools and settings, the researchers would suggest that a replication of this study be conducted in similar settings with a larger number of participants. This study could also be replicated in an urban location or in districts of high and low socio-economic status.

In addition, a study of this nature could benefit from gathering additional data from a survey of students, counselors, teachers, and administrators. The additional information garnered from a survey may provide a more varied view of stakeholder perspectives among a larger number of participants, as well as guide additional interview and focus group questions.

Additionally, the researcher would suggest that the use of focus groups may have been a more effective technique in gathering data from constituents. The group setting may be less intimidating to students, teachers, and counselors than a personal interview. The concept of blending constituents in focus groups may also create a level of comfort among students when the researcher is not a trusted member of the school staff. In addition, further research should consider the parental perceptions of school factors that

impact students completing high school. Interviews and focus groups of parents and of students who dropped out of high school could also add valuable insight to what school-related factors and programs assist students at risk of dropping out to stay in high school until completion. Finally, further research could explore the impact of the family and resilience on at-risk students' persistence in high school. Studying why some students persist in a school with a positive culture and high expectations and others who do not may add valuable insight as to educational programming that can increase student resilience.

### Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine how social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration, as well as other school-related factors, affect an at-risk student's decision to stay in school until completion. The analysis of the data gathered during this study indicated:

- the importance of positive adults being involved with students in both formal and informal ways,
- written documents and policies, including the mission and vision of the district, should be considered in developing and maintaining a culture of caring and accountability,
- the existence of programs and practices that encourage a systemic culture of caring, support, and accountability,
- large school size can be mitigated by personalizing the school environment, and
- the negative impact of standardized testing can be allayed with the use of varied and alternative assessments and vehicles for meeting graduation requirements.



Garnered from the data in this study were school-related factors that would assist in the creation of a norm of caring and accountability, such as hiring staff that have an appropriate disposition to work with students and are willing to work beyond the prescribed role of a school employee. In order to develop and sustain a culture that values caring and accountability, the importance of providing funding for programs that offer students academic and social support and all teachers professional development should be considered in every aspect of the school infrastructure including the budget.

Additionally, the data from this study indicated that in order to mitigate the impact of a large school, factors to consider would include clear and consistent application of rules, varied programming, and personalized communication. Again, the infrastructure of the school system must recognize the importance of the ease and accessibility of tools, such as telephones and technology, to facilitate this communication. In addition, flexibility in the budget in order to create opportunities for students and employees that promote growth and support academic achievement in a culture of caring must be considered.

Finally, the findings of this study implied that if students were provided alternative ways to meet the academic requirements to graduate, their persistence increased. Additional implications surrounding the mitigation of the negative impact of standardized testing included the personalization of programming for students and communication between the school employees and parents.

The drop-out crisis cannot be allowed to continue. “Almost one million students who start ninth grade each year will not earn a diploma four years later. That’s one of every four students. For African American and Latino students, it’s closer to one in three

(Hall, 2007, pg.1).” The critical issue of providing our students with an attainable, quality education must address the needs of both the students and the school community. The findings of this study clearly support the value of providing rigorous programs and resources to support student persistence in a culture of caring and accountability. The noble goal of all students graduating from high school prepared for college or the workforce is truly attainable.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A

**Student Record Checklist**

Student ID # \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Birth Date \_\_\_\_\_

Race \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's highest level of education \_\_\_\_\_

Father's highest level of education \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's marital status: \_\_\_\_\_

Free and Reduced Lunch: Yes No

Student Assistance Team Referral: Yes No

Alternative Education Placement: Yes No \_\_\_\_\_

PSSA Test Scores: 5<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ 8<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ 11<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_

Other Significant Test Data:

\_\_\_\_\_

School History

Name of School	Grade(s)	Days Absent	Retention	Core Subject Failure	Special Education

Appendix B

**SUPERINTENDENT/DISTRICT LETTER OF APPROVAL**

An Exploration of School Related Factors and Experiences that Impact High School Graduation.

An East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Doctoral Dissertation

Patricia Mulroy, Assistant to the Superintendent, Bangor Area School District

Dear Superintendent:

As you are aware, I currently serve as the Assistant to the Superintendent in the Bangor Area School District. Educationally, I have been working to obtain my doctoral degree at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am currently seeking permission to gather data in reference to my study and would greatly appreciate it if you could set aside a few minutes of your valuable time to review this document. I am hoping that you will support my research by approving the request to have High Graduation High School students and staff members participate in this study. If so, please sign the approval form and return it to my attention in the self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Sincerely,

Patricia Mulroy  
Assistant to the Superintendent  
Bangor Area School District  
Educational Leadership Doctoral Student  
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

This project will be submitted for approval by the East Stroudsburg University of  
Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Dr. Shala B. Davis, IRB Administrator, (570) 422-3536 x3336

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol for Students

#### Project: Factors that Impact High School Persistence

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Position of Interviewee:

The purpose of this study is to identify the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until completion.

#### Questions:

- What school activities do you participate in?
- What types of work experiences do you have? Do you work after school?
- Why do you think students drop out of high school?
- Have you ever thought about dropping out of high school?
  - If so, why did you think about dropping out of high school?
- What made you stay in school rather than drop out?
  - What about this person or activities helped you?
- What about school might cause you to leave school before graduation?
- How do you think students who are held back/retained feel about school?
- Describe any special programs offered to help you through the difficult parts of school.
- Is there a trusted adult who has been a positive influence/someone you could turn to when you were having problems in school?
- Describe any courses or programs that will help you be successful in future schooling or work.

- (If these programs do exist...), describe the ones you participated in.
- If you have taken remedial math or English classes that are meant to help you learn, how have they helped you to learn?
- How does the size of the high school play a part in a students' (your) decision to stay in or leave school?
- How are your parents/guardians and the community involved in your education?

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol for Adults

#### Project: Factors that Impact High School Persistence

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Position of Interviewee:

The purpose of this dissertation is to identify the major school-related factors that are associated with why students decide to stay in high school until completion. This study attempts to identify the precipitating experiences that serve as a catalyst for students persisting until graduation. These findings are particularly important in light of the new accountability requirements mandated by *NCLB* legislation. Because few studies have explored in detail what programs and interventions schools are implementing to keep students from leaving school prior to completion, a case study devoted to understanding what keeps students engaged is the best qualitative tradition for examining this phenomenon.

Questions:

From your experience:

- Describe how social relationships with peers, faculty, and administration affect a student's decisions to stay in school until completion
- Communicate the pressures of standardized testing and its influence on a student's decision to stay in school until completion.
- Share how required remedial course taking influences a student's decision to stay in school until completion.
- Describe how the structure of the curriculum relates to a student's decision to stay in school until completion.
- What might a typical day look like for a student in your class who has persisted in school despite facing risk factors of not completing? What does a typical day look like for students in honors or college preparatory classes?

- What type of assessments do you use in the various classes you teach? Are they different for students in honors/college prep than for students in tech prep?
- Do all students receive a challenging rigorous curriculum? Do at-risk students receive a challenging curriculum?
- Describe how increasing graduation requirements affect student's decisions to stay in school until completion.
- How does the size of the school influence students' decisions to stay in school until completion?

Appendix E

**PARENT/GUARDIAN LETTER**

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a doctoral student at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania and am currently working on my dissertation in the Department of Professional and Secondary Education. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

The following includes a consent form requesting that your student be allowed to participate in a research study at High Graduation High School. The study is to gather feedback from students regarding what schools do to support students until they graduate. The study will involve interviews with your student to understand the supports or difficulties they face as they work to complete their high school requirements. This research will look at school factors that encourage students to stay in high school until completion.

I look forward to your student's input in helping to create positive programs that help students be prepared for the future and successfully complete high school.

If allowed to participate, your student will play an important part in my research, as well as provide insight what schools can do to provide programs to help all students meet with success. In this study there will be little or no risk to your child and all of the responses will remain confidential. Data will be combined so that individual responses will not be able to be identified.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (610) 588 – 2163 x 8803, or Dr. Faith Waters, Chairperson, (570) 422-3358 or Dr. Shala B. Davis, IRB Administrator, (570) 422-3536 x3336.

Thank you,

Patricia Mulroy  
Assistant to the Superintendent  
Bangor Area School District

An Exploration of School Related Factors and Experiences that Impact High School  
Graduation  
An East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Doctoral Dissertation

Patricia Mulroy, Assistant to the Superintendent, Bangor Area School District



Appendix F

**STUDENT LETTER**

Dear Student:

I am a doctoral student at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania and am currently working on my dissertation in the Department of Professional and Secondary Education. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at East Stroudsburg University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

This consent form requests your participation in a research study at High Graduation High School. The study is to gather ideas from you regarding what schools do to support you until you graduate. The study will involve interviews with you to learn the supports or difficulties you face as you work to complete your high school career.

We look forward to your input in helping to create positive programs that help all students' successfully complete high school. If you agree to participate, you will play an important part in my research, as well as provide insight on what schools and school administration can do to provide programs to help all students meet with success. In this study there will be little or no risk to you and all of your responses will remain confidential. Data will be combined so that individual responses will not be able to be identified.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (610) 588 – 2163 x 8803, or Dr. Faith Waters, Chairperson, (570) 422-3358 or Dr. Shala B. Davis, IRB Administrator, (570) 422-3536 x3336.

Thank you,

Patricia Mulroy  
Assistant to the Superintendent  
Bangor Area School District

An Exploration of School Related Factors and Experiences that Impact High School  
Graduation  
An East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania and Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Doctoral Dissertation

Patricia Mulroy, Assistant to the Superintendent, Bangor Area School District

Appendix G  
**Informed Consent**

School Related Factors and Experiences That Influence High School Graduation  
East Stroudsburg University - High Graduation Area School District

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby agree to participate in this research project on the school programs that encourage students to stay in high school until graduation. The study is to gather feedback from students regarding what schools do to support students until they graduate. The study will involve interviews to understand the supports or difficulties students face as they work to complete their high school requirements. This research will look at school factors that encourage students to stay in high school until completion. The study will also look at the influence of new national, state, and local laws. High Graduation was chosen because of its high graduation rate. Results of the study may be beneficial to High Graduation School District, as well as other schools in their efforts to develop effective programs.

My participation in this study will involve discussing factors that are related to staying in high school until graduation. It is estimated that the time involved will be no more than one hour.

I understand that there will be little or no risk to me and that all of my responses will remain confidential. Data will be combined so that individual responses will not be able to be identified.

I understand that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study, but involvement may help increase knowledge of the effective initiatives related to improved student programming for helping students complete high school.

I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

If I have any questions at any time about this study, I may ask or email directly:

Patricia Mulroy 610.588.2163 [Mulroy@bangorsd.org](mailto:Mulroy@bangorsd.org)

Faith Waters 570.422.3363 [fwaters@po-box.esu.edu](mailto:fwaters@po-box.esu.edu)

Patricia Smeaton 570.422.3363 [psmeaton@po-box.esu.edu](mailto:psmeaton@po-box.esu.edu).

Concerns or questions that may result from my participation in this study may be reported to:

Dr. Shala Davis, Administrator, Institutional Review Board, East Stroudsburg University  
at 570.422.3336, [sdavis@po-box.esu.edu](mailto:sdavis@po-box.esu.edu)

I have read and understand the information in this letter and have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and my participation. I agree to participate in this study.

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Student Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Parent/Guardian Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

(You will receive a copy of this document for your records)

## Appendix H **Student Assent**

School Related Factors and Experiences That Influence High School Graduation  
East Stroudsburg University - Pocono Mountain Area School District

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby agree to participate in this research project on the school programs that encourage students to stay in high school until graduation. The study is to gather feedback from regarding what schools do to support students until they graduate. The study will involve interviews to understand the supports or difficulties students face as they work to complete their high school requirements. This research will look at school factors that encourage students to stay in high school until completion. The study will also look at the impact of new national, state, and local laws. High Graduation was chosen because of its high graduation rate. Results of the study may be beneficial to High Graduation School District, as well as other schools in their efforts to develop effective programs.

My participation in this study will involve discussing factors that are related to students staying in high school until graduation. It is estimated that the time involved will be no more than one hour.

I understand that there will be little or no risk to me and that all of my responses will remain confidential. Data will be combined so that individual responses will not be able to be identified.

I understand that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study, but involvement may help increase knowledge of the effective initiatives related to improved student programming for helping students complete high school.

I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.

If I have any questions at any time about this study, I may ask or email directly:

Patricia Mulroy 610.588.2163 [Mulroy@bangorsd.org](mailto:Mulroy@bangorsd.org)

Faith Waters 570.422.3363 [fwaters@po-box.esu.edu](mailto:fwaters@po-box.esu.edu)

Patricia Smeaton 570.422.3363 [psmeaton@po-box.esu.edu](mailto:psmeaton@po-box.esu.edu).

Concerns or questions that may result from my participation in this study may be reported to:

Dr. Shala Davis, Administrator, Institutional Review Board, East Stroudsburg University  
at 570.422.3336, [sdavis@po-box.esu.edu](mailto:sdavis@po-box.esu.edu)

I have read and understand the information in this letter and have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and my participation. I agree to participate in this study.

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
(You will receive a copy of this document for your records)

Appendix I  
**School District Philosophy**

**EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY**

\*High Graduation High School seeks to prepare all students for tomorrow's challenges and opportunities. We work with the home and the community to enable students to develop the academic, personal, and social skills necessary for our young persons to be responsible, productive, and well-informed citizens.

We believe that learning is a life-long process and therefore strive to equip each student with a general knowledge base and the skills necessary to examine and master new areas of interest or concern. Such skills will enable these young adults to apply their knowledge in unfamiliar circumstances and to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

It is our belief that all students can learn. We recognize that students have varied talents and strengths; that they learn at different rates and use a variety of learning styles. We encourage students to develop their individual talents and strengths as they work to attain the required standards of achievement. Within the confines of a trusting, supportive, safe, and healthy learning environment, our students must feel confident to creatively propose new solutions and explore new ideas.

We attempt to mirror real life in our programs, where learning is multidisciplinary and multidimensional. Ability grouping, therefore, is flexible enough to assure that all students are challenged to the fullest and that students will share varied talents and experiences. We enable students to work towards accessible goals and endeavor to ensure that each student reaches those targets. Through their efforts in the pursuit of these objectives, our students learn to measure their progress and skills. We seek to identify those areas where our students require assistance in order to achieve a goal. In all areas - from instruction to assessment - we offer the tools and strategies needed to assist each student in meeting the district outcomes. In doing so, we prepare our students for tomorrow's challenges and opportunities.

\*Name changed to protect identity of the school district.