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# Graduates' Perceptions of a Western Pennsylvania Public High School Alternative Education Program

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GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF A WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC  
HIGH SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Beverly J. Knopf

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May 2013

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The purpose of this study was to examine graduates' perspectives of factors that contributed to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that have persisted beyond graduation. This study examined graduates' perceptions of their experiences in a traditional school setting and an alternative education program as well as their perceptions of experiences following graduation from an alternative education program. The theoretical perspectives such as school as a caring community, resilience, and persistence served as body of framework for developing the research.

A mixed methods protocol was utilized to examine graduates' perceptions. The data collection consisted of a survey which was administered to graduates in a quantitative phase, followed by individual interviews which were conducted with eight graduates in a qualitative phase.

Results from the quantitative phase of this study showed that graduates had more favorable perceptions of the alternative education program than the traditional school setting, and that graduates had positive perceptions of the benefits of the alternative education program that persist following graduation from the program. The qualitative phase results indicated that graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting were

negative due in part to large classes, a large school, and a lack of connection with adults in the traditional school. Findings from the interviews revealed that the main reason graduates preferred the alternative education program and were successful in the program was because of the connection graduates were able to form with the adults in the program. Moreover, this study identified these aspects of the alternative education program that contributed to graduates' accomplishments: increased attendance, academic achievement, smaller class sizes, and a caring and nurturing environment. This study concludes that alternative education programs are effective in meeting the needs of students at risk.

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# CHAPTER I

## THE PROBLEM

### **Introduction**

School systems in Pennsylvania, as in other states, have the monumental task of providing compulsory education for students up to the age of seventeen. School districts face unprecedented pressure to raise the graduation rates by graduating as many students as possible. When academic and social pressures prevent students from achieving by traditional methods, then these students are considered to be at risk of not completing high school. For some students at risk, leaving school when they reach the legal dropout age is a consideration. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), over one million students who enter ninth grade each school year will not graduate. The National Center for Education (NCES) (2010b) reported that in 2008, three million out of thirty-eight million individuals aged 16 to 24 years were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma.

Society suffers when students do not complete their high school education. Menzer and Hampel (2009) reported that crime and use of the welfare system increase and “the lack of a high school diploma closes the door to nearly all skilled and white-collared jobs” (p. 660). It is estimated that an individual who does not graduate from high school earns \$260,000 less over a lifetime than an individual with a high school diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011b). In addition, people who do not earn a high school diploma have a greater incidence of health risks, more unemployment, and increased job turnover (Chan, Kato, Davenport, & Guven, 2003).

President Barack Obama described in his address to the Joint Session of Congress on February 24, 2009, the current high school dropout rate as “a prescription for economic decline” and noted that “dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country” (Obama, 2009). Dropping out of school affects more than the individuals themselves—it creates a financial burden on their communities, states, and countries (Siegrist, Drawdy, Leech, Gibson, Stelzer, & Pate, 2010). Because of the cost to society, estimated into the billions of dollars, dropout prevention is an important aspect to study, as indicated by Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2009).

Based on statistics from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011c), the 1.3 million students who dropped out of high school in 2010 will cost the nation \$337 billion in lost wages. If half of those students had remained in school and graduated, those graduates would have earned up to \$7.6 billion more each year. A combination of those additional earnings would have created economic benefits by generating spending in the amount of \$5.6 billion, with an additional \$2 billion available for investments. The earnings would also have produced \$19 billion dollars in home and vehicle sales by the time the graduates reach the midpoint of their careers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011c). Dropouts from the class of 2006, for example, over the course of their lifetime, could save the United States more than \$17 billion in Medicaid and uninsured health care expenditures (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Cassel (2003) stated, “We have one million high school dropout students in our prisons,” representing half of the prison population (p. 641). The NCES (2006) reported the amount spent to educate a student per year in the United States is an annual average

of \$9,644, significantly less than the annual average cost of \$22, 600, which according to Stephen (2004), is the amount spent to house an inmate. Increasing the high school graduation rate and the enrollment of male students in college by 5% could reduce crime-related costs by \$8 billion each year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). Therefore, school programs designed to decrease the dropout rate, logically, benefit not only the student, but also society as a whole. This mutual benefit draws researchers to examine the factors associated with dropping out of school as well as effective programs that prevent dropping out (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). One such preventative strategy utilized by many school districts is alternative education.

Alternative schools and programs in the United States have existed since the mid-1800s (Miller, 1997). Although they varied over time, they maintained the perception that a single and uniform educational system does not always address the needs of the entire student population (Miller, 1997). The concept of contemporary alternative education can be traced to the 1930s when John Dewey and other members of the progressive movement acknowledged that students benefited from being directly involved in their educational decisions, including the decision to be placed in an alternative education setting (Siegrist, Drawdy, Leech, Gibson, Stelzer, & Pate, 2010).

The NCES (2002) defined an alternative education school as “a public (or private) elementary or secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (p. 55).

Raywid (1994) categorized alternative education into these three types of programs:

- Type I (academic) alternative education programs are popular schools of choice that often replicate themes and stress content or instructional strategies. Type I alternative schools often resemble magnet schools.
- Type II (discipline) alternative education programs are designed for students with behavior or discipline problems; students typically have no choice in their placement which is usually a last step before expulsion.
- Type III (therapeutic) alternative education programs focus on remediation for academic, social, or emotional skills through emphasizing school as a caring community, with the idea of returning the student to the traditional school setting after successful intervention. Students are placed in a Type III alternative education program through a school referral process, and students may choose not to participate.

Alternative education program models have been created to provide a setting that encourages learning and meets the individual needs of the students enrolled (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Linton (2000) described alternative school students as students who had discipline problems or students who needed a more structured educational program. Two foundational tenets of alternative programs are that (1) students have different goals and (2) not all students learn the same way. Many of the programs promote a more informal relationship between students and teachers (Linton, 2000). An adult mentor, such as a staff member or community volunteer, who develops a positive relationship with an individual student can contribute to a student's increased

self-esteem, academic achievement, and successful experience in an alternative education program by providing support, encouragement, and guidance (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Many students are placed in alternative schools when consequences for discipline problems fail, especially those youths who are adjudicated by the court system. One form of discipline involves suspending a student from school with the number of days of suspension being commensurate the severity of the infraction. More than 3.3 million students are suspended each year (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Suh and Suh (2007) conducted a study on the effects of high school suspension and dropout rates. The results of the study indicated “that if a student had a prior history of suspension, it increased the likelihood of the student dropping out by 76%” (p. 169). Suspending a student from school sends a message that the students are not wanted and removes students from the learning environment, making their keeping up with lessons difficult (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fann, 2011). Linton (2000) found that some students choose to be suspended in traditional education settings to avoid unfriendly or adversarial environments. Alternative schools offer a less punitive approach and a more supportive option, promoting educational success rather than academic failure (Linton, 2000).

When students experience a supportive environment, they are more likely to have positive outcomes and a sense of belonging which helps to create intellectual and social well-being. (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000). Developing a caring relationship between students and adults ensures a sense of belonging and produces a caring community (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) found in their evaluation of successful alternative education programs that the development of a sense of community within the school was

an important factor in determining the success of the program. Lange and Sletten (2002) emphasized the need for low student-teacher ratio, individualized instruction with more opportunities for one-on-one discussions between students and teachers, and noncompetitive assessments as the necessary features for alternative classrooms.

Alternative schools are a viable solution for meeting the diverse abilities and achievement levels of students at risk who are disappointed with or apathetic toward traditional schools (De La Ossa, 2005). The U. S. Department of Education (2010) reported that during the 2007-2008 academic year, 64% of districts reported having at least one alternative school or program for students at risk that was administered either by the district or by another entity. Of the 645,500 students enrolled in public school districts attending alternative schools and programs for students deemed at risk of dropping out of school, 558,300 of those students attended district-administered alternative schools and programs, and the other 87,200 students attended alternative schools and programs administered by another entity.

The high school alternative education program focused on in this study falls into the Type III category for alternative education programs and was housed within the traditional public high school. The program was eliminated at the end of the 2010 school year due to budget constraints at the state and local levels. Students who were at risk academically and had missed a substantial amount of school were referred to the program by teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and the home and school visitor, who also served as the director of the program. The program was outlined for eligible students, and they were given the option to participate or not to participate. In a study of alternative education programs, Klima, Miller, and Nunlist (2009) reviewed alternative

education programs functioning as schools-within-schools, such as the one in this study, and found they had overall positive effects on dropout, achievement, and attendance rates.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Zhang and Law (2005) noted a major milestone for every adolescent is the transition from adolescence to adulthood and is typically marked by the successful completion of high school. However, a significant number of students fail to reach this important milestone and drop out of school. Dropout prevention has become a national priority, especially since the No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to track and report students who graduate from high school in four years with a regular diploma (Lehr, 2004). Suh and Suh (2007) found that one of the major causes of students dropping out of high school is an accumulation of failing grades associated with limited educational resources, especially for students from a low socioeconomic background who do not have access to educational enrichment activities and resources. In addition, suspensions, expulsion, retention, and alienation also contribute to unacceptable dropout and incompleteness rates (Suh & Suh, 2007). In response to these issues, many states rely on alternative schools to address the needs of students at risk for school failure (Gilson, 2006).

The most frequently used intervention methods for increasing student engagement and maximizing student achievement are alternative learning options through alternative programs (Featherston, 2010). Alternative education programs offer unique opportunities to meet the needs for students identified as at risk for school failure (Foley & Pang, 2006). As stated, while some programs focus on disciplinary alignment, others

emphasize innovative programs to meet individual students' educational needs (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Students attending alternative education programs often have diverse backgrounds and various needs. Students are often placed in these programs for numerous reasons such as behavioral problems in school, academic or social disengagement, truancy problems, being a pregnant or parenting teen, or having a disability that prevents a student from functioning in a traditional school setting (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Educators often consider placement in an alternative setting as an approach to provide students at risk the opportunity for school engagement. For preventing students from dropping out of school, engagement in the school environment has become quite important (Ruebel, Ruebel, & O'Laughlin, 2002). When developing and improving alternative education programs, educators may consider the points of view of those the program is designed to serve, namely the students at risk. In order to establish a caring community in which students are connected, educators would benefit from understanding the factors, from a student's perspective, that contribute to a student's feeling engaged and supported. As indicated by Richman, Rosenfeld, and Bowem (1998), the most important aspect of reality may be represented by the student's perception. Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) noted that the views, experiences, concerns, life circumstances, and ideas for reform must be elicited from students who are at risk of dropping out if changes are to occur. Students are often not invited to participate in conversations with teachers, administrators, school counselors, and district superintendents when it comes to discussing high school dropouts, particularly students who are thinking about leaving school or students who have already dropped out

(Gallagher, 2002). The needs of students at risk must be given careful consideration and should not be based solely on the preconceived perceptions and judgments of educators (Robinson, 2004). Students have expectations of schools, school leaders, and employees before they enter high school. Surveys and discussions should be encouraged so that the expectations of the students can be voiced (Davis & Cole-Leffel, 2009) and misconceptions eliminated.

Lange and Sletten (2002) remarked that although alternative schools “have been in existence for many years, there is still very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence of their effectiveness or even an understanding of their characteristics” (p. 2). Despite the accelerated growth of alternative education programs, Gilson (2006) stated that research and evaluation of these schools and the effect they have on student retention and academic achievement levels are very limited. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) remarked that more evidence is needed in order to understand what is effective and ineffective in attempts to decrease the dropout rate through dropout-prevention programs.

### **Significance of the Study**

Interest in alternative education and programs has increased for several reasons. National and state expectations demand greater accountability for academic achievement for all students, including those enrolled in alternative education programs. Some students have become disillusioned by the rigorous traditional instruction and assessment model that educators have instituted in an effort to raise academic standards (Baker, Gratma, Bachtler, Peterson, Scott, & Bianchi, 2008). The purpose of an alternative education program is to provide an alternative method for meeting the needs of those students who have not been successful in a traditional school setting. Research by Linton

(2000) and Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, and Hirley (2000) clearly indicated that alternative schools have a positive impact on students who were once at risk of dropping out. Although administrators and teachers may believe that an alternative program is thriving, it is imperative that the students' voices be heard in order to validate that belief. Student perceptions of school life and their reactions to the school environment are significant for understanding school climate and designing a positive educational environment (De La Rosa, 2005). It is intended that graduates' voices heard through this study will impact school reform and policy structures related to alternative education. According to Barr and Parrett (1995), alternative schools should be a key element of a blueprint to restructure public education so that all students will have an equal chance to succeed in school.

There is a need to look at the influence school factors play in preventing students from dropping out of high school (Rumberger, 1987). Knesting and Waldron (2006) noted, "Although numbers of at-risk students choose to leave school prior to graduation, there are also many students who choose to stay. While schools may contribute to students' early school leaving, they may also contribute to their persistence" (p. 600). Past studies have focused more on why students leave school before graduating and not on what constitutes a student's decision to persist and complete their high school education (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001). The perspectives of students who have successfully graduated from the alternative education program in this study may help school districts better understand the role the school played in the persistence of those students who chose to remain in school after being enrolled in an alternative education setting.

Surveying and interviewing the graduates of the alternative education program in this study will also provide insight into the aspects of the program that benefit students after graduation. According to Scanlon and Mellard (2002), a need exists to monitor the post-school experiences of students to gain an understanding of what was beneficial and how satisfying the school experience was for the students. That information could certainly impact the restructuring of school standards and curriculum (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002).

Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren (2004) noted that limited research exists on students' perceptions of high school experiences and programs as they relate to school completion. Professionals would gain a better understanding of the dropout issue from this line of research and could be influenced by student perspectives when designing intervention programs (Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004). Furthermore, students' perceptions have considerable influence on the decisions students make, so educators should value their importance because these perceptions are the students' reality (Dunn, Chambers, and Rabren, 2004).

Even though evidence exists to support alternative education as a viable option to help ensure student success in school, educators, administrators, parents, and others still have much to learn about alternative schooling (Bullock, 2007). Those affiliated with alternative schools currently in existence, as well as those in districts considering starting these types of schools, can learn a great deal about what factors lead to effective programming through the results of this study and the review of the existing literature.

This study may also provide the staff working with students at risk a better understanding of the effects of their actions. Additionally, the research from this study

will enhance the current research in the understanding of student-related factors such as school as a caring community, resilience, and persistence, all of which contribute to a student's success and subsequent graduation from an alternative education program.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates' perspectives of factors that contributed to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that have persisted beyond graduation. The objectives of the study are these:

1. determine graduates' perceptions of their experiences and relationships in a traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to their enrollment in an alternative education program;
2. determine graduates' perceptions of their experiences and relationships in an alternative education program and the factors that contributed to their successful completion of the program and graduation;
3. determine graduates' perceptions of the enduring benefits of the alternative education program after graduation.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be used to gain former alternative graduates' perspectives of traditional education, a specific alternative education program, and the benefits of the alternative program that persist after graduation:

1. What are the graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to their enrolling in the alternative education program?

2. What are the graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting and the program-related factors that contributed to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education program?
3. What program-related factors influence program graduates following graduation from the alternative education program?
4. How, if at all, do program graduates' perceptions of the traditional school program differ from program graduates' perceptions of the alternative school program?

### **Theoretical Perspective**

As a result of studying the phenomenon of students at risk of leaving high school before graduation, several theories focus on factors contributing to students' successful completion of high school through an alternative education program. The first perspective examined is the theory of school as a caring community, where students feel connected and engaged, that in turn enables students to achieve (Bowen, 2009). The second is the notion of resilience, whereby—despite hardships and at-risk factors—some students at risk are able to establish coping skills that assist them in their success (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Persistence is the third concept that is often present when students at risk decide to remain in school and graduate instead of dropping out (Knesting & Waldron, 2006).

School as a caring community is based in large part on Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory of human development—persons, objects, and symbols in the student's environment may either promote or constrain a student's ability to achieve. Without proper adults and supervision, students look for attention in inappropriate places

and these behaviors may lead to problems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). School personnel have the ability to affect students' educational decisions understanding that an individual's interaction within his or her social environment, such as a school, has a direct impact on that person's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although teachers cannot replace parents, they can become positive role models and maintain appreciable influence over students, especially at-risk students. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, society in general influences the lives of all people. It takes a caring community with love and respect to raise a child.

Bowen's (2009) Eco-Interactional Developmental (EID) model of school success is often described:

a model for understanding the role that neighborhoods, schools, families, and peers play in increasing the proportion of students who successfully complete high school, which is a precursor to students pursuing higher education, advanced career training, or moving into employment opportunities that have the potential to pay a living wage (p. 3).

The concept of the EID model shifts the focus from students dropping out of school to students being successful in school, which increases when supportive adults such as teachers, parents, and neighbors are accessible to students (Bowen, 2009). When attention is placed on the students' sense of belonging in a school environment and the role it plays in their decision to remain in school or drop out, the likelihood that students will be successful increases (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The EID model puts the students' needs first and advocates a school environment where the adults at the school care about students and value every student. The model not only focuses on the

present but also validates the past experiences that a student brings to the school in order to provide a framework for understanding future school success. In recent years, family and social structures have changed placing a greater emphasis toward student reliance on the school environment to provide a positive influence on his or her well-being (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000). Students who do not develop a sense of belonging often drop out of school or attempt to fulfill this need through membership in antisocial groups (Lee & Breen, 2007).

Resilience is another determining factor in a student's successful completion of a high school program. Werner and Smith's (1992) research serves as the foundation for the resiliency theory which is based on the premises that there are just as many children who come from at-risk backgrounds who become competent adults as those that need intervention, and that all individuals have the human capacity to transform and change. Educational resilience was defined by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1994) as "the heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences" (p. 46).

Even resilient students face challenges; however, many of the at-risk students in a study conducted by Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, and Royer (2009) addressed most of their significant challenges within their families. Students reported little or no support was provided by their parents, especially in reference to school. Despite their personal or academic challenges these students seemed to know to seek support from friends, teachers, and other important adults in their lives. They built healthy relationships,

demonstrated self-efficacy and positive self-esteem, and made daily decisions that kept them on a path to graduate (Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, & Royer, 2009).

Regarding resilience, one of the most noteworthy efforts to produce academic success with students at risk has been reported by Finn and Rock (1997). The fundamental concept behind their research was the idea that the more students are engaged in school, the more academically resilient they become, and the more likely they will remain in school through graduation. Finn and Rock (1997) found that students who were more engaged in school had higher resilience and were less likely to drop out of school. Schools that foster resilience provide an environment that promotes student trust, acceptance, support, respect, and engagement (Krovetz, 1999).

Persistence is the third element found to have an impact on students' decision to remain in school and graduate. Tinto (1993) focused on several studies and revealed that “ineffective schools are often those whose faculty and staff hold little expectation for the success of their students. Student failure, then, comes to mirror the activities of the schools” (pp. 90-91). He outlined five conditions that are supported for retention.

Students are more likely to persist and graduate given these conditions:

1. they are expected to succeed;
2. they are given clear expectations and advisement about their programs of study;
3. they are provided academic, social, and personal support;
4. they are involved with the institution and supported by faculty, staff, and other students;
5. they are in an environment that promotes learning.

Tinto's (1993) theory leads to the understanding of the dropout process as the students' interactions with institutions is a factor that contributes to a student's commitment to or disengagement from the institution, academic persistence, and completion.

In a qualitative study of students at risk conducted by Knesting and Waldron (2006), three factors contributed to the students' persistence to graduate. The first factor was the students' belief that they would benefit from graduating, the second factor was the students' willingness to follow the rules, and the third factor was a connection students had to teachers who provided support and believed the students were capable of completing the graduation requirements. All three factors were present for the students who remained in school and one or more of the factors were missing for the students who left school before graduation.

Hardre and Reeve (2003) found that persistence could be predicted by students' self-determined motivation to remain in school versus dropping out. A teacher can develop students' internal motivation by supporting their interests rather than controlling their behavior, and as the internal resource of motivation becomes student-owned, students will be more likely to persist in school.

Alternative education programs can make significant contributions to support students' efforts to remain in school and graduate by establishing caring communities, fostering resilience, and promoting persistence. This study will review and examine the empirical links between schools as caring communities, student resilience, and student persistence and enrollment in and graduation from an alternative education program.

## Definitions

1. *Adjudicated* – “A judge’s decision to establish responsibility for a delinquent act” (Blanton & Dagenais, 2007, p. 309).
2. *Alternative school* – “A public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, p. 55).
3. *At-risk* – Students who are likely to fail or in are danger of dropping out of school. Any student who is not succeeding, academically in school (Robinson, 2004).
4. *Dropout* – Non-graduating youth that left high school before the end of their senior year (Menzer & Hampel, 2009). The total number of students that were enrolled at some point in the reporting year that were not reported at the end of the reporting, and did not leave school due to a move or similar factors (Lehr, 2004).
5. *Engaged, engagement* – A sense of belonging to school, including feeling personally accepted, respected, and included in the classroom (Goodenow, 1993).

6. *Resilience* – The occurrence of high risk (personal, family, and school related factors) or trauma and the demonstration of adaptation through positive outcomes (Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, & Royer, 2009).
7. *School dropout* – A process of disengagement in which students become more and more alienated from school and withdraw to the point of dropping out (Ruebel, Ruebel, and O’Laughlin, 2002).
8. *Suspension* – Students are removed from constructive learning environments and place in isolated and often temporary settings (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2004).

### **Methodology**

A mixed methods approach was used to explore the research questions. The participants in the study were graduates from the years 2002-2011 of a high school alternative education program housed in a public high school in western Pennsylvania. The alternative education program was eliminated at the end of the 2011-2012 school year due to budget constraints at state and local levels. The collection of the data was divided into two phases. During Phase 1, 116 graduates of the high school alternative education were invited to participate in a survey for quantitative purposes; during Phase 2, eight graduates from the high school alternative education program participated in a semi-structured interview for qualitative purposes. The data gathered from the survey and interviews was utilized and analyzed to determine graduates’ demographics, graduates’ perceptions of the traditional school setting and alternative school setting, factors that contributed to enrolling in an alternative education program, program-related

factors that contributed to the successful completion of the alternative education program and graduation, and the program-related factors that influence a former student after graduation from the high school alternative education program.

### **Limitations**

The following limitations are evident in this study:

1. The study was limited to one alternative high school education program in Pennsylvania that has produced 124 graduates.
2. Current contact information for some graduates from the alternative high school education program in the study is not available.
3. The researcher was a teacher in the high school that facilitated the alternative high school education program in the study. Every attempt was made to recognize and eliminate any bias.
4. The researcher taught in the alternative education program for seven years and may be familiar with some of the graduates participating in the study. Every attempt was made to recognize and eliminate any bias.

### **Summary**

Society demands the accountability for all levels of public education and expects achievement in all educational programs, including alternative education (Barton, 2006). Quinn et al. (2006) noted that educators need to be directly involved in developing alternative programs that focus on the long-term advantages of intervention. Alternative education programs should be maintained and supported because research indicates that many of today's youth have already benefited from these programs (Conrath, 2001). The intent of this mixed-methods study is to examine student perceptions of factors that

contribute to enrollment in and the successful completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that persist beyond graduation. “The voices of students can and should be a vehicle of change for the future. Ultimately, a high school is only what an individual young person perceives it to be” (De La Rosa, 2005, p. 37).

This study is based on three fields of literature and theories that support a caring community, resilience, and persistence. McMillan and Reed (1994) stated that although students at risk face unfavorable odds at times, the resilience of those that eventually succeed and persist on through graduation gives us hope and encouragement as well as opportunities to put into practice what we learn from them. The findings from this study will enable educators to be more cognizant of what it takes to create an alternative education program that respects the resilience and persistence that students are capable of when provided an effective caring community.

Chapter I includes detrimental ramifications dropouts impose on society and themselves and background information on alternative education. Chapter I also includes an introduction to the study; the statement of the problem; the significance of the study; the purpose of the study, which is to examine graduates’ perspectives of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that have persisted beyond graduation; the research questions; the theoretical perspective consisting of a caring community, resilience, and persistence; definitions; a brief methodology; and limitations.

Chapter II consists of a review of the existing literature related to at-risk factors for students; high school drop-outs; dropout statistics; the history of alternative

education; alternative education programs; second-chance programs; and theories based on school as a caring community, resilience, and persistence. The theoretical framework for this study relates principles of expertise to the existing literature on students at risk and alternative education programs.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

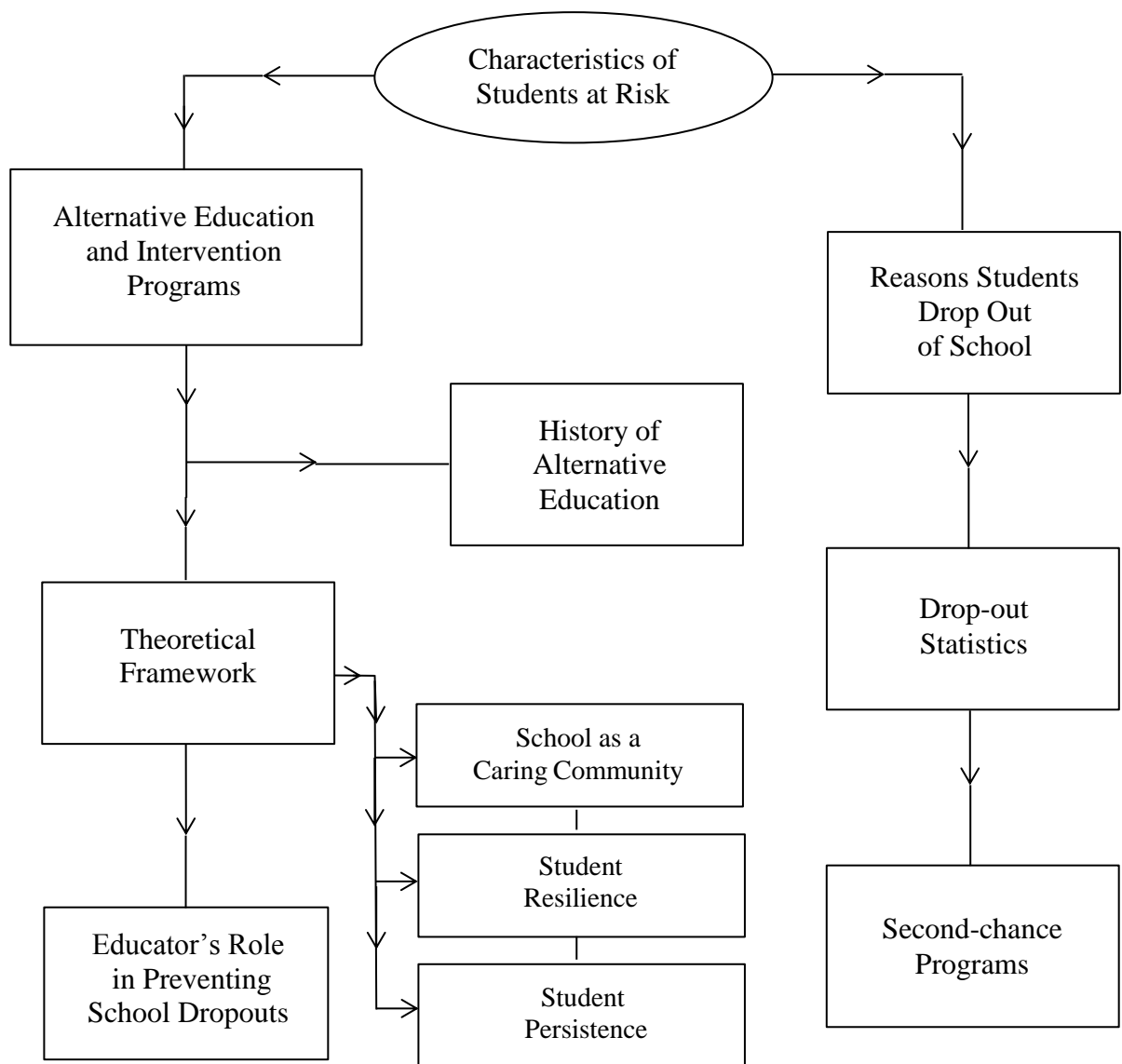
#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates' perceptions of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that persist beyond graduation. The results of this study will lead educators to better understand graduates' perceptions of their experiences in an alternative education program.

The focus of this study is high school alternative education. For students to be eligible for placement in the high school alternative education program in this study, they were at risk academically and had missed a substantial amount of school. Therefore, this chapter will begin with a review of characteristics of students at risk. Some students with at-risk factors may or may not be given a choice to participate in an alternative education program or another type of intervention program. The review presents relevant research on alternative education and intervention programs. Moreover, in order to understand the concept of alternative education it is important to present the history of alternative education.

While many students participate in alternative education programs, others choose to drop out of high school. For that reason research pertaining to high school dropouts and dropout statistics is reviewed. Once students drop out of school, they must find other means to continue their education if they choose to do so, often accomplished through second-chance programs. This chapter examines second-chance programs consisting of job training, chances for employment, and educational opportunities.

The literature review also provides the theoretical framework that views the characteristics of factors that contribute to the successful completion of school by students at risk. The scholarly research presents school as a caring community, as well as the resilience and persistence traits of students at risk. Likewise included in the chapter are results from studies addressing issues experienced by traditional, non-traditional, and minority students as well as findings regarding the educator's role in helping those students graduate. The overall structure of Chapter II is delineated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework of the review of the literature for Chapter II.

### **Characteristics of Students at Risk**

Researchers, alarmed by the numbers of students who are at risk of dropping out of school, often separate the concept of risk into social type risk and academic type risk (Lee & Burkham, 2003). Social risk is defined as developmental differences resulting from social backgrounds that place a student at a disadvantage in an educational setting. Demographic factors associated with social risk that results in problems in school may

include the following: gender, family income, family structure, parents' level of education, race or ethnicity, age, and language-minority status (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). Students who are underachieving and not fully engaged in their studies in addition to not having mastered school system are at academic risk (Alfassi, 2004). Academic risk includes behaviors and performance that contribute to a student's difficulties in school. These behaviors may consist of a history of absenteeism, lack of academic achievement, special education placement, grade retention, low educational expectations, and discipline problems (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997).

### **Social Risk**

A close examination of family structure, often an indicator of social risk, reveals that it is crucial for educators who work with students at risk on a daily basis to understand the home environment. Willis (2009) noted that in a perfect world, home is where children are taught socially acceptable behavior. Oftentimes, disruptive behaviors can be tied to family dynamics that expose the child to daily stressors which manifest themselves through the child in unacceptable social behavior such as anti-social behavior, disruptive classroom behavior, and delinquent behavior. Some of those unhealthy family characteristics tied to disruptive behaviors include these: parents who are substance abusers, parents with mental illness, family financial problems, and chronic violence in the family. Additional factors related to families and individual student behavior that put a student at risk of dropping out of school are the following: the family moves at least two times during the school year; student becomes pregnant ("High School," 2006); student is living in a single-parent home; family receives public assistance; student has at least one sibling who dropped out of school; student is over-age for his or her grade level

(Bowers, 2010); student exhibits substance abuse or suicidal behaviors; and student is considered a delinquent because of fighting, stealing, trouble with police, or running away from home for more than a day (Hallfors, Hyunsan, Brodish, Flewelling, & Khatapoush, 2006). Students who enter school from low-income and less-educated families tend to be less prepared than children from higher-income, better educated families and, as a consequence, this places a student at risk academically (Barton, 2005). Background factors such as having friends who did not graduate or being Black or Latino ethnicity place a student at risk of not graduating (“High School,” 2006).

Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in public schools are often unjustly classified as at risk (Vang, 2005). A large number of LEP students are considered at risk because the American education system places them in a position where their cultural and linguistic backgrounds become a handicap for them in the classroom. They often lack the academic language and English skills needed for school success, and the public schools are not prepared to meet their academic needs. Some LEP students face additional challenges in the classroom because they learn one language at school and speak another language at home.

Vang (2005) argued that at-risk factors for LEP students and dropping out are not always synonymous. He explained that although many LEP students graduate, they often do so with inadequate academic competencies, and even if they do not drop out, schools fail to effectively meet their educational needs.

Honigsfeld and Dunn (2009) noted that nontraditional learners are those students who do not respond to the traditional teaching of ‘kill and drill’ instruction and repetitive instruction that is often used in response to preparing students for high-stakes testing. As

a result of not responding to traditional teaching methods, these students, along with LEP students, may be identified as at risk because they often experience the following:

- are diagnosed or misdiagnosed as learning disabled;
- grow up in isolated communities and do not begin learning English until they enter school;
- do not speak English because they have recently arrived from another country;
- live in poverty and lack basic and educational resources in their homes;
- are the children of migrant workers or undocumented immigrants whose presence in our schools is transient; or
- are homeless and do not have their basic needs of safety and security met (pp. 220-221).

### **Academic Risk**

Some students who develop academic risk factors performed well in school at first but eventually fell behind and became underachievers. Honigsfeld and Dunn (2009) identified these characteristics of such youth:

- process new and difficult information globally and find it difficult to follow analytic, step-by step teaching;
- do not seem to try or to take school seriously (e.g., draw or doodle while listening; appear bored, tired, or listless);
- are nonconforming or disobedient (e.g., refuse to remain in their seats);
- cannot sit still, concentrate, or pay attention to the teacher for more than a few minutes; or

- may read, but cannot remember and often do not understand what they read (p. 221).

Other factors such as attendance and grades are often reported by researchers as causing students to be placed at risk of dropping out of school. Suhyun, Jingyo, and Houston (2007) provided supporting evidence that students are more likely to drop out of school if they have low grade point averages or have experienced suspension from school, a contributor to a student's absenteeism. The results from a study they conducted concluded that students with a low GPA and a high absenteeism rate combined with a lack of optimism about their future had a higher possibility of dropping out of school. Hallfors et al. (2006) concurred that attendance and GPA were risk factors that contribute to academic problems. They added that relying on teacher referrals was a reliable screening tool for identifying students who displayed factors that contribute to a student's chance of failing in school and justification for early interventions.

### **Grade Level At-risk Factors**

Besides a student's GPA, Bowers (2010) in his research supported that teacher assigned grades were a strong predictor of students at risk of dropping out of school. The studies he reviewed contributed disciplinary problems and "failing grades at the high school and middle school levels" as indicators of risk factors emerging as early as seventh grade, with eighth and eleventh grade being the most vulnerable times for students to drop out (p. 192).

Additionally, Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) found in their study of sixth-grade students in the Philadelphia area that if a student had at least one identifiable at-risk indicator, then that middle school student had a three in four chance of dropping out of high school. At-risk indicators they identified were these: "a final grade of F in

mathematics; a final grade of F in English; attendance below 80% for the year; and a final ‘unsatisfactory’ behavior mark in at least one class” (p. 29). In a separate analysis Neild et al. (2007) conducted with eighth-grade students, the same at-risk indicators identified for the sixth graders were also shown to be indicative of which eighth-grade students would eventually drop out. More than half of the dropouts from the eighth-grade study could have been predicted before entering high school (Neild et al., 2007).

In another grade level study, Dounay (2006) reported that student demographics do not always dictate who will drop out of high school. A student’s decision to stay in school or leave school is often based on academic performance and engagement, especially in schools where a large number of students have demographic risk factors. However, one risk factor that does appear to be significant is whether or not a student is successful in ninth grade. Students that are *on track* at the end of ninth grade and are scheduled to be promoted to tenth grade are less likely to drop out than their peers who had failed to earn enough credits to continue to tenth grade. Dounay also recognized that even though some students were successful in eighth grade, they were not able to make a successful transition to ninth grade, and this inability held them back in ninth grade.

Sparks, Johnson, and Akos (2010) also studied ninth-grade students in an attempt to identify factors associated with ninth-grade dropouts. The ninth graders in their study were enrolled in a large southeastern United States school district. The following factors were found to be significant in predicting whether a student would drop out of school in ninth grade: “being retained in any grade, kindergarten through ninth grade, scoring below grade level on the North Carolina end-of-grade math test in eighth grade or failing Algebra I, or receiving a long-term suspension” (p.47). However, the study also

presented evidence that students with one or more of the risk factors were less likely to drop out if they had been enrolled in a middle school with less tracking, participated more in extracurricular activities, and were part of a transition program from eighth to ninth grade (Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010).

### **Lack of Attachment**

As mentioned earlier by Dounay (2006), student engagement in school may play a role in whether or not a student decides to remain in school. In a study of adolescent students at risk of dropping out of school, Faulkner, Adlaf, Irving, Allison, and Dwyer (2009) acknowledged risk factors contribute to whether or not a student will feel connected to his or her school. Students who missed school often because of poor health and/or doctor appointments had feelings of disconnectedness and showed a decline in academic performance. Additionally, students who did not participate in extra-curricular activities also felt a lack of attachment to their school. Furthermore, physical inactivity was recognized as a risk factor that contributed to a student's detachment. A lack of attachment can determine students' school failure and is often associated with students who drop out.

Social and academic risk factors have been identified and examined. Lee and Burkham (2003) stated, "Students at high social risk are more likely to manifest at-risk academic behaviors" (p. 358). Researchers linked at-risk social and academic factors to numerous studies which examined minority students, nontraditional students, and grade levels. Much their research was placed on sixth through ninth grade, in particular the transition from eighth to ninth grade. Recognizing the characteristics of students at risk

may help educators understand the reasons students who are at-risk socially or academically or both consider leaving school before graduating.

### **Reasons Students Drop Out of School**

Although NCLB mandates an accurate report on school demographics such as dropout and graduation rates, schools and districts have a tendency to report low dropout and high graduation rates because high dropout rates jeopardize funding and accreditation for schools (Zachary, 2010). Regardless of the school-generated reports, leaving school early is harmful for adolescents because it interferes with the normal transition from childhood to adulthood in today's society. Negative aspects contribute to this important life decision but one entity consistent in the research is that the decision to drop out of school is not made suddenly (Lee & Burkam, 2003).

The decision to leave school is usually gradual and often follows a complex myriad of experiences (Lee & Burkam, 2003). It is a slow progression of academic and social disengagement often influenced by a student's perceptions of high school's expectations and his or her early school experiences. There are usually warning signs for at least one to three years that these students are losing interest in school and may be at risk of dropping out (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morrison, 2006). Jerald (2006) indicated that most dropouts exhibited behaviors during middle school that strongly correlated to dropping out in high school. Factors such as low attendance or a failing grade have been identified by researchers as precursors for identifying future dropouts, even as early as sixth grade.

## **Disengagement**

In a report for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Bridgeland et al. (2006) cited these reasons that were given by respondents as to why students eventually lose interest and drop out of high school: “a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events” (p. iii). Additionally the report listed supports that can be provided within the school and home environment that would improve students’ likelihood of remaining in school:

- improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and to engaging and enhance connection between school and work;
- improve instruction, and access to supports, for struggling students;
- build a school climate that fosters academics;
- ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school; and
- improve the communication between parents and schools (pp. iv-v).

Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant (2010) agreed that most students who dropped out of school may have graduated if their schools, communities, and parents had provided them with appropriate support. Although some students reported dropping out of school because they had to get a job or had become pregnant, others indicated failing grades or missing too many days as the main reason for becoming disengaged and dropping out. Bridgeland et al. (2010) also expressed in their study that some dropouts did not see the purpose between what they were learning in the classroom and their own career goals and lives. Half of the dropouts they interviewed cited being bored with

school and not understanding the value of their classes. The majority of the dropouts said they were not inspired to work harder and would have benefited from more interesting teachers. Many of them longed for teachers and parents who cared about their education and were more involved.

Smyth (2006) stated, “When students feel that their lives, experiences, cultures, and aspirations are ignored, trivialized, or denigrated, they develop a hostility to the institution of schooling. They feel that schooling is simply not worth the emotional and psychological investment necessary to warrant their serious involvement” (p. 285).

Students in the United States and most other western countries are dropping out of high school at alarming rates due to the boring and repetitive experiences they encounter in school that lead to their disengagement.

### **Dropouts Identified as Gifted or Talented**

Students identified as gifted or talented may also develop a sense of disengagement that may contribute to their decision to drop out of school. While the dropout rate for students identified as gifted or talented is significantly lower than that of other students, the factors contributing to their dropping out are worth discussing as dropouts identified as gifted or talented share some common characteristics with dropouts who have not been identified as gifted or talented. In their research, Renzulli and Park (2000) found that dropouts identified as gifted or talented did not like school and felt disconnected from other students. Some warning signs for dropouts identified as gifted or talented such as disruptive behavior, underachievement and poor performance, and absenteeism, were present as early as elementary school but often overlooked. Thorp (2004) concluded that dropouts identified as gifted or talented disliked school because

they felt ignored or disrespected by teachers, even as early as elementary school.

Another study (Hansen, 2002) showed that pre-service and in-service teachers were willing to modify lessons for struggling students but would not extend lessons for students identified as gifted or talented. As a result of not being challenged, Hansen and Toso (2007) explained through their study of dropouts identified as gifted or talented, former students with gifted capabilities felt bored and emotionally disconnected from the school environment. They often felt disrespected by other students, as well as by teachers, and may have had problems with authority. Additionally, many of the dropouts identified as gifted or talented in Hansen and Toso's study had experienced a significant loss or tragedy while enrolled in school, but received little or no support within the school environment when trying to cope. It is often a common misconception that students identified as gifted or talented are able to handle any academic or social situation on their own. Oftentimes students identified as gifted or talented will not ask for help even if they need it.

### **Retention**

Some students who suffer academically may eventually face the consequence of being held back or retained at their current grade level. The purpose of retention is to keep students who lack the academic capabilities from being promoted to the next grade level with the premise that it will benefit the student academically. Two characteristics of students who are retained are lower achievement levels and more disciplinary problems than children who are continuously promoted (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). Research also indicates that students who are retained at a grade level have a greater rate of dropping out of high school than students who always advance to the next

grade. Also notable is that Black students have a higher risk of dropping out due to retention than White students, especially because they are twice as likely to be held back (Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007).

As Jimmerson, Anderson, and Whipple (2002) pointed out, “The experience of being retained may influence numerous factors determined to be associated with dropping out of high school (e.g., student’s self-esteem, socioemotional adjustment, peer relations, and school engagement)” (p. 442). Since retention separates students from their same aged peers, friendships that were established prior to being retained may end. Moreover, there is often an age difference between students who are retained and their peers in the same grade level. Additionally, because retained students are often older than their classmates, they may feel societal pressures that their classmates do not understand and may not be experiencing, such as taking on adult responsibilities that require some students to leave school to work or to undertake a role of parent or caregiver (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

### **Truancy, Suspensions, and Expulsions**

It has already been noted by Suhyun, Jingyo, and Houston (2007) that absenteeism is a risk factor that contributes to the drop out dilemma. Absenteeism may result from legitimate reasons such as physical or mental illness, family obligations, or suspensions. However, Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent (2001) pointed out that hundreds of thousands of youth absent from school each day fail to produce a valid excuse; consequently, these youth are labeled truant because they lack an unauthorized absence. There is a strong correlation between high truancy rates and low academic achievement. Youths exhibiting high truancy and low academic achievement are more likely to drop

out of school and have a high dropout rate. Truancy and the dropping out that result have a direct financial impact on communities that can be measured in the following ways:

- less educated workforce;
- business loss because of youth who “hang out” and/or shoplift during the day;
- higher daytime crime rates (in some cases); and
- cost of social services for families of children who are habitually truant (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001, p. 3).

Rumberger and Larson (1998) commented that frequent suspensions and expulsions may lead a student to believe that teachers and administrators do not care about them and no longer want them in school. As a result of the suspensions and expulsions, these students become chronically absent, fall behind in their classes, and frequently give up trying to pass their courses. As predicted, these students may become more disruptive and eventually drop out.

### **School Factors**

Lee and Burkam (2003) contend that researchers may provide explanations for why students leave school before graduating that extend beyond the personal characteristics of students. They conducted a study that focused on the influence that characteristics of a school have on students leaving school before graduating. In their study, 3,849 students in 190 urban and suburban high schools participated in an examination of how school affects students’ decisions to drop out between tenth and twelfth grades. The data in the study were collected from a survey, High School

Effectiveness Study. Their findings indicated that school factors such as the size of the school, the academic curriculum, and the social organization contributed to students' decisions to remain in school or drop out, leading them to conclude that school is part of the problem. In addition to the traditional social and academic risk factors, they concluded that schools with more than 1,500 students, a lack of a student-teacher relationship, and a curriculum that is deficient in academic rigor can drive students away.

It is important to examine the ramifications resulting from students leaving school before graduating. An examination of the dropout statistics may give a clearer indication of the dropout dilemma.

### **Dropout Statistics**

The dropout statistics presented will include dropout rates as they apply to traditional, non-traditional, and minority students. Although the demographics from the high school alternative education program in this study indicate the vast majority of the graduates are White, it is appropriate to include a substantial amount of statistics for minority students for these two reasons: (1) The student population that is quickly gaining momentum, moving from the minority to the majority in our nation, is students of color and Native American students. In 12 states, these students account for up to more than half of the total number of students and in 10 additional states, 40% to 50% of the student population is comprised of students of color and Native American students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011a), and (2) In researching the dropout statistics, much of the focus is placed on minority students and the detrimental effect their dropping out of school has on them as individuals and to society in general.

## **State and National Statistics**

Since this study takes place in a large rural public high school alternative education program in western Pennsylvania, it is significant to include the dropout rates for this state. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania alone, more than 17,000 dropouts are reported annually and the state's freshman graduation rate is 82%. These dropout rates and graduation rates are relevant to the population served by the alternative education programs in Pennsylvania (Hosley, Hosley, & Thein, 2009).

Barton (2005) placed the national graduation rate somewhere between 66% and 71%, lower than the average graduation rate in Pennsylvania. Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morrison (2006) reported that almost one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate. In addition, Rumberger and Thomas (2000) compared the dropout statistics for various types of schools and reported a lower dropout rate for Catholic schools and other private schools than public schools, as well as a lower rate for suburban and rural schools than urban schools, and lower dropout rates for smaller schools than larger schools. Examination of the graduation rates reported by various researchers and state reports made evident that there is little consistency in graduation and dropout statistics.

## **High-stakes Testing**

Clarke, Haney, and Madaus (2000) examined how high-stakes tests, otherwise known as high stakes assessments, affect dropout and high school completion rates. They defined high stakes tests as assessments that are used to determine readiness for kindergarten, grade promotions, graduation, teacher effectiveness and pay, and school effectiveness and funding. In a study of 10 states, Clarke, Haney, and Madaus (2000)

revealed that in states with the highest dropout rates, higher stakes were placed on mandated tests than in states with the lowest dropout rates.

Jacob (2001) reported that students in states that use mandatory high stakes testing are 25% more likely to drop out of high school than students in states that do *not* mandate these tests. This statistic was also evidenced, although at a higher rate, in a report by Reardon and Galindo (2002). They indicated that the odds of students dropping out of schools with high-stakes testing are 39% greater than for students of states where the tests are nonexistent.

### **Male Dropouts**

Statistics regarding the dropout rates of males are significant since male students often drop out of school at a slightly higher rate than female students (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Greene and Winters (2005) added that at-risk and non-completion statistics often use gender as an identifier for high school students. According to statistics provided by NCES (NCES, 2010a), boys are more likely to be held back a grade, to need special education services, or to be diagnosed with either attention-deficit disorder or hyperactivity. Much attention has been focused on boys—more specifically, African American and Hispanic males (Monroe, 2005).

### **Minority Dropouts**

In a report released in May 2011, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011a) noted that the graduation rate for students of color and Native Americans was approximately 50% while the graduation rate for White students was 75%. Asian Americans, who the United States Census Bureau defines as Asians with American descent, including races such as Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, and

Vietnamese, had an 81% graduation rate, but Southeast Asian Americans from countries such as Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, East Timor, and Vietnam had graduation rates that were significantly lower than those of the larger group. School performance may directly affect dropout rates of minority students.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011a), 12% of the nation's high schools identified as the lowest performing schools produce half of the nation's dropouts, 58% of all African American dropouts, and 50% of all Hispanic dropouts, but only 22% of all White dropouts. Many students of color and Native American students attend the lowest-performing schools in the country. Students of color or Native American students are six times more likely to attend one of the nearly 2000 high schools that are considered to be "dropout factories" (p. 1). They also make up the majority of the student population in nearly 75% of the high schools identified by the federal School Improvement Grant as the lowest performing schools in each state. While dropout statistics for minorities are disconcerting, employment opportunities for minority dropouts are equally as bleak.

Barton (2005) reported that the employment experience in 2004 for Black youth who dropped out of school before earning a high school diploma was noticeably dismal, as only 35% of Black dropouts had jobs. In addition 45% of those Blacks who were unemployed were not looking for work. These employment and unemployment rates have changed very little since 1990.

## **Special Education Dropouts**

Another population that deserves attention when addressing the school dropout situation is students who are identified as being in need of special education services. In October 2011, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011a) reported that 13% of special education students aged 14 to 21 years dropped out of school or moved without continuing their education during the 2008-09 school year. The dropout rate for non-special education students is lower than the dropout rate for special education students. Students with emotional disturbances have the highest national dropout rate (20.7%) followed by students with mental retardation (17.3%), those with multiple disabilities (16.7%), learning disabilities (14.7%), other health impairment (13.1%), traumatic brain injury (12.3%), deaf-blindness (11.7%) and orthopedic impairment (11.7%), autism (8.5%), speech-language impairments (8.4%), visual impairments (8.2%), and hearing impairments (8.1%) (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011c).

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2011c) conveyed a comparison of the personal costs of dropping out for special education students with the personal costs for special education students who graduate. Up to two years out of high school, 56% of dropouts had been arrested compared to 16% of graduates. Sixteen percent of *graduates* had been on probation or parole compared with 34% of dropouts (Alliance for Excellent, 2011c).

## **Students Who Earn a GED**

It is noteworthy to compare statistics for former students who earn a General Educational Development (GED) diploma after dropping out of high school with those for students who remain in school and graduate. The November 2011 report by the

Alliance for Excellent Education (2011a) acknowledged that students who earn a GED do not fare as well in college as high school graduates. They revealed the following statistics: 64% of high school graduates were enrolled in a two- to four-year college or university in 2003 while only 31% of students earning a GED were enrolled that same year, and 53% of high school graduates participated in a college preparatory course of study in high school while 51% of GED recipients and 52% of dropouts participated in a general education high school program (Alliance for Education, 2011a).

Although this study is focused on alternative education programs and preventing students from dropping out of school before graduation, the dropout statistics are an important element to include, in part because they validate the need for alternative education programs. The need for alternative education has been in existence for decades and continues today.

### **History of Alternative Education**

Lange and Sletten (2002) reported that alternative schools have existed since the beginning of American education. However, alternative schools recognized in the modern sense are rooted in the civil rights movement. Public education in the late 1950s and early 1960s was criticized for ignoring equity and for being designed to meet the needs of the few. As part of the War on Poverty and The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, President Johnson named the public school system as the front line of attack. This was the start of government backed and funded alternatives that were eventually divided into these two types: alternatives outside of the public school system and those within public education (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

## **Alternative Schools Outside the Public School System and Within the Public School System**

Parents who were dissatisfied with the traditional schools often transferred their children to Free Schools and Open Schools, when available, which were designed to meet students' various needs, learning styles, and interests (Kim, 2006). Designed in urban settings with higher minority populations, the Freedom Schools and the Free School Movement were two well-known examples of alternative programs outside the public education system. These schools were based in communities and often in storefronts or church basements (Lange & Sletten, 2002). The founders of the Freedom Schools believed that minorities were not receiving a quality education in the public school system. Freedom Schools focused on individual achievement, happiness, and fulfillment. A. S. Neill, the founder of a Freedom School called Summerhill, focused instruction to give children "the freedom to learn and the freedom from restrictions" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 3).

Open Schools, on the other hand, were designed by educators inside the public school system. The first open public high schools recognized in America were the St. Paul Open School in Minnesota, the Murray Road Annex in Massachusetts, and the John Adams High School in Oregon (Young, 1990). The open education movement eventually spread to all levels of education and generated schools within a school, schools without walls, learning centers, magnet schools, multicultural schools, continuation schools, and fundamental schools (Young, 1990). The Open Schools promoting a child-centered approach became schools of choice for parents, students, and teachers (Young, 1990).

## **Progression of Alternative Schools**

In the 1960s and 1970s, alternative schools gained momentum in the United States. The civil rights precipitated the shift in educational priorities back to the progressive education movement priorities (Conley, 2002, Young, 1990). Alternative schools offered problem-solving skills, humanistic approaches, and the development of self-concept (Conley, 2002). In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the focus of alternative education shifted again to students at risk and those that were most likely to drop out of school. The U.S. Department of Education's 1983 Report *A Nation at Risk* generated the perception that public schools in America had failed to meet the educational needs of students and prompted the growth of alternative schools. Consequently public schools actively sought ways to keep students at risk from dropping out of school (Holland, 2002). According to McKee and Connor (2007), schools experimented with motivating students by developing partnerships with businesses and colleges through vocational training and by maintaining student interest through non-graded courses.

Today public alternative schools are often stigmatized as so called "dumping grounds" for students at risk who have behavioral problems, academic problems, or both, or who are labeled as juvenile delinquents through court adjudication (Conrath, 2001). However, despite this stigma, alternative programs today are actually quite diverse and largely non-deserving of this reputation. Alternative education programs include, but are not limited to, magnet schools, charter schools, home schools, virtual schools, language immersion schools, hospital schools, and correctional facility schools (Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). Alternative schools serve a multitude of populations which includes gifted students or advanced students, students with strong religious beliefs, special education

students, students with a history of truancy or substance abuse, and students who have been adjudicated by the courts (Huges-Hassell, 2008).

There are 34 states with formal legislation that define alternative education, otherwise referred to as alternative programs or alternative schools. Ahearn (2004) addressed the following four themes that exist as characteristics or conditions in the state definitions:

- Alternative education includes schools or programs in non-traditional settings separate from the general education classroom.
- Alternative schools/programs serve students who are at risk of school failure.
- Alternative schools/programs serve students who are disruptive or have behavior problems.
- Alternative schools/programs serve students who have been suspended or expelled. (p. 3)

Raywid (1999) explained that alternative schools have functioned in various capacities since their beginning. The first schools identified as alternatives emerged in the 1960s in the private sector and eventually the public domain. They opened in urban and suburban settings more than in rural ones. The urban alternatives aimed to serve minority and poor students who were not succeeding in a traditional setting. Suburban alternatives were designed as innovative programs which offered a new way to educate and learn. Both types continue to thrive as a means to address juvenile crime and delinquency, to prevent school dropouts, and to increase school effectiveness. Regardless of the purpose, the small schools and schools-within-schools movement

occurring today may determine whether alternative programs continue to garner the support needed to survive and possibly achieve institutional legitimacy, something they have not yet been able to accomplish (Raywid, 1999).

### **Alternative Schools and Intervention Programs**

The number of alternative schools has increased as their supporters attempt to attract dropouts back to school or to keep students until graduation (Dugger & Dugger, 1998). Enough evidence of the past successes of alternative schools and programs, as well as intervention programs, supports the rationale for districts and communities to consider adopting them. Raywid (1994) noted, “Despite a lack of ‘institutional legitimacy,’ alternative schools can serve as models for any school that seeks innovative change” (p. 26). Many alternative schools and programs are innovative with creative instructional approaches, and they establish positive school environments. Not only are alternative schools thriving, they would also seem to be a worthwhile model for improving education (Raywid, 2001a).

### **Types of Alternative Schools**

Raywid (1999) categorized three different types of alternative schools. The first category is labeled as a Type I school and its aim is to change the entire educational system through a high-engagement, challenging academic curriculum. The second category is a Type II school, and its mission is to change the behavior of the student and offer a last chance for students who break the rules. The category called a Type III school has as its purpose to provide remediation for students who fall behind their classmates due to academic risk factors such as poor attendance and low grades. Schools

are usually identified as one of these three types, but some programs may be a mix of different types.

### **Type I Alternative Schools (Educational)**

Schools in this first category operate a full-time, multi-year instructional program in which students earn the necessary credits to graduate. “Models range from schools-within-schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums” (Gregg, 1998, p. 2). Type I schools have been successful for students at risk including those with behavior problems because of the individualized approach and the voluntary enrollment policy (Raywid, 1994).

The most recent form of a Type I school is the charter school. The main reason charter schools were founded was to offer innovative programs to students from low to moderate income families. Research indicates that charter schools have a positive influence on student achievement, attendance, and attitudes. For teachers, charter schools offer an opportunity to employ innovative ideas that would be discouraged in a traditional school setting. Charter schools also offer educators a chance to test ideas, and if the ideas are found to be effective, to integrate them into other schools as well (Nathan, 1996).

Besides charter schools, additional private alternatives exist—some of which are expensive and selective while others operate on a shoestring budgets. Private schools range from those with a religious focus to those with individual ideals such as home schools and some are identified as magnet schools with themes in the arts and sciences, or for-profit alternative schools (Koetke, 1999).

## **Type II Alternative Schools (Disciplinary)**

Schools in this second category are often described as schools for students with behavior problems and adjudicated adolescents facing expulsion. Lehr, Lanners, and Lange (2003) referred to Type II schools to as “last chance” schools; student placements are often involuntary (p. 60). Oftentimes students who are adjudicated by the courts are ordered to attend. The determination of placement in some states is mandated if a suspension or expulsion is a result of a felony, an assault, or bringing a firearm or weapon to school.

Schools range from openly punitive or highly structured Type II alternative education programs, such as the 1995 Safe Schools Act of Texas (Bickerstaff, Leon, & Hudson, 1997), to therapeutic and remedial programs such as the Central Alternative High School in Lexington, Kentucky, which is driven by a technology-filled curriculum (Koetke, 1999). Type II programs can be short-term, such as in-school suspension, or longer termed if necessary. These disciplinary programs are not schools of choice and usually emphasize behavior modification (Raywid, 1994). Students are mandated to be placed in Type II schools by school districts or the legal system.

## **Type III Alternative Schools (Therapeutic)**

In contrast to Type II schools which focus on changing the behavior of the student, Type III schools maintain a philosophy of altering the way students experience school by changing the school environment. Raywid’s third category encompasses schools that offer an academic curriculum aimed at engaging alienated students. According to Drake (2000), high-engagement schools are considered the most successful. They provide opportunities for close working relationships to develop among teachers

and provide collaboration time for colleagues. Type III alternative schools have a high retention rate of students at risk established by a supportive environment which assists students through to graduation. However, Raywid (1994) points out that Type III schools may be a temporary fix for improving student behavior and achievement if students are returned to their home schools before graduation.

The high school alternative education program in this study is considered a Type III program. Students are given the choice of whether or not to enroll in the public high school alternative education program housed within the high school building. Students are referred to the program by educators or parents after presenting academic or attendance problems, placing them at risk of not completing high school. Because the alternative program in this study falls into the Type III category, presentation of further research on other Type III alternative programs follows.

### **Successful Type III Alternative Schools**

Raywid (1994) identified Urban Academy in New York City as one Type III alternative school that is thriving. Urban Academy is a school within-a-school serving approximately 100 tenth- through twelfth-graders, mostly minorities of low socio-economic status, although some of the students are considered to be middle-class. Although students may choose whether or not to attend, the Urban Academy is often viewed as Last Chance High. Most students enrolling in Urban Academy have had problems with school authority in the past. Even though the majority of students who enter the Academy are not at that point considered college bound, 95% of its graduates enter college while the remainder of the graduation class usually enters the military. The design for the educational experience at Urban Academy is based on these three

premises: an inquiry method is used to make school a thought-provoking academic environment; the schedule is arranged based on programmatic purposes with adjustments being made to include daily variation; and students are provided unconditional support through homework labs, course-connected labs, college labs, and counseling provided by the teachers. Additional counseling is provided for problems that need special attention by a part-time psychologist. Continual collaboration among the staff to identify, address, and resolve problems has led to a high level of teacher satisfaction and a staff that is proud to be part of a successful program.

Another successful Type III program that boasts a graduation rate of 90% with 97% of the graduates going on to college was singled out and described by Raywid (1999). Central Park East Secondary in East Harlem, New York has a school program designed a school program to utilize a nontraditional curriculum which concentrates on a “less is more” principle. An inquiry-oriented approach for instruction is complemented by an evaluation system driven by portfolios and exhibits which showcase students’ accomplishments. The program is directed by a teacher who presides over other empowered teachers who contribute to the school’s success.

An additional example of an effective Type III alternative school is Oakland, California’s Fremont High School, a career academy which follows a school-within-a-school protocol, helping students develop a direct connection between education and their own future. Fremont High School, located in a section of Oakland known for gang activity and poverty, was restructured through a state grant in 1992. It blends a college-preparatory curriculum with career focuses such as media, arts and education, architecture, health and bioscience, electronics, and business and government. Students

complete hands-on projects, work at local businesses as interns, and receive mentoring by community members and teachers. As a result of the restructuring, the dropout rate has decreased and more students are enrolling in college. Additional evidence suggests that academies such as Fremont High School have significant benefits for high risk students (Gehring, 2000).

Beech Grove High School near Indianapolis, Indiana, uses another exciting alternative program known as the Student Knowledge in Living and Learning Program (Skill). Students are given a chance to enroll in the program before the possibility of being expelled from their home school arises. The alternative program offers smaller classes with individualized instruction. Students take two of the core classes of math, science, language arts and social studies on different mornings and then are placed in jobs at locations such as stores, fast-food restaurants, or nursing homes in the afternoons. The philosophy of the program is to help the students achieve academic success, increase self-esteem, and develop a vision for their future (Koetke, 1999).

Jay McGee (2001) director of Hamilton Alternative School (a school of choice) in South Bend, Indiana, proudly refers to Hamilton Alternative School as a school of success and shares his views of the program. A typical student who chooses to enroll in Hamilton Alternative School can best be described as a student who, for whatever reason, had not been successful in the traditional school setting and had faced a variety of problems before leaving the traditional school. Hamilton Alternative School is well funded, positioned in a good facility with a well-trained staff, and supported by the community. Although the graduation rate from the school is not 100%, the staff of Hamilton Alternative School “believes that even one grading period spent at the school

will increase any student's likelihood of becoming successful in life" (p. 591). Hamilton Alternative School equips students with life skills and emotional support along with the necessary academic support. Many students expressed that Hamilton is more like a home than an alternative school.

In addition to providing alternative schools, some school systems have initiated for all students at risk successful intervention programs which share some common characteristics with successful alternative programs. These programs are designed to intervene with students at risk within the school system before a placement in an alternative school becomes necessary.

### **Intervention Programs Within School Systems**

The Effective Learning Program (ELP) was developed for students at risk at Ballard High School in Louisville, Kentucky, in an effort to increase students' relationships with peers and adults to increase the graduation rates. Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Taylor (2004) compared the graduation rate for 38 students receiving the ELP intervention with those of 36 students who were ELP-eligible but did not receive the ELP intervention and with those of 50 regular education students. ELP students participated in an afternoon block of English, mathematics, social studies, and humanities instruction with a lower student-teacher ratio of approximately 15:1, compared with 31:1 elsewhere in Ballard High School. The purpose of the block was to allow students and teachers to build a family or team atmosphere, which in turn enabled students to form more meaningful relationships with the teachers. The program also taught students how to behave appropriately through regular feedback and a nurturing environment. Students at risk in the ELP program developed the knowledge and skills

necessary to successfully complete their high school education as evidenced by the results of the study, which revealed that students who received the ELP intervention had a significantly higher graduation rate (98%) than the comparison group (38%) who did not receive intervention. ELP participants also maintained more internal control over their behaviors, earned higher scores on achievement tests, and developed greater social skills and relationships than both the ELP eligible and regular education students.

Sometimes successful intervention for students at risk of failing, and thus dropping out, is accomplished through tutoring, usually in the core academic areas. However, Johnson, Holt, Bry, and Powell (2008) bypassed the core academic areas and evaluated a tutoring program established in a high school physical education class for students transitioning from eighth grade to ninth grade. They analyzed the effect of the program on high school dropout-associated factors in a low-income urban high school. The study consisted of 157 ninth-graders; 47% were Latino, and 40% were African American. Students were assigned tutors during a seventh period physical education class to assist them in meeting objectives through “peer led activities that taught students how to enhance students’ sense of school attachment; create kinships with other pro-social peers; manage anger and stress; develop a belief system associated with an actual orientation; set realistic goals; and resist negative influences” (Johnson et al., 2008, p. 73). The findings indicated that students increased their ability to resist peer pressure as a result of the physical education tutoring program. While many intervention programs focus on academic support for students at risk, other programs provide counseling in an effort to deter students from leaving school before graduation.

In a study of ninth-grade students conducted by Steen and Bemak (2008), participants at risk were provided supportive group counseling intervention. The students' GPA for the treatment group and for the control group were compared at the conclusion of the counseling intervention. Although the findings did not indicate any significant improvement in the GPA for the treatment group, the feedback from the students involved in the counseling sessions indicated favorable responses to the counseling process—the students pointed out that their counseling experiences had a positive influence on their development and functioned as a possible deterrent to dropping out of school (Steen & Bemak, 2008).

While schools continue their effort to decrease the dropout rate through alternative schools and school intervention programs, some communities also put programs in place for youth at risk and actively attempt to prevent high school students from leaving school before graduating.

### **Community Intervention Programs**

Several community intervention programs have been designed and initiated to address high school students at risk in the inner cities. A pilot program created by Tam, Rousseau, Nassivera, and Vreeland (2001) in a collaborative effort with the New York City Board of Education, the City College of City University of New York, and the American Museum of Natural History involved 19 inner-city high school students at risk selected for the program by high school teachers and principals. This pilot program, *Holiday in the Museum*, was conducted at the American Museum of Natural History for four days during the students' winter break. The goal of the program was to engage students in meaningful and challenging activities to increase interest in science and

mathematics with the intention of raising the levels of performance in those subject areas. The science activities were created through a collaborative effort of science, mathematics, and special education teachers with university faculty and met the diverse abilities and learning needs of the students, as evidenced by student assessments and evaluations. “This collaboration enabled the instructional team to develop, implement, and modify science activities for teaching students with diverse abilities using resources in the informal educational environment (Tam et al., 2001, p. 82).

Another program, the Quantum Opportunity Program, focuses on inner city youth in the Philadelphia area and was created to help educationally disadvantaged and youth at high risk to improve their academic performance through tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and other student assistant services. The program includes instruction in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies through self-paced computer-assisted-instruction. Personal development, consisting of training in life skills and cultural enrichment, as well as a financial incentive for each hour of participation are included along with access to counselors and mentors who are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week are also featured as program components (Kerka, 2003).

Carr and Jitendra (2000) initiated a project based learning program that utilized individualized planning to integrate community service, academic skills, and structured reflection for students at risk of dropping out of school. Technological approaches of hypermedia and multimedia were also provided to engage the students in the learning process by arranging chunks of information based on the student’s needs through a computerized technique. Hypermedia and multimedia motivated the students to relate knowledge and problem-based tasks used in their community service to their own lives

and to promote acquisition of problem solving skills. As a result of the program, students developed confidence and increased self-reliance (Carr & Jitendra, 2000).

Chmelynski (2006) examined the American Youth Forum report *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth* and determined that the most successful dropout prevention programs have the following characteristics:

- Open entry/open exit. Students are permitted to progress at their own pace. Once state and district guidelines are met, the student graduates.
- Flexible scheduling and year-round learning. This type of scheduling is beneficial for students who have family and work responsibilities.
- Teachers as coaches, facilitators, and crew leaders. The faculty serves as a support system guiding students towards their desired goals.
- Real-world, career-oriented curricula. “The aim is to prepare students for postsecondary education, postgraduation employment, and further advancement in the workforce” (p. 41).
- Opportunities for employment. Summer and after-school jobs are arranged for the students so they can contribute to their individual and family support.
- Clear codes of conduct with consistent enforcement. Positive rewards for academic achievement and peer recognition replace punitive forms of discipline.
- Extensive support services. Caring adults are assigned to mentor and guide students.

- A portfolio of options for a varied group. A diverse range of options are provided to reconnect out-of-school youth.

While many schools and communities work independently to solve the drop-out dilemma, some schools and communities have formed a partnership to reach students at risk of dropping out. Dynarski and Gleason (2002) emphasized that schools and communities have a strong impact on academic achievement and preventing students from dropping out of school. Partnerships between school districts and community-based organizations are commonly arranged as a preventative dropout strategy.

### **School and Community Intervention Programs**

In a study conducted by Lesley (2008), a literacy group was formed with students identified as at risk by the Communities in Schools program at an urban high school in the southwestern United States. The program is a federally funded program designed for at risk high school students and Lesley volunteers at the high school as a mentor and literacy teacher. She interacted with the students during lunch periods or homeroom and also took them on field trips. Students were resistant to read until they were given readings with which they could identify and become engaged. Their interests were recognized through discussions Lesley held with the students, and the text chosen for the students was based on those determined interests. Her study shed light on the impact literacy and community involvement have on the development of adolescent students as well as the quality of literacy instruction needed for high school students at risk (Lesley, 2008).

Anderson, Christenson, and Sinclair (2004) found that personal contact with students at risk helped to reduce the dropout rates and delinquency for ninth-graders

served through the Check and Connect Program High School Completion Initiative in Minneapolis Public Schools. The Check and Connect model of engagement operates through a mentorship program and community resources. Criteria for referrals to the program for ninth-graders showing early warning signs of disengagement include these: academic failure, high absenteeism, suspensions, and being a new student in the district. Attendance liaison personnel make immediate contact with a student following initial absences, and community resources are solicited as a model for intervention (Anderson, Christenson, & Sinclair, 2004).

### **Concerns About and Suggestions for Alternative Education**

Kraemer and Ruzzi (2001) recognized that many alternative programs do not rely on the state standards set for regular education and often lack the resources for the appropriate classroom materials. Kraemer and Ruzzi suggested that educators push to raise the standards for alternative education and search for ways to make learning relevant and applicable so that students are prepared when they enter the workforce or postsecondary education. Gregory (2001) argued that alternative schools have an essential role in revamping the American high school, but in order to do so they must gain more control over who attends and recruit a more diversified student body (not just those with behavior problems. Alternative schools often have little control over a student's time of entry and little control in the selection of teachers who will teach these students. In addition, because many alternative education teachers face the absence of professional development and the teacher turnover rate is high (Kraemer & Ruzzi, 2001). Other issues for consideration are that alternative schools have a reputation for serving these specific types of students: "at-risk students, pregnant girls, adjudicated youths,

expelled students, or underachieving or unmotivated student” (Gregory, 2001). Although one of the main reasons these schools were created was to serve these populations, they are capable of serving others as well.

Conrath (2001) asserted that “alternative schools must insist on being part of a systemic intervention that involves changing the system in which students operate (including teaching students internal control, developing their participatory academic skills and knowledge through genuine effort, and changing the odds of success in school and life) and keeping the students in the new system until they graduate from high school” (p. 587). An open-door policy receptive to attracting interested students and welcoming to all school personnel may help alternative schools alleviate their punitive stigma (McGee, 2001).

Alternative educators can meet these challenges by adhering to the mission set forth by effective alternative education programs as described by Kraemer and Ruzzi (2001). They state:

The best alternative programs have always searched for ways to make learning relevant and applicable to life outside of school. The conditions in which they operate require flexibility and openness to innovation and new approaches. In the end, the pledge to reach all students with high standards will rise or fall on the performance of alternative education programs that serve a quarter or more of those who must be educated. (p. 56)

### **What Works in Alternative Education Programs**

Throughout the research and descriptions of alternative education programs, consistent factors emerged as features of effective alternative education:

- The presence of caring, well-informed adults such as teachers, counselors, community members, and others who sincerely care about youth, their well-being and success (James & Jurich, 1999).
- A small learning community concentrated on youth development and achievement with a feeling of belonging as the incentive for success (Grobe, Niles, & Weisstein, 2001).
- High expectations for academic achievement and accountability for behavior teamed with appropriate learning supports (James & Jurich, 1999).
- A comprehensive approach that meets the individual needs, interests, and learning styles of the student (Elliott, Hanser, & Gilroy, 2002).
- An authentic connection between engaging learning and a student's future life and work (Conchas & Clark, 2002).
- An opportunity for students to participate in community service to develop leadership skills and self-respect (James & Jurich, 1999).
- Follow-up services for participants who go on to postsecondary education or training, and for those who are placed in jobs (James & Jurich, 1999).

Successful high school alternative education programs and intervention programs established within schools or communities or through a combination of efforts from both educators and community leaders have been identified, as have the components of effective alternative education programs. Although there is significant evidence to support that many students at risk are successful in alternative education programs, there are still students at risk who choose not to enter alternative education programs or who

drop out once enrolled. For those dropouts, support in the form of employment, training, and education may be initiated through other avenues that are often referred to as second-chance programs (Barton, 2005).

### **Second-chance Programs**

Barton (2005) acknowledged that when students drop out of high school, there are limited opportunities for resuming education and training. However, some programs that have proven to be successful in providing education, training, employment, counseling, and social services for dropouts include Job Corps, YouthBuild USA, and the Center for Employment Training (CET). Community colleges as well as the General Education Development (GED) program also play a significant role.

Some students drop out of school with the idea of obtaining a GED certificate, which is designed to be the equivalent of a high school diploma. One out of seven high school diplomas is now based on passing the GED test. Dropouts typically study for the GED test on their own or find a program in which to enroll to prepare them for the GED test. In 2002, the GED test was revised to be more rigorous and to extend beyond multiple choice questions, making it more challenging for one to pass (Barton, 2005).

Second-chance programs such as Job Corp and YouthBuild USA offer on the job training as well as opportunity to earn a GED. The Job Corp was established in 1964 by the United States federal government as part of the Economic Opportunity Act. Partnerships with corporations, labor organizations, trade associations, and national volunteer groups provide the foundation for the program's operation. Disadvantaged individuals aged 16 to 24 years who have dropped out of high school may enroll to learn a trade, earn a high school diploma or a GED, and receive assistance in finding

employment. Students receive follow-up support for up to 12 months after graduation. Another community-based youth employment program, YouthBuild USA, offers support toward postsecondary education for participants. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given grants to college-focused community organizations such as YouthBuild (Bloom, 2010).

YouthBuild USA was founded in 1990 and is funded mainly by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Young people aged 16 to 25 years who are unemployed or underemployed are targeted to receive assistance in obtaining their GED or high school diploma while attending an alternative high school and learning the construction trade by building affordable housing for low-income and homeless people in their own communities. A YouthBuilders program in Portland, Oregon, offers an articulation agreement with Portland Community College (PCC) Prep which is designed to help high school dropouts earn both a high school diploma and community college credits. Once students successfully complete the Portland YouthBuilders program, they receive up to 11 credits in PCC's construction department. PCC Prep also offers a Gateway to College program for high school dropouts that places them in small classes designed to bring their writing, reading, math, and study and career planning skills up to a level that leads to enrollment into mainstream college classes. These classes are then counted toward both a high school diploma and an Associate's degree (Pines, 1999).

Additional second-chance programs such as the Center for Employment Training (CET) focus on career training. Barton (2005) traced the establishment of the CET back to 1967 where it was first established in San Jose, California. It now operates with 33 vocational education centers in twelve states. The majority of the CET funding comes

from local, state, and federal government, while the remainder is from private funding. Over half of the enrollees are high school dropouts aged 17 to 60 years. CET provides job training and educational instruction to meet each student's needs, as well additional support services. The instruction is self-paced for individual needs and meets the criteria of employers. The emphasis is placed on helping the participants obtain employment. Evaluations of the program by the Manpower Development Research Corporation confirm that CET has had good results in increasing employment.

Bloom (2010) emphasized that some high school dropouts will eventually continue their education and get back on track. It is important to develop opportunities for those youth through education, job training, employment, and a chance to enter postsecondary programs, especially for those who have the interest and aptitude to continue. He stated, "Many young people who leave school attempt to reengage as they mature, and both rigorous research and practitioner wisdom suggest that many second-chance programs are worthy of investment and expansion" (p. 105).

Throughout the review of the research on students at risk and alternative education, three theoretical perspectives namely school as a caring community, student resilience, and student persistence have been identified as factors that contribute to students at risk remaining in school and earning a high school diploma. A closer examination of the three perspectives as well as related studies may lead to a clearer understanding of the effects schools have in influencing students' decisions to complete their high school education and graduate. Each will be discussed in turn.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

In an attempt to define and understand human development through a person's environment and the relationships that are formed, Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the ecological theory. He defined human development as follows:

The ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation throughout the life course between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives. [This] process is affected by the relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the setting are embedded (p. 21).

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) advocated using an ecological approach to understand human development through the environment. Through Bronfenbrenner's (1989) initial ecological theory, he established four layers of systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the macrosystem. All are interrelated and can affect an individual's development. He later added the chronosystem, which is appropriate for describing a school district or an individual school (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Each of the five systems is described below:

1. The *microsystem* is defined as the pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships experienced by a developing person in a particular setting with particular physical and material features and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). When this theory is extended from human development to organizational development, then a school is of importance.

Students, parents and family members, administration, teachers, and the community make up the microsystem (Johnson, 2008).

2. The dynamics between parents and students and an individual school is an example of a *mesosystem*. The expectations parents place on the school and child impact the climate of the school, student behavior, and the communication between the school and the parents (Johnson, 2008).
3. The *exosystem* represents the larger entity that the developing individual has no control over. For a school system, it might consist of state regulations, federal mandates, and local disasters (Johnson, 2008).
4. “The *macrosystem* can be thought of as the *social blueprint* of a given culture, subculture, or broad social context and consists of the overarching pattern of values, belief systems, lifestyles, opportunities, customs, and resources embedded therein.” The microsystem of a school encompasses the three previous ecological layers, plus the entire nation (Johnson, 2008, p. 3).
5. The *chronosystem* is not one of the four original layers. It represents both short- and long-term dimensions of the individual, and it influences the operation of the first four layers of the ecological system. “The chronosystem of an individual school may be represented by both the day-to-day and year-to-year developmental changes that occur in its student body, teaching staff, curricular choices, etc., as well as the overall number of years in operation” (Johnson, 2008, p. 3).

Bronfenbrenner (2005) asserted that the social organization of which an individual is a part contributes to an individual’s social development. To summarize, a

child's development is shaped by a number of influences such as family, community, and nation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). There is plenty of evidence to support Bronfenbrenner's theory and the importance of providing a caring and supportive environment, particularly school environment, to assist in a child's healthy development (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002).

### **Establishing a Caring School Community**

Tremendous pressure is placed on teachers to not only educate students and make adequate yearly progress as mandated by NCLB, but also to assume the role of a parent in teaching a diverse and needy student population such matters as character education; social and emotional well-being; and bullying, drug, and violence prevention.

Establishing a caring community can make the task less daunting (Schaps, 2009).

Policies like No Child Left Behind that are based on threats, punishments, and malicious comparisons are in need of re-direction (Noddings, 2005). Willie (2000) supported the need to move away from authority reforms to ones that build confidence, trust, and respect. Smyth and McInerney (2006) recommended that reforms emphasize the importance of rigor, relevance, and relatedness while maintaining a strong commitment to dignity, humanity, and sense of belonging and connectedness. Schaps (2009) explained that in order for a school to establish a caring community it should accomplish the following:

- foster supportive relationships between students, teachers, and parents;
- establish common purposes and ideals;

- place an emphasis not only on academics but also on social and civic participation that promotes fairness, concern for other, and personal responsibility;
- provide opportunities for students to assist and work together with others;
- encourage autonomy and choices.

Rak and Patterson (1996) agreed that schools should provide an atmosphere that makes children feel welcomed and creates a sense of belonging in a caring community. Criteria for schools to consider when creating a sense of a caring school community are to provide choices for students and teachers and to establish a smaller school size. Smaller schools allow teachers and students to become familiar with each other and establish a family-like atmosphere which supports the whole child (Morley, 1991). Alternative schools are generally smaller, usually less than 200 students, and are often staffed by teachers who prefer to work in a nontraditional environment. “When you walk into an alternative school, you generally get a sense of community and personal caring” (DeBlois, 2000).

Caring is not always the main focus of the policies and practices in traditional schools (Noddings, 2002), and even though the need for caring is not limited to students at risk, they are the ones that suffer the most when faced with uncaring schools. Students whose social backgrounds and academic records put them at risk of dropping out of school, failing, or not graduating cannot afford to be in an uncaring environment (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). Alternative school programs are the most effective means for serving students at risk of dropping out as they provide a community of caring that is often lacking in more traditional high school settings (Wehlage, Rutter, & Turnbaugh, 1986).

Wehlage and colleagues' (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Wehlage, Rutter, & Turnbaugh, 1986) studies of alternative education programs described the importance of school as a caring community. When students feel valued in their school environment, they become more invested and their behavior changes, increasing the likelihood that students will be more receptive to school policies and rules.

### **Caring School Communities**

Doyle and Doyle's (2003) study of Lincoln Center Middle School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, showed that a caring community promotes the development of students to become caring individuals who will transfer their capacity for empathy and compassion beyond the classroom walls and into the community. The staff at Lincoln Center Middle School developed a program to teach caring and outlined these five critical activities that may be used to model effective programs:

- establishing powerful policies;
- empowering groups;
- teaching caring in classrooms;
- caring for students; and
- caring by students. (p. 259)

In addition, for schools to create a caring community, they must also attend to the psychological and social well-being of their students by extending their efforts beyond concerns for academic performance (Doyle & Doyle, 2003).

A sense of community was described by students in a study (Saunders & Saunders, 2001) conducted at Walnut Creek, an alternative high school in the Midwest. Participants indicated that they found a greater sense of community at Walnut Creek than

at their previous schools. An environment of academic and psychosocial support created by the caseworkers, teachers, and administrators for students at risk of dropping out transformed the alternative education experience into a caring community. In an additional qualitative case study of Prairie Alternative High School (pseudonym) located in the Midwest, Kim and Taylor (2008) echoed the results of the Walnut Creek study. Students enrolled in Prairie felt they were provided a caring environment in which they felt comfortable. Participants' initial perceptions of the alternative school as a dumping ground and a place to dislike changed to a belief that it was a school from which they wanted to graduate. Prairie offered them a nurturing environment that the students needed in order to succeed. Teachers and students felt a sense of family and were able to establish a relationship built on mutual respect and trust due in part to the smaller class sizes that were not present in their regular high school.

Research conducted by Kratzer (1997) led to a significant number of educators advocating for schools as caring communities, especially for meeting the needs of low-income urban children of color, believing that a relationship exists between student achievement and school culture. It is well documented that affluent and White students feel more connected to their schools than students of color and low-income students (Schaps, 2009). Kratzer (1997) further explained that the cultivation of school as a caring community is based on the premise of a schoolwide sense of ownership and responsibility for establishing a climate of mutual trust and respect among school personnel and students of all colors and incomes. The mission of alternative schools is often to develop individual student relationships with caring teachers (Lange & Sletten, 2002). This mission is based on the theory that students will persist throughout their

school experience if they are encouraged by caring teachers who help them establish academic achievement and a sense of self-esteem (Amove & Stout, 1980).

Although the idea that students at risk have the greatest need for caring teachers is evidenced in research (Muller, 2001), there is little inquiry into the alternative setting and its approach to teacher caring. In an attempt to gain the perspective of students in an alternative setting, Souza (2005) explored students' definitions of caring through the following questions:

Research Question 1: How is caring communicated to the alternative school student?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of teacher caring at the alternative school?

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between perceptions of teacher caring and student learning? (p. 43)

Souza's research questions were examined through Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach which relates the relationships of individuals to their surrounding environment and "the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). The participants in the study were selected from a public alternative high school, Livingston Alternative High School (LAHS), in a large city in the Northwest United States. Interviews were conducted with 10 female and 10 male students of diverse backgrounds, as well as with and six teachers. The analysis of the data collected from the interviews revealed themes such as communication of caring, perceptions of teacher caring at LAHS, and the relationship between caring and learning. The communication

of caring theme revealed seven practices that students identified as communication behaviors that teachers exhibited:

1. helping students;
2. talking to students;
3. taking interest in students' lives;
4. listening;
5. encouraging and pushing students to do their best;
6. wanting students to do well academically;
7. actually teaching students. (p. 48)

Teachers' responses to the question of how they perceived themselves as communicating caring to alternative schools students included two common practices such as getting to know students and talking to students. All six teachers interviewed believed they made an effort to learn more about their students through talking to the students or through phone calls to their homes to communicate with family members. From the students' response to the research question pertaining to perceptions of teacher caring at LAHS, 12 of the students acknowledged that some teachers cared about them and demonstrated their caring by teaching and seemingly wanting students to perform well academically. In response to the third research question which explored the relationship between caring and learning, most students communicated that most of the teachers wanted the students to get good grades and that caring influenced learning. Five of the teachers agreed with the students' noting that caring impacted student learning. Many of the students revealed that a focus on academics communicates caring, especially if the students have not been successful academically in the past.

Muller (2001) believed “students may perceive teacher behavior that supports access to instruction as caring, especially if they are at risk of dropping out of high school” (p. 252). Lange and Setten (2002) proposed that in order to get alternative school students to work their hardest, teachers must combine their effort of leading students toward reaching academic goals with communicating that they truly care about the students.

Throughout the review of schools as caring communities researchers often presented evidence that protective factors in family, school, and community environments appears to alter or reverse predicted negative outcomes. Some studies indicated that alternative schools have a responsibility to provide an environment that communicates caring to the students at risk and the importance of effective relationships between students and teachers. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological approach is referenced several times as a means for understanding the effect the environment has on establishing relationships and a caring community. A continued review of the literature will reveal the effect that a caring community has on student resilience.

### **Student Resilience**

Bosworth and Earthman (2002) described resilience as children’s responses to both long-term and short-term adversity. “Thus, children who flourish despite such adverse conditions as poverty, racism, low family cohesion, family psychiatric illness, or alcoholism have been described as resilient” (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002, pp. 299-300). An individual may be faced with a natural disaster or major family illness and demonstrate resilience, regardless of his or her background, by coping effectively. Both types of resilience focus on strengths rather than risk factors (Bosworth & Earthman,

2002). Krovetz (1999) based his beliefs on the resilience theory, specifically, every person has the ability to overcome adversity if important protective factors are present in that person's life. Resilience theory is founded on the intention that if family members, and school care deeply about a student, have high expectations and meaningful support for a student and value his or her contribution, he or she will maintain a belief in the future and can overcome almost any misfortune. The resilient child is one "who loves well, works well, plays well, and expects well" (Werner & Smith 1992, p. 192). Many researchers have identified multi-faceted characteristics of resilient students which include social proficiency, an optimistic attitude, goal formation, responsible risk taking, sense of humor and creativity, emotional control, and intellectual perception (Parr, Montgomery, & DeBell, 1998).

### **Environmental Factors**

Werner's (1989) longitudinal study of resilient children and youth indicated that environmental factors play an important role in promoting resilience in children. She outlined aspects such as the age of parents, the number of siblings, the age difference between siblings, and the network of caretakers that were available to help the mother care for the children as factors that contributed to children's resilience. The determining factors to which resilience in children might be attributed were younger mothers for resilient boys; older fathers for resilient girls; two or more years in age difference between siblings; and an influential presence of different generations of friends, relatives, and teachers during the child's adolescence stage; and church attendance.

## **Social Competence**

Werner and Smith's (1992) research on an individual's resilience, focused on social competence. Throughout their longitudinal study they cited the importance of having worthy problem-solving and communications skills. Other notable factors that resilient children possess include these personality traits identified by Werner and Smith (1982) that distinguish resilient children from those who are unable to cope with risk factors:

- problem solving abilities;
- the ability to gain positive attention;
- an optimistic outlook even when faced with challenges;
- the ability to focus on the possibility of a life with meaning;
- the ability to be alert and self-sufficient;
- the acceptance of new experiences;
- a practical viewpoint.

Along with these personality factors, mentors outside the family structure throughout a child's development also contribute to their resilience (Rak & Patterson, 1996).

Waxman, Gray, and Padron (2003) added social and academic ability, autonomy, and a sense of purpose as types of individual resilience or protective characteristics to those already identified by researchers. Current literature places children facing poverty, family conflict, violence and abuse, illness, and parental illness as factors that place children at risk of not being successful. Characteristics such as the child's personality, self-esteem, and unforeseen support from family and the community are protective

factors that contribute to the success of children at risk even when they are faced with unforeseen adversity (Rak & Patterson, 1996).

Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009) conducted a mixed methods study of resilient Native American teenagers on an Indian Reservation in the upper Midwest. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) noted a framework for fostering resiliency is a constant in the Native American culture. The Lakota Sioux list four essential factors that promote resilience: a sense of belonging, kindness, independence, and accomplishment. These core elements are outlined in a model identified as the Circle of Courage. The questions for the study were developed after viewing the Circle of Courage through the lens of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, an approach to human development which provided the structure for understanding teenage resilience and a method for developing the questions for the interviews. Nine high school students were interviewed after being identified by teachers as academically successful. The questions from the interviews are listed below along with the related layer of the ecological system:

- The *microsystem* consists of the interpersonal interactions in an individual's life. The related questions were these: What are your plans following high school? Do you have a role model? Who? Why? (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, & Baartman 2009, p. 13)
- The *mesosystem* is composed of the relationship between parent and teacher or parents and teenager's friends. The related questions were these: "What are your parents' attitudes toward school? Are they involved in your school?"

What are your friends' attitudes toward school?" (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, & Baartman 2009, p. 13)

- The *exosystem* consists of the indirect factors such as a parent's workplace, the school board, or extended family. The related imperative statement was this: "Describe your relationship with your extended family." (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, & Baartman 2009, p. 13)
- The *macrosystem* is composed of the cultural values, customs, and societal laws of the individual's community. The related imperative statement was this: "Describe your community." (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, & Baartman 2009, p. 13)
- The *chronosystem* includes a broad picture of the individual's life within a socio-history perspective. The related question was this: "How does the majority white culture impact Native American culture?" (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, & Baartman 2009, p. 13)

Family and extended family's support and values toward school and work played a crucial role in Native American teenage resiliency despite at-risk factors present in this population. However, peer support and the approval of their culture did not contribute appreciably to the Native American teenager's resilience. The findings of the study substantiated the idea that the Circle of Courage and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offered an existence of individual and environmental factors of resiliency (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, & Baartman 2009).

The review of the literature indicates that substantial focus is placed on ethnic-minority resilience in terms of life events while a few studies focused on academic

resilience. However, academic resilience pertains to all students who at some point may not reach a satisfactory level of academic performance or may face other challenges and adversities. One study focusing on academic resilience was conducted by Martin and Marsh (2006). In their sampling of over 400 Australian high-school students in eleventh and twelfth grade, they examined the correlation between educational and psychological factors, and academic resilience. Academically resilient students are those “who sustain high levels of achievement motivation and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school, ultimately dropping out of school” (Alva, 1991, p. 19). The data collected from the sampling indicated that five factors were present that predicted academic resilience: control, planning, low anxiety, self-efficacy, and persistence. The analysis of the data showed that academic resilience also predicted additional educational and psychological outcomes such as students’ involvement in class participation, greater enjoyment of school, and attainment of more self-esteem. A student demonstrating academic resilience has the ability to handle any obstacles and is also more receptive to interventions, if needed.

Numerous researchers have indicated the potential benefits of teaching social skills and life skills (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002). In a study of school administrators, conducted by Bosworth and Earthman (2002), the idea of resilience was seen as a viable consideration when designing school programs and school environments. Many of the administrators in the study implemented programs to enhance resiliency in individual students or to create an environment that promotes resilience. One principal believed that in order to initiate resilience, schools needed to teach not only academic skills but also

personal, social, and emotional skills (Bosworth & Earthman, 2002). Henderson and Millstein (1996) proposed these six strategies for promoting resilience within the school environment:

1. Teach life skills.
2. Increase pro-social bonding.
3. Provide caring and support
4. Provide opportunities for meaningful student participation
5. Set and communicate high expectations.
6. Set clear and consistent boundaries.

### **Promoting Resilience in Schools**

Morrison and Allen (2007) proposed that student resilience can be built through day-to-day interactions at school and state that “autonomy, sense of purpose, social competence, problem-solving, and achievement motivation are protective possibilities or opportunities to reduce risk and enhance resilience” (p. 168). In addition, Klem and Connell (2004) suggested that educators must ensure that protective factors are present daily in the classrooms, on the playground, with peer groups, and through interactions with teachers and other school employees. Students are more academically engaged if they have caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school (Klem & Connell, 2004). “Fostering school engagement is one strategy for taking students from risk status and enhancing their resilience; school engagement also may be described as being a protective possibility” (Morrison, Brown, D’Incau, O’Farrell, & Furlong, 2006).

Krovetz (1999) found through his observation of schools which foster resilience that the following practices were adhered to:

- classes are heterogeneously grouped for most of the day, with regrouping as appropriate;
- students usually are working in small groups or independently;
- there is a well-defined safety net in place for students who are falling behind academically;
- common instructional strategies are used in most classrooms within and across grade levels;
- when teachers ask questions, students are required to use higher-order thinking skills to answer and all students have opportunities to respond;
- when students ask questions, teachers usually reply with a question that requires thought by the student, rather than with the answer. (p. 122)

Raywid (2001b) suggested that students who have been unsuccessful need a strong educational direction, more so than students who manage to succeed under any circumstances. Children who have parents that spend quality time with them well as children who have been labeled by researchers as resilient can thrive even in a bad school. They are often able to adapt and succeed even though their home and school environments are poor. Bushweller (1995) noted that higher IQ scores also appear to be a predictor of resiliency, although it is not the constant that ensures success in life. Society's ills can become overwhelming for even those students appearing to be the most intelligent and resilient. Wolin and Wolin (1993) indicated that resilient children are capable of understanding that their parents' problems have nothing to do with them. To escape from troubles at home, resilient kids spend more time in libraries, at school by

becoming involved in activities, or in neighbors' homes; they develop more meaningful relationships with those outside the family.

However, many students identified as at risk and unsuccessful require a quality education system to aid them in seeking alternative solutions for overcoming adversity they may face at home or school. Evidence indicates that alternative schools are an option available in some school districts and represent various degrees of departure from traditional school settings which may be beneficial for many students at risk (Raywid, 2001a). MacDonald and Validivieso (2000) maintained that providing an alternative setting with developmental opportunities as well as motivational and emotional support may aid in promoting resilience.

Most alternative schools and programs are small enough to meet the individual needs of a student, provide the necessary attention that contributes to a student's sense of belonging, and deliver the skills so a student can experience success and a sense of trust that lead him or her to becoming a resilient person (Krovetz, 1999). Students often feel lost and unimportant in a large school environment and receive little nurturing toward fostering an optimistic future. Fostering resiliency means creating a school environment with supportive adults who get to know each student, making him or her valued members of the school community, and provide the necessary tools for a student to become academically successful at a high level. Once resiliency, the ability to cope with what comes their way in life, is instilled in students, the trait may be enhanced by the awareness of persistence—the ability to keep going, no matter the circumstances.

## **Student Persistence**

Mohl (2009) described persistence as a behavior successful people demonstrate when they do not have an immediate solution to a situation or problem. People who are persistent do not give up. They examine a situation or problem, formulate a plan to handle the situation or problem, and then implement the plan until they reach a desired outcome. If educators wish to prepare students to handle problems in school and throughout their lives, persistence must be instilled in them.

Although persistence has been studied since the 1920s (Lufi & Cohen, 1987), a review of the literature revealed that limited research exists on the persistence of students at risk, especially those enrolled in high school alternative education programs. The purpose of this study is to examine graduates' perspectives of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that have persisted beyond graduation. Because the participants in this study were persistent in the pursuit of their high school diploma and successfully graduated from a high school alternative, the theological perspective of persistence is considered relevant to discuss.

## **Student Integration Model**

Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model (SIM) was originally developed to explain the phenomenon of dropping out which was influenced by three variables:

- (1) *background characteristics* and attributes affecting the level of goal attainment (personal attributes, previous experiences, and family situation that may affect educational expectations and commitment); (2) level of *academic integration* (grade performance and intellectual development); and (3) level of

*social integration* (informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with teachers. (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2006, p. 221)

Tinto suggested that the way variables interact with each other determines whether or not students drop out of school.

Duquette et al. (2006) explained that in 1997, Tinto revised the SIM model and changed its focus to student persistence, rather than students dropping out. His new model proposed that schools should develop learning communities that offer academic support through tutoring or study groups and social support through counseling in an attempt to help students persist and graduate. Although the SIM was aimed at the persistence of post-secondary students, other researchers modified the model to examine persistence in high school focusing on characteristics from Tinto's model such as academic and social integration.

### **Studies of Youth Who Are Persistently at Risk**

Hardre and Reeve (2003) used self-determination theory to explain the circumstances that cause rural students to form intentions to persist and remain in high school rather than drop out. Self-determination theory, when applied to education, is the concept of promoting a student's interest in learning through activities that are meaningful to the student and fostering confidence in a student's competencies. Internal motivation is developed through self-determination and competence leading to student engagement and persistence in school (Vellerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). The 483 participants in Hardre and Reeve's study were from four rural, public high schools in Iowa school districts. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire assessing the

five variables of “perceived teacher autonomy, self-determination motivation, perceived competence, school performance, and intention to persist versus drop out.” The latter addressed the two items “I sometimes consider dropping out of school” and “I intend to drop out of school” (p. 349). The results of the study were found to be similar to results from previous studies (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), in that students begin to express their intentions to drop out when their needs were no longer being met. When educators provide an environment with supportive motivation and promote achievement, persistence is affected. Hardre and Reeve’s (2003) findings propose that “(a) both motivational resources significantly and uniquely predict achievement and persistence, (b) achievement has relatively deeper roots in perceived competence, and (c) the intention to persist has relatively deeper roots in perceived self-determination” (p. 355).

Many researchers directed studies that focused on student-teacher relationships and how those relationships affect student persistence while other researchers emphasized family relationships and student persistence. For example, May and Copeland (1998) conducted a mixed methods study with 264 students from three mid-western communities in an attempt to identify the influence that personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, coping strategies, and health status perceptions had on persistence at an alternative education school. An equal number of high school students from alternative and traditional school settings participated. The alternative sites in the study served students who had not experienced success in a traditional high school environment. The data were collected in a group setting through a demographic questionnaire, a stressor list, and a coping strategy instrument as well as a rating instrument of their personal concern for physical symptoms. The results of a study

indicated that site factors contributed to academic persistence more than personal characteristics. While both peer and family relationships contributed to persistence in the alternative setting, student-teacher relationships had the strongest influence. Student-teacher relationships are sometimes formed through professional communication such as counseling experiences.

Knesting (2008) conducted a study of students at risk at Washington High School, a medium-sized, comprehensive high school for students in ninth through twelfth grades, and found that although Washington High did not have an official dropout prevention program, they did offer counseling and an academic support program for ninth- and tenth- grade students at risk to help them transition from middle school to high school. The findings indicated that when students were involved with supportive teachers and administrators, they were more determined to earn a high school diploma. These findings contribute to the existing literature that suggests that a student's ability to persist can be influenced by the schools. From this study four factors were outlined that were considered to be critical in supporting student persistence: "(a) listening to students, (b) communicating caring, (c) the school's role in dropout prevention, and (d) students' role in dropout prevention" (p. 3). Knesting claimed that schools have the ability to contribute to a student's persistence. Supporting students who are at risk of dropping out of school requires schools to change their approach toward these youth of high risk. Changes must be made within the school climate to support student persistence in order to increase the students' chances for graduating. Even subtle changes such as teachers talking to students in the hallways between classes or asking students for their opinion can change students' attitude toward school and their decision to persist and graduate.

Also, stopping students from making derogatory comments toward another student or installing in students a belief that they can succeed are changes that can make a difference in whether or not a student decides to stay in school or drop out.

In their longitudinal study, Heck and Mahoe (2006) addressed these two important social phases during students' high school years: their transition from middle school to high school and their later progress toward graduation (11th- to 12th-grade). They developed two research questions to examine the phases:

How do intersections between social divisions (e.g., ethnicity, social class) and academic-social integration within schools contribute to students' likelihood to persist? How do school contextual and process variables (a) affect students' likelihood to persist and (b) moderate the strength of within-school relationships regarding school persistence? (Heck & Mahoe, p. 424)

Their results implied that social and cultural capital such as relationships between teachers and students in schools that are somewhat segregated may affect students' decisions to persist in schools. In an attempt to increase persistence rates for high school students, individual differences such as early educational experiences, school transitions, previous courses, family poverty, and career and postsecondary goals must be considered. They emphasized that a concerted effort should be established nationally to standardize procedures to aid in the effectiveness in educating students of diverse social categories (Heck & Mahoe, 2006).

In order to address education equity, discussing academic persistence and motivation of students of diverse social categories, in particular African American and Latino students, is imperative. Those students contend with social and language stigmas

such as racism, discrimination, sexism, academic struggles, and political bias on a daily basis (Graham & Taylor, 2002). The ramifications of the battles endured by minority populations in educational settings can have a lifelong effect on the individuals. The academic persistence of these minorities is marked by decreased educational attainment as evidenced by high dropout rates and low standardized test scores. Previous qualitative and quantitative studies of African American and Latino students' academic achievement propose that academic persistence and educational achievement may be influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors. Caldwell and Siwatu (2003) provided a model intervention for academic persistence and motivation for African American and Latino high school students through a study they conducted with African American and Latino students. They indicated two variables in their study that influenced educational achievement for African American and Latino students, namely, students' being able to relate to academics and students' believing in the importance of education. Intervention programs that are successful with African American and Latino children at risk are culturally based, attempt to establish a healthy cultural identity, and promote academic persistence. Developing essential educational navigation skills may provide the motivation for academic persistence in African American and Latino high school students and prevent students from dropping out while promoting higher education attainment (Caldwell and Siwatu, 2003).

Although schools play a significant role in a student's persistence, parent influence may also be a contributing factor in whether or not a student remains in school, particularly in alternative education schools. Parental involvement was suggested by research as an important element in the persistence of alternative education students in

graduating or earning a General Education Development (GED) certificate (May & Copeland, 1998). The findings of a study led by Foley and Pang (2006) revealed that only one-third of the alternative programs in their study provided opportunities for parent involvement. Involving parents in their child's education may be advantageous in supporting the child in the successful completion of his/her secondary education and is one aspect of alternative programs that educators should consider.

Besides the parents' influence, another important factor to explore is how a student's personality relates to persistence in education. Gottfredson's (1982) eight year longitudinal study examined the personalities of over 2,000 young male tenth grade students in an attempt to answer the question "What kinds of people are successful at attaining educational credentials?" According to Gottfredson, research indicates that "persistence in educational pursuits is a powerful determinant of subsequent occupational prestige and earnings" (p. 532). The results from her study revealed that the grades students earn have a direct effect on the development of their personality characteristics which carry over into their adult life and may influence success. Low grades create anxiety and high grades cause students to be more responsible or committed. The study found that low anxiety and high commitment increased persistence in educational attainment regardless of the student's level of intelligence or socioeconomic status. Educational attainment is an important triumph that students need to experience, and it is the educator's role to foster the educational achievement that may prevent students from dropping out of high school.

### **The Educator's Role in Preventing Students from Dropping Out**

Muller (2001) claimed that social capital is not held by individuals but exists in the relationships among individuals and is defined by the actions it facilitates. Teacher-student relationships, particularly in school, include the idea that both teacher and student are to act in ways that promote learning. Suhyun, Jingyo, and Houston (2007) asserted that assistance and guidance from teachers and counselors can decrease the probability of a student's dropping out of school by almost half. Students who exhibit a high rate of absenteeism and low academic achievement are in need of support from teachers or guidance counselors to address the factors that contribute to their attendance and academic problems (Suhyun et al., 2007).

The demands of homework, tests, and getting up early in the morning to go to school are sometimes too much for students to handle. Students need to be listened to carefully and their feelings need to be validated, Knesting (2008) declared after conducting a qualitative case study of students at risk who were determined to graduate. Supportive teachers or administrators who showed interest or concern influenced the students' decision to remain in school.

Cassel (2003) contended that every ninth-grade student should be given The Personal Development Test (PDT) which is comprised of 200 true/false items measuring personal maturity and social integration. The results are analyzed using a Global Assessment Functioning Scale which "consists of 5 points ranging from Inadequate Information, through Serious Symptoms, to Superior Functioning" (p. 642). The PDT could be used to identify potential high school students at risk of dropping out and based

on the results interventions in the form of remediation or counseling could be employed (Cassel, 2003).

According to Knesting and Waldron (2006), educators should focus on the following to help students graduate:

- Place emphasize on the students, not the programs. Match students with teachers who are committed and caring.
- Focus on the positive. Point out to students what they do well.
- Have high expectations. Students want teachers who challenge and believe in them.
- Talk with students. Listen to students and talk with them, not at them.
- Pay attention to the small things. Make eye contact, speak politely, ask for their opinion, and acknowledge something that might go unnoticed.

Anastos (2003) stated, “Not only must districts provide every student with a quality, standard-based core curriculum, school leaders must recognize that students in alternative settings need the best teachers the district has to offer” (p. 25). Only experienced teachers should be working with students in an alternative program, and rigorous programs need to be in place to accommodate the needs of this population of students (Anastos, 2003).

Azzam (2007) suggested five actions that schools could enact in order to improve the chances for students to complete school:

1. Engage students in real-world and practical learning experiences. Make connections for students between school and employment.

2. Hire better teachers, have more individualized instruction, offer tutoring, and provide more one-to-one time with teachers.
3. Promote a safe environment with more supervision and classroom discipline.
4. Encourage a healthy relationship between students and at least one adult role model at school.
5. Improve communication between schools and parents.

A strong message was delivered by the National Education Association (NEA) and their comprehensive plan for communities to address the dropout crisis. At the announcement of the plan, NEA president remarked, “We must take time to intervene and give students individual attention to stay connected and in school. This is a call to action, a call to change, a chance to step up and do our part. It’s no longer acceptable to drop out” (Pascopella, 2007, p. 31). Pascopella (2007) revealed the National Education Association’s 12-step plan to address the dropout crisis:

1. Mandate high school graduation or equivalency as compulsory for everyone below age 21. (p. 32)
2. Establish high school graduation centers for older students, aged 19-21, to provide specialized instruction and counseling, separate from younger students. (p. 33)
3. Ensure students receive individual attention through safe schools, smaller learning communities in larger buildings, smaller classes, and during summer, over weekends, and in after-school tutoring programs. (p. 33)
4. Expand students’ graduation options by creating partnerships with community colleges in career and technical fields and with alternative schools. For

students who are incarcerated, tie their release to high school graduation. (pp. 33-34)

5. Increase career education and workforce readiness programs so students can see connections between school and careers. (p. 34)
6. Act early so students do not drop out, using high-quality, universal preschool and full-day kindergarten and programs that ensure students are doing grade-level work throughout their school careers. (p. 34)
7. Involve families in students' learning at school and home in new and creative ways so they can help their children engage in healthy behaviors and stay involved in their education. (p. 35)
8. Monitor students' academic progress through various measures during the school year for a full picture of students' learning. (p. 36)
9. Monitor, accurately report and push for reduced dropout rates by gathering accurate data for key student groups like ethnic and racial groups, establishing benchmarks in each state, and adopting standardized reporting developed by the National Governors Association. (p. 36)
10. Involve the entire community through family-friendly policies that provide release time for parents to attend parent-teacher conferences, work schedules that allow high school students to attend classes on time and be ready to learn, and adopt-a-school programs that encourage volunteerism. (p. 36)
11. Ensure educators have the necessary training and resources, including professional development focused on needs of diverse and at-risk students; the latest textbooks and computers; and safe modern schools. (p. 38)

12. Make high school a federal priority by calling on Congress to invest \$10 billion over the next decade to support dropout prevention programs and support states that make high school graduation compulsory. (p. 38)

Most educators who viewed the plan believed the ideas generated were worthy; however, most of the ideas require funding which is in short supply, and educators often lack the know-how needed to implement the plan successfully, especially in districts that vary in location, size, and ethnic and racial diversity (Pascopella, 2007).

### **Summary**

The literature review presented reviews of scholarly research which included the characteristics that lead to a student being identified as at risk of dropping out of high school. Although at-risk factors may be present, research indicated that a student's decision to remain in school may be influenced by other aspects, such as a caring school community, student resilience, and student persistence. It also reviewed successful alternative education and intervention programs, the history of alternative education, and second-chance programs. The reasons students drop out were also presented along with dropout statistics.

Finally, the review contributed an examination of numerous studies. Most of the relevant literature in which studies were conducted consisted of qualitative studies of students at risk and alternative education or intervention programs with a limited number of participants. This study followed a mixed methods protocol and includes both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. All of the graduates of the alternative education program in this study were invited to participate in the survey, allowing for a greater number of alternative education graduates' perceptions to be collected and

analyzed in the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase of this study analyzed data collected from individual semi-structured interviews with eight of the graduates. Chapter III presents and explains the study's design and methodology.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates' perceptions of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that persist beyond graduation. The alternative education program in this study was adopted by the district's school board in spring of 2001 and the program was implemented during the 2001-2002 school year. Since the program's inception, the only data collected about students were grades, attendance, and graduation rates; no data has been collected about graduates of the program. Because the graduates were enrolled in an alternative education program and were successful in completing the program, this study attempted to identify the school-related factors that led a student to enroll in alternative education and the program-related factors that facilitated their persistence in completing the program. Examining program-related factors that benefit graduates after graduation was also of particular interest in determining what factors lead to effective programming for them as at-risk students. These findings are important for educators working in alternative schools as well as those in school districts considering reinstating or instituting an alternative education program.

The data collected from graduates in this study were used to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to their enrolling in the alternative education program?
2. What are the graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting and the program-related factors that contributed to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education program?
3. What program-related factors influence program graduates following graduation from the alternative education program?
4. How, if at all, do program graduates' perceptions of the traditional school program differ from program graduates' perceptions of the alternative school program?

In order to explore students' perceptions of the alternative education program in this study, a mixed methods study was conducted. The data gathered were utilized in a descriptive analysis and comparative analysis to answer the research questions. This section describes in detail the procedure for data collection. It begins with identification of participants and study site, followed by an explanation of the study design which includes two phases—data collection and pilot study.

### **Study Site**

The Road to Success, a pseudonym for the former alternative education program in this study, falls into the Type III category for alternative education programs and operated as a preventative dropout program at a public high school in a rural school district in western Pennsylvania. The Rolling Meadows School District, the pseudonym

for the school district in this study, has a student population of approximately 6,600 students and a resident population of over 49,000. Rolling Meadows School District covers approximately 95 square miles and lies east of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The school system includes six elementary buildings (K-5), three middle schools (6-8), a high school (9-12), an off-campus alternative education school for adjudicated youth (7-12), and an in-house after-school alternative education program (11-12).

The school district offers a comprehensive program providing college preparatory, business, general, and vocational technical courses to students in grades K-12. The largest percentage of students is enrolled in the college preparatory program. Students in the Rolling Meadows School District score above state and national levels on all standardized achievement tests. Approximately 66% of the juniors and seniors take the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the students consistently score higher on the SAT than other Pennsylvania students. Nearly 70% of the district's graduates attend four-year Baccalaureate degree programs. The high school is fully accredited by the Middle States Association, and the professional staff for the district totals 502 administrators and teachers.

The Road to Success alternative education program, established in 2001, was originally funded by the state of Pennsylvania. The Rolling Meadows School District then funded the program until the board voted to eliminate the program at the end of the 2012 school year due to budget constraints at the state and local levels. The Road to Success is an alternative to a traditional school day, which for many of the students enrolled in the program was difficult to complete. Juniors and seniors in Rolling Meadows High School, a pseudonym for the high school which housed the Road to

Success, were recommended to the program by principals, counselors, parents, teachers, and the home and school visitor, who also served as the program's director. High school students recommended to the alternative education program were at risk academically and had missed a substantial amount of school. After the initial recommendation, the program was outlined for the students, who were then given the choice to enroll in the alternative education program or not to enroll.

Instead of attending school during the traditional school hours, participating students attended from 2:50 p.m. until 7:15 p.m. Monday through Friday and studied science, English, social studies, and mathematics, the core subjects, as well as non-academic courses such as physical education, consumer science, technical education, and art. Teachers from Rolling Meadows High School were offered the opportunity and a supplemental contract to serve as instructors, advisors, and mentors for the students in the Road to Success after-school alternative education program.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were graduates from the years 2002-2011 with an age range of 18 to 30, of a public high school alternative education program in western Pennsylvania. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), "For smaller populations, say,  $N = 100$ , or fewer, there is little point in sampling; survey the entire population" (p. 133). Since the graduate population from the alternative education program in the study is 116, and that is not that much larger than 100, all 116 graduates were asked to participate in the survey which was conducted in Phase 1, the quantitative portion of the study.

The sampling for qualitative data collection in Phase 2 was a convenience sample. A convenience sample is “the process of whoever happens to be available at the time” for the study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009, p. 134). The last question on the survey administered during Phase 1 asked each graduate if he or she would be willing to participate in an interview with the researcher at the public high school that houses the alternative education program. The first eight graduates who responded favorably were asked for additional contact information and were contacted by telephone, and arrangements, including times and dates, were made with the graduates to participate in an individual semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher.

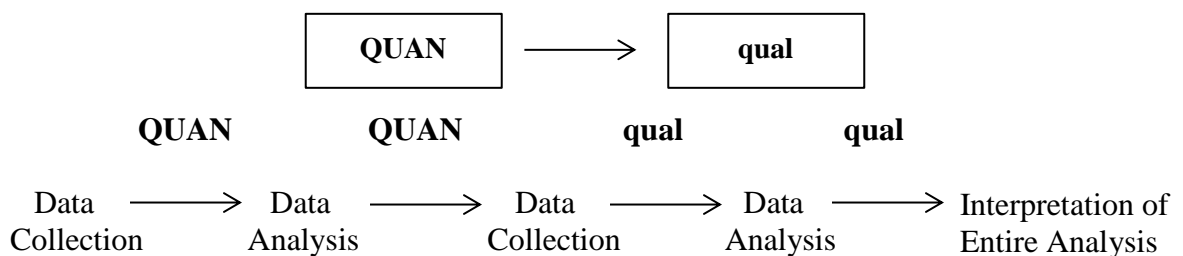
Since all of the graduates of the alternative education program are 18 years of age or older, parent permission was not needed for participation in the study. Official written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and the superintendent of the school district (Appendix A) which operated the alternative education program in this study. The instruments used for the collection of the data, the survey and interview questions, were shared with the superintendent.

Contact information for the participants was acquired through the high school office with the assistance of the former alternative education program director. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The identity of the participants was protected by the attachment of codes to the surveys and pseudonyms to the graduates who were interviewed. The gathered data were not shared with other participants or those not related to the research. All paper copies of surveys, transcribed interviews, and

consent forms will be contained in a locked area for three years and then shredded to destroy all traces of the data collection.

## Study Design

The collection of the data was a sequential explanatory mixed methods design and was divided into two phases: Phase 1 consisted of the quantitative portion; Phase 2 was utilized for qualitative purposes. The sequential explanatory model in Figure 2 was applied and deemed appropriate for explaining the collected data and exploring a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2007) described a phenomenon as a shared human experience by individuals. The shared human experience in this study is enrollment in an alternative education program and graduation from the program. The sequential explanatory approach, often referred to as the Quan-qual model by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), began with a collection of the quantitative data and an analysis of the data, followed by the qualitative data collection. After collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the qualitative data, the results were used to explain or elaborate on the quantitative results.



*Figure 2.* Mixed methods design sequential explanatory model. The quantitative data is collected first and then analyzed, followed by the collection and analysis of the qualitative data (Creswell, 2009, p. 209).

## **Phase 1: Quantitative Research Design**

In quantitative research, a survey provides a quantitative description of opinions of a particular population (Creswell, 2009). In this study, data were collected via a 67-item survey during the summer following the 2012 school year from graduates of an alternative education program housed in a public high school in a rural school district in western Pennsylvania using a survey containing 67 items. Surveys generally take on the form of a questionnaire which is a collection of survey questions (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2007). The questionnaire designed for this study was a researcher-developed survey, Alternative Education Program Survey (Appendix K). The survey consisted of five parts:

1. Graduates' Demographics. This section contains four checklist items consisting of year of graduation, gender, race or ethnicity, and residence location. The demographic information was used to identify the characteristics of the sample (Creswell, 2009).
2. Traditional School Assessment. This assessment consists of 20 items which were used to answer this question: What are the graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to their enrolling in an alternative education program? A Likert-like scale coded as Agree (4), Somewhat Agree (3), Somewhat Disagree (2), and Disagree (1) was used to help determine graduates' perceptions.
3. Alternative School Assessment. This assessment consists of 22 items which were used to answer this question: What are the graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting and the program-related factors that contributed to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education

program? A Likert-like scale coded as Agree (4), Somewhat Agree (3), Somewhat Disagree (2), and Disagree (1) was used to help determine graduates' perceptions.

4. Post-Graduate School Assessment. This assessment consists of 24 items which were used to answer this question: What program-related factors influence a graduate after his or her successful completion of the alternative education program? A Likert-like scale coded as Agree (4), Somewhat Agree (3), Somewhat Disagree (2), and Disagree (1) was used to help determine student perceptions in 14 of the items, while seven of the statements utilized a free response of *yes* or *no* to determine a graduate's employment status and additional education, and one completion question was included to determine a graduate's occupation.
5. The final question in the survey asked each graduate if he or she would be willing to participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher followed by a request for additional contact information if the response was favorable.

The use of a survey and a quantitative approach enabled more graduates of the alternative education program in the study to participate and respond to a larger number of questions. Another purpose of a questionnaire was to utilize a tool that may elicit more honest responses from the participants than when meeting face-to-face with the researcher for an interview. The survey was mailed to all of the 2002-2011 graduates of the Road to Success alternative education program. Names and addresses of the graduates were obtained from the director of the program.

In order to help ensure a high response rate to the survey, Salant and Dillman's (1994) four-phase protocol for administering a mailed survey was followed. The first mail-out was an advance-notice letter (Appendix E) to all participants explaining the nature of the study. Any returned mailings due to change in address from the first mail-out were followed up by a phone call to the participant's family; the family's phone number was obtained from the director of the alternative education program and used to attain a correct current address for the graduate. Once the corrected address was found, an additional mailing was sent to those graduates who did not receive the first advance-notice letter. A second mail-out followed approximately one week after the original advance-notice letter. The second mailing consisted of a cover letter (Appendix F), the survey, survey consent form (Appendix G), and pre-addressed return envelope. Graduates were asked to respond within a two-week period. A third mail-out, sent to all members of the sample four days after the initial questionnaire, was a follow-up postcard (Appendix H). The final mailing was sent to all non-respondents two weeks after the second mail-out and consisted of a cover letter, the questionnaire, the consent form, and a pre-addressed return envelope with postage. The data gathered from the survey was entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) which was used to conduct all statistical analyses including data analysis and appropriate comparative analysis.

### **Pilot Study for the Quantitative Data Collection**

Before a pilot study was launched the researcher-developed questionnaire for the survey was reviewed by the director of the alternative education program being studied to determine the appropriateness and clarity of the survey. According to Gay, Mills, and

Airasian (2009), a pilot study should be conducted for a researcher-developed questionnaire before it is distributed to participants. “Having three or four individuals complete the questionnaire will help identify problems. Choose individuals who are thoughtful, critical, and similar to the intended research participants” (p. 181). Therefore, before study participants received the survey, a pilot study was conducted to determine the clarity of the directions and questions in the survey.

Students who were currently enrolled in the alternative education program in the study with an expected graduation of June 2012 and who would not be part of the study of graduates from the years 2002-2011 were invited to participate in a pilot study through an invitation letter (Appendix B) distributed to the students by the director of the alternative education program. Three students expressed an interest to participate in the pilot study, which was conducted one month prior to the June 2012 graduation at the site of the alternative education program in a group setting with all three participants. The three were given the Pilot Study Informed Consent Letter (Appendix C) along with Pilot Study Informed Consent form (Appendix D). Since the participants in the pilot study were 18 years of age or older, parent permission was not needed for participation. The survey was administered after the consent forms were signed. Participants did not answer the first question of the survey since it requested the graduation year, and participants were not graduates at the time of the pilot study. Also, the last question was omitted from the survey because it asked participants if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. The interview protocol was not subject to piloting since questions from an existing study were modified with permission (Appendix M) from alternative education researcher Amy Wodnicki (2009) for the interview process. Suggestions and

comments concerning the survey directions and specific items were solicited by the researcher in the group setting from the participants after they completed the survey. The responses were hand-recorded on paper and read back to the participants to ensure correctness in the recording. The completed pilot survey, along with the hand-recorded list of the pilot study participants' comments and suggestions, was examined by the researcher and the director of the alternative education program in the study. The survey instrument was revised to include some of the suggested changes to the directions and specific items. Upon conclusion of the pilot study, the participants were given a note of appreciation for their time and a gift card in the amount of \$25 for a local convenience store.

The pilot study was used to test the survey for readability and clarity. Cronbach's alpha test for internal consistency was used to test the survey instrument for reliability after the survey was administered to the sample population.

## **Phase 2: Qualitative Research Design**

Qualitative research was helpful in exploring and understanding the meaning (Creswell, 2009) and perceptions that the graduates of the alternative education placed on their experiences while in school and after graduation. Data for Phase 2 of the mixed methods study were collected through phenomenological individual semi-structured interviews in order to gain a more detailed view of graduates' perceptions. The interviews were conducted after the sampling population was identified through the survey administered in Phase 1. An Interview Informed Consent Letter (Appendix I) inviting the graduates to participate in the interview was e-mailed to all participants. Arrangements were made for the interview with the selected sampling of eight graduates

by e-mail and telephone calls. An e-mail was sent and a telephone call was made the day before the scheduled interview as a reminder for each participant. At the interview site and prior to the interview, graduates were asked to reread the Interview Informed Consent Letter that was emailed to the participants before signing the Interview Informed Consent form (Appendix J). Parent permission was not needed for participation in the interview process since the participants were ages 18 to 30.

The selected participants responded to face-to-face open-ended questions asked by the researcher. The interview lasted approximately one-half hour and consisted of the following types of interview questions located in Appendix L: The first five interview questions were directed toward the graduates' educational experiences prior to attending the alternative education program, the next five questions addressed the graduates' educational experiences while attending an alternative education program, and the last five questions pertained to the graduates' experiences after attending an alternative education program. In order to prevent the responses from being too rehearsed, the researcher chose not to send the interview questions to the participants ahead of time.

The interview questions used to guide the semi-structured interviews were modified with permission from Wodnicki (2009) (Appendix M). According to Wodnicki (2009), the Interview Questions were designed to generate a discussion of school attendance, academic success, family encouragement, contribution of schools to the drop-out problem, teacher attitudes, and resilience. The modified questions also produced dialogue related to persistence and school as a caring community.

The responses to the interview questions were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were organized by the researcher through the use of

NVivo 10 software which aided in analyzing and interpreting the responses. Themes were developed from key words and phrases pertaining to graduates' perceptions; these themes helped the researcher draw conclusions about the alternative education program. Member checking was employed via a follow-up phone interview to each participant in the interview session to ensure that an accurate account of the findings and themes was interpreted appropriately by the researcher (Creswell, 2009).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine graduates' perceptions of a public high school alternative education program in western Pennsylvania. The focus of attention was on the perceptions and experiences of the participants. For the purpose of this study, descriptive methods for data collection and analysis were used in a mixed methods design involving two sequential phases charted in Figure 3. The quantitative data for this study was solicited through a survey administered in Phase 1 during the 2011-2012 school year. The survey, Alternative Education Program Survey, consisted of 67 items, mainly Likert-like scale statements and questions, contained in five parts. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the Summer 2012 or Fall 2012 and followed the quantitative data collection. The collection of data during Phase 2 through an interview protocol was for qualitative purposes.

All data collected were used for the purpose of analysis only. The data collected from the survey were analyzed through SPSS and the responses from the interviews were analyzed through NVivo 10 software. The results of this study will be described in detail in Chapter IV along with the research findings from the data analysis.

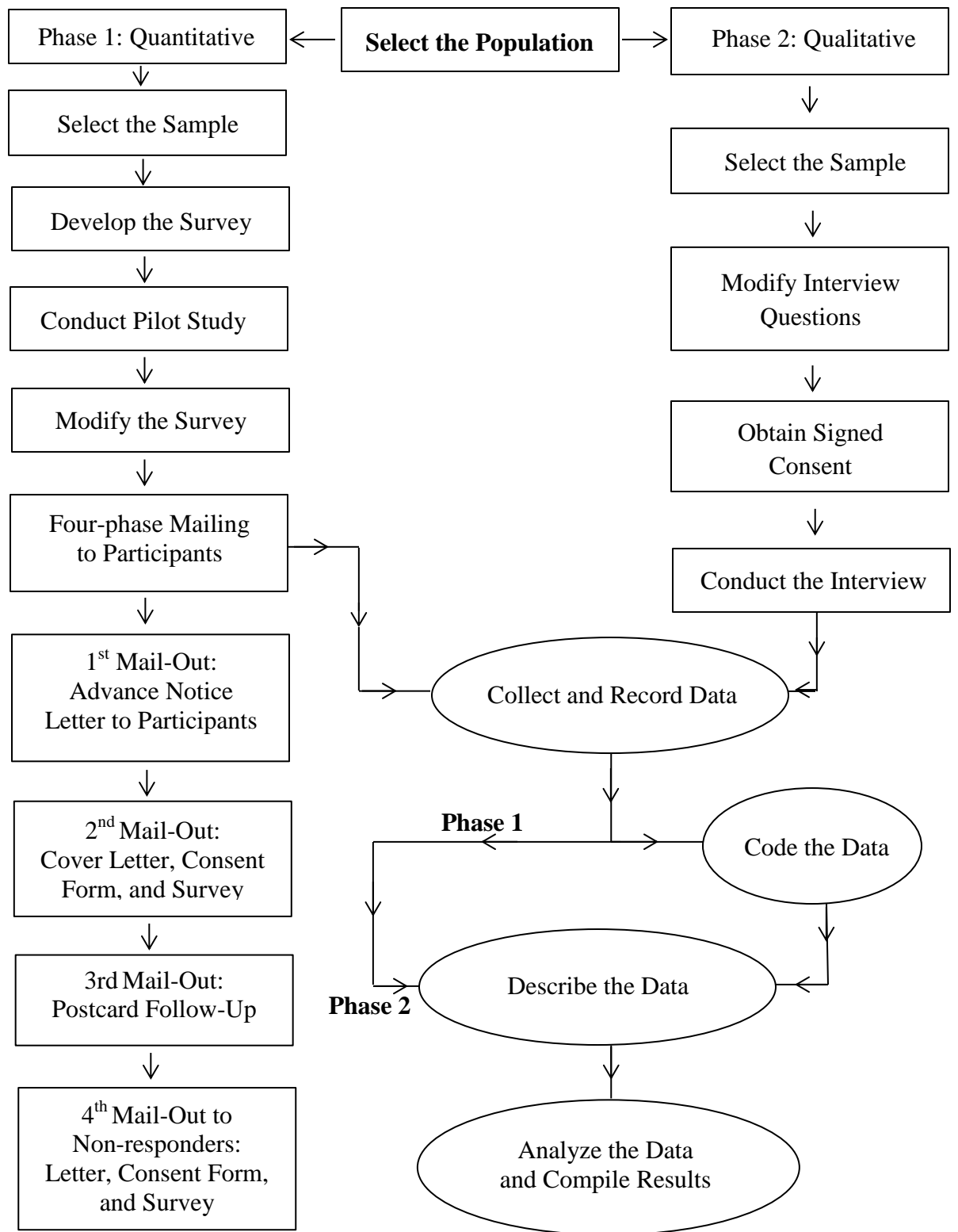


Figure 3. Data collection protocol for quantitative and qualitative phases.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

This mixed-methods study was conducted to examine graduates' perceptions of factors that contribute to enrollment in and completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that persist beyond graduation. A sequential explanatory model, otherwise known as a Quan-qual model, was applied in two phases: Phase 1 comprised the quantitative collection, and Phase 2 entailed the qualitative portion.

The data collection in the Phase 1: Quantitative portion was obtained via a researcher designed survey consisting of 67 items partitioned into five sections: graduates' demographics, traditional school assessment, alternative school assessment, post-graduate school assessment, and a final question asking each graduate to participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The survey was mailed through the United States Postal Service to graduates from the years 2002-2011 of an alternative education program in western Pennsylvania. The survey was utilized to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to their enrolling in the alternative education program?
2. What are the graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting and the program-related factors that contribute to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education program?

3. What program-related factors influence program graduates following graduation from the alternative education program?
4. How, if at all, do program graduates' perceptions of the traditional school program differ from program graduates' perceptions of the alternative school program?

The data collected in the Phase 2: Qualitative segment were solicited through face-to-face interviews with eight graduates of the alternative education program in this study. The interview consisted of open-ended questions which were designed to answer the research questions and included a discussion which enhanced the three fields of theories that this study was based on: school as a caring community, student resilience, and student persistence. After an analysis of the interview responses, emergent themes were developed. These themes will be discussed in detail in the Phase 2: Qualitative results section.

This chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) study demographics, (b) study sample, (c) Phase 1: Quantitative results, (d) Phase 2: Qualitative results, and (e) chapter summary.

### **Study Demographics**

This study was conducted with graduates of an alternative education program, The Road to Success, which is no longer in existence. Due to budget constraints at the state and local levels, the program was eliminated at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. Graduates in this study were serviced by the alternative education program from the years 2002-2011. The Road to Success was operated through a public high school in western Pennsylvania. The high school is situated in the Rolling Meadows School

District, the largest district in the county, with a resident population of over 49,000, and covers an area of approximately 70 square miles southeast of Pittsburgh. The high school serves students in grades ninth through twelfth and had a student population of over 1,900 students and a graduation rate for the 2010-2011 school year of 94.64%, substantially higher than the state graduation rate for the 2010-2011 school year of 82.63% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012a). The Pennsylvania Department of Education (2012b) reported the dropout rate for public schools in 2010-2011 in Pennsylvania was 1.19%, substantially higher than the dropout rate of .94% for Rolling Meadows High School. However, the dropout rate for the county where Rolling Meadows School District is situated is slightly lower, .86%.

Even though the Road to Success is no longer functioning, data obtained and analyzed through this study are important to consider especially since the school district in this study is considering discontinuing a second alternative education program the district operates in conjunction with a neighboring school district. The information provided in this study may be beneficial to school districts when considering maintaining, eliminating, or reinstating alternative education programs.

### **Study Sample**

The participants in this study were graduates from the years 2002-2011 of a high school alternative education program. Names, along with addresses and phone numbers for 116 graduates, were obtained from the director of The Road to Success, the alternative education program in this study. Salant and Dillman's (1994) four-phase protocol described in Chapter 3 was used to administer the mailed survey. Of the 116 letters sent in the advance-notice mailing, 30 letters were returned due to incorrect

addresses. In an attempt to acquire correct addresses for the returned letters, phone calls were made to locate graduates. Twenty-eight of the calls resulted in a message that the phone was no longer in service, while two of the calls led to a corrected address. A second attempt to locate the 26 graduates with incorrect addresses was made through the social network, Facebook. Three of the graduates responded with current addresses. Of the 30 returned mailings due to incorrect addresses, 25 of them remained unknown. An additional mailing consisting of the advance-notice letter was sent to the five corrected addresses obtained from the phone calls and through Facebook. Although letters explaining the study were initially sent to 116 graduates, a mail-out consisting of a cover letter, the survey, consent form, and a preaddressed return envelope with postage was sent to 91 or 78.4% of the graduates. Twenty-five of the graduates were not sent the survey due to unknown addresses. In response to the reminder post-card sent as a third mail-out, 21 surveys were returned. Non-respondents were sent final mailing containing the cover letter, the survey, consent form, and a preaddressed return envelope with postage; this effort yielded a return of 18 surveys. The total number of participants in Phase 1: Quantitative portion of this study was 39. The results of the mailings are described in Table 1.

Table 1

*Mailing Results*

	N	%
First Mailing	116	100.0
Returned Letters Due to Incorrect Addresses	30	25.9
Graduates That Could Not Be Located Due to Phones No Longer in Service	28	24.1
Graduates Located Through Phone Calls	2	1.7
Graduates Located Through Facebook	3	2.6
Second Mailing to Graduates with Last Known Addresses	91	78.4
Surveys Returned after Second Mailing	21	23.1
Surveys Re-mailed to Non-respondents	70	76.9
Surveys Returned after Mailing to Non-respondents	18	26.0
Total of Surveys Returned	39	43.0

Of the 39 participants in the Phase 1: Quantitative sample, eight of those graduates participated in Phase 2: Qualitative portion of the study which consisted of a face-to-face interview with the researcher. Phase 1: Quantitative results were entered and analyzed through SPSS software, and Phase 2: Qualitative responses were entered into NVivo 10 software and analyzed. Phase 1 will be described in detail first.

## Phase 1: Quantitative Results

The quantitative portion contains an analysis of responses to a survey that was returned by 39 out of 91 graduates of The Road to Success with last known addresses. The survey began with an explanation of the questionnaire, including a description of it as an instrument that was being utilized to examine graduates' beliefs about the traditional school setting and the alternative education program setting that participants were enrolled in during their junior or senior year in high school or both junior and senior years in high school. Demographic information was requested throughout the survey.

### Demographic Characteristics

Demographic information was obtained from items 1 through 4 of the survey which asked for date of graduation, gender, race or ethnicity, and residence location. Item 24 directed graduates to indicate the people who influenced their decision to enroll in the alternative education program, and items 59 through 65 requested information regarding the graduates' education beyond high school, military service, and employment. The results are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

#### *Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=39)*

Characteristic	N	%
Respondent's Year of Graduation		
2002	2	5.1
2003	8	20.5
2004	3	7.7
2005	2	5.1

Table 2 (*continued*)

Characteristic	N	%
2006	3	7.7
2007	5	12.8
2008	2	5.1
2009	8	20.5
2010	3	7.7
2011	3	7.7
Respondent's Gender		
Male	23	59.0
Female	16	41.0
Race or Ethnicity of Respondent		
White	39	100.0
Respondent's Residence Location		
Resides within the school district of the alternative education program	29	74.4
Resides within the same county as that where the respondent attended alternative education program but not within the same school district	10	25.6
Respondent's Continued Education, Military Service, and Employment		
Currently enrolled in a two-year college program	3	7.7
Currently enrolled in a four-year college	0	0.0

Table 2 (*continued*)

Characteristic	N	%
Graduated from a two-year college	2	5.1
Graduated from a four-year college	1	2.6
Currently in the military	0	0.0
Retired/discharged from the military	2	5.1
Employed	34	87.2
People Who Influenced Respondent's Decision to Enroll in the Alternative Education		
Parent(s)	14	36.0
Peer(s)	9	23.1
Principal(s)	9	23.1
Counselor(s)	10	25.6
Program Director	15	38.5
Teacher(s)	8	20.5
Self	2	5.1

*Note.* Totals of percentages are not 100 for Year of Graduation because of rounding. Totals of percentages are not 100 for Respondent's Continued Education, Military Service, and Employment and People Who Influenced Respondent's Decision to Enroll in the Alternative Education are not 100 because some respondents responded with more than one answer.

Graduates were also asked to state their occupation if they were employed. For those that completed the question, the responses were as follows: clerk at fast food store, works for father's business, certified nursing assistant (CNA) and training for emergency medical technician (EMT), working in retail, cashier at local gas station, cook at local

restaurant, ultrasound technician, teller for local bank, baker, artist and laborer, machinist, USMC veteran, waitress at parent's restaurant, independent contractor and bartender, construction, auto mechanic, home health care, server at local restaurant, cashier for local grocery store, factory worker, carpet installer, and part-owner of a beer distributor.

### **Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting and the Alternative Education Program**

Survey items 5 through 23 and 25 through 46 were based on a Likert-like scale coded as Disagree (1), Somewhat Disagree (2), Somewhat Agree (3), and Agree (4) to help determine graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the alternative education program. Survey items 5 through 23 were designed to answer the research question: What are the graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to enrolling in an alternative education program? Survey items 25 through 46 assessed the research question: What are the graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting and the program-related factors that contribute to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education program? The two sets of items assessed graduates' perceptions of relationships with peers, teachers, and administrators; expectations; attendance; and overall support. A descriptive analysis, shown in Table 3, was calculated for the responses to the two sets of items. The minimum, maximum, and mean scores for graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the graduates' perceptions of the alternative school setting indicate that the graduates' perceptions of the alternative school setting were more favorable.

Table 3

*Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting and the Alternative Education Program (N=39)*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
SCHLPERC	39	1.00	3.50	2.33	.797
ALTPERC	39	2.00	4.00	3.68	.421

*Note.* SCHLPERC = Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting, ALTPERC= Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program. This table shows the descriptive statistics for SCHLPERC (items 5-23) and for ALTPERC (items 24-46).

A paired-samples *t*-test was calculated to compare the mean score of graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting to the mean score of graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting. The mean for graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting was 2.33 (*sd*=.797), and the mean of graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program was 3.68 (*sd*=.421). A significant difference in graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the alternative education program setting was found (*t*=10.54, *p*=.000). Table 4 indicates the difference.

Table 4

*Paired Samples Test for Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting and the Alternative Education Program (N=39)*

Paired Differences: 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
SCHLPERC- ALTPERC	1.35	.804	10.45	< .001

*Note.* SCHLPERC = Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting, ALTPERC= Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program. The table compares the mean score for SCHLPERC (items 5-23) and the mean score for ALTPERC (items 25-46). Clearly the means are different. The analysis determines whether or not that difference is statistically significant. The 2-tailed Sig. in the table indicates the probability that the difference in means was due to chance is less than .0005. Therefore the difference is almost certainly a real one.

Items 5 through 15 which referred to graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and items 25 through 35 which addressed graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program were designed to be identical in order to calculate a comparative analysis of graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the alternative school setting and answer the research question: How, if at all, do program graduates' perceptions of the traditional school program differ from program graduates' perceptions of the alternative school program? The items were as follows:

- Items 5 and 25. I was able to build strong relationships with other students.
- Items 6 and 26. I was able to build strong relationships with teachers.
- Items 7 and 27. I felt supported and respected by administrators.
- Items 8 and 28. The majority of teachers treated me with respect.

Items 9 and 29.	The majority of teachers provided one-on-one help.
Items 10 and 30.	The majority of teachers gave me personal attention.
Items 11 and 31.	The majority of teachers accepted students for who they were.
Items 12 and 32.	Students accepted other students for who they were.
Items 13 and 33.	I felt my presence mattered.
Items 14 and 34.	I felt successful in the program most of the time.
Items 15 and 35.	I attended school regularly.

The items were coded on a Likert-like scale as Disagree (1), Somewhat Disagree (2), Somewhat Agree (3), and Agree (4). Table 5 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and graduates' perceptions of the alternative school setting. The means are clearly different for graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the alternative education program indicating that graduates favor the alternative education program.

Table 5

*Means and Standard Deviations for Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting and the Alternative Education Program Setting (N=39)*

	Mean	Std. Deviation
SCHL	2.53	.939
ALTED	3.71	.455

*Note.* SCHL= Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting and ALTED=Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program. This table compares the mean score for SCHL (items 5-15) with the mean score for ALTED (items 25-35).

The analysis in Table 6, paired samples *t*-test, analyzes whether or not that difference is statistically significant. The two-tailed Sig in the Table 6 indicates that the probability that the difference in means was due to chance is less than .0005. Therefore, the difference is almost certainly a real one.

Table 6

*Paired Samples t-test for Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting and the Alternative Education Program Setting (N=39)*

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Paired Differences: 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
SCHL- ALTED	1.18	1.01	-.852	< .001

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*Note.* SCHL=Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting and  
ALTED=Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program Setting.

### **Graduates' Perceptions Following Graduation**

Graduates' responses to survey items 47-58 were utilized to answer the research question: What program-related factors influence program graduates following graduation from the alternative education program? The items were coded on a Likert-like scale as Disagree (1), Somewhat Disagree (2), Somewhat Agree (3), and Agree (4) and are as follows:

- Item 47. A high school diploma continues to be important to me.
- Item 48. I have clear career goals.
- Item 49. Personal relationships I formed in the alternative education program are still important to me today.
- Item 50. The program prepared me for life after high school.

- Item 51. I speak effectively.
- Item 52. I write effectively.
- Item 53. I work well with others.
- Item 54. I take responsibility for my behavior.
- Item 55. I think the things I learned in the program are useful.
- Item 56. I feel well prepared for employment.
- Item 57. I feel successful.
- Item 58. I feel well prepared for post-graduate opportunities.

The descriptive statistics in Table 7 indicates that the graduates have a favorable perception of the program-related factors that continue to influence them after graduation.

Table 7

*Graduates' Perceptions of Program-related Factors Following Graduation (N=39)*

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PGRAD	3.00	4.00	3.82	.334

*Note.* GRAD= Graduates' Perceptions of Program-related Factors Following Graduation. This table shows the descriptive statistics for PGRAD (items 47-58).

### **Analysis of the Survey Instrument**

The survey was researcher-developed, therefore, the questionnaire was reviewed by the director of the alternative education program in this study and a pilot study, described in Chapter 3, was conducted to determine the clarity of the directions and items. In order to determine the reliability of the survey instrument, Cronbach's alpha test for internal consistency was conducted after the administration of the survey to the sample population. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) an acceptable level of

reliability on standardized achievement and aptitude tests is .90 or higher. They stated that a researcher should be satisfied with results somewhat lower than the expectations of an achievement test. Table 8 clearly shows Cronbach's alpha scores to be higher than .90 for Items 24 through 46 and Items 5-15 and slightly lower than .90 for Items 5 through 23, Items 47 through 58, and Items 25 through 35, which would indicate that the questionnaire is reliable.

Table 8

*Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Test Statistics*

	N	Cronbach's Alpha
SCHLPERC (Items 5-23)	19	.855
ALTPERC (Items 24-46)	22	.904
PGRAD (Items 47-58)	12	.863
SCHL (Items 5-15)	11	.935
ALTED (Items 25-35)	11	.897

*Note.* SCHLPERC= Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting (Items 5-23), ALTPERC= Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program Setting (Items 24-46), PGRAD= Graduates' Perceptions of Program-Related Factors Following Graduation (Items 47-58), SCHL= Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting (Items 5-15), and ALTED=Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program Setting (Items 25-35).

### **Phase 1: Quantitative Summary**

Phase 1: Quantitative data were collected via a researcher-developed survey and mailed to graduates of The Road to Success. The data collected from the 39 returned surveys was quantified through SPSS statistical software package.

In addition to the demographics gathered, a descriptive analysis was calculated to compare graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting to graduates' perceptions

of the alternative education school setting. The results clearly indicated that the graduates found the alternative education program setting more favorable. To determine if the probability in the difference of means calculated for graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the alternative school setting was due to chance, a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted. The results of the paired-samples *t*-test indicated that the difference is almost certainly a real one further substantiating that graduates had a more favorable perception of the alternative school setting.

To enhance additional validation of the graduates' perceptions, survey items 5-15 which questioned graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and items 25-35 which examined graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program were designed to be identical so that a comparison could be made and evaluated. To analyze the responses to the aforementioned items, paired samples statistics were calculated to determine the means for both set of items. The results indicated a clear difference in the means, confirming graduates had a more favorable perception of the alternative education program. A two-tailed paired test was performed to determine if the difference in the means calculated in the paired samples statistics was due to chance. The results indicated the difference is almost certainly a real one.

Descriptive statistics were also calculated to determine if graduates had a favorable perception of program-related factors that benefitted them following graduation. The minimum, maximum, and mean score indicated that graduates did have a favorable perception of the program-related factors.

Since the survey was researcher-developed, Cronbach's alpha test was conducted to determine if the survey instrument was reliable. The results of the test indicated that the questionnaire used for the survey was reliable.

Further exploration of graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the alternative education program will be featured in Phase 2: Qualitative portion. The qualitative section focuses on the analysis of responses obtained from interviews with graduates of the alternative education program .

### **Phase 2: Qualitative Results**

Seidman (2006) stated that interviewing "is a powerful way to gain educational insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues." The purpose of the interviews in this study was to explore and understand the perceptions graduates have as they recall their experiences while enrolled in a traditional school setting and the alternative education program as well as their experiences after graduation from the alternative education program.

The interview consisted of 15 questions divided into three sections. For the first five questions, the graduate was directed to think about his or her educational experiences in the traditional school setting, prior to attending the alternative education program. Each graduate was asked to recall his or her experiences while enrolled in the alternative education program in order to respond to the next five questions, and for the final five questions each graduate was asked to reflect on his or her experiences after attending the alternative education program in this study.

## **Student Profile**

The final question on the survey sent to The Road to Success graduates from the years 2002-2011 directed graduates to indicate whether or not they would be willing to participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. Eighteen graduates responded favorably and provided contact information such as phone number(s) and email address. The names of the graduates agreeing to be interviewed were listed in the order that the surveys were returned. The researcher began with the name at the top of the list and proceeded sequentially through the names to procure eight graduates for a scheduled interview. After three unsuccessful attempts were made to contact a graduate, the researcher moved to the next name on the list. The researcher obtained verbal permission from eight graduates willing to commit to an interview after attempted contacts to 12 graduates were made.

The participants who were interviewed had graduated from the years 2003, 2004, 2009, 2010, and 2011. All of the participants were white, reflecting the demographics of the school district. Of the 6,070 students enrolled in the Rolling Meadows School District in the 2011-2012 school year, 95.5% of the students were identified as white (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012c). Five of the participants were females, and three were male. The participants for the interviews are described in Table 9. Researcher assigned pseudonyms for the graduates will be used throughout when identifying the graduates who participated in the one-on-one interviews.

Table 9

*Graduates of the Alternative Education Program Participating in the Interview Protocol*

Pseudonyms	Gender	Year of Graduation	Occupation
Abby	Female	2011	Works for Father's Business
Ben	Male	2004	Landscaper
Carla	Female	2009	Cashier at Local Gas Station
Donna	Female	2009	Home Health Care
Eric	Male	2003	Independent Contractor/Bartender
Felicia	Female	2010	Unemployed
Greg	Male	2003	Artist/Laborer
Hannah	Female	2011	Cashier at Grocery Store/Student

The researcher met with each participant either during the summer or fall of 2012 for a one-on-one interview at a coffee shop in a local shopping mall. Each of the eight graduates arrived as scheduled and was ready to respond to the questions.

### **Analysis of Graduates' Interviews**

Graduates were asked to recall their experiences in the traditional school setting. This section summarizes the responses to the first five questions that relate to graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting.

## **Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting**

*Question 1: What are your thoughts and feelings regarding your educational experience prior to attending an alternative education program?*

Two of the graduates felt that the school was too large and their needs were not being met in the traditional school setting for various reasons. Greg stated, "I felt that individual needs were brushed under the rug intentionally, sometimes unintentionally other times, but I felt that things were way too big and chaotic." Felicia, expressing concern that the school size contributed to her not succeeding academically, said, "I felt very dumb in a school full of so many people where you were in competition the whole time. I didn't feel like I was good enough." Carla also felt overwhelmed by the school size and indicated, "The classes were too big. It's just a big school in general so when you have 30 people per class, it's hard to get the individual attention that some kids like me need." Donna, very adamant about disliking the traditional school setting, declared, "I hated it. I hated it. There were too many kids and people were bullying people." Carla also felt the effects of bullying. "I'm a plus size girl and I get taunted all the time. It was hard," she said.

Abby and Hannah were functioning successfully in the traditional school setting until they became pregnant. Abby began having attendance problems and missed school often because of not feeling well during her pregnancy. Hannah quit school in tenth grade after getting pregnant and enrolled in cyber-school because she no longer felt comfortable in the traditional school setting.

Ben blamed his dislike of the traditional school setting on the teachers. He said, "I just really wasn't comfortable in mainstream classes because it seemed at the time I

had an attitude that teachers were out to get me because I was young.” Eric also commented that teachers influenced his interest in school. “It all depended on the teachers because if I got along with them, then I took their classes more seriously,” he commented. He also indicated that attending the vocational technical school for half of the school day had more meaning because of the hands-on approach the school provided.

*Question 2: Did you attend school regularly? Why?*

Abby had addressed this question in her response to the first question, but elaborated more for the second question. “I would get sick a lot since I was pregnant. I would miss weeks at a time, so then I had an attendance problem.”

Carla and Donna attempted to attend school, but personal issues hampered their consistent presence. Carla felt that bullying and family issues contributed to her attendance problem. “It was hard for me to go to school...because of the taunting, and things going on with my family,” she said. Carla’s father and grandfather had passed away, and she had a strained relationship with her mother. She blamed her association with a “bad group of kids” for her “troubles of skipping school.” Donna also attributed missing school to family problems. “In tenth grade I had to put my dad in jail for sexual abuse, and I had to miss for court hearings,” she explained. As a result, Donna experienced depression and was concerned about what others would think about her situation. “It was real hard going to school thinking they all know what happened, and I didn’t want to face them.”

Hannah attended school regularly prior to getting pregnant. She stated, “My parents influenced me. I would have got into so much trouble if I wouldn’t had gone to school.” Ben had perfect attendance. He explained, “My grandparents made me go.

They didn't take none of the crap like, 'Oh, I'm sick.'... 'Too bad, you're going anyways.' Unless I was missing a limb or deathly ill, I wasn't missing even a day." Eric stated that he never missed school. Attendance was never an issue for him. Greg also attended school on a regular basis until his senior year. Even though he did not miss school his freshman, sophomore, and junior years, he recognized that "the first three years" he "was there pretty regularly causing trouble." Felicia attended school every day because it was expected, "...but I would leave the school," she stated. "I would run out with the 'Techers' [students attending a vocational technical school], hitch a ride with them, or ride with the kids that would leave for work study." Felicia did not want to attend her classes and blamed the teachers. "I didn't like my teachers. Because I didn't understand things, I felt like there was a lot of tension between us."

*Question 3: Were you having academic success? Why?*

Once again Abby's pregnancy influenced her traditional school experience. She was performing well academically until she began having attendance problems due to the pregnancy which then affected her academics.

Felicia struggled with social studies and history and had difficulties with the reading assignments. She explained, "I sit there and have to read the book, read the paragraph six times before I could completely understand it." However, she shared that she was succeeding academically in English, math, and science.

Carla said she was "pretty much failing every class...except for math." Donna stated that she felt unsuccessful academically as well because of "how many days that I'd missed. If I was there I did good, but if...most of the days I wasn't there."

Greg and Hannah were successful in ninth grade but both of them encountered obstacles in tenth grade. Greg felt that personal choices he made in tenth grade affected his academics negatively, and eleventh grade was even more difficult. Hannah had enrolled in cyber-school in tenth grade because of her pregnancy. She said that once her baby was born in February of her tenth grade year, “it was like the end of school was pretty much over.” Like Greg, eleventh grade proved to be even more challenging for Hannah. “I passed obviously, but it was just difficult,” she said, adding that she thought participating in cyber school “was just more difficult, not having an actual teacher. It wasn’t as good as I did before in school.”

Eric never failed any subjects but also never excelled. “I kind of just floated in the middle,” he commented. “So, I just kind of flew below the radar.” Ben also never experienced failing grades. “I was getting C’s and D’s mainly because I didn’t do my homework” Ben said, confessing that he would leave school, go home and skate with his friends.

*Question 4: Did you feel connected to peers or teachers at your traditional school?*

*Why?*

Most of the graduates felt connected to their peers and specified which peers they felt connected to. Carla expressed, “I definitely hung out with a different bunch of kids, but I never felt a part of someone.” Carla felt that she related more to her teachers, stating, “I felt older than what I was because of the things I had to go through.” She indicated that she liked her teachers more than her peers. Donna, on the other hand, did not feel connected to teachers at all. “Most of them seemed like they really didn’t care,” she said. She did, however, have her own group of friends.

Eric had just a few close friends even though he felt he was able to relate well to most of the students. “I kind of got along well with everybody,” he said, but as for his relationship with teachers, he noted, “Some teachers I either got along with, or some teachers I didn’t get along with at all.” Ben echoed Eric’s sentiments and indicated that he was easy going and got along well with his peers, but, “as far as teachers, it all depended,” he explained. “It seemed like some of them were cool with me,” and other teachers were not as accommodating. Greg was close to peers and teachers when he felt supported by them. However, some peers and teachers did not make him feel appreciated. “The people that I was not particularly fond of gave me a hard time,” he concluded.

Felicia, Hannah, and Abby acknowledged that they had a lot of friends. Felicia related that after failing sixth grade, she had to make new friends because the students she had been friends with “kept moving on.” All three recognized that because there were so many students in the school, it was difficult to make connections with teachers and receive the individualized attention they desired. Abby recounted, “They [Teachers] just treated you like everyone else and it didn’t matter.”

*Question 5: What are the main reasons you decided to attend an alternative education program?*

Felicia decided to attend the alternative education program because she was not succeeding academically in the traditional school setting, and, although she was attending the traditional school daily, she often left school in the middle of the day. She had already failed sixth grade, and she was worried about failing another grade. She thought about dropping out until the option of attending the alternative education program was

presented to her. Eric had also contemplated dropping out of school his senior year. “I was having trouble in school and it [the alternative education program] was an option that was proposed to me that was appealing at the time, and ended up being beneficial to me.” Donna considered dropping out as well. She said, “I was under a lot of stress from depression. I didn’t feel well going to school in the morning. I didn’t want to drop out; I wanted to succeed...to be able to go to college.”

Ben and Greg both felt pressured to attend the alternative education program. John recalled, “My arm was being twisted, I got to admit. It was ultimately my decision. I basically had a D-average.” Ben remembered his principal telling him, “...you’re really not doing good in school so I will give you this option. If you don’t take this option...don’t come back to school.”

Abby and Hannah both enrolled in the alternative program because of their pregnancies. Abby entered the program after she became pregnant and missed school frequently. The alternative education program met after school, which was more convenient for Abby “...I could go to school at night. It’s less time, less stress. I thought it would be easier,” she said. Hannah had enrolled in cyber-school after becoming pregnant but said she felt “it was difficult not having an actual teacher.” She was drawn to the alternative education program after giving birth because of the accommodating schedule and the opportunities it provided. The local community college, for instance, awards graduates of the alternative education program a scholarship which covers the cost of tuition at the local community college for two years.

Chelsea did not like school at all and felt she did not fit in. Her guidance counselor presented her with the option of attending the alternative education program.

Attending school at the alternative education program from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. was more appealing to her. She stated, “I thought that was great that if I can attend school and only have to go for three hours, work during the day...it would have been worth it for myself to do it.” She also liked the idea of attending smaller classes. “I definitely thought it was a better fit for me...small...not as many people.”

### **Themes Developed from Graduates Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting**

Distinct themes emerged upon analysis of the responses from the first five questions obtained through one-on-one interviews with the graduates of the alternative education program in this study. Responses were analyzed through NVivo 10 software package. The most prominent themes resulting from the responses to the questions regarding the graduates’ perceptions of the traditional school setting were (a) recognizable risk factors, (b) connectedness, and (c) school environment.

Throughout the review of the literature, researchers identified risk factors that were associated with placing students at risk of dropping out of high school. Many of these risk factors were associated with responses from graduates of the alternative education program in this study when questioned about their perceptions of the traditional school setting. Those at-risk factors acknowledged in the graduates’ responses included lack of attendance, emotional and physical problems, academic difficulties, adult responsibilities, and grade retention.

### **Risk Factors**

Many students were recommended to the alternative education program in this study because of attendance and academic problems. The eight graduates interviewed were not exceptions. During the interview session, most of the graduates recounted that

their lack of academic success was preceded by missing a substantial amount of school. Some of the graduates reported being successful at some point early on in their educational experience but eventually fell behind and found it difficult to catch up. Additionally, several of the graduates attributed their academic and attendance issues to emotional or physical problems. Moreover, those that did attend school on a regular basis did not enjoy it.

Two of the graduates felt the pressures of adult responsibilities such as being pregnant and then later caring for a child, contributed to their limited attendance and consequent academic risk. Some of the graduates had to work and found difficulty in keeping up with the traditional school hours, academic work load, and their work schedule.

One graduate had been retained in sixth grade after failing academically. In high school she was worried about failing a second time because once again she was not being successful in some of her classes.

Many of the graduates interviewed had thought about dropping out of school before enrolling in the alternative education program. They saw enrollment in the alternative education program as their last chance to finish high school and graduate.

### **School Environment**

The graduates being interviewed repeatedly voiced their opinions about the size of the student body and the amount of students in each class at the traditional school. Their frequent feelings of disconnectedness from the school environment contributed to their lack of academic achievement. Moreover, they were concerned about not being given the one-on-one attention from teachers that many of the graduates needed.

Because of the large class sizes the graduates reported that they were not able to form meaningful relationships with the teachers.

### **Connectedness**

When graduates were questioned about whether or not they felt connected to peers and teachers, all of the eight graduates said they felt connected to their peers and had formed some important relationships with peers. On the other hand, most of graduates in this study overwhelmingly, agreed that they did not feel connected to adults such as teachers in the traditional school setting. Several graduates expressed that they felt everyone was treated the same by the teachers—there was no individualism. Only one graduate felt connected to teachers more than to her peers. Because of the adult responsibilities she had to face, such as dealing with the death of her grandfather and father and then living on her own, she felt the adults at school understood her situation better than her peers.

Table 10 summarizes graduates' responses for the identified themes. The section following Table 10 presents graduates responses to questions pertaining to their enrollment in the alternative education program.

Table 10

#### *Themes Identified from Graduates' Perceptions of the Traditional School Setting (N=8)*

Traditional School Experiences Themes	Number of Times Referenced by Graduates' Responses
Recognizable Risk Factors	
Attendance	8
Emotional Problems	4

Table 10 (*continued*)

Traditional School Experiences Themes	Number of Times Referenced by Graduates' Responses
Academic Difficulties	13
Physical Problems	5
Adult Responsibilities	7
Retention	3
School Environment	
Class Size	4
School Size	6
Connectedness	
Peers	10
Lack of Connectedness to Teachers at School	15

### **Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Setting**

*Question 1: What are your thoughts and feelings about your alternative education experience?*

All of the graduates had positive comments to make about the alternative education program and believed the program was responsible for making it possible for them to graduate. Many of graduates expressed the following similar comments about the program:

- Felicia, “Well, it was absolutely enjoyable. I loved every second of it.”
- Greg, “It was wonderful.”
- Abby, “I loved it.”
- Donna, “I absolutely loved it.”
- Carla, “The experience was amazing.”

Hannah conveyed that she thought “it was pretty good. I think it was a better choice than cyber-school. I definitely liked it a lot better...I learned more.” Eric agreed with Hannah’s sentiment. “I enjoyed it a lot better than traditional school because it allowed me to work in the morning and then come to school,” he stated.

Ben, remarking that the environment was less restrictive, said, “a lot more laid back and easy going. The teachers weren’t nearly as strict.” Donna also felt she had more choices in the alternative education program. “I loved how much freedom we had and I learned more in the alternative program for one year than I did in the three years I was in regular school,” Other graduates had additional fond recollections of their interactions with teachers:

- Ben, “All of the teachers at alternative program were all reasonable, real cool.”
- Hannah, “It was really nice that you could be comfortable with teachers.”
- Felicia, “The teachers were like a counselor to us. The teachers were amazing, they were so helpful and so nice and ...it made the students wanna learn.”

Felicia continued to express that the students could talk to teachers not only about education, but they could also talk to teachers about things that were bothering them in their lives.

*Question 2: Suppose it is my first day at an alternative education program; describe it for me.*

All of the graduates conveyed that the first day at the alternative school was not much different from the first day at the traditional school. They were all were a little nervous and were not sure what the expectations would be. Each of them took a moment to think about their first day and then easily expressed what had the most impact on them. Greg remembered the first day as being a lot less intimidating than the first day at the traditional high school. “A small town showed up at the traditional high school each day...this was a little more laid back...there were less people. It was a little less chaotic and a little less stressful.” Donna also recalled the setting being more inviting. “You had your freedom. It was like attending college for the first time.”

Eric said he was unsure of what he would encounter at the alternative education program but then realized after attending his first day that he knew most of the students there. He added, “It’s just the same kind of thing as your regular school. It was all right.” Ben described his first day by saying, “Basically, we sat there and just got to know each other and explained why we were there. It was basically just getting your feet in the water for a whole new set of rules and stuff.”

Hannah and Felicia recounted a specific activity that the director of the alternative program conducted. Hannah described the activity as “a rope exercise and you said your name and a little about yourself. We went outside and stood with a rope and everybody

had to pull on it tight. We did that every time a new person came.” Felicia also reflected on the rope exercise. “We stood in a big circle and held the rope and talked about how we’re all working at this together. And if one person doesn’t hold up their end, the whole team suffers for it...we all have to help each other get through things.” Carla recalled another exercise they participated in on the first day. The director darkened the room and had the students close their eyes while holding one nostril closed and breathing slowly in through their nose and out through their mouth for one minute. They repeated this exercise daily. Carla liked how it relaxed her before she started her classes.

Abby and Carla described the configuration of their school day at the alternative education program. Abby explained, “Basically you have two classes a day, which makes it a lot easier, because instead of focusing on seven subjects, you only have two a day.” Carla clarified that each class met for an hour and fifteen minutes. They were structured classes but the scheduling allowed the teachers to make sure that all of the students understood the material presented before proceeding to new information. “If we had questions, the whole class stopped to make sure everyone understood what was going on, and that was nice.” She continued to explain that every other day the students had two different classes. On Monday and Wednesday students met for math and science, and on Tuesday and Thursday they had social studies and English. On Friday, they attended art, gym, or family and consumer science, alternating those courses over three week periods.

*Question 3: What would an ideal alternative education program be like?*

Felicia, Carla, and Abby all agreed that the alternative education program they attended was the ideal alternative education program. Felicia commented, “It was put

together perfectly.” Abby also thought the program was perfect and would not change anything about it. “It worked so well...the teachers are more willing to help you since there’s not as many students.” Carla thoughts were that “it’s great for kids that you know either don’t think they can make it, or you know, have their own problems...they have a place to turn to.” Donna mentioned that an ideal alternative education program “would be doing whatever it takes to help students succeed and to have a little bit more freedom than regular school and to work around the kids’ personal issues.” Eric and Hannah both commented that an ideal alternative education program would be structured to fit the needs of all students without sacrificing academic standards. They remarked that students want to be challenged but may need additional support.

Greg stated that his ideal alternative education program would have high expectations and address disciplinary issues immediately and effectively. He stated, “Students causing disruptions should be eliminated from the program.” Ben also believed an ideal alternative education program would have clear definitive rules and regulations for the students which would be consistently enforced.

*Question 4: Some people say students who attend alternative education programs did something to bring this about. What would you say?*

Felicia reworded the question, “Meaning like a lot of people think we’re the bad kids?” Felicia indicated that the students enrolled in the program were not “bad kids”; however, she admitted that some of the students enrolled in the alternative program because it was held after school, allowing them to avoid waking up early to attend the traditional high school. She remarked, “I guess that’s kind of lazy, not bad. But, a lot of people did it because it helped them with their work. They could work more when you

didn't have to go to school for five or six hours." Carla defended the students from being labeled as "bad kids." "I don't think that students that aren't in the program shouldn't talk badly about it. They don't know the reasons behind it and what we've gone through. It's not necessarily that we're bad kids," she said. Donna concurred that "some people can't control what happens to them."

Hannah blamed her high school for stigmatizing the students who attended the alternative education program. She remembered being told, "'Once you come in there [the alternative education program], you can't go back to regular school.' They made it sound like a punishment. So I think that kind of makes people think you're a bad kid."

Ben, Greg, and Abby made it clear that enrolling in the alternative education program was the student's choice. Abby stated, "I went there because I wanted to. It wasn't a punishment."

Eric pointed out that everybody had different reasons for being in the alternative education program. The program was recommended to Eric, Ben, and Greg after they talked about dropping out of high school. Eric elaborated by saying, "I guess it's just different for everybody as to how they get there—the road that they take to get there varies, depending on the individual."

*Question 5: How did you feel about the classes and the teachers in the alternative education program?*

Teachers in the alternative program were employed in the high school where the alternative education program was located and were offered a supplemental contract to teach in the after-school alternative education program. Therefore, some of the

interviewed graduates were familiar with the teachers who taught in the alternative education program before enrolling in the program.

Many of the graduates felt that the classes were easier even though they were similar in content to the classes they would have had in the traditional school setting. Several of the graduates noted that the smaller class sizes in the alternative education program enabled teachers to provide more one-on-one assistance, and this helped the graduates understand the lessons better. Greg spoke about how he noticed that “the teachers in general were less stressed because of the smaller classes.” Even though Greg had some of the same teachers when enrolled in the traditional high school, he recalled changing his perception about some of them just by getting to know them better, and he learned to respect them more. Ben likewise had many of the same teachers for the alternative program as he had for his traditional school courses. He stated, “I got along with them the same if not better in the alternative education program than I did in regular class.”

Carla remarked, “Loved the teachers.” She still visits them once in a while and keeps in contact with one teacher and his wife on Facebook. She noted, “I really think that the teachers that either volunteered or were picked out for the program were a good fit for kids.” Hannah also liked the teachers. She said, “They were really great teachers. I mean for the program at least you could open up to them and go and talk to them.” She also enjoyed the classes and recalled that “in tenth and eleventh grade from cyber-school I didn’t really get to learn as much as I should have in those years. So, I liked all the stuff I learned.”

Felicia reminisced about several of her teachers and about how interesting they made the classes. She also appreciated the additional activities the alternative education program provided. “When we would clean up outside of the high school...meals on wheels...it was so life-experiencing. It made me realize there’s people out there that need help, and we really reached out and helped a lot of people that way.”

As Donna began to succeed in her classes in the alternative education program, she regained her confidence. “I did real great in all of them. I think I had like 90 percent or higher in all of them. I found that they [the teachers] were more connected with the students and even taught better.” Abby responded in a similar manner, “The teachers were very helpful. They were always there if you needed one-on-one time.” Eric disclosed his liking of the teachers as well. “I enjoyed every single one of the teachers that I had. I thought they were good teachers. I thought they were dedicated to the program.”

### **Themes Developed from Graduates’ Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program**

The second set of questions asked graduates to recall their experiences while enrolled in an alternative education program. Graduates’ responses to those questions were analyzed through NVivo 10 software package and resulted in emergent themes such as (a) academic success, (b) connectedness, (c) sense of community, and (d) school structure.

For most of the interviewed graduates, enrolling in the alternative education offered them an opportunity to continue their high school education and successfully graduate. All of the interviewed graduates in the program recognized the importance of a

high school diploma and recalled many of the benefits that the alternative education program provided, especially academically.

### **Academic Success**

One of the reasons graduates of the alternative education program had been encouraged to enroll in the alternative school was that they were not succeeding academically in the traditional school setting. Many of the graduates in the interview verified that point and were somewhat specific about their academic difficulties. All of the graduates acknowledged achieving notable academic success when they were enrolled in the alternative education program. Various explanations for improvements were given such as smaller class sizes, more individualized attention, meaningful lessons, and a sense that their teachers truly cared about their academic and personal endeavors. Teachers also made sure that all of the students understood the material before teaching new material.

### **Connectedness**

All of the graduates were very adamant about being able to form meaningful relationships with the teachers in the alternative education program and the director of the program. Many of the graduates felt the teachers were very dedicated to the program and understanding of the graduates' academic struggles as well as personal issues that many of these graduates had faced prior to enrolling in the alternative education program and while enrolled in the program.

When graduates were students in the alternative education program, they formed significant relationships with other students in the program. Since the classes were smaller, they were able to become familiar with each other and to support one another.

Additionally, the director of the program engaged students in activities that promoted positive interactions. Many of the graduates felt that the connections they formed with the teachers, the director, and other students in the program led them to experience a sense of community within the alternative program.

### **Sense of Community**

The graduates remembered looking forward to attending the alternative school each day. They felt comfortable with the teachers and made new friends with the other students. Some of them were enrolled in the program at the start of the school year while others enrolled at various times throughout the year. One of the comments made was, “We welcomed everybody.”

A comparison was often directed to the traditional school setting and all of the graduates had no regrets about being part of an alternative education program. For many of them, the traditional school setting was overwhelming, not only in size but also in structure.

### **School Structure**

Some of the graduates of the alternative education program had faced either personal difficulties such as emotional or physical problems, or adult responsibilities such as caring for a child, employment obligations, or living on their own. Dealing with personal issues, along with trying to succeed in a traditional school setting where graduates felt insignificant was insurmountable at times for the graduates.

The structure of the alternative education program with shorter school days allowed the graduates to attend to the personal concerns that confronted them. The graduates were able to work more hours, which most of them needed to do. They did not

feel as burdened by their jobs and the expectations school when enrolled in an alternative education program as they felt when enrolled in a traditional school setting.

Graduates appreciated the amount of freedom and options they had in the alternative education program. Although the content of the courses was similar to that of the traditional school setting, they felt they had more choices and that their opinions mattered. In addition, the graduates valued being treated as responsible adults.

Furthermore, graduates liked being in smaller classes with longer class periods. Unnecessary electives, study halls, and lunch periods were eliminated. Graduates likewise felt comfortable with the teachers and were not too intimidated to ask for help. They also felt at ease making presentations in front of other students. The teachers and environment were better matched to the graduates' learning needs and many of the lessons were designed to relate to real-life experiences.

Table 11 summarizes graduates' responses for the identified themes. The section following Table 11 presents graduates' responses to questions pertaining to their perceptions of their experiences after graduating from the alternative education program.

Table 11

*Themes Identified from Graduates' Perceptions of the Alternative Education Program  
(N=8)*

Alternative Education Program Experiences Themes	Number of Times Referenced by Graduates' Responses
Academic Success	7
Connectedness	
Adults at School	16
Peers	5
Sense of Community	10
School Structure	19

### **Graduates' Perceptions after Graduating from the Alternative Education Program**

*Question 1: What are your feelings about having attended an alternative education program?*

Half of the graduates credited the alternative education program for their graduating with a high school diploma. Eric realized, "...without it I probably wouldn't have graduated. I was thankful for it. It helped me out getting my education finished...I didn't have to go get a GED." Ben felt the program provided him with a viable opportunity for completing high school. He said, "I was given an option to get through it [high school] and get it done. All right, I'll take it. Good deal."

Donna and Hannah both believed they would not have enrolled in college if they had not attended the alternative education program. Felicia “loved the experience” and regrets not taking advantage of the community college opportunity. “I wish I would have took the two free years of college that I got with it. I slacked off on that. That was the best gift that came with that whole package and I didn’t use it.”

Carla is very proud of having attended the alternative education program. She tells her employers when asked about her education, “I went to an alternative class that they [Rolling Meadows High School] had. It’s really made me the person that I am today. The program really helped me emotionally and physically, too, because I’m a lot happier...I’m a lot healthier.”

Some of the graduates did not fully value the alternative education program until after graduation. Greg remarked, “I never really thought about it at the time. But now that I’m a dad...I hope that it [the alternative education program] would be back [the program has been eliminated] for my son if he would need it.” Abby recalled, “It was a great experience. I met people that I wouldn’t have met through regular school, so I think I made more friends that way.”

*Question 2: Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with alternative education experience? Why?*

All of the graduates were pleased with their alternative education experience. Greg was pleasantly surprised by how much he enjoyed the alternative education program. “I mean at first, I thought, you know the stigma, just like anyone else here I go, I’m gonna go in this sped program.” Greg really stressed over his decision to enroll in the alternative education program but found that the program was challenging, and it offered him a second chance to succeed and graduate. Eric also acknowledged that the

program helped him flourish. “I could be in a different place right now. I might not have went to school [college] and the military. I might not have accomplished as much as I have up to this point, or it might have taken me longer.”

Abby, Ben, Hannah, and Donna offered a brief statement about how satisfied they were with the alternative education program. None of them had any regrets about being involved in a program that operated after the normal school hours. Donna, expressing her thoughts stated, “It was wonderful. The way it was set up was absolutely perfect. It was set up at the perfect time with two classes a day with a little break.”

Carla and Felicia credited the program with helping them become more self-assured. Carla’s grades changed from D’s and F’s in the traditional school setting to A’s and B’s in the alternative school setting. She said, “It made me feel better about myself and made me believe that I can do something if I put my mind to it. I did a full 360 [180].” The alternative education experience helped Felicia become more confident and build connections with people she might not otherwise have had the chance to meet. “It made me more confident as a person. It brought me close with people and teachers that I never thought I would have been close with. And it brought me closer to the school...and have a lot more school spirit,” she added.

*Question 3: Did alternative education help or hurt you academically? How?*

The majority of the graduates agreed that the alternative education experience helped them academically. Hannah hesitantly stated, “I’m kind of 50/50 on that because I think they could have pushed a little more...I noticed when I went to college it wasn’t as easy as if I went all four years to regular high school.” Abby spent ninth grade in the traditional education setting, her sophomore and junior years in cyber-school, and her

senior year in the alternative education setting. Greg shared that he felt somewhat slighted during the time that he was enrolled in alternative education because “there was no art.” He elaborated, “Me personally, it was rough. So I think maybe that hurt a little bit.” However, Greg comprehended that “...maybe some people were overloaded and the more simple things were, the more stripped down it was, the better shot people had. It beats dropping out.”

Felicia was very adamant about how much the program helped her academically, “I wouldn’t call myself a failure, but I definitely struggled a lot more than I should have [in the traditional school setting].” Donna also found that the alternative education helped her improve her grades. She conveyed that her grades went from “a C- and B-average to an A-average.” Carla’s original thought about the alternative education program was, “It was gonna be kinda like blow-off, but some of the things were really challenging and it really made you think. I definitely went from straight D’s and F’s in regular education...to where I am making A’s and B’s.” The change in Carla’s grades made her feel better about herself.

The alternative education program changed Ben’s perspective about his entire schooling experience. “It changed my outlook on the educational system period,” he declared. “If you can do this for certain people and get the information through to them in a different way, why not do that for everybody?” Eric also approved of the approach the alternative education program used to reach students. “It was because the classes were so general and so much smaller. The biggest problem with schools is not having that one-on-one time that some students need,” he concluded.

Abby gave birth to her daughter earlier than expected and missed a month of school. She readily acknowledged that individualized time was needed after returning to the alternative school. “Everyone was willing to help me one-on-one so I caught up within a week. I think it helped my grades a lot because I had a lot of one-on-one time with all the teachers.”

*Question 4: What did you learn or not learn at the alternative education program that you apply or do not apply to your adult life?*

There was only one graduate who could not recall applying anything he had learned from the program to his adult life. Ben commented, “I really haven’t applied anything from school to my life...I really haven’t even thought about school since I left.”

Others vehemently proclaimed that the alternative education program was responsible for life-long lessons that continue to influence them in their approach with other people. Because of the program, Carla feels she is much more patient and more disciplined, especially with her husband and son and when learning her husband’s native language. She observed, “I am now confident about myself. I’m not depressed. I’m very happy with my life, how it’s turned out. It’s all because of the program [The Road to Success].”

Felicia, Donna, and Hannah apply the concept of respect that they learned from their teachers in the alternative education program to their adult lives. Felicia noted, “The teachers taught me a lot about respecting people, understanding other people’s situations, and their sides of things. Being able to have a discussion with a person maturely. The program matured me a lot.” Donna also acknowledged the teachers’ role in her learning how to communicate with people respectfully. She emphasized, “I take

from how the teachers treated us like adults and I apply that to how I treat younger kids.” Hannah continues to give respect to teachers and adults and applies that aspect to raising her daughter, “I teach her to be a nice person to everybody no matter what or who they are,” she explained. Eric admitted to gaining a better respect for teachers while enrolled in the alternative program. When he entered the traditional high school, he was not able to form relationships with teachers because classes were large. However, after spending time in the alternative education program, he noted, “I definitely gained a lot more respect for teachers and for other individuals and stuff like that. I guess in terms of maturity, I did learn to respect others more.”

Greg learned that “life’s not always gonna give you a second chance to wipe the slate clean” like the alternative education program did. Because of his “second chance” to graduate, Greg disclosed, “I learned that if you show somebody you’re not so bad or you’re gonna put forth a little more effort than what you originally thought, then you’ll get there.” He continues to be thankful for his “second chance.”

Abby recounted a lesson that one of her teachers in the alternative education program had students complete. The students were instructed to set goals for their futures and devise a plan to achieve those goals. All of the students then had to present their goals and plan to the class. She stressed that “I don’t think I would have thought about my future and how hard it is gonna be in the real world. I would never thought about that stuff going to regular school. So that helped put things into perspective for me.”

*Question 5: In what ways did the alternative education program prepare you or not prepare you for life after high school?*

Once again, Abby recalled the project that her teacher had students complete in which they planned for their futures. It made Abby realize she needed to set some goals for herself, especially since she had a daughter to care for. She credited the alternative program for helping her focus on her future and assisting her in enrolling in college.

Greg answered the question by recounting a conflict that he faced with a teacher in the traditional school setting that contributed to his enrollment in the alternative education program. He admitted regretfully, “The teachers in the alternative program cared about us. I wish we would have showed appreciation a little more then.” As a graduate, he recognized how much the alternative education program aided him.

Eric, Hannah, Donna, and Carla acknowledged the program for helping them to enroll in college. Eric successfully completed four years of college, and Hannah is currently a student at the community college. Although Donna and Carla remorsefully did not complete their college education, they are grateful to the alternative education program for providing them with a chance to attend college.

Since graduating, Carla has visited the alternative education program several times to promote the program. She told the students enrolled, “You’ll never find a better program. If you can’t make it here, I don’t know what you’re gonna do because everybody’s so caring, so nice.”

Even though Hannah is thankful The Road to Success led her to apply and enroll in the local community college, she continued to emphasize, “Well, once again I think that academic wise, it [the alternative education program] didn’t prepare me as much as I

wish they could have. We didn't have homework on a regular basis...or didn't have testing like we do in college."

After graduating from the alternative education program, Felicia felt prepared to handle some of the financial aspects of her life. "It prepared me for my checkbook. I had no idea how to balance a checkbook," she stated. She also contributed additional lessons from *The Road to Success* as beneficial to her life after high school, saying, "Everything that we did was exactly what we needed to get started after school. We were told what we needed to do and watch out for in this life. It was very helpful."

Bill credited his experience in the alternative education program to changing his entire attitude in life. He recounted, "In regular school, I didn't give a crap. I just did whatever I wanted to. In the alternative program, everybody was nicer to me. They presented the information differently. It took some stress off my shoulders and gave me a better outlook on life."

### **Themes Developed from Graduates' Perceptions after Graduating from the Alternative Education Program**

The final set of questions asked graduates during the interview session to recall their experiences after graduating from the alternative education program. After analyzing the graduates' responses through NVivo 10 software package, the following themes emerged: (a) sense of accomplishment, (b) connectedness, (c) respect, and, (d) self-worth. Graduates' responses to the identified themes are summarized in Table 12.

Most of the graduates realized that they probably would not have graduated from high school if they had not enrolled in the alternative education program. The graduates were grateful that the alternative education program helped them finish high school with a diploma.

### **Sense of Accomplishment**

Several of the graduates were initially apprehensive about enrolling in yet another school environment, unsure of the expectations and afraid of the unknown. But all of them recognized that the provisions the program offered them by a supportive staff enabled them to accomplish goals on which they had almost given up. The encouragement provided to them, along with the graduates' own resilience and perseverance, enabled the graduates to achieve academically and instilled in them a belief that they were capable of being successful.

The graduates realized that they had all been given a second chance by enrolling in the alternative program and were pleased that they had taken advantage of their second chance, which for most of the graduates was their last chance to graduate. Several of them were happy that they did not have to seek a GED. They were proud of themselves for completing the program. The graduates continually acknowledged the adults in the alternative education program for motivating them to succeed.

### **Connectedness**

The graduates made new friends not only with other graduates from the program, but also with the teachers and director of the program. Some of them continue to communicate with their peers and the adults in the program and have returned to visit the site of the alternative education program.

As adults, graduates were able to recall specific experiences they had with their teachers in the alternative education program and expressed their gratitude for not only the academic lessons they were taught, but also the real-life lessons shared with them. Those real-life lessons contributed to how they now perceive themselves.

**Respect**

The respect shown to the graduates by the teachers and the director is now reciprocated by the graduates in their interactions with others. Many of the graduates acknowledged that they are now more patient and disciplined because of their experiences in the alternative education program. Because someone believed in them, they now believe in themselves and continue to strive to better themselves.

**Self-worth**

Not only did the alternative education program enrich the students academically, but it also provided them experiences such as collecting items for a local domestic violence shelter, working at the local food bank, landscaping and cleaning up the school environment, and packing meals on wheels. These real life experiences gave purpose to the graduates' lives.

Table 12

*Themes Identified from Graduates' Perceptions after Graduating from the Alternative Education Program (N=8)*

Post-Graduation Themes	Number of Times Referenced by Graduates' Responses
Sense of Accomplishment	12
Connectedness	
Adults at School	16
Peers	5
Respect	6
Self-Worth	10

### **Phase 2: Qualitative Summary**

The responses from interviews of graduates of the alternative education program in this study were examined to determine graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting, the alternative education program, and the program-related factors that continue to benefit them after graduation. In addition to the theoretical perspectives such as school as a caring community; student resilience; and student persistence, which arose as a perspective during research on the phenomenon of students who are at risk of not graduating from high school, several other themes emerged from the interview responses. Different themes emerged based on each set of questions.

The first set of questions asked graduates to recall their experiences in the traditional school setting. The emergent themes from those questions were recognizable

risk factors such as attendance, emotional and physical problems, academic difficulties, adult responsibilities, and retention. Other themes that emerged from the responses were school environment, including class size and school size, and the graduates' connectedness to peers alongside a lack of connectedness to teachers. The reasons given for the lack of connection to the adults in the traditional school setting were the large school size and large class sizes. The emergent themes from the responses to the second set of questions which asked graduates to discuss their experiences in the alternative education program were academic success, connectedness to peers and adults in the alternative program, sense of community, and the school structure. The interviewed graduates often credited the teachers in the alternative school for creating a caring environment in which the graduates felt comfortable. A sense of accomplishment, a connection to adults and peers in the alternative education program, a sense of respect for others and themselves, and a sense of self-worth were themes that developed upon analysis of graduates' responses to questions regarding their perceptions after graduating from the alternative education program.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter attempted to answer four research questions that were directed toward graduates' perceptions of the traditional education setting, an alternative education program, and the benefits of the alternative education program that continue beyond graduation. Data were collected from two sources: (1) a survey consisting of 67 items, and (2) an interview consisting of 15 questions.

The data collected from the surveys were analyzed through SPSS statistical software package. The questions for the survey were derived from the research

questions. After collecting the data and entering it into SPSS software package, various tests were conducted to determine graduates demographics and perceptions of the traditional school setting versus the alternative school setting. The tests indicated that graduates found the alternative school setting to be more favorable, and additional tests determined that the results were valid and the survey was reliable.

The data collected from the interviews were entered into NVivo 10 software package. The questions for the interview stemmed from a review of the literature and the theoretical perspectives such as school as a caring community, student resilience, and student persistence. The questions were divided into three sections. The first set of questions asked graduates to discuss their perceptions of the traditional school setting, the second set of questions asked for graduates' perceptions of alternative education, and the third set engaged graduates in a discussion about their perceptions after graduating from an alternative education program. Upon analysis of graduates' responses, additional themes emerged specific to each set of questions. The most frequently stated item was the lack of connectedness that graduates had with adults at the traditional school and the connectedness graduates had with adults and peers in the alternative education program. Graduates in this study repeatedly recalled the positive experiences they had with the director and teachers of the alternative education program. The staff of the alternative education program set an example of a superb learning environment. The environment in the alternative education program was inviting and provided the much needed positive interaction between peers and adults. Graduates felt comfortable attending the alternative education program and looked forward to the academic and personal attention they received from the adults in the program. Additional responses to the interview questions

validated the results from the quantitative phase of the study—graduates deemed the alternative education program more favorable.

Chapter 5 will include a discussion of the findings and conclusions from this study. The research questions will be discussed as they relate to the findings and to the theoretical perspectives resulting from the review of the literature. The themes that emerged from the responses to the interview sessions will also be discussed in their relationship to the research questions and the literature review. The final section of Chapter 5 will include suggestions and recommendations for further study of alternative education.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

#### **Introduction**

Alternative education has been in existence since the beginning of American education (Lange & Setten, 2002). While numerous studies already exist on alternative education, some of which are discussed in Chapter 3, it is important to continue studying the phenomenon. As school districts face pressure from the NCLB Act to graduate as many students as possible, this researcher deemed as appropriate the study of an alternative education program that was successfully keeping students at risk in school until graduation. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore graduates' perceptions of an effective public high school alternative education program and of the traditional school setting. To collect data that would assist in the examination of graduates' perceptions, a Quan-qual approach was employed.

The Quan (quantitative) phase was utilized to obtain the perspectives of graduates through a researcher-developed survey that was mailed through the United States Postal Service to the presumed correct addresses of graduates (N=91) from 2002-2011 of a public high school alternative education program. The intention of the researcher was to use the survey to elicit honest responses from as many graduates as possible. The data collected from graduates (N=39) were used to conduct a comparative analysis of graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and of the alternative education program in this study.

The qual (qualitative) phase which followed the quantitative analysis utilized a face-to-face interview protocol with graduates (N=8) of the alternative education

program. Graduates participating in the interview sessions were solicited through the last question on the survey instrument. The purpose of the interviews was to substantiate the replies to the survey. Responses from the interviews were analyzed and results used to explain or elaborate further on the quantitative analysis.

This chapter discusses the findings from the quantitative and qualitative phases in relationship to these research questions:

1. What are the graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to their enrolling in the alternative education program?
2. What are the graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting and the program-related factors that contributed to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education program?
3. What program-related factors influence program graduates following graduation from the alternative education program?
4. How, if at all, do program graduates' perceptions of the traditional school program differ from program graduates' perceptions of the alternative school program?

Using, along with emergent themes, school as a caring community, student resilience, and student persistence—the theoretical perspectives that comprise the basis of this study—this chapter will relate graduates' responses to the research questions, established themes, and emergent themes. The following sections are included: (a) a summary of the findings; (b) a discussion of the findings which consists of graduates' perceptions and how these findings relate to current literature on the topic of alternative

education; (c) implications for alternative education; (d) limitations of the study; (e) recommendations for further research; (f) chapter summary.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The researcher-developed survey used for the quantitative phase and the interview protocol utilized in the qualitative phase were similar in format. The survey items and interview questions were divided into three sections. Each section paralleled one of the first three research questions. The fourth research question will be addressed through a comparison of responses to the first two research questions in which graduates were asked to reflect on their experiences in the traditional school setting and in the alternative school setting.

#### **Summary of Findings Related to the First Research Question**

*What are the graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting and the factors that contributed to their enrolling in the alternative education program?*

Questions on the survey utilized to obtain graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting were based on a Likert-like scale with answers ranging from one to four, were worded and scored so that an answer of (4) *Agree* indicates that graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting are favorable to a score of (1) *Disagree* which indicates that graduates' perceptions of the traditional school are not favorable. The results of a descriptive analysis of graduates' responses to questions showed a minimum score 1.00 which indicates that of the graduates did not favor the traditional school setting, a maximum score of 3.50, and a mean score of 2.33 which indicates some of the graduates perceptions of the traditional school were mediocre. The summation of responses to questions gathered from semi-structured interviews with eight of the

graduates provides further analysis and clarification of graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting.

Graduates were recommended to the alternative education program in this study by principals, counselors, parents, teachers, and the home and school visitor, who also served as the program's director. The recommendations resulted because the graduates were at risk academically due in part to having missed a substantial amount of school. Prior to enrolling in the alternative education program, graduates were juniors or seniors in a traditional school. The alternative education program in this study is identified as a Type III alternative school. A Type III alternative education program is therapeutic in nature; students are placed in such an alternative education program through a school referral process—students may or may not choose to participate. If the interviewed graduates in this study had chosen not to enroll in the program, most of them would have dropped out of school.

Each of the graduates had their own individual reasons for enrolling in the alternative education program. Those reasons were revealed in the interview sessions. Most of the graduates were solemn as they described their traditional school experiences. One graduate even wiped away tears as she shared her memories.

All of the graduates in this study were not succeeding in the traditional school setting for various reasons. Some of the graduates had emotional, physical, or family related issues. Others had academic difficulties. Most of the graduates experienced attendance problems which also contributed to their academic predicament. Many of the graduates attributed their lack of success in the traditional school to not being given the individualized attention from teachers that they needed. Also, when discussing their

traditional school experience during the interviews, graduates often described the school setting as being too large and their classes as having too many students.

Additionally, all but one graduate did not form any connections with teachers at the traditional school. Several felt the teachers did not care and the lessons taught had little meaning. While graduates reported not forming a connection with teachers in the traditional school setting, all of them had a small group of peers to whom they related to in the traditional school.

### **Summary of Findings Related to the Second Research Question**

*What are the graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program setting and the program-related factors that contributed to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education program?*

The questions on the survey about graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program were based on a Likert-like scale with answers ranging from one to four, were worded and scored so that an answer of *(4) Agree* indicates that graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program are favorable to a score of *(1) Disagree* which indicates that graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program are not favorable. The results of a descriptive analysis of graduates' responses to questions showed a minimum score of 2.00, a maximum score of 4.00, and a mean score of 3.68 which would indicate that graduates' perceptions of the alternative setting are favorable. The summation of responses to questions gathered from semi-structured interviews with eight of the graduates provides further analysis of graduates' perceptions of the alternative education program.

Graduates were eager to discuss their alternative education memories in the interview sessions. They were much more verbal with their responses to questions about their alternative education experiences, often contributing information beyond what the question asked. For most of the graduates, the entire structure of the alternative education program was more conducive to their learning. The amount of time spent in school was shorter, the start time for classes was later in the day, classes were smaller, there were fewer homework assignments and tests, and graduates received more individualized instruction. As many of the courses were project-based, the graduates found more meaning in the content. However, a few of the graduates thought the expectations of the students should have been higher, and the courses could have been a little more rigorous, especially those graduates who enrolled in college and struggled with the transition from high school courses to college courses. Overall, all of the graduates were content with their alternative education experiences and had no regrets about entering the alternative education program.

Graduates frequently mentioned the connections they made with the teachers and the director of the alternative education program. They described the teachers as being kind and dedicated. Graduates felt the teachers selected for the program were a “good fit” and recalled teachers giving students much needed attention both academically and personally.

### **Summary of Findings Related to the Third Research Question**

*What program-related factors influence program graduates following graduation from the alternative education program?*

Items in a survey conducted with graduates regarding their perceptions of program-related factors that continue to influence them after graduation were based on a Likert-like scale with answers ranging from one to four, were worded and scored so that an answer of (4) *Agree* indicating graduates' perceptions of program-related factors that continue to influence them after graduation are favorable to a score of (1) *Disagree* indicating graduates' perceptions of program-related factors that continue to influence them after graduation are not favorable. The results of a descriptive analysis of the graduates' responses to questions showed a minimum score of 3.00, a maximum score of 4.00, and a mean score of 3.82. Those scores affirm that graduates' perceptions of the program-related factors that continue to influence them after graduation are favorable. The summation of responses to questions gathered from semi-structured interviews with eight of the graduates provides further analysis on graduates' perceptions of the program-related factors that continue to influence them after graduation.

All of the graduates in this study attributed to the alternative education program their success in graduating with a high school diploma. As young adults, they realized the opportunities that a high school diploma provided for them. The opportunity to attend college was a bonus presented to all graduates of the alternative education program, some of whom welcomed and used this gift. Several of the graduates regretted that they had not taken advantage of the agreement the alternative education program had with the local community college. Graduates were awarded full tuition at the community

college for two years immediately following graduation from the alternative education program. Two of the graduates were currently utilizing the one-time offer. One participant graduated from the community college through the agreement, and two others enrolled in the community college but did not complete the two years. Only one of the participants interviewed graduated from a four-year college, having done so with assistance he received from the military.

Most of the graduates believed that the alternative education program had successfully prepared them for life after high school. Several of them reported that their communication skills had improved, citing their learning the procedure for carrying on mature conversations with the adults in the program as an example. Looking back on their involvement in an alternative education program, many of the graduates credited the teachers and director of the program for the leadership they provided in helping the graduates successfully navigate their way through the alternative education experience. The adults in the program not only provided academic assistance, but they also served as positive adult role models for the graduates, often taking on the roles of confidant and guidance counselor. Their mentoring contributed to the graduates' feelings of belonging and self-worth.

#### **Summary of Findings Related to the Fourth Research Question**

*How, if at all, do program graduates' perceptions of the traditional school program differ from program graduates' perceptions of the alternative school program?*

The fourth research question is best answered through the results from tests that were conducted for responses to the survey items collected in the quantitative phase of

this study. The results from those tests were further substantiated during the interviews with graduates.

When statistical tests were conducted to compare graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting to graduates' perceptions of the alternative school, all of the outcomes clearly indicated that graduates found the alternative education program to be more favorable. Also, during the face-to-face interviews, graduates were adamant about their preference for the alternative education program over the traditional school setting. It was inferred from graduates' demeanor and responses when questioned about the traditional school experiences versus the alternative education program experiences that graduates preferred the alternative education program. In the traditional school setting, graduates struggled academically and personally. Those issues were addressed in the alternative education program. In the alternative education program, graduates were provided remediation and individualized attention which increased their academic achievements and contributed to their persistence. Additionally, counseling was provided as needed. This assisted graduates when they were coping with personal problems and contributed to their resilience.

In recalling their decision to enroll in the alternative education program, all of the interviewed graduates indicated that they would have repeated the choice all over again and would have also recommended the alternative education program to other students if it were still in existence. Several graduates expressed their dismay in knowing that the alternative education program has been eliminated by the school district which operated it.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

This study asked graduates of an alternative education program to reflect on their experiences in the traditional school that they attended, prior to enrolling in the alternative program, and on their experiences while enrolled in an alternative education program. Many of the responses and common themes that emerged were consistent with the review of current literature on this topic.

### **Traditional School Setting Discussion**

Reasons that graduates in this study gave for not succeeding in the traditional school setting corresponded to characteristics identified by other researchers for students who were at risk of dropping out of school. Graduates in this study were not being successful academically in the traditional school. Honigsfeld and Dunn (2009) noted that sometimes students develop academic risk factors after performing well in school at first and then eventually falling behind. Some graduates in this study remembered functioning well academically during earlier grades in their traditional school experience, but developing difficulties in middle school and additional problems in high school. Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morrison (2006) found that many of the precursors for identifying future dropouts were present as early as sixth grade. One of the graduates in this study was retained after failing and repeated sixth grade. An academic performance problem which Honigsfeld and Dunn (2009) identified was the inability for a student to understand what he or she read. The graduate in this study who failed sixth grade recalled reading her social studies at least six times and still not being sure she comprehended the material. As a result, she began to lose interest in school and missed school often. Being absent from school and experiencing academic struggles in the

traditional school setting became a vicious cycle for the graduates in this study and preceded their consideration to drop out of school. Hallfors, Hyunsan, Brodish, Flewelling, and Khatapoush (2006) identified poor attendance and low GPA as risk factors that often contribute to a student's decision to leave school before graduating.

Some of the graduates in this study reported missing school because of physical and emotional problems. Faulkner, Adlaf, Irving, Allison, and Dwyer (2009) acknowledged that when a student missed school because of poor health, the absence contributed to the student's feeling disconnected from the school environment.

Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morrison (2006) reported that students lose interest in school because they experience a lack of connection and see no purpose in the lessons being taught. Participants in this study found difficulty in forming connections with the adults in the traditional school setting. Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological theory of human development explained that a student's environment has the ability to support or limit a student's achievement. For the graduates in this study, the traditional school environment limited their capacity for success. Tinto's (1993) theory related that students are more likely to persist and graduate if they are provided academic, social, and personal support. Attending a large school and having too many students in their classes were reported in this study as additional reasons for students' not feeling connected to the school environment. Pascopella (2007) revealed one of the 12 steps in the National Education Association's plan to address the school dropout crisis was the recommendation that schools provide smaller learning communities with smaller classes. When comparing dropout rates, Rumberger and Thomas (2000) reported that larger schools had higher dropout rates than smaller schools.

Another at-risk factor is student pregnancy, which creates a social risk factor (“High School,” 2006). Two of the graduates in this study had to deal with unexpected pregnancies, one in her sophomore year, the other graduate during her senior year. Assuming adult responsibilities such as caring for a child may lead students to drop out of school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Fortunately, the two aforementioned graduates were presented with the option of enrolling in an alternative education program which accommodated their need to provide child care at home in the mornings and early afternoon. That option was not possible while they were attending the traditional school.

Many of the characteristics identified by graduates in this study and discussed were factors that contributed to their limited success in the traditional school setting.

These include:

- academic difficulties;
- a lack of attendance;
- physical or emotional problems;
- teen pregnancies;
- a large school;
- large class sizes;
- a lack of connection to adults in the traditional school setting.

Risk factors that were present during the graduates’ tenure in the traditional school setting were eliminated or addressed while the graduates were enrolled in the alternative education program.

## **Alternative Education Program Discussion**

The alternative education program in this study is considered a Type III program, meaning that it was therapeutic in nature and students had a choice of whether or not to attend. The program boasts 124 graduates over the course of ten years, from 2002-2012; however, participants in this study graduated from the program from the years 2002-2011. The graduates' responses from a face-to-face interview with the researcher indicated that graduates had a positive view of their alternative education experience.

Koetke (1999) reported after researching a successful Type III alternative school, Beech Grove High School near Indianapolis, Indiana, that smaller class sizes with individualized instruction contributed to the effectiveness of the school. Smaller class sizes and one-to-one attention from the teachers in the alternative program in this study were notable reasons for graduates' success in this alternative program as well. Grobe, Niles, and Weisstein (2001) also noted that a smaller learning community that is student centered, displays a sense of belonging or community, and provides motivation is the pillar for success. Some of the graduates in this study remarked that they felt like "one big, happy family" when attending the alternative program and looked forward to school each day. A factor contributing to the family atmosphere was the presence of adults such as the teachers and the director of the program who were kind, understanding, and knowledgeable, important attributes James and Jurich (1999) found in effective alternative education.

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems theory described the ecological approach to understanding human development through the environment. School is an important part of the microsystem, one of the five layers of his theory. Bronfenbrenner's

theory maintains that teachers have the ability to provide inspiration to the lives of the students in a positive manner, in particular students who are at risk. All of the graduates in this study related being inspired and encouraged by the adults in the alternative program. Teachers within the alternative education program in this study became mentors to the students.

Bowen's (2009) Eco-Interactional Development (EID) model of school success puts the needs of the students first and supports a school environment in which students feel valued. Graduates in this study felt appreciated and respected in the alternative education program. The EID model also recognizes and validates past experiences that students bring to school (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2000). Graduates of the alternative education program in this study felt comfortable with the teachers and director of the program and often confided in them about past and present personal concerns. Many of the graduates felt that the adults in the program were more than just teachers and director. Oftentimes, the adults provided advice, support, and sometimes a shoulder to lean on for the graduates.

Although all of the graduates in this study exhibited factors that placed them at risk of not graduating before entering the alternative education program, they demonstrated the needed resilience and perseverance to successfully complete the program. Even though some students at risk face personal and academic challenges, supportive friends, teachers, and other adults can help students overcome obstacles and keep them on the path to graduate (Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, & Royer, 2009). The alternative education program in this study provided the much needed support and motivation the graduates required. When asked when asked about her connection to

peers in the alternative program, one graduate in this study remarked that because the classes were small, students were able to get to know each other well and often collaborated on assignments. Graduates reported that teachers in the alternative program in this study engaged the students in meaningful lessons that related to real-life experiences. This, they observed, contributed to the graduates' academic success. Finn and Rock's (1997) research revealed that students become more academically resilient and less likely to drop out school when they are actively engaged in school.

Quinn et al. (2006) acknowledged that the model alternative education program is structured to meet the needs of students at risk. Alternative students need a structured approach that promotes a less formal rapport between teachers and students. This study found that the alternative education program being examined was designed to fulfill the needs of the students enrolled and that teachers were carefully selected from the traditional school to serve as instructors and mentors for the after-school alternative education program. Many of the graduates needed a later start time due in part to providing child care in the morning or employment commitments which often required them to work long hours and late at night. Getting up early for the traditional school hours, a difficult task for many of them, along with a lack of motivation to attend classes caused some of the graduates to miss a substantial amount of school. If graduates missed a day at the alternative school, which operated after the hours of the traditional school, they had to make the day up by completing a full day of in-school suspension at the traditional school, or they were not permitted to graduate. Absenteeism and tardiness were not tolerated in the alternative education program. Whenever a graduate was absent or tardy and prior notice had not been given to the school, the director made a phone call

home or to the student to identify and address the reason for the absence or tardiness. Fortunately, graduates in this study looked forward to attending the alternative school each day; this eagerness helped to alleviate absenteeism and tardiness. Klima et al. (2009) concluded after reviewing alternative education programs functioning as schools-within-schools, such as the one in this study, that alternative programs improved attendance as well as academic performance.

The primary aspects of the alternative education program in this study that added to the resilience and perseverance of graduates as they successfully completed the program and graduated from high school were the following:

- increased attendance;
- academic achievement;
- smaller class sizes;
- caring and nurturing environment;
- formation of meaningful relationships with adults in the program.

Tinto's (1993) five conditions for supporting retention that were met by the alternative education program in this study included: (1) the director and teachers focused on when the participants would graduate, not if the participants would graduate; (2) graduates were given clear and concise expectations for the program—for many, this was their last chance to complete high school; (3) graduates were provided continuous social, personal, and academic advisement throughout the program; (4) graduates were engaged in the school not only academically but also socially as they participated in school and community service projects; and (5) the environment promoted learning through meaningful lessons.

## **Implications for Alternative Education**

Findings from this study provide insight not only into what beneficial program features for students in alternative education, but also into advantageous characteristics for students in traditional education, as well. The attributes of an effective alternative education program that previous researchers have identified in addition to the findings from this study are important considerations for education.

A significant factor indicated by the eight graduates of this study for their perseverance and success in alternative education was strong, meaningful connections to caring adults in the program. Instructors in the alternative education program in this study taught additional hours after spending eight hours in the traditional school. Such teachers who are willing to extend themselves beyond the expectations of the usual school day regularly display energy, commitment, and dedication. One graduate in this study offered the following observation about teachers in this particular alternative education program:

You still learn that there are people [teachers] out there that actually care. There are people [teachers] out there that aren't actually just trying to collect a paycheck. Obviously, if you're devoting more time after school every day to be a teacher, you actually are showing initiative in yourself; therefore, you're there for a good reason. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we [the students] all pick up on that. Teachers didn't necessarily want to be there three hours every day after being there all day long, but they cared enough to be there.

Alternative education programs need to be selective when hiring teachers for the program. Administrators should question candidates for teaching positions in alternative

education programs about their motives. Also, personality is an important consideration when determining whether an individual would be a viable match for working with students with at-risk factors and diversified requirements. Teachers working in alternative education should be compassionate yet willing to set and maintain high academic standards for students. The staff in this study set reasonable and attainable standards for the graduates in this study. Graduates wanted to learn; however, many of them lacked adequate study habits and course prerequisites when they entered the program. Teachers in the alternative education program provided the necessary remediation and worked with the graduates tirelessly and patiently to ensure the requirements for the program were met. Professional development should be ongoing for teachers working with students at risk. Teachers need to be made aware of the emotional and academic challenges these students face and of the best practices for helping students at risk conquer their difficulties.

For many students at risk, individualized instruction is an essential element to employ when students are faltering academically. Providing individualized instruction is difficult if class sizes are large. Research indicated that smaller classes are an important component of an effective alternative education program. These findings validated that research. Graduates in this study felt more comfortable in smaller classes, had more one-on-one time with teachers, and observed that the teachers seemed more comfortable dealing with a smaller number of students.

An additional implication of this study centers on the structure of the school day. High school students often have a difficult time waking up for school with an early start time. Graduates indicated that they had to work at paid jobs because they needed money,

and their scheduled hours required them to work until late at night. The alternative education program start time was 2:50 p.m. This allowed graduates to sleep in or, if necessary, work additional hours early in the day. In addition, graduates with physical and emotional needs were able to attend doctors' appointments and counseling sessions before the start of school. The structure of the alternative program overall was advantageous to graduates, in particular those with adult responsibilities such as child care, employment, and independent living, as well as those with illnesses and family issues. For some graduates, time during the school day seemed to be wasted on homeroom periods, activity periods, electives, study halls, and lunch. The alternative education program in this study streamlined the school day by eliminating unnecessary requirements and focusing on core subjects. Meeting smaller classes during longer class periods enabled teachers to compact the curriculum while maintaining the criteria for the content being taught.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (2012b) presented statistics for reasons students dropped out of school during the 2010-2011 school year in Pennsylvania as listed in the following Table 13.

Table 13

*Summary of Dropout Reasons for 2010-2011 School Year (N=10,482)*

Dropout Reason	N	%
Academic problems	1,034	9.86
Behavior problems	188	1.79
Child, Married, or Pregnancy	316	3.01
Disliked school	2,697	25.75
Wanted to work	628	5.99
Other reason	5,619	53.61

The reasons indicated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2012a) as to why students drop out of school were consistent with the responses interviewed graduates in this study gave for why they were considering dropping out of school. This study presented evidence that an alternative education program is a viable solution for addressing the needs of students at risk of dropping out of high school. The majority of the interviewed graduates in this study did not like the traditional school environment, particularly the size of the school and classes, and the lack of connection with adults. Educators must recognize that an accommodating school environment and meaningful communication between adults and students are necessary entities to promote growth, both academically and personally, and a culture of caring.

One factor that was identified by several of the interviewed graduates, but not found in the review of the literature, was the lack of funding for alternative education. Several graduates in this study were concerned about the elimination of the alternative

education program they had attended. The program graduated its final class in June 2012. Graduates had a difficult time understanding why funding the successful alternative education program was not a priority for the school district. After hearing an explanation of budget constraints at the state and local level by the researcher, graduates still could not comprehend why the elimination of the program was warranted. School districts need to consider whether or not eliminating a program is truly cost effective over time. This study implied that of the eight graduates surveyed all would have considered dropping out of school if they had not attended the alternative education program. If that implication is applied to all 124 graduates of the alternative education program in this study, then the school district must question whether or not the money saved by not funding a program is truly worth jeopardizing the future of so many students.

The detriment to society and individuals who do not complete high school is great. The following statistics were presented earlier in Chapter 1:

- High school graduates earn over \$260,000 more in a lifetime than non-graduates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011b).
- Societal costs for dropouts are estimated into the billions of dollars (Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky, 2009).
- Dropouts from the class of 2006 will cost the United States over \$17 billion dollars in Medicaid and uninsured health care expenditures over the course of their lifetime (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).
- Eight billion dollars could be saved in crime-related costs by increasing the graduation rate from high school and the enrollment of male students in college by 5% (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

The statistics validate the idea that school districts must do everything possible to sustain an alternative education program that is successfully functioning. Operating a program in conjunction with neighboring school districts may be one way to defray expenditures.

Furthermore, the stigma that is oftentimes attached to an alternative education program needs to be dispelled. Schools can benefit from the premise that alternative schools meet the needs of students at risk and offer what the name entails, an alternative. In traditional school settings, students are pressured into meeting the needs of the schools or the convenience of the schools—there is no flexibility—something this study indicated as a necessity. While the alternative education program in this study is no longer functioning, perhaps the school district through which this program operated can maximize the findings and address them with teachers in the traditional school setting. Teachers must make a concerted effort to connect with students both academically and personally. The interviewed graduates' voices were heard. The analysis of the graduates' responses indicated that students want and need high expectations, accountability, structure, individualized attention—most importantly—supportive and caring adults in their educational systems.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most integral drawback was encountered when the researcher attempted to obtain current addresses for graduates of the alternative program. Although the director of the alternative education program provided addresses and phone numbers for graduates from the time of their enrollment in the program and some current addresses for graduates who remained in touch with her, current addresses for most of the graduates and their families were difficult to obtain. The first mail-out explaining the study was

sent to 116 graduates of the program. Thirty letters were returned due to incorrect addresses and 28 phone calls that followed in an effort to obtain corrected addresses resulted in messages that the phones were no longer in service. Having taught for the program for seven years, this researcher knew that many of the students enrolled in the alternative education program were raised in families that were known to be somewhat transient. Therefore, this researcher was not taken aback by the number of returned mailings and disconnected phones.

The initial plan was to send surveys to all 116 graduates of the alternative education program in this study; however, only 91 surveys were mailed to graduates with last known correct addresses. For those 91 surveys that were mailed, there was no guarantee that the recipients of the mailing were the graduates or families of the graduates. Moreover, even if the family did receive the survey, there was no way of knowing whether or not the survey was forwarded to the graduate.

Another limitation of this study was the diversity of the population. The demographic composition of the population was fairly equal for gender; however, there was no ethnic diversity—100% of the respondents were white. Without cultural diversity, a reflection of the school district in this study, generalizing the results of this data to the entire student at risk population serviced by alternative education programs is difficult.

An additional limiting factor may be that graduates who agreed to be interviewed did so because they had positive experiences while enrolled in the alternative education program. Also, six of the eight participants knew the researcher as a teacher in the traditional school setting and in the alternative education program. Although this

researcher made every attempt to eliminate any reaction to graduates responses, graduates may have refrained from giving completely forthright answers to the questions.

Finally, this study was limited to one high school alternative education program. Although the alternative education program was operating at the onset of this study, the program was eliminated due to budget constraints at the state and local levels at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. Interested researchers or educators interested in the findings from this study will not be able to observe the alternative education program in this study in progress or conduct further studies of the program since it no longer exists.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study focused on a former alternative education program facilitated through a public high school in a rural school district in western Pennsylvania. The purpose of this study was to examine graduates' perspectives of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that have persisted beyond graduation. Graduates in this study were recommended to the alternative education program because they were not succeeding academically, they had missed a substantial amount of school, and they were at risk of not graduating from high school. The following characteristics contributed to their poor academic performance and chronic absenteeism: physical and emotional problems, teenage pregnancy, family issues, adult responsibilities, large school size, large class sizes, and a lack of connections with adults in the traditional school. Since the participants in this study are graduates of a high school, and since the participants presented at-risk factors prior to enrolling in the alternative education program, then it follows that characteristics of the alternative education program enabled the participants to persevere,

successfully complete the program, and graduate. Those aspects that contributed to graduates' resilience and perseverance while they were enrolled in the alternative education program were the following: academic achievement, improved attendance, smaller class sizes, a more accommodating school structure, a sense of community, and connections with caring adults. In order to generalize the findings of this study to other alternative education programs, this researcher recommends that this study be replicated in the following types of schools:

- a school with a larger alternative education program;
- a smaller public high school;
- an urban school;
- a suburban school;
- a school with more cultural diversity;
- a school with either a high or low socio-economic status.

After examining the findings and the recurrent themes identified through this study, this researcher offers the following additional recommendations for future studies of alternative education:

1. While the graduates in this study successfully completed the alternative education program, there are students who enter the program but do not complete it. Interviews with those students may provide additional perceptions as to why some students are not successful in an alternative education setting.
2. This study did not examine the perspectives of students who are recommended to an alternative education program but choose not to enroll in

the program and then drop out of high school. Educators may learn how to influence those students' decisions if they understand why students chose a different avenue.

3. Academic and attendance records could be examined to provide additional insight into when at-risk factors first appeared.
4. Students enrolled in the program could be surveyed or interviewed prior to graduation as part of a longitudinal study. Students could also be surveyed or interviewed preceding their entrance into the alternative education program and then again prior to graduation as part of a longitudinal study. This would provide easier access to data and a larger quantity of data.
5. Data from school records that indicate students' socio-economic status, family structure, reasons for absenteeism or tardiness, truancy, suspension, expulsion, retention, or achievement test scores might provide interesting and pertinent data. This data may offer additional insight into at-risk factors and predictors for students at risk.
6. The interview session of this study included participants who regarded their experiences in alternative education as having a positive impact on their lives. It would be beneficial to interview graduates who had negative experiences in alternative education. The information gathered from those graduates could lead schools to design more effective programs.

This phenomenological study provided an understanding of what constitutes an effective alternative education program by examining the perceptions of graduates through a survey (N=39) and an interview (N=8). The at-risk factors identified by the

participants contributed to their enrollment in an alternative education program. The characteristics of the alternative education program that contributed to graduates' successful completion of the program are significant. Graduates who were originally recognized as being students at risk of dropping out of high school were given the motivation and support to persevere and complete their education.

While graduates in this study identified adults in the alternative education program for their positive influence, it would be worthy to explore if an adult presence in the family is influential or detrimental in the resilience and perseverance of students with at-risk factors. Further research could explore the family's influence on student perseverance.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine graduates' perspectives of the school-related factors that contributed to a student's enrolling in an alternative education program and the graduates' perspectives of the program-related factors that contributed to their successful completion of the program and that continue to influence them post-graduation. The findings from this study indicated the following:

- Students, especially students at risk, feel disconnected from the school environment and teachers in a large school with large classes.
- It is important to have caring and nurturing adults in a school.
- Programs that are created and structured to meet the needs of students at risk contribute to their successful high school completion;
- Individualized instruction is an important consideration for students with academic difficulties.

- Students' personal concerns and problems should be addressed if students are to persevere;
- Lessons that students deem relevant and relatable impact students' engagement in their academics and benefit them beyond graduation.

This study presented evidence that graduates benefited from being enrolled in an alternative education program. The alternative education program in this study is no longer functioning even though the program was successfully keeping students at risk in school until graduation. This alternative education program had successfully graduated 124 students from the years 2002-2012.

In recent years, the state of Pennsylvania has made drastic cuts in funding for public education. As a result, some school districts have been forced to close schools, eliminate programs, and reduce school staff. The school district operating the alternative education program in this study chose to eliminate at the end of the 2011-2012 school year one of two alternative education programs to save money and help balance the district's budget. This same school district is currently considering eliminating the second alternative education program, a disciplinary alternative education program that it operates in conjunction with a neighboring school district, at the end of the 2012-2013 school year.

A final recommendation for future research would be to conduct a comparative analysis of graduation rates for schools with alternative education programs and graduation rates for schools that do not have alternative education programs. The dropout rate for the school district in which the alternative education program in this study functioned was .94% in 2010-2011, substantially lower than the dropout rate for

Pennsylvania (2010-2011), which was 1.19% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012b). The most current dropout rate for the United States (4.1%) found by this researcher was for the school year 2008-2009. The dropout rate for Pennsylvania for the 2008-2009 school year was significantly lower at 2.3%. While the dropout rate for Pennsylvania decreased from 2.3% for the 2008-2009 school year to 2.1% for the 2010-2011, it will interesting to explore if the dropout rates increase as the commonwealth of Pennsylvania continues to reduce funding to public schools. Also, it would be interesting to determine and examine any long-term effects that closing alternative education programs, such as the one in this study, has on dropout rates for high schools that formerly operated the programs. As stated at the beginning of Chapter I, over one million of the students who enter ninth grade will not graduate four years later (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). If school districts continue to close alternative education programs, then educators are confronted with the responsibility to reach out to students at risk by other means, or society will end up suffering the consequences of potentially more high school dropouts populating our states.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A  
**Site Approval Letter**

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

Department of Professional Studies  
in Education  
Davis Hall, Room 303  
570 S. Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1087

724-357-2400

Internet: <http://www.iup.edu>

April 16, 2012

Mr. XXX  
Superintendent of Rolling Meadows School District  
XXX, PA XXX

Dear Mr. XXX,

I am writing to seek approval from the Rolling Meadows School District to conduct a study and pilot study for my research and dissertation entitled, *Graduates' Perceptions of a Western Pennsylvania Public High School Alternative Education Program*. The purpose of my research is to examine graduates' perceptions of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of the Road to Success alternative education program and the benefits from the program that persist beyond graduation. These findings are important for educators working in alternative schools currently in existence, especially those educators operating the Road to Success, as well as school districts considering instituting an alternative education program.

In conducting my research, I would like to survey all 2002-2011 graduates from the Road to Success. The survey I developed consists of a collection of graduates' demographics and graduates' perceptions of the traditional school setting, the alternative school setting, and post-graduate program-related factors. I plan to use postal mail to distribute and collect the surveys. After the survey has been administered to graduates, I would like to interview eight graduates at a mutually agreed upon site, to gain further insight into their perceptions of the aforementioned categories listed for the survey data collection. Before distributing the researcher-developed survey to graduates, I would like to conduct a pilot study of the survey to determine the clarity of the directions and questions. The pilot study would be conducted at the high school with at least three seniors, eighteen years of age or older, currently enrolled in the Road Less Traveled and willing to volunteer as participants. The pilot study would have no effect on academics and students may withdraw at any time by notifying the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran, or me through contact information which will be provided for participants in an invitation letter and informed consent letter.

All data gathered will remain confidential to avoid putting anyone at risk or so that no one's identity is revealed. The alternative education program, the school, and the district will remain anonymous as well, each being named by a pseudonym only. The protocol

approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (Phone: 724-357-7730) will be adhered to at all times. I have attached the survey, along with the interview protocol that I will be using to obtain the data for my dissertation. I will be happy to discuss all procedures in detail with you.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Beverly J. Knopf  
Doctoral Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-836-7786  
E-mail: B.J.knopf@iup.edu

Dr. Valeri Helterbran  
Dissertation Chair  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-357-2400  
E-mail: vhelter@iup.edu

Appendix B  
**Pilot Study: Invitation Letter**

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

Department of Professional Studies  
in Education  
Davis Hall, Room 303  
570 S. Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1087

724-357-2400  
Internet: <http://www.iup.edu>

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You are being asked to participate in a pilot study for my doctoral dissertation research on the topic of alternative education being conducted through Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). You are invited to participate in this pilot study since you will soon be a graduate of the Road to Success. Your help would be greatly appreciated and is needed in order for me to continue my study entitled, *Graduates' Perceptions of a Western Pennsylvania Public High School Alternative Education Program*.

If you agree to participate in the pilot study, you would be asked to complete a survey which I will administer in a group setting to all participants of the pilot study. The completion of the survey will last approximately 30 minutes. You will be encouraged to make notes and comments on the survey about any of the directions or questions. After the completion of the survey, you will be asked to participate in a brief discussion, which will last approximately 10 minutes, with me and the other participants of the pilot study about the clarity of the directions and the survey questions—in other words, you will be asked if the survey was easy to understand and if you have any suggestions for changes or improvements. You will not be asked to explain your answers.

If you agree to participate, you will be compensated for your time with a \$25 gift card to a local convenience store which will be distributed after the completion of the survey and discussion.

You may find the survey and discussion experience enjoyable, and the information the researcher gains may be helpful in continuing research on graduates' perceptions of the Road to Success. The information gained from this pilot study will be used to improve the survey instrument for the actual study which is focused on graduates of the program.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you are 18 years of age or older and choose to participate, you will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form before completing the survey, giving your permission to participate. The information obtained in this pilot study may be published in scholarly journals or used for professional presentation, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. There are no known risks to participating in this pilot study and you may withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me or Rolling Meadows High School. If you choose to withdraw, you may contact the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran,

or me through the contact information provided at the end of this letter. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed. Thank you for your consideration for participating in a pilot study. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Beverly J. Knopf  
Doctoral Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-836-7786  
E-mail: B.J.knopf@iup.edu

Dr. Valeri Helterbran  
Dissertation Chair  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-357-2400  
E-mail: vhelter@iup.edu

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).**

Appendix C  
**Pilot Study: Informed Consent Cover Letter**

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

Department of Professional Studies  
in Education  
Davis Hall, Room 303  
570 S. Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1087

724-357-2400  
Internet: <http://www.iup.edu>

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the pilot study for my doctoral dissertation research on alternative education. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates' perceptions of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that may persist beyond graduation. You are invited to participate in this pilot study since you will soon be a graduate of the Road to Success. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey with 65 questions. After the completion of the survey, a brief discussion with the primary researcher and the other participants of the pilot study will be conducted to discuss the clarity of the directions and the survey questions—in other words, you will be asked if the survey was easy to understand and if you have any suggestions for changes or improvements. Your suggestions are important and will be used to improve the survey. You will not be asked to explain your answers on the survey. Participation in the survey and discussion will require approximately 40 minutes of your time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you are 18 years of age or older and choose to participate, you will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form before completing the survey, giving your permission to participate. If you agree to participate, you will be compensated for your time with a \$25 gift card to a local convenience store after the completion of the survey and discussion. The information obtained in this pilot study may be published in scholarly journals or used for professional presentation, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. There are no known risks to participating in this pilot study and you may withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me or Rolling Meadows High School. If you choose to withdraw you may contact the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran, or me through the contact information provided at the end of this letter. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this pilot study, please sign the following statement and return to Mrs. XXX, Director of the Road to Success. Please keep the second copy for yourself.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Beverly J. Knopf  
Doctoral Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-836-7786  
E-mail: B.J.knopf@iup.edu

Dr. Valeri Helterbran  
Dissertation Chair  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-357-2400  
E-mail: vhelter@iup.edu

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-  
7730).**

Appendix D  
**Pilot Study: Informed Consent Form**

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:**

I have read and understand the information on this form and I am willing to participate in this pilot study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and my identity will remain anonymous. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the pilot study at any time by contacting the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran, or the Primary Researcher, Beverly J. Knopf through the contact information provided in the cover letter. Upon my request to withdraw, all information pertaining to me will be destroyed. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name (PLEASE PRINT)

Signature:

Date:

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Primary Researcher's Signature

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).**

Appendix E  
**Study: Advance-Notice Letter**

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

Department of Professional Studies  
in Education  
Davis Hall, Room 303  
570 S. Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1087

724-357-2400  
Internet: <http://www.iup.edu>

Dear Graduate of the Road to Success:

I am a doctoral candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and I am conducting a research study on the perceptions of former high school alternative education students and their insights into their high school experiences in an alternative education setting. As a graduate of the Road to Success at Rolling Meadows High School, you are being invited to participate in a study titled *Graduates' Perceptions of a Western Pennsylvania Public High School Alternative Education Program*.

We are proud of our graduates from the Road to Success and want to learn more about the determining factors that contribute to students choosing to enroll in an alternative education program and completing the program, so that we can understand the qualities that make an alternative education program successful, as well as the features that need improvement. Your input in this study is important and will help educators know more about what works and what does not work for students who overcame obstacles in high school.

In approximately one week, you will receive a packet in the mail containing a letter explaining the study, a survey, and a consent form. If you are interested in participating in this study, please sign the consent form and complete the survey. Return the signed copy of the consent form and the completed survey in the stamped envelope provided for you.

If you have any questions or need more information, please do not hesitate to contact me at 724-836-7786 or through my email address ([b.j.knopf@iup.edu](mailto:b.j.knopf@iup.edu)).

Sincerely,

Mrs. Beverly J. Knopf  
Doctoral Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-836-7786  
E-mail: [B.J.knopf@iup.edu](mailto:B.J.knopf@iup.edu)

Dr. Valeri Helterbran  
Dissertation Chair  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-357-2400  
E-mail: [vhelter@iup.edu](mailto:vhelter@iup.edu)

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).**

Appendix F  
**Study: Survey Informed Consent Cover Letter**

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

Department of Professional Studies  
in Education  
Davis Hall, Room 303  
570 S. Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1087

724-357-2400  
Internet: <http://www.iup.edu>

Dear Graduate of the Road to Success:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision as to whether or not you agree to participate. Please feel free to ask any questions. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a graduate of the Road to Success at Rolling Meadows High School and your opinion is important.

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates' perceptions of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that have persisted beyond graduation. You are being asked to participate in a survey with 67 questions. Participation in the survey will require approximately 30 minutes of your time. If you complete and return the survey within (date), you will be entered into a drawing for a \$100 gift card to a local convenience store. All participants will be randomly numbered and their identities will remain anonymous. The drawing will take place on (date) and the winner will be contacted with a phone call.

Question #67 of the survey will ask you are interested in participating in a follow-up interview with the primary researcher at a mutually convenient time and location. Participation or non-participation is entirely voluntary. The interview will require approximately one hour of your time. The first eight graduates who agree to an interview will be contacted and a date and time will be arranged for an individual interview. Before the interview begins, you will be asked to sign a second consent form indicating your willingness to participate in the interview. As a token of appreciation for your participation in the interview you will receive a \$25 gift card to a local convenience store. The gift card will be distributed to the eight interview participants after the completion of each interview.

You may find answering the survey enjoyable and the information the researcher gains from your responses may be helpful in identifying what areas of the alternative education program are beneficial as well as what areas of the program should be improved. Your voice is important in continuing and contributing to the research on alternative education.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with

the investigator or XXX. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and locked in storage in the researchers' home for three years. Data collected from this study may be published in a journal or book, or shared at an academic conference, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential and you will remain anonymous. There are no known risks to participating in this pilot study and you may withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me or XXX. If you choose to withdraw you may contact the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran, or me through the contact information provided below. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the following statement and return to Beverly J. Knopf, the primary researcher. Please keep the second copy for yourself.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Beverly J. Knopf  
Doctoral Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-836-7786  
E-mail: B.J.knopf@iup.edu

Dr. Valeri Helterbran  
Dissertation Chair  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-357-2400  
E-mail: vhelter@iup.edu

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).**

Appendix G  
**Study: Survey Informed Consent Form**

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:**

I have read and understand the information on the form and I am willing to participate in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and my identity will remain anonymous. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time by contacting the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran, or the Primary Researcher, Beverly J. Knopf through the contact information provided in the cover letter. Upon my request to withdraw, all information pertaining to me will be destroyed. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name (PLEASE PRINT)

Signature:

Date:

Phone number of location where you can be reached

Best days and times to reach you

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

---

Date

---

Primary Researcher's Signature

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).**

Appendix H  
**Study: Follow-Up Postcard**

Dear Graduate,

Recently you were sent a packet containing a cover letter asking you to participate in a research study for my doctoral dissertation, a survey, and consent form. Completing the survey, signing the consent form, and returning both the survey and consent form in the preaddressed stamped envelope by (date) would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to participate in this worthy research study. I hope to hear from you soon; your voice is important.

Sincerely,

Beverly J. Knopf  
Primary Researcher

Appendix I  
**Study: Interview Informed Consent Letter**

**Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

Department of Professional Studies  
in Education  
Davis Hall, Room 303  
570 S. Eleventh Street  
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1087

724-357-2400  
Internet: <http://www.iup.edu>

Thank you for completing the survey and volunteering to be interviewed. The following information is provided in order to help you understand the interview process and the study being conducted. Please feel free to ask any questions. You are eligible to participate in this study on alternative education because you are a graduate of the Road to Success at Rolling Meadows High School and your opinion is important.

The purpose of this study is to examine graduates' perspectives of factors that contribute to enrollment in and the completion of a public high school alternative education program and the benefits that have persisted beyond graduation. You are being asked to participate in one interview consisting of a series of 15 open-ended questions. You will be asked to sign a consent form to participate in the interview at the interview site, before the interview begins. Each interview will last approximately one hour and will be conducted by the researcher. Your interview will be audio recorded. Your responses will be transcribed under a pseudonym (an alias chosen by the researcher). You will also be asked to verify that the transcript created by the researcher is accurate in reporting the responses obtained from your interview. As a token of appreciation for your participation in the interview you will receive a \$25 gift card to a local convenience store. The gift card will be distributed to you after your completion of the interview.

You may find participating in the interview enjoyable and the information the researcher gains from your responses may be helpful in identifying what areas of the alternative education program are beneficial as well as what areas of the program should be improved. Your voice is important in continuing and contributing to the research on alternative education.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence. Data collected from this study may be published in a journal or book, or shared at an academic conference, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. There are no known risks to participating in this interview and you may withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with me or Rolling Meadows High School. If you choose to withdraw you may contact the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran, or me through the contact information provided at the end of this letter. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the following statement and return to Beverly J. Knopf, the primary researcher. Please keep the second copy for yourself.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Beverly J. Knopf  
Doctoral Candidate  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-836-7786  
E-mail: B.J.knopf@iup.edu

Dr. Valeri Helterbran  
Dissertation Chair  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Department of Professional Studies in Education  
Indiana, PA 15705  
Phone: 724-357-2400  
E-mail: vhelter@iup.edu

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).**

Appendix J  
**Study: Interview Informed Consent Form**

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:**

I have read and understand the information on the form and I am willing to participate in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and my identity will remain anonymous. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time by contacting the Project Director, Dr. Valeri Helterbran, or the Primary Researcher, Beverly J. Knopf through the contact information provided in the cover letter. Upon my request to withdraw, all information pertaining to me will be destroyed. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name (PLEASE PRINT)

Signature:

Date:

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

---

Date

---

Primary Researcher's Signature

**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-7730).**

Appendix K  
**Alternative Education Program Survey**

Graduates' identification code \_\_\_\_\_

***What is the Alternative Education School Survey?***

**The Alternative Education Program Survey (AEPS) is an instrument that examines your beliefs about the alternative education program you were enrolled in either during your junior or senior year in high school, or both junior and senior years in high school. The researcher would like to know your perceptions of the traditional school setting, your perceptions of the alternative education program, and your perceptions of how the alternative education program benefitted you after graduation.**

**Demographics**

***Directions:***

**Please check the appropriate answer.**

1. I graduated from high school

- ☐ 2002
- ☐ 2003
- ☐ 2004
- ☐ 2005
- ☐ 2006
- ☐ 2007
- ☐ 2008
- ☐ 2009
- ☐ 2010
- ☐ 2011

2. Gender

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

3. Race or ethnicity

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

4. Residence location (Check all that apply)

- ☐ I reside within the school district where I attended the alternative education program
- ☐ I reside within Westmoreland County
- ☐ I reside within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
- ☐ I reside out of state
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

**Traditional School Assessment**

**What are the graduates' perceptions of the *traditional school setting* and the factors that contributed to enrolling in an alternative education program?**

***Directions:***

**Statements #5-24 refer to when you were a student in the *traditional high school* and your responses should be based on the following scale: Agree (4)**

**Somewhat Agree (3) Somewhat Disagree (2) Disagree (1)**

**Please respond to the statements as honestly as possible.**

5. I was able to build strong relationships with other students.	4	3	2	1
6. I was able to build strong relationships with teachers.	4	3	2	1
7. I felt supported and respected by administrators.	4	3	2	1
8. The majority of teachers treated me with respect.	4	3	2	1

9. The majority of teachers provided one-on-one help.	4	3	2	1
10. The majority of teachers gave me personal attention.	4	3	2	1
11. The majority of teachers accepted students for who they were.	4	3	2	1
12. Students accepted other students for who they were.	4	3	2	1
13. I felt my presence mattered.	4	3	2	1
14. I felt successful most of the time.	4	3	2	1
15. I attended school regularly.	4	3	2	1
16. I had a strong support system at home.	4	3	2	1
17. I felt comfortable in the school environment.	4	3	2	1
18. I was actively involved in extra-curricular activities.	4	3	2	1
19. Because my school is so large, I never felt lonely.	4	3	2	1
20. I thought about dropping out of high school.	4	3	2	1
21. I was often referred to the office for disciplinary action.	4	3	2	1
22. I have been suspended from school.	4	3	2	1
23. I liked school.	4	3	2	1
24. The following people influenced my decision to enroll in the alternative education program: (Check all that apply)				
<input type="radio"/> Parent(s)				
<input type="radio"/> Peer(s)				
<input type="radio"/> Principal(s)				
<input type="radio"/> Counselor(s)				
<input type="radio"/> Program Director				
<input type="radio"/> Teacher(s)				

Continue to the next page.

## Alternative School Assessment

What are the graduates' perceptions of the *alternative education program* setting and the program-related factors that contribute to graduates' successful completion of the alternative education program?

### *Directions:*

Statements #25-46 refer to when you were enrolled in the *alternative education program* and your responses should be based on the following scale: Agree (4)

Somewhat Agree (3) Somewhat Disagree (2) Disagree (1)

Please respond to the statements as honestly as possible.

25. I was able to build strong relationships with other students.	4	3	2	1
26. I was able to build strong relationships with teachers.	4	3	2	1
27. I felt supported and respected by administrators.	4	3	2	1
28. The majority of teachers treated me with respect.	4	3	2	1
29. The majority of teachers provided one-on-one help.	4	3	2	1
30. The majority of teachers gave me personal attention.	4	3	2	1
31. The majority of teachers accepted students for who they were.	4	3	2	1
32. Students accepted other students for who they were.	4	3	2	1
33. I felt my presence mattered.	4	3	2	1
34. I felt successful in the program most of the time.	4	3	2	1
35. I attended school regularly.	4	3	2	1
36. My parent(s) encouraged and supported me while I was enrolled in the program.	4	3	2	1
37. I had different options in the alternative education program that I didn't have in the traditional school program.	4	3	2	1

38. The alternative education environment allowed students to succeed.	4	3	2	1
39. Teachers had high expectations.	4	3	2	1
40. Teachers, staff, and administration had an interest in my academic and emotional well-being.	4	3	2	1
41. The schedule suited my needs better.	4	3	2	1
42. Staying in school and graduating was important to me.	4	3	2	1
43. Staying in school and graduating was important to my parent(s).	4	3	2	1
44. The program director encouraged and supported me while I was enrolled in the program.	4	3	2	1
45. I would recommend the program to a friend.	4	3	2	1
46. If I had to choose all over again, I would still choose to enroll in the alternative education program.	4	3	2	1

### Post-Graduate School Assessment

**What program-related factors influence program graduates following graduation from the alternative education program?**

***Directions:***

**Statements #47-58 refer to you as a graduate of the *alternative education program* and your responses should be based on the following scale: Agree (4)**

**Somewhat Agree (3) Somewhat Disagree (2) Disagree (1)**

**Please respond to the statements as honestly as possible.**

47. A high school diploma continues to be important to me.	4	3	2	1
48. I have clear career goals.	4	3	2	1

49. Personal relationships I formed in the alternative education program are still important to me today.	4	3	2	1
50. The program prepared me for life after high school.	4	3	2	1
51. I speak effectively.	4	3	2	1
52. I write effectively.	4	3	2	1
53. I work well with others.	4	3	2	1
54. I take responsibility for my behavior.	4	3	2	1
55. I think the things I learned in the program are useful.	4	3	2	1
56. I feel well prepared for employment.	4	3	2	1
57. I feel successful.	4	3	2	1
58. I feel well prepared for post-graduate opportunities.	4	3	2	1

***Directions:***

**For the following statements choose either yes or no.**

59. Are you currently enrolled in a two-year college program?	Yes	No
60. Are you currently enrolled in a four-year college program?	Yes	No
61. Have you graduated from a two-year college?	Yes	No
62. Have you graduated from a four-year college?	Yes	No
63. Are you currently in the military?	Yes	No
64. Are you retired from the military?	Yes	No
65. Are you employed?	Yes	No

Continue to the next page

66. If you answered yes to #65, state your occupation.

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67. I would be willing to participate in an interview with the  
researcher at a mutually agreed upon time and location

Yes

No

If you answered yes to #67 please complete:

Name (First and Last) \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Cell phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to contact you

---

**Thank you for completing the survey. Your responses are important and will be very helpful in contributing to the research on alternative education.**

## **Appendix L**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Educational Experiences Prior to Attending an Alternative High School**

1. What are your thoughts and feelings regarding your educational experience prior to attending an alternative education program?
2. Did you attend school regularly? Why or why not?
3. Were you having academic success? Why or why not?
4. Did you feel connected to peers or teachers at your traditional school? Why or why not?
5. What are the main reasons you decided to attend an alternative education program?

#### **Educational Experiences While Attending an Alternative Education Program**

1. What are your thoughts and feelings about your alternative education experience?
2. Suppose it is my first day at an alternative education program; describe it for me?
3. What would an ideal alternative education program be like?
4. Some people say students who attend alternative education programs did something to bring this about. What would you say?
5. How did you feel about the classes and the teachers in the alternative education program?

#### **Experiences after Attending an Alternative Education Program**

1. What are your feelings about having attended an alternative education program?
2. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your alternative education experience? Why?
3. Did alternative education help you or hurt you academically? How?

4. What did you learn or not learn at the alternative education program that you apply or do not apply to your adult life?
5. In what ways did the alternative education program prepare you or not prepare you for life after high school?

APPENDIX M  
**Permission Obtained for the Interview Questions**

**Subject: Dissertation Survey**

**From:** Beverly Jane Knopf <b.j.knopf@iup.edu>

**Date:** 11/04/11 09:51 AM

**To:** awodnicki@cvsd.net <awodnicki@cvsd.net>

Dear Dr. Wodnicki:

I am a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction and a Teaching Associate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). I am currently working on my dissertation pertaining to graduates' perceptions of an after-school alternative education program that is housed within a traditional high school. For my study I plan to conduct a mixed methods study. For the quantitative portion I have developed a survey which will be used for all of the graduates of the alternative education program. For the qualitative portion I would like to interview some of the graduates of the alternative education program in my study.

Through my research, I found that you conducted a similar qualitative study and created three sets of interview questions which appear in Appendix C of your dissertation. I would like your permission to modify your interview questions and then use the modified questions for my interview with alternative education graduates for my study. I am currently writing my IRB proposal for a course I am enrolled in and hope that I will be able to reference your instrument as part of my methodology.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact me (b.j.knopf@iup.edu). Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Beverly J. Knopf

**Subject: questions**

**From:** Amy Wodnicki <awodnicki@cvsd.net>

**Date:** 11/04/11 11:08 AM

**To:** b.j.knopf@iup.edu <b.j.knopf@iup.edu>

Certainly you may use the questions. Good luck with your study!

Amy

--

Amy F. Wodnicki, Ed.D.

Co-Principal

Chartiers Valley High School