Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the practices, programs, and processes within one urban charter high school. The school has been in existence for ten years and has a history of attracting and retaining students who have been described as “at risk” of academic failure. The study was designed to provide an in-depth, rich understanding of the procedures and routines which support student success and retention within this single school. Further, it utilized comprehensive focus groups, individual interviews, surveys, and demographic questionnaires to elucidate the motivation of students, families, and staff members in their selection and persistence at this particular school. Three major themes emerged from participant responses: (a) people and relationships; (b) school climate and culture; and (c) student centered curricula. Recommendations for practical applications and future research are offered
Dedication

To Mark, Micah and Kenji: you mean more to me than I can ever express.
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Fields of Study

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

What is worth fighting for in our schools is ultimately meeting the learning needs of all students and caring for them effectively. While these educational needs are virtually timeless and universal, responding to them effectively in the complex postmodern age creates unique challenges. (Hargreaves, 1997, p. 22)

Public schooling in the United States is in a state of constant flux (Parejas, 2000). Achievement gaps exist among students across the United States, based on test scores associated with race and socioeconomic status (NCES, 2001, 2006; National Education Association, 2009). Students of African American or Hispanic backgrounds, as well as those in poverty, continue to achieve at lower rates than their white peers (Clark, 1983; Fuhrman, 2002; Haycock, 2001; Haycock, Jerald & Huang, 2001; Lee, Winfield & Wilson, 1991; NCES, 2006, National Education Association, 2009; Orfield, & Lee, 2005). The passage of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), in 2001, called for increased accountability, with the hope that improved oversight and measurable outcomes would lead to a reduction of achievement gaps. Further, NCLB provided additional motivation for schools to serve the needs of all students (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010).

Unfortunately, the lack of funding for the initiative has led to additional challenges among urban and rural schools that struggle to meet the requirements of the law, as well as the educational needs of students without an increase in funding to do so (Haycock, 2001; Haycock, Jerald & Huang, 2001; Machtinger, 2007). At the local, state,
and national levels, NCLB mandated testing created “measures” of academic success but focused on only on the academic aspect of schooling (Haycock, Jerald & Huang, 2001).

Based on the scholarly literature, substantial research has been conducted on how to reform schools, and a multitude of best practices have been identified to help support students and their parents as students try to achieve and graduate from high school (Brown, 2008; Johnson, 2006). Many of these ideas involve evaluation of school leadership, data usage, teacher training and preparation programs, partnerships with industries and institutions of higher learning, statewide and national curriculum evaluations, additional student assessments, changes to the school structure, and many other ideas (Brown, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). Despite the efforts of multiple groups, there is not one unique paradigm that can be replicated and provide success for all struggling schools.

Today, many schools struggle to meet the needs of students. Research, by The Education Trust (2003), indicates that the achievement gap still exists in American public elementary schools and persists beyond high school. Across America, less than half of the ninth graders in the 35 largest cities graduate from high school in four years (National High School Alliance, 2006). Among 18-24 year olds, ninety percent of Whites and 94% of Asians have completed high school or have earned a GED as compared to 81% of African Americans and 63% of Latinos. Further, African Americans are half as likely as White students to earn a college degree by the age of 29, and Latino students are one-third as likely to earn a college degree (The Education Trust, 2003). Data from the Common Core of Data, during school year 2007-2008, indicated that a total of 2,965,286 public school students received a high school diploma, resulting in an Averaged
Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) of 74.9 percent. It was highest for Asian/Pacific Islander students 91.4 percent (Stilwell, 2010). White students attained an 81.0 percent AFGR, while the rates were 64.2 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native students and 63.5 percent for Hispanic students, and 61.5 percent for Black students (Stilwell, 2010). These data show that, despite efforts, the numbers have not changed significantly over the past decade.

Student mobility has shown to have a negative impact on student achievement as well (Fowler-Finn, 2001; Rumberger, 2003; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Rumberger, Larson, Ream and Parlardy, 1999; Stover, 2000; Wright, 1999). The achievement gap is more pronounced in schools with higher mobility rates (Kerbow, 1996; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2006). In large metropolitan urban areas, the mobility rates of high school students range from 0.9% to 39% (NCES, 2007). In urban high schools in particular, it is not atypical to have students move several times within one school year (NCES, 2006). Rumberger, et al., (1999) assert that high school students who change schools are more than twice as likely to drop out prior to graduation. In urban school contexts, the reasons for movement from school to school include, but are not limited to, issues of safety, academic opportunities, and economic or familial crisis (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2006). The reasons for student movement from school to school in a suburban environment are less clear, although suburban schools have increased in diversity over the past two decades as Hispanic and African American students move from urban schools to the suburban schools (NCES, 2006).
Regardless of rationale, students and families often change schools during the high school years. Each move has an effect on the academic and social achievement of students with most outcomes being negative in nature with research showing that the negative outcomes affect not only the student and family who moves but also the classroom teachers who have to re-teach information to new students (Kerbow, 1996). In essence, students who transfer frequently between schools during the school year are at greater risk for academic and behavioral problems (Hartman, 2002). Students changing schools frequently are also at greater risk of dropping out (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2010; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Efforts to retain students, within a single high school for the duration of their secondary educational career, often enhance the opportunity for students to attain academic, social, and post-secondary success (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2010; Pribesh & Downey, 1999).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the processes, programs, and practices of one urban charter high school that entices students to transfer and remain at the school until graduation. By state law, as a charter school, TSS\(^1\) is open to all students within the state of Ohio. The school is physically located within a large urban school district in Ohio, and sixty percent of the TSS student body is from the neighboring large, urban school system. The remaining students come from a variety of school districts, including several who drive 30-50 minutes, each way, to attend this charter school. Further, suburban school districts are well-represented in the student population, with

\(^1\) TSS is the alias given to the charter high school to preserve its identity.
approximately 10% of the student body coming from schools that are rated “excellent with distinction” by the State of Ohio (Ohio Department of Education, 2009, 2010). The following broad question persists, “Why do these students choose this particular school and why do they stay until graduation?”

1.3 Significance of the Study

This qualitative case study was designed to obtain answers for why students chose TSS, and why they remained there as explained in the voices of the students themselves. Parents and faculty were also included in this study. To this end, the researcher hoped that this exploratory investigation would render information related to policies and/or procedures that could be elucidated, recorded, and potentially replicated in other school contexts and settings. An enriched understanding of the rationale of school selection practices of students and their families may provide information for educational professionals and policymakers as they search for direction and answers to improve school outcomes for students in urban school settings.

1.4 Research Questions

According to Feur, Towne, and Shavelson (2002), “understanding causal process and mechanisms requires close attention to contextual factors and that capturing these complexities typically involves qualitative methods…[qualitative methods] are necessary to describe complex phenomena, generate theoretical models, and reframe questions” (p.12). This study examined the thoughts, perceptions, and processes found within an urban charter school to answer the specific research questions below:

(1) What factors convinced students, families, and staff to choose TSS over other schools?
(2) What experiences have had the greatest influence on the students’, families’, and staff’s attitudes toward TSS?

(3) What processes or programs at TSS influenced students, families, and staff members to remain at TSS?

(4) What changes do the students see in themselves as a result of their experiences at TSS?

1.5 Assumptions

The following assumptions were held by the researcher:

1. TSS provides an inviting school climate, which is attractive, safe, and engaging to students and their families.

2. TSS has an enabling structure, which includes meaningful, positive relationships between staff and students.

3. Both respect and trust are evident in the processes and mission of TSS.

4. TSS students benefit from experiential educational opportunities.

5. Each participant has his or her own story on why he or she attends and persists at TSS.

6. Participants in this research study will answer questions truthfully and to the best of their abilities.

1.5 Research Methodology

The rationale for the selection of a specific high school over others involved a multiplicity of individuals, circumstances, and contexts. In an effort to elucidate the complex interaction of factors, perceptions, and mechanisms at work in the selection process, personal interactions with a variety of students, parents and staff members were
necessary. The answers to the research questions posed were based in social explanations as opposed to statistical models; therefore, a qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study (Maxwell, 1996). More specifically, the study utilized a qualitative case study format (Yin, 2003) to holistically explore the interactions and complex processes of the school itself. Further, a qualitative case study approach allowed the researcher to critically examine the phenomena as a way to better understand and clarify why students, parents, faculty, and other staff chose TSS, and why they remained there until graduation. Therefore, students, parents, faculty, and other staff were extended an invitation to participate in the study. Individuals’ involvement in the study comprised participation in an individual or focus group interview or the completion of a written survey of the interview questions. Additionally, participants were asked to complete a biographical questionnaire.

Throughout the collection of data, the study utilized an interpretivist, grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The analysis utilized a constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and was an on-going process and was “flexible” and “emergent” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16). Open and axial coding processes were utilized by the researcher and her team to break down, categorize and rebuild the data to make connections between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), internal and external validity, common criteria in quantitative research, were replaced by trustworthiness. The dependability and accuracy of the study was addressed through copious, careful documentation throughout the process and member checking of the data by participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Authenticity and reliability of qualitative data was replaced by dependability and credibility (Denzin & Lincoln,
Credibility was established through triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

1.6 Sampling Methods

Similar to quantitative research, the method of sample selection is important to qualitative investigations (Patton, 2002). The desire to study a phenomenon in depth and in context should be weighed against the urge to gather a wider view of the processes under observation. The goal of sample selection in qualitative research is to focus on purposeful, criterion based samples composed of individuals who have the knowledge necessary to answer the question under investigation (Schwandt, 1994, 2000). In the context of this study, all students have insight about why they entered TSS. The answers to the question of what specific factors, interactions, policies, or procedures influenced students to remain at TSS; however, they often can only be answered by students who had attended the school for more than a single school year.

Parent engagement and involvement is an important component of student success in schools (Epstein, 2009, Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; National PTA’s National Standards for Family-School Partnerships, 2002). Research indicates that students learn more when parents, educators and community members collaborate and share responsibility for student learning (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). Parents influence often determines the high school that their children attend. They also influence whether or not their children continue to attend a specific school. Schwandt (1994) asserts that the composition of groups surveyed should be limited to those who have the necessary information to answer the question under investigation. Parents possess important insight regarding the most influential factors that shape their students’ decision to attend TSS. To
this end, parents were invited to participate in the study because they possessed unique information into what factors determine their children’ decisions to persist in TSS. Further, TSS faculty and staff were also invited to participate in the study. The research literature suggests that building personnel, such as teachers, school counselors, and administrators, play a critical role in students’ academic and personal lives (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; ASCA, 2006; Brown, 2008).

1.7 Operational Definitions

The operational definitions relevant to the current study include:

- **Experiential education** is an educational, intentional mentored internship experience for all students. This component comprises 40% of the curriculum at TSS and is executed in conjunction with over 85 community partnership sites.

- **Walkabout** is a culminating mentored internship experience for senior students. This component is a requirement for graduation from TSS and occurs, during the second semester of the senior year.

- **Advisory groups** are grade level groups of students (typically 12 to 15) associated with individual teachers who also act as academic advisors and student advocates (*TSS student/staff/parent handbook*, 2009).

- **Advocacy** is actively working to remove systemic barriers to student achievement by promoting policies and procedures that serve all students (ASCA, 2006).

- **Collaboration** is working together toward a common goal, with shared responsibility for outcomes (ASCA, 2005)
• *Optimism* is “an overarching theme that unites efficacy, trust, and academic emphasis” (Hoy, Tarter & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006, p. 824; Hoy, Hoy & Kurtz, 2008).

• *Efficacy* is the belief in one’s ability to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1997).

• *Collective efficacy* is a belief of a group of people in their ability to accomplish a task (Hoy, 2002).

• *Resiliency* is the ability to overcome adversity (Garmezy, 1993; Gordon, 1995; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Milstein & Heny, 2000).

• *Mobility* is the movement or transfer from one school or school district to another.

• *Trust* is an individual’s or group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999).

• *Alternative grading system:* TSS utilizes a mastery-based grading system in which a student is measured against his or her own performance over time. Each teacher has expectations for mastery and each student can earn one of four grades. Two grades are passing: ME which means that a student has Met Expectations and EE which means that a student has exceeded expectations. Two grades are failing: AE which means that a student is Approaching Expectations but did not do well enough to pass and JB which means Just Beginning. A JB grade indicates that a student has done little to no work.
Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature on school reform initiatives as they relate to this urban charter school. In the search for answers on how to best improve the American educational system, many ideas, methods, techniques, programs, and formulas have been developed and examined. In some cases, a program is effective in one school but the formula is not always successful in another (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The challenge of meeting the needs of all students with a one-size fits all model of education has not proved successful based on current levels of performance of graduates of American high schools (Brown, 2008; Fuhrman, 2002; Hess, 2000; NASSP, 2004). The complexity associated with the variety of needs of students across the country is almost unfathomable, yet educational and political leaders persist in trying to reform education with the goal of improving outcomes for all students (Fuhrman, 2002; Lachat, 2001; NASSP, 2004; NCES, 2001, 2006). The challenges of educational reform have focused on how to identify what to reform; how to carry out the reform; and how to measure the progress of the reform efforts.

2.2 Student Performance

In most states, urban students perform below their non-urban peers on standardized tests, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and college entrance examinations, such as the SAT (known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test) (ACT, 2009, 2010; College Board, 2010; NCES, 2001, 2006). Approximately 16,000
school districts exist in the United States (NCES, 2006). Statistically, thirty one percent of all students attend school in the 226 largest school districts (Fuhrman, 2002, NCES 2006). The majority of large school districts are located in metropolitan areas with high population densities.

Past studies, by Dryfoos (1998) and Warren (2005) document that students cannot learn well if they lack the basic requirements of safety, nutrition, housing, and health. Regardless of the setting, high schools are often targeted as the “last chance” for students to attain the skills and knowledge necessary to become productive adults (Jordan, McPartland, Legters & Balfanz, 2002; Raynor, 2006).

2.2.1 The effects of NCLB

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 is the revision of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965 (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002; US Department of Education, 2008). There is significant question about the effectiveness of NCLB on the achievement gap as most measures are limited to test scores (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2006; Haycock, 2001, Ravitch, 2010). NCLB mandates have had a negative effect on community perceptions of schools and thus have inadvertently led to school-leaving tendencies of students in low performing schools (Rumberger, 2003; Rumberger & Larson, 1998, Ravitch, 2010).

A component of NCLB allowed parents to remove their children from low performing schools (Harris, 2006; US Department of Education, 2008). While the intent of the stipulation was to allow parents to seek a better educational environment for their children, the inadvertent effect was an increase in student mobility. High levels of student mobility have been demonstrated to have a negative effect on academic achievement not
only on the students who move but also parents, teachers, school personnel and classmates at both the departing and receiving schools (Fowler-Finn, 2001). Any successful reforms must be sensitive to the potential for inadvertent increases in negative situations (Rumberger, et al., 1999; Rumberger, 2003).

One of the mandates of NCLB is the requirement that all states incorporate graduation rates into their school accountability systems (US Department of Education, 2008). This federal policy resulted in an increase in research directed toward understanding why students drop out of school and what programs or practices may be effective in reducing the dropout rate (Rumberger, 2004). The reasons that students drop out are varied and not limited to one specific area such as family life, income or academic success (Rumberger, 2004).

2.2.2 At risk students

A student determined to be at risk is defined by Sagor and Cox (2004) as:

“any child who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs and inter/intrapersonal relationships” (p. 1)

The identification of students who leave school prior to graduation has been a challenge with current research supporting attention to both individual and institutional factors (Rumberger, 1995, 2001, 2004; Sagor & Cox, 2004). Many students who attended TSS were defined as at risk of not completing high school.

Each component of a student’s life (e.g., home, school, and community) interacts and reacts to the circumstances and situations in each of the other areas. This continual action, reaction, and adjustment process is developmental. It is ever changing and can be challenging but can result in significant growth for students and teachers alike.
(Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The quality of the variety of interactions throughout the lifespan can mitigate or exacerbate the developmental process of growth and it is incumbent upon the teachers entrusted with the education of young people to make every effort to create opportunities for positive, growth-enriching exchanges (Erickson, 1968).

School personnel can play a significant role in limiting the impact of adversity and promoting “self-righting” tendencies within students and their families and is something which can be integrated into the culture and climate of a school through intentional design and effort (Benard, 1999; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Masten, 1994). The strength-based approach of the concept of resiliency attempts to understand, support, and empower students to overcome adversity and attain positive academic, social and career outcomes (Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Milstein & Heny, 2000).

2.2.3 Dropout Risk Factors

Students who drop out of school do so for a myriad of reasons (Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007; Jerald, 2006; Rumberger, 1998, 2001, 2004). Research by Jerald, 2006, indicates that students drop out of high school due to school-related factors as well as personal factors. Poor academic performance (failing classes, low test scores, grade retention and falling behind in course credits) is a significant reason for many students who drop out (Jerald, 2006). Student behaviors such as high absenteeism, bad relationships with teachers and peers and bad classroom behavior have also been identified as reasons for dropping out (Jerald, 2006).

A 2007 study of dropout risk factors, conducted by Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew on behalf the National Dropout Prevention Center, examined dropout literature from 1980 through 2005. Their goal was to identify the risk factors or conditions that
increased likelihood of students dropping out as well as to identify exemplary evidence-based programs that successfully addressed risk factors and conditions. They began with 3400 articles, narrowed them down to 75 worthy of additional review and then chose the 44 that focused on high school dropout or high school graduation as the main focus of analysis. The final group of 21 studies evaluated included longitudinal data, involved groups of at least 30 dropouts in the study and covered diverse groups of students and school environments (Hammond, et al., 2007). The following trends were found:

1. Dropping out of school is related to a variety of factors which can be divided into four domains: individual, family, school and community factors.

2. There is no single risk factor that accurately predicts who is at risk of dropping out

3. The accuracy of dropout predictions increase with the multiplicity of risk factors

4. Dropouts are not a homogenous group. The groups can be categorized by risk factors

5. Students who drop out cite factors across multiple domains. Complex interactions of risk factors are also cited

6. Dropping out of school is a long-term process of disengagement that may begin before the student even enters school

7. Dropping out is described as a process that occurs over time; dropping out is not a single event

The National Dropout Prevention Center work by Hammond, et al. (2007), continued the analysis of dropout risk factors by dividing the factors into four domains. The identified domains are as follows: individual domain; family domain; school domain; and community domain.
**Individual domain risk factors**

Risk factors associated with the individual domain (students themselves) cannot be altered. These factors include race/ethnicity, gender (Rumberger, 2001), immigration status (Rumberger, 1995), limited English proficiency (Schargel, 2004), limited cognitive abilities (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) and the presence of other types of disabilities including physical, emotional or behavioral issues (Lehr, et al, 2004, Schargel, 2004). Students with disabilities were subject to similar risk factors; however they were more likely to have multiple risk factors and were more prone to dropping out (Wagner et al, 1993).

Other individual risk factors identified in the literature included early onset of adult responsibilities, specifically early parenthood (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001) and working at a paid job for more than 20 hours each week (Barro & Kostad, 1987; Bridgeland, et al., 2006; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The combination of school and work proved to be a significant risk factor for high school students dropping out. Barro and Kolstad (1987) analyzed data from the High School and Beyond (HS&B) survey of the sophomore class of 1980 and found that working more than 15 hours a week on a job increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. While the overall dropout rate was 12 percent; it was 18 percent the rate for students who worked 15 or more hours per week. The dropout rates in Barro and Kolstad’s (1987) work increased to 22 percent for students who worked 22 hours or more per week. Social activities were also noted as potential risk factors for dropping out, specifically if peers of students dropped out of if students engaged in early sexual activity (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, et al., 2000).
Poor school performance (low test scores, poor grades or course failure) is one of the most consistent predictors of school dropout and crosses all levels of education (Alexander, 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Jerald, 2006; Rumberger, 2001, Wagner et al., 1993). One-third of dropouts stated that they were “failing in school” or couldn’t keep up with the schoolwork” when asked why they left school prior to graduation (Jordan et al., 1994). Grade retention, also known as being held back, was another indicator of poor school performance as well as a significant risk factor on its own (Rumberger, 2001; Wagner, Blackorby, & Hebbeler, 1993). The impact of grade retention proved to be cumulative in that multiple retentions increased the likelihood of dropping out (Alexander, 2001; Bridgeland, et al., 2006; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Thirty two percent of dropouts surveyed by Bridgeland, et al. in 2006 stated that they were required to repeat at least one grade. Wagner, et al., (1993) utilized data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students (NLTS), found that students with disabilities tended to have multiple risk factors including lower grade point averages, course failures and being up to three years behind their peers in reading and math levels. These students were found to leave school during the last two years, typically at age 18 and having accumulated only 10 academic credits.

Lack of school engagement was identified as a significant risk factor for school dropout (Hammond, et al., 2007). The definition of engagement varies in the literature. Marks (2000) conceptualized engagement as “a psychological process, specifically, the attention, interest, and investment and effort students expend in the work of learning.” (pp 154-155). Marks’ conceptualization includes both affective and behavioral components of student learning. Finn and Voelkl (1993) defined school engagement as
having "both a behavioral component, termed participation, and an emotional component termed identification" (p. 249). Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, (2004) assimilated data from school engagement research and defined school engagement as having three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement deals with student actions such as following school rules, attending school regularly and completing homework. Emotional engagement focuses on feelings, attitudes and values which can be captured in sense of school belonging and identification with the school and teachers. Cognitive engagement is a measure of effort and motivation to achieve and go beyond the minimum requirements for learning tasks (Finlay, 2006; Fredricks et al., 2004). Regardless of which definition or conceptualization is utilized, the literature indicates that there is significant overlap between the behavioral, emotional and cognitive types of engagement (Fredricks, et al., 2004). The lack of school engagement is termed disengagement and parallels the three areas identified by Fredricks, et al., (2004).

Academic disengagement can be measured in multiple ways with absenteeism as the simplest indicator (Rumberger, 2001). Cutting classes, leaving early and basic truancy are also indicators of academic disengagement (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Fifty nine to sixty five percent of dropouts surveyed by Bridgeland et al. (2006) indicated that they missed class often, took three hour lunches and had long strings of absences that sometimes resulted in referrals to the truancy officer. Students who exhibit these forms of disengagement are not necessarily behaving poorly, they are simply not in school or in class.

Behavioral disengagement is exhibited by students acting up in class, being disrespectful to teachers and otherwise getting into trouble (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).
Negative behaviors that eventually led to police involvement and truancy were found to be a strong predictor of dropout by Wehlage and Rutter (1986) in their analysis of the data gathered in the High School and Beyond (HS & B) survey of the class of 1980.

Psychological disengagement is demonstrated in the attitudes students have toward schools (Hammond et al., 2007). Surveys of dropouts include statements such as not feeling as if they belonged at school (Jordan, et al, 1994) and being bored, discouraged, unchallenged and uninterested in classes (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Social disengagement is demonstrated by lack of participation in extracurricular activities (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe & Carlson, 2000) and the tendency of students to spend time with others who were not interested in school (Bridgeland, et al., 2006).

**Family Domain Risk Factors**

Forty percent of the dropout risk factors identified in the 2007 National Dropout Prevention Center analysis by Hammond et al. can be attributed to factors related to family backgrounds and home experiences. These factors have a tremendous influence on student perceptions of school, their persistence and the value they place upon education in general (Bridgeland, et al., 2006; Hammond et al., 2007). These factors include challenges that cannot typically be changed but recognition of them can help educators conceptualize how best to support students in the school setting.

Familial background characteristics include socioeconomic status (SES), single parent families and limited spoken English within the home (Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986. Levels of household stress such as those brought about by family conflict, substance use and/or abuse (Rosenthal, 1998) and financial and physical concerns (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio & Thompson 2004) are also risk factors.
associated with dropping out of school. The dynamics of families can also play a part in school leaving tendencies in the form of too much freedom and limited parental checking on school work (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Lehr et al., 2004; Rosenthal, 1998) and in the form of early caregiving practices and the quality of mother-child relationships (Jimerson et al., 2000). A logical connection between family influences and school dropout is that of parental attitudes, values and beliefs about education. Low parental expectations are linked to higher dropout rates (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006). The likelihood of dropping out also increases if a sibling or other family member has already dropped out of school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The final familial domain factor identified by Hammond et al. (2007) is that of parent behaviors related to education. The parents of dropouts tended not to have much contact with school until their children were failing (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger, 1995) and they spent little time, if any, talking to their children about school in any form (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

There may be limits to what educators can do to ameliorate the effects of individual and family factors; however, schools do have the ability and responsibility to do what they can to improve or modify the school structure, environment and policies to support student persistence to graduation.

**School Domain Risk Factors**

School structure has received much attention in recent literature examining the national dropout crisis (Hammond et al., 2007). Large school size tends to allow students to become “invisible” and not be noticed in either a positive or negative way (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Lehr et al., 2004). Smaller learning communities may offer the
opportunity for relationships and additional student to adult contact on a regular basis (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). Smaller class sizes and teacher competence are also school-related factors that can be related to dropout rates, although there is some debate over the impact of these factors (Rumberger, 1995, 2001). Not surprisingly, schools with high poverty rates and higher concentrations of minority students tend to have higher dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995, 2001) as do schools with low overall student performance levels and a high number of previously retained students (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). The perceived safety of the school, low attendance rates and high rates of negative behavioral incidents all affect the climate within the school, which can in turn lead to increases in the number of dropouts (Lehr, et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1995, 2001).

Surveys of individuals who have dropped out of school cite issues related to school policies and practices (Hammond, et al., 2007). The zero tolerance policies as practiced in some schools actually function to push students away from schools as opposed to making the environment more inviting or engaging (Rumberger, 2001; 2004). Other issues cited by dropouts include lack of relevant curriculum (Lehr et al., 2004) non-interesting classes and a lack of opportunities for real world learning (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). These areas, specifically cited by dropouts, are areas that school administrators and policy makers can change.

**Community Domain Risk Factors**

Urban schools have higher dropout rates than do suburban or rural schools (Education Week, 2010; Lehr et al., 2004) with the highest rates of dropouts located in the western states of California and Nevada, the state of Florida as well as New York City and Chicago, Illinois (Education Week, 2010; Lehr et al., 2004). The term “dropout
factories” has been coined by Balfanz and Letgers (2004), to describe the large, urban, high poverty schools that produce the greatest number of dropouts. Estimates from the 2010 Diplomas Count data compiled by Education Week, 1,297,628 students from the class of 2010 failed to graduate and one out of every five of those non-graduates can be traced to 25 individual school systems. Congruent with the dropout rates in urban schools; higher rates of dropouts are associated with higher levels of poverty within the community (Rumberger, 2001). Communities with higher levels of mobility and instability are also associated with higher dropout rates (Rosenthal, 1998).

The questions of why students drop out and what can be done to reduce the dropout rate are complex and multifaceted. As the preceding literature suggests, non-school related dropout risk factors, including those of individual students, their families and the surrounding community are important but in essence out of the control of school officials. The ability to create and offer educational alternatives that are designed to increase student engagement, provide individualized, relevant, real-world educational experiences is one of the benefits of the school choice parameter of NCLB (US Department of Education, 2008, 2010).

2.3 Alternative Education

Alternative education programs exist for a myriad of reasons. Some serve specific populations such as students with behavioral challenges, intellectual challenges, pregnant and parenting teens and potential dropouts (Foley & Pang, 2006). Regardless of the underlying principles for the creation of alternative education programs, they do serve a purpose and as a group share several significant characteristics (Foley & Pang, 2006). Despite a rather negative connotation of the term “alternative program,” the schools are
growing in number and diversity (NCES, 2006). The definition of alternative education now encompasses charter schools, public alternative schools, community-based schools, and schools within juvenile detention centers (NCES, 2006). Alternative programs often serve as organizations in which students can obtain an individualized, appropriate education designed to foster student success.

Many alternative school programs are small in size, serving approximately 200-300 students (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass & Witte, 2009). They are often designed to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of the students in supportive environments that strengthen relationships. Meaningful interactions occur between and among peers and staff members and are the pathway to the formation of relational trust among the members of the school community (Foley & Pang, 2006; Gordon, 2002; Byrk & Schneider, 2002; Wehlage, et al, 1998). Students who attend alternative programs come from a variety of educational, socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. They may come from widespread areas depending on the type of program or needs of the student. Some alternative educational programs are privately funded but many are public schools which are either part of school districts or charter schools located within failing school systems (Center for Education Reform, 2007, 2010). Alternative programs exist in rural, suburban and urban school communities and are sometimes funded by joint efforts of several school districts in an effort to provide appropriate services for students in an economical manner (Ohio Department of Education, 2009).

2.3.1 Charter Schools

The first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992. Charter schools have been met with resistance, since their inception, and only until the President Obama’s emphasis
on charter schools have they been hailed as a positive educational alternative (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010). Further, charter schools are an educational option currently available in 40 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia and serve over 1.5 million students in over 4600 schools (Center for Educational Reform, 2010). They are typically located in areas where failing schools exist. In essence, they began as a response for educational choice and individualized educational opportunities (Dryfoos, 2003; Levine, 2002; Zimmer, et al. 2009).

Charter schools are one specific type of alternative education. They operate with three basic premises: (a) choice, (b) accountability, and (c) freedom. The concept of educational choice is that families are afforded the opportunity to choose the schools their children attend and can select schools that offer specific programs that meet the educational needs of individual students (Center for Educational Reform, 2010). Accountability is exemplified by the fact that all public charter schools test students to the same standards as those in typical school systems. Charter schools’ end of course and graduation examinations is typically identical to those given in traditional public schools. Charter schools are also placed on the same rating system, as other public schools (Ohio Department of Education, 2010).

The freedom afforded to charter schools is based on autonomy from bureaucratic red tape and layers of administration that is typical of many school districts, especially large districts (Center for Education Reform, 2007, 2010; Zimmer, et.al., 2009). The ability to utilize true site-based management about almost all aspects of the educational process from curriculum and instructional time to teacher selection allows charter schools to focus on the students and their needs as opposed to conforming to central office
administrative mandates (Center for Education Reform, 2010). In addition, charter schools have to demonstrate fiscal responsibility and management competence for their work with and on behalf of students. The consequence for poor fiscal and overall management of a charter school is that they can be shut down by their sponsors or by the state department of education (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). To date, more than 12.5% of all charter schools opened across the nation have closed (Center for Education Reform, 2007, 2010).

Historically, charter schools offer an educational choice for families who have not found success in typical school systems or who have chosen to leave such systems for reasons of safety, specific educational focus, specific philosophical goals (such as “back to basics” or “college preparation”) and for individualized attention for students. In many charter schools, curricular decisions are made at the school level and learning environments are determined by the staff and teachers of the school, as opposed to being mandated by a large district. Most charter schools are smaller than typical schools with the average size of 372 students per school (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009).

Charter schools are typically funded at a lower rate than typical schools, with an average federal and state spending deficit of $3468.00 per student (Center for Education Reform, 2010). Despite the disparity in funding, many charter schools manage to meet performance standards on graduation tests, graduation rates and make adequate yearly progress (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes at Stanford University, 2009; Harris, 2006; Ohio Department of Education, 2010).
Charter school success rates are as varied and individualized as the schools themselves. A 2009 report by the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) analyzed longitudinal math and reading data from 15 states and the District of Columbia to track student performance in the charter schools compared to how they would have performed in their home schools. The students who attended charter schools were matched with virtual counterparts in their home schools, based on student demographics, limited English proficiency, free and reduced lunch status and participation in special education services. The results indicated that 17 percent of charter schools across 15 states and the District of Columbia provided a superior education for students; almost 50% delivered an education equivalent to their home school system, and 37% performed at a level lower than that of students who remained in their home schools. According to segments of the research literature, charter schools can offer a “good” alternative for students and families who seek unique learning experience or environment.

2.4 School environment

Bernard (1993) described a positive school environment as one with caring and trusting relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution which can nurture a student’s problem-solving abilities and social skills. Schools are required by law to provide safe environments for their students through the creation of policies, procedures, and expectations that clearly identify emergency plans and consequences for behavioral infractions (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). The physical environment of a school and how it interacts with the students, staff, and other
stakeholders plays a part in the way people within it experience education (21st Century School Fund, 2009).

School systems are often seen as bureaucratic structures that are entrenched in historical management practices that favor business models of efficiency (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hoy & Miskel, 2008, Patterson, Hale & Stessman, 2007; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). The basic design of typical school systems has not undergone significant change, despite reform efforts for 100 years (Lee, 2001). Typically, school systems depend on hierarchical power arrangements with multiple levels of administration, central offices and impersonal relationships (Geist & Hoy, 2004; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007). Many teachers work in isolation at all grade levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school), but it is more prevalent at the high school level. Mandated graduation requirements, state testing constraints, and adherence to state, local, and national standards of education all converge to make the task of high school that of “hitting all the targets,” as opposed to focusing on student learning (Ravitch, 2010). The fact that students are aware of the targets and mandates does not change the scenario nor does evidence suggest that students possess the desire to have relationships with their teachers (Foley & Pang, 2006; Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007). The voices of students, as they matriculate through high school, have been noticeably absent from the discussion of school reform.

2.4.1 School Climate

An environment in which students feel respected and trusted by teachers and peers can be described as a school with a positive school climate (Gonder & Hymes, 1994). There are multiple measures of school climate. Many involve brief written
surveys or inventories, which invite staff members to rate their perceptions of empowerment, trust, collegiality, efficacy, and collaboration between students and administration (Geist & Hoy, 2004; Hoy, Sweetland & Smith, 2002; Hoy, Tarter & Woolfolk Hoy, 2006; Hoy, Hoy & Kurtz, 2008; Stanley, Juhnke, & Purkey, 2004). Purkey and Smith (1983) include community involvement, community influences, characteristics of school community members and school polices as components of the school climate as well.

There is some variation among experts in the definition of what factors encompass a school’s climate. According to the Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth and the Alliance Organizing Project (2001), positive school climates are those that embrace safety. It also defined school climate as “an orderly environment in which the school family feels valued and able to pursue the school’s mission free from concerns about disruptions and safety” (p. 2). Further, the measure of a school climate can be described as part of the health of an organization as well (Hoy, Sweetland & Smith, 2002), and a healthy school is one in which “the institutional, administrative, and teacher levels are in harmony; and the school meets functional needs as it successfully copes with disruptive external forces and directs its energies toward its mission” (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 203). Regardless of the components of school climate, there is agreement among researchers that school climate creates the norms and values of the school. These norms and values, which are sometimes intrinsically understood, in turn affect teaching, learning, policies, programs and practices within the schools (Hoy & Hannum, 1997, Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Purkey & Smith, 1983).
The Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC, 2004) determined that eight components interact to compose a school’s climate. These expression and levels of each of these components within a school environment are captured in the ASSC survey, and are listed below:

1. Appearance and physical plant
2. Faculty relations
3. Student interactions
4. Leadership/decision making
5. Disciplined environment
6. Learning environment
7. Attitude and culture
8. School-Community relations

The first seven items of the above list are discussed elsewhere in this literature review. Additionally, the importance of school community relations is one which demands attention in the discussion of educational reform and is discussed in section 2.5.

2.5 Parent Engagement

In many homes across America, parents want their children to be successful (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parents tend to want their children to have more than they did as children and to have opportunities that help them be successful (Lareau, 2003). This desire to have children in an environment in which they can grow and learn is human nature (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Typically, parent engagement is limited to those who have the time, comfort level and desire to participate in school activities (Redding, Langdon, Meyer & Sheley, 2004). Despite a desire to participate, many racial/ethnic minority and poor parents are not able to participate, due to their need to work multiple jobs to pay the rent and keep food on the table (Lareau, 2003). Further, parents in poverty may also have negative memories and school experiences from their own lives and may be reluctant to engage in school-related activities (Lareau, 2003).
Parent engagement programs tend to be small in scope and scale and not specifically focused on student learning. They also tend to be short-lived and associated with specific events as opposed to being integral to the functioning of the school community. Henderson and Mapp (2002), based on their research in high-achieving schools, concluded that successful efforts to engage families in schools might include:

1. building a foundation of trust and respect,
2. connecting parent-engagement strategies to learning objectives, and
3. reaching out to engage parents beyond the school community

Building trust between parents and school requires focused investments of time and resources but as teachers enlist the support of parents in learning, in different ways at different points in time, they are reminded of the advantages of such connections (Whitney, Leonard, Leonard, Camelio, & Camelio, 2005). Over time, student learning and success become the focus of interactions between parents and teachers. Frequent and positive interactions between teachers and parents can lead to a greater level of trust and respect, increased social capital for children, and a school community which is more supportive of each child’s school success (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Redding et al., 2004).

### 2.6 Relational Trust

Schools are, at their core, social institutions that depend on daily interpersonal relations among students, teachers, and administrators (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Based on studies in three Chicago elementary schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) demonstrated that schools with high levels of trust between school professionals and parents; between teachers and the principal; and among teachers were three times more likely to show
improvement in reading and mathematics than those schools with very low levels of trust. Further, schools with consistently low levels of trust showed little or no improvement in student achievement measures, despite being matched in student populations and neighborhood dimensions.

Relational trust is an organizational property that develops at the individual level. It is formed through social exchanges between and among members of role groups associated with the organization (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Members of each role group judge, as individuals, the intentions of others based on personal exchanges, social interactions and socially defined norms (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Trust is determined to exist, when actions enable the organization to operate effectively and productively. The concept of relational trust helps to explain the differences in productivity of schools as shown by the Chicago School Reform work conducted by Byrk and Schneider (2002).

High trust levels within teacher role groups have been associated with school effectiveness. In a past study focused on middle schools, Tarter, Sabo and Hoy (1995), found that teacher trust in the principal and teacher trust in their colleagues predicted school effectiveness. These studies were conducted using research instruments that allowed for participants to report their ratings on Likert scales, which were then scored utilizing a standardized scoring rubric created by the researchers. The scores could then be converted to Z scores and compared to the existing database of similar schools.

Collective efficacy is the belief among staff members that their efforts as a whole will have a positive effect on student achievement (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2000). In this study of 452 urban elementary teachers in 47 schools, they found that a
single point increase in the schools’ collective efficacy score translated to an 8.5 point increase in student achievement scores; therefore, efficacy was a positive indicator of school performance.

The conceptual properties of relational trust, as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002), mirror the elements identified by Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999). Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) identified the facets of trust to include openness, honesty, competence, reliability and benevolence. Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) characteristics of discernment were respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. Using both approaches, trust involved the cognitive judgment of one party that compelled the other to either risk or not to risk trusting the other. The two aforementioned authors described the process toward trust as a temporal progression (e.g., intrapersonal discernment to interpersonal interactions to favorable outcomes). The effect of structural properties and contextual conditions on social exchanges within schools can either support the formation of relational trust between role groups or it can block its development (Byrk & Schnieder, 2002). Since learning is a cooperative process, distrust often negatively affects cooperation and teachers' tendency toward collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Based on previous research by Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999) Tschannen-Moran (2004) proceeded to describe the attitudes and behaviors that school administrators and staff members could demonstrate as they worked to enhance levels of trust within schools. She identified leadership functions that can lead to the development of trust as multidimensional and include:

1. visioning (having a clear idea of where the school should go)
2. modeling (demonstrating appropriate professional behaviors)
3. coaching (working with teachers and staff members to improve outcomes)
4. managing (making appropriate decisions and protecting teachers and staff members from outside interference) and
5. mediating (facilitating and peacemaking when necessary).

In this work, Tshannen-Moran (2004) suggested that when all of these leadership functions are performed and relayed to all stakeholders, a culture of trust can develop.

Creation of an inviting school environment in which students can thrive, learn, and grow requires a variety of processes, policies, programs, and practices demonstrated from leadership, staff, and parents. Many students who chose to attend TSS exhibited factors which could lead them to be at risk of not graduating from high school. This research study was conducted to elucidate how the environment at this particular charter school increased student engagement and facilitated their persistence to graduation.
Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Many American urban schools are not meeting the needs of students in terms of college readiness and workforce readiness (Campbell, 2003; College Board, 2010, Green, 2002; Warren, 2005). While students may choose to follow a variety of career or educational paths after graduation from high school, all should be ready to meet the challenges of college and work (ACT, 2009). Many factors influence students and their families’ decision to choose specific schools. Little research has been conducted to explore why students remain at specific schools, particularly charter schools.

3.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and elucidate the combination of practices, programs, and processes that take place within the context of an urban charter school. Specifically, the researcher was interested in identifying the actual practices of the students and staff within the school that both encouraged students to enter the school and persist until graduation.

The data collected from this study may have the potential to contribute meaningful information to the field of urban educational reform by examining the types and areas of support provided to students in the school with the hope of transferring, such practices to other urban schools. For this study, the urban charter school reflected the diversity of the specific community in which it was located but did not match the urbanicity, as measured by the poverty rate and racial/ethnic diversity, of the major
metropolitan city in which it was located. Thus, this particular charter school was defined as an urban school based on its geographic location within a large city and not on the demographics of the students, teachers or parents associated with the school.

3.3 Overview of the School Setting

3.3.1 The Scarlet School (TSS)

TSS, a researcher-selected pseudonym for the actual school, is an urban charter school created in 2000 to meet the needs of student and families in the central Ohio area. By law, the school is open to all students within the state of Ohio but geographical limitations typically limit enrollment to students living within a 60 minute radius of Columbus. The school has an experiential education focus, with hands-on service learning program comprising 40% of the school’s academic curriculum. Like all public charter schools, TSS is required to administer state-mandated graduation examinations; meet state requirements for graduation, attendance and adequate yearly progress; and must have highly qualified teachers (HQT) in core academic classes (e.g., math, science, social studies, English, languages, the arts, and reading).

Its mission statement and vision both exemplify the role of the student as the center of the educational process at TSS. More specifically, the mission of the school is the following:

[The Scarlet School (TSS)] has a particular mission to urban students in Central Ohio preparing them for lifelong learning and informed citizenship through real-world experiences and rigorous academics. Fostering ownership and responsibility for their education prepares our students to be successful in college, the workplace, and other endeavors they undertake upon leaving TSS. (TSS Student handbook, 2009, p. 2)
TSS has been successful in that it has survived and succeeded in a variable climate of political and fiscal support from the state, over its ten year history; however, little research has been done to identify why students and their families are attracted to it and why they stay at TSS after their arrival.

According to the 2009-2010 School Year Report Card, TSS has achieved a rating of “Effective”; meeting 10 of 12 state indicators and achieving a performance index of 99.2 out of a possible 120 (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). The measures of rigorous curriculum for the class of 2010 indicated a graduation rate of 82%; attendance rate of 93.0. During the 2009-2010 school year, specific demographics were as follows:

1. Ethnicity: 15.8% Black non-Hispanic; 0.0% American Indian or Alaskan native; 0.0% Asian or Pacific Islander; 0.0% Hispanic; 11.2% Multi-racial and 70.2% White, non-Hispanic
2. Socioeconomic status: 34.7% are economically disadvantaged based on federal guidelines
3. Students with disabilities: 23.7% of students have identified disabilities
4. Migrant and Limited English proficiency (LEP): 0.0% of the students are classified as migrants; 0.0% of the students are identified as students meeting LEP criteria (Ohio Department of Education, 2010).

TSS is housed in a three building facility that was originally a flooring store. The only building with full occupancy permits is the main building, which is referred to as “building A”. All nine classrooms, an art room, a media lab, a computer-based writing lab and a multi-purpose “big room” are all located within in building A. Three offices for administrators and one office for the nurse complete the central facility. The building is
ADA compliant with wheelchair ramps both inside and outside the building but it does not have an elevator. There are no classes offered on the second floor (media and writing labs) that cannot be duplicated on the first floor. The second building of the school is referred to as “building B” and is located across a small parking lot from building A. The second building houses the school registrar, development department and the business management team. This building is in the process of obtaining full occupancy permits but at this time can only be used sporadically for short term events such as college visits and photography. The third building is referred to as “building C” and is currently utilized as a storage building (personal communication, E. Meers, 2010).

TSS began with 75 students in 2000 and has grown to an enrollment of about 240 students. TSS is open to all students within the state of Ohio and has drawn from as many as 20 school districts in one year. A large percentage of students who attend TSS come from the areas in closest proximity to the school; with approximately 60% of the student population drawn from the surrounding city district. Based on data from addresses listed in the 2006-2007 student directory (the most recent one in print), 13.5% of the student body resided in the xxx24 zip code; 10.9% resided in the xxx14 zip code; 10% lived in the xxx02 zip code and 9.1% lived in the xxx29 zip code. The remainder of the student body resided in a collection of 36 other zip codes including 16 students from the high achieving surrounding suburban school districts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

The multiplicity of student domiciles makes it challenging to describe urbanicity of the students’ home environments; however, it is possible to make some general statements about the areas in which 43.5% of the student body resides. The general area surrounding TSS is named somewhat unique. The area has many suburban
characteristics even though it is located within the confines of a large urban area. This enclave is a residential area with small businesses on the main traffic thoroughfares. Examples of businesses in the area are dry cleaners, auto repair shops, restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, print shops, and bookstores. Larger businesses in the area include a food manufacturing facility, a sport and racquet club and two educational support facilities, one for hearing impaired individuals and the other for persons diagnosed with autism. Other features of the area include private, parochial and public elementary and middle schools as well as several public parks, a branch of the City Library and a multitude of natural resources such as a natural ravine and watershed (City of Columbus, 2007).

Positive statistics from the area immediately around TSS include a higher than national average of occupied housing units and a higher than national percentage of the population (ages 16 and over) in the workforce. The xxx29 and xxx02 and xxx24 zip codes all indicated a higher than national average percentage of renter-occupied housing units and slightly lower than national average median family and household incomes. These are interesting statistics which may be offset by considering the effect of the somewhat transient nature of the students associated with the University area. However, the poverty rate of non-students in the xxx02 zip code is still higher than national averages even after the college-age student effects are taken into account. The only zip code with higher than national average median household, family and per capita income was xxx14; the area immediately surrounding TSS. Not surprisingly, this zip code also held the highest percentage of residents with bachelor’s degrees or higher and the lowest average family size (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).
3.4 Research Questions

According to Feur, Towne, and Shavelson (2002), “understanding causal process and mechanisms requires close attention to contextual factors and that capturing these complexities typically involves qualitative methods…[they] are necessary to describe complex phenomena, generate theoretical models, and reframe questions” (p.12). This study was designed to examine the thoughts, perceptions, and processes found within an urban charter school to answer the following research questions:

(1) What factors convinced students, families, and staff to choose TSS over other schools?

(2) What experiences have had the greatest influence on the attitudes of students, families and staff toward TSS?

(3) What processes or programs at TSS influenced students, families and staff members to remain at TSS?

(4) What changes do the students see in themselves as a result of their experiences at TSS?

3.5 Conceptual Framework: Invitational Education and Counseling

The work of Purkey (1999) and Purkey and Novak (1996) created a theoretical model for the creation of a total educational environment. It has been described as democratically oriented, perceptually anchored, self-concept approach to the educative and counseling process. Invitational education and counseling is based on positive psychology and focuses on the positive and negative signal systems that exist in all
human interactions. It is described as a “self-correcting theory of practice” (Purkey & Novak, 1996) and is based on Dewey’s (1916) concept of democratic, participant based ethos in education; Carl Rogers’ (1951) client-centered psychotherapy, in which development of positive regard between participants is paramount; Sidney Jourard's (1971) humanistic theory of self-disclosure as a tool for developing relationships; Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy, in which participants believe that they can change and improve their situations and Martin Seligman's (1998) concept of learned optimism, in which participants react to setbacks from a position of control and personal power (International Alliance for Invitational Education, 2010).

Purkey (1999) asserts that invitational education/counseling provides a framework to make schools safer, more satisfying, exciting and enriching for all stakeholders (e.g., parents, students, and teachers). Invitational education focuses on four premises of respect, trust, optimism and intentionality. The four guiding principles are enacted throughout the school through five school environmental areas. The five environmental areas addressed by invitational education are the “5 Ps”: people, places, policies, programs, and processes that either support or hamper student success (Purkey, 1999; Purkey & Novak, 1996; Purkey & Schmidt, 1996; Purkey & Strahan, 1995; Stanley, Juhnke & Purkey, 2004).

Invitational education/counseling involves all stakeholders in the educational process, students, staff, family members and the community at large. It encompasses efforts on the part of all stakeholders but begins with the adults within the school. Teachers are the first line of intentional modeling in invitational education, and are
charged with demonstrating respect, caring and understanding (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996; Purkey & Strahan, 1995; Stanley & Purkey, 1994; Stanley, Juhnke, & Purkey, 2004)

The physical environment of the school plays a part in the engagement and success of students and staff within the building. On the contrary, poor facilities tend to engender poor results (Schneider, 2002). The less concrete but no less influential components of an inviting school are the policies, programs and processes that take place on a day to day basis. Policies are the formal and informal rules, regulations, procedures, and activities that determine how the school functions (Hoy, et al., 2006; Purkey & Strahan, 1995; Purkey & Novak, 1996; Stanley, Juhnke & Purkey, 2004). These components provide structure and limitations for those who work and learn within the school environment.

Programs are defined as the curricular components of the school that support emotional, social, academic and physical growth among the students and staff. These components are typically formal and may be flexible depending on the needs of the school community at any given time. The processes are collected values, attitudes, engagement, behavioral expectations and activities that support student, staff and administrative work within the school. Processes may change over time as the population changes and grows but in all cases should be intentional in nature (Purkey & Novak, 1996; Purkey & Strahan, 1995).

The goal of inviting education/counseling is that of creating learning environments that support growth of the human spirit of staff, students and administrators in addition to providing opportunities for academic, social and physical growth (Shoffner & Vacc, 1999). Trust, respect, optimism, and positive intentionality are all important
components of creating an environment in which students can achieve success on multiple levels (Lightfoot, 1999; Purkey, 1999; Purkey & Novak, 1996; Stanley, Juhnke & Purkey, 2004). An underlying premise of invitational education is that of the belief in the human potential for growth and success.

The lens of invitational education and counseling enables the researcher to focus on how the four assumptions are applied within this school under study. This research project hopes to identify policies, programs and processes as they exist within this school. The framework of invitational education and counseling provides the researcher with direction for stakeholder identification and a focus for the types of questions to ask participants, as well as the kinds of things to closely examine.

3.6 Conceptual Framework: Student Engagement

Student engagement can be defined in a variety of ways as (Fredricks, et al., 2004; Marks, 2000) but most definitions included behavioral, emotional and cognitive types of engagement with significant overlap between them (Fredricks, et al., 2004). The work of Rumberger & Larson (1998) provided a conceptual framework viewed through the lens of student engagement with specific attention to student background characteristics, social and academic engagement and educational achievement/attainment.

Rumberger and Larson’s model (1998) examined the lengthy process of dropping out from the individual perspective of students and how their interactions and experiences influenced their eventual decisions to stay in school and graduate or to drop out. Individual student characteristics included demographics, educational background and general attitudes and beliefs about schools and schooling. These individual (and essentially static) characteristics interacted with and influenced the levels of social and
academic engagement of the student. The model also suggested that individual student characteristics exhibit a bi-directional interaction with educational attainment (earning credits, graduating). Educational attainment was directly influenced by educational stability (high mobility and dropping out) and academic achievement (earned grades in classes and test scores). The bi-directionality of the connection between educational stability and academic achievement represented the cyclical nature of students staying in one school long enough to demonstrate high academic achievement which in turn may have encouraged them to remain in school while the opposite situation (failing grades and low test scores) could hasten the process toward dropping out (Rumberger, 1995, 2001, 2004).

The model incorporated two types of engagement often associated with dropouts, social engagement (attendance, participation in school activities and misbehavior) and academic engagement (level of class participation, motivation to do well in school) (Wehlage, et al., 1989). Student engagement was identified in multiple studies as a strong predictor of dropping out, even after controlling for student background and academic achievement (Rumberger, 2001). Students who exhibited high levels of absenteeism, fail to attend classes and complete the homework were more likely to drop out of school than those who were present and completed work (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

Poor academic achievement was also identified as a strong risk factor for dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Students who performed poorly
on tests, including high stakes exit examinations, were more likely to leave school without earning a diploma (Rumberger, 2001; Ravitch 2010).

Specific demographic characteristics were also associated with dropping out of school. Gender (maleness), race and ethnicity, limited English proficiency and immigration status all increased the likelihood of dropping out of high school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995). Low levels of educational planning, limited occupational aspirations and early parenthood were also associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Grade retention was also shown to be a large factor in predicting dropouts (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Rumberger (1995) found that students who were retained for at least one year between grades one and eight were four times more likely to drop out between grades eight and then than those who were not retained. The data held true even when personal characteristics and other environmental factors were controlled (Rumberger, 1995).

Rumberger and Larson’s (1998) model of student engagement and how it is related to the process of dropping out was selected to provide specific direction for this study. The framework of invitational education and counseling (Purkey, 1999; Purkey & Novak, 1996) provided an explanation of what stakeholder groups were important to this study as well as creating general directions for examination (people, places, policies, programs and processes). Invitational education and counseling did not provide specific information about what behaviors, individual student factors, types of engagement and indicators of educational progress should be examined. The combination of the two frameworks provided a philosophical direction (Purkey, 1999; Purkey & Novak, 1996)
supported by specific indicators (Rumberger & Larson, 1998) that could illuminate whether the school under study actually supported student success and facilitated persistence. The bi-directionality of the interactions of the student engagement model (Rumberger & Larson, 1998) also provided a beginning point for the development of the emerging conceptual framework of TSS, discussed in section 5.3.

Figure 1  Student engagement model as developed by Rumberger & Larson, 1998

3.6 Case Study Design

Qualitative research is described by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 2). Merriam (1998) described
qualitative research as the “umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p.5). The five characteristics explained by Merriam (1998) are as follows:

1. to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participant’s perspective (emic) but not the researcher’s (etic);

2. to use the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis;

3. to do research is to involve fieldwork, i.e., “the researcher must physically go to the people, setting, site, institution (the field) in order to observe behavior in the natural setting” (p. 7);

4. to employ an inductive research strategy, i.e., “builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than tests existing theory” (p. 7);

and

5. to focus on the process, meaning and understanding, and “the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive” (p. 8).

The complexity of a functioning school community is one which lends itself to the five components of qualitative research as listed above. A qualitative approach seemed appropriate for the study as proposed in section 3.2.

Case studies can be conducted with small or large groups, individuals, programs, cultures and religions (Patton, 2002). A case study design can be open-ended to allow the researcher to examine issues in depth and modify research directions, based on emergent themes within the data collected. Case studies allow for in-depth exploration of
processes, people and behaviors to enable the research to delve beyond the “what” and instead focus on why and how of issues. Yin (2008, p. 13) stated that “for the “how” and “why” questions, the case study has a distinct advantage”.

Case study results are more convincing and rich in information when the data collected comes from a variety of sources and methods (Patton, 2002). Merriam (1998) describes it as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27) and suggests analyzing data as you go, arguing that this process will follow in a funnel-like design resulting in less data gathering in later phases of the study along with a congruent increase in analysis checking, verifying, and confirming.

3.6.1 Epistemology

This study utilized a grounded theory approach in which theory is developed from the data (Patton, 2002). Grounded theory focuses on the lives of participants in small increments of time or “slices of life” with the researcher acting as a participant-observer (Charmaz, 2000, p. 522). The grounded theorist, according to Glaser (2009), is to apply a set of rigorous research procedures to the data to allow for conceptual categories to emerge. The researcher has to be able to trust the process and not use simplistic descriptive analysis to identify the main concern of the participants.

The research proposed in this study utilized an interpretivist epistemology (Schwandt, 1994). Merriam (2009) states, “In interpretive research, education is considered to be a process and school is a lived experience” (p. 4). According to Patton (2002), interpretivism attempts to “establish a context and meaning for what people do” (p. 115). Narratives collected from participants, during the study, can enhance and inform the results of the qualitative survey data and provide a deeper insight into the “whys” of
the beliefs expressed. Further, they allow the researcher to construct a “rich description of words and pictures” from quotes and documents (Merriam, 2009, p. 16) of the perceptions of the study participants within the context of their work and makes explicit nuances of the culture, organizational, historical and relational structures that underpin participant decisions in their knowledge making process (Schwandt, 1994, 2000).

3.7 Sampling Methods

3.7.1 Sample Size

Miles and Huberman (1994a) state that “qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth” (p. 24). The definition of small varies, based on the goals of the researcher and the study. According to Patton (2002),

Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what’s at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources (p. 244).

In addition, this type of scientific investigation allows for researchers to modify the sample size as themes emerge throughout the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this case study, the size of the samples was limited by the groups of interest (students, parents and staff members) and the number of each group that met the prerequisites for participation, as dictated by the questions under study and the proposed methodology. The first question of this study asked why participants chose to TSS.

All members of the TSS community had information to answer this question; however, the second question of this study asked why they persisted at TSS. In order to
provide an educated answer to the second question, at least one full school year of attendance was necessary. Further analysis of the TSS population led the researcher to decide that students and parents who had been associated with TSS for three or more years would have the most information to provide informed responses to the question about what conditions, actions, and experiences led them to remain at TSS until graduation.

All staff members were eligible to participate in this study as the question of persistence was not a part of their protocol. Staff members, including teachers, administrators, business staff, management staff, student support staff (e.g., registrar, advisors, etc.), part time staff members and the custodial staff, were all invited to participate. However, the school counselor/administrative intern was not invited to participate as she was the researcher. To avoid potential bias from the researcher’s multiple roles and experiences at TSS, it was appropriate to omit her data. Her insights, perceptions and historical perspectives of the school were captured in her interpretation of the data and in filling in gaps as themes emerged during the coding process.

### 3.7.2 Participants

This study utilized purposeful criterion based samples of senior students, parents, and staff members of The Scarlet School. Each sample had specific reasons for the selection of participants, based on the recommendations of Patton (2000) who posited that participants need to “information rich” (p. 40) and can offer insight into that which is being studied.

The rationale for including the three stakeholder groups of students, school related staff and parents, was driven by the need to address the complexity of the processes under
study (Purkey, 1999). Each group of stakeholders had unique perceptions of how TSS met their needs as parents, students and staff members. The responses from each group were insightful and informative but each group represented only a part of the whole that makes the environment known as TSS. The need for impressions, perceptions and information the three groups which interacted on multiple levels on a consistent basis was a driving force behind inclusion of such a large group of participants. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1989), the interactions between the students, their teachers and their parents are all bi-directional and each influences the other. To omit any one of the three groups would be limit the ability of the researcher to capture how students, parents and school staff members interact and perceive each others’ actions. TSS was an organization with complex systems of expectations, policies and procedures, each of which was uniquely interpreted and understood by members of each of the participant groups.

**Student participants**
The total pool of graduates for the class of 2010 was 48 students, two of which were excluded, due to completion of credits and Walkabout requirements by December of 2009, and one of which was excluded, due to a scheduled August graduation. Of the remaining 45 students, 8 were not yet 18-years-old and thus were excluded from participation in the study, based on the exempt status of the research project (Appendix A). Of the 37 remaining students, 7 were either out of the state or outside of the United States at the time the focus groups were conducted, leaving a total of 30 prospective participants. The focus groups were open to all senior students aged 18 or older, with 24
of the 30 participants in attendance during the scheduled time periods. Thus, this produced an overall 80% participation rate among the eligible focus group members.

The researcher visited each advisory group during the week prior to the focus group meetings. The students were given a verbal overview of the study and its objectives and were invited to ask questions and seek clarification. Students were also given a written packet of information about the study so that they could examine it on their own and/or with their parents/guardians. To this end, the written packet was composed of a letter of introduction, (Appendix B), a demographic data form, (Appendix C), a written copy of the focus group protocol questions (Appendix D), and an informed consent form (Appendix E). They were also informed, the week prior to the focus group of the times and dates for the meetings. It was also indicated who would facilitate the focus groups. Please see description of research team participants (Appendix F). The focus group facilitator began each session with a written introductory script, provided by the researcher (Appendix G).

**Parent participants**
A letter inviting parents to participate in the study, (Appendix H) a demographic data form (Appendix I), a written version of the interview questions, (Appendix J) and a written consent form (Appendix K) were mailed to 100 parents of all 11th and 12th graders and some 10th graders. Contact information was provided by the school under study. Two survey packets were returned as undeliverable.

The participation goal for this portion of the study was to obtain interview data from 20 parent participants. Parents of 11th and 12th graders were chosen as part of the study was to explore why parents remained at TSS as they could speak to the issue of
persistent at TSS while newer families could not. The invitation packets were sent snail mail and two e-mail reminders were over the three week data collection window. The mailed package also included a self-addressed stamped envelope in which to return the questionnaire to the researcher. Parents were encouraged to select their own pseudonyms; if a pseudonym was not selected, the researcher assigned one to the respondents.

A total of 25 written surveys were collected and 5 oral interviews were conducted with parents. The researcher conducted all oral interviews and read a statement prior to beginning the interview to remind participants of their rights (Appendix L). Eight parents did not provide any demographic information to the researcher. Therefore, it was not possible to trace the demographic data (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, number of years associated with TSS, and number of children attending/attended TSS) of the eight group members as the written surveys were returned anonymously. Seven parent participants had multiple students associated with TSS. The numerical participation rate of the parent group was 31%.

**School staff member participants**

All staff members (e.g. teachers, administrative staff members, front desk staff, school administrators and administrative assistants and the custodian) were invited to participate in the research study. The school counselor/administrative intern was not invited to participate as she is the researcher. Staff members were invited to participate in the research study through an e-mail followed by a printed package letter of introduction (Appendix M) a demographic data form, (Appendix N) a written copy of the interview questions/written survey (Appendix O) and a written consent form (Appendix P). A self-addressed stamped envelope was provided for return the questionnaire to the researcher.
They were also allowed to return their anonymous questionnaires to a secure box located within the school office.

Staff members were also invited to participate in individual interviews with the researcher either in lieu of or in addition to the written questionnaires. The goal was to interview 10 staff members, which is a sample of the school. This comprised approximately 50% of the staff. The school employed 15 full-time teachers and 3 full-time administrators. One person taught part-time and was a part-time administrator. At the time of this study, the administrative intern also acted as the school counselor, as she is licensed in both areas. All full-time administrators who participated in the survey were not licensed by the Ohio Department of Education as school administrators. Three support staff participants were not licensed to teach and identified themselves primarily as administrative in function and performed duties such as data entry and front desk management. These participants were not included in the “number of years teaching at TSS” data.

A copy of the written survey, a demographic data sheet, a consent form and letter of introduction/invitation was placed in the mailbox of each of the 24 full-time staff members of TSS. Responses from 16 staff members were collected through returned survey and/or a personal interview for a 63% participation rate. The researcher conducted all staff interviews and read a script reminding participants of their rights prior to beginning the interview (Appendix Q). The co-founder of the school was also interviewed, but she did not provide demographic data. Questions asked of the co-founder were unique to the role and history of the school (see Appendix R).
Several staff members indicated their interest to participate in the study but expressed concerns about potential recriminations based on their responses. Staff members who chose their own pseudonyms selected names that were associated with their family members or personal data that could be matched to them. In an effort to protect their confidentiality, responses were converted to a “staff member,” number format (i.e. Staff member 1, Staff member 2, etc).

3.7.3 Individual Interviews

In 1985, Lincoln and Guba described interviews as “conversations with a purpose” (p. 286). The goal for interviews is to gather additional information about individual answers to the research questions and to engage participants of the study into open-ended conversations, which provide insight into their working environments and professional lives (Patton, 2002). Scripted questions provide a semi-structured component to the interviews but the nature of qualitative research is designed to let the themes emerge (Kensit, 2000).

For this study, the individual interviews of parents, staff members and two students took place on a discrete basis to preserve confidentiality of personal data and responses, as well as to capture individual lived experiences. The researcher digitally recorded, with permission, all individual interviews. She also allowed these participants to choose pseudonyms to protect their identities (Arkley & Knight, 1999, Bailey, 1996). The researcher conducted the interviews and took notes during the interviews. She then allowed participants to view the notes as well as a written verbatim transcript of the interviews to allow for the correction of any errors or misrepresentations.
This researcher intended to conduct personal interviews with respondents to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. To achieve this goal, personal interviews were conducted within the context of the respondents’ workplaces whenever possible. The interviews were conducted in the participant’s locale to provide the researcher with additional context. This allowed for appropriate “memoing” by the researcher to record information about sights, sounds, feelings, thoughts and experiences while collecting data and reflecting on the process (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

3.7.4 Focus Groups

In an effort to better understand the perceptions from the perspectives of students this research project utilized focus groups to collect data. Focus groups are defined as small groups of people, typically four to ten in number. Typically, members of focus groups have similar backgrounds and experiences (Krueger, 1994). Examples of shared backgrounds include, but are not limited to, prior school experiences; living in the same neighborhoods; shared religious beliefs; and living through traumatic situations.

The purpose of a focus group is also to have people share their perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about a specific topic of discussion in a structured social setting (Patton, 2002). The group members are expected to listen and respond to the comments of other members of the group. Thus, there is ample opportunity to converse and enrich the knowledge shared (Krueger, 1994). On another note, the groups are not decision-making groups but instead groups that provide meaningful information about the context in which the members function (Patton, 2002).

In the interest of full disclosure, the researcher was an administrative intern at the school under study. At the time of this study, the researcher had a nine-year historical
relationship with the school having previously served as a volunteer, school counselor, financial contributor and parent. As such, a non-biased colleague who had training in group processes and facilitating focus groups was asked to conduct the focus groups. The research colleague was a doctoral student in counselor education, with over 30 years of experience as a licensed, professional school counselor. The researcher had conducted interviews with the colleague on prior occasions and had interacted with her in a school setting. To this end, the researcher believed that her doctoral student peer would do a good job facilitating the focus groups to render needed data for the study. The researcher and doctoral student peer met, prior to conducting the first focus group, to discuss the interview script or protocol, as well as expected procedures and goals of the research project. The content of the focus groups were recorded in verbatim, utilizing a digital recorder.

Again, the focus groups comprised seniors who met the outlined participation criteria and who agreed to participate. The seniors participated in their existing advisory group compositions. Senior students met with their advisors weekly for one hour on either a Tuesday or a Thursday. There were a total of 6 groups of seniors, ranging from 4 to 14 students each. The groups represented all academic, socioeconomic and racial groups present within the school. Two of the advisory groups from each day were so small that they were combined for the purposes of focus group participation.

This resulted in a total of 4 focus groups, two conducted on each day. Two of the members eligible for focus group participation were individually interviewed, based on their individual comfort levels and personal needs. In essence, the same interview script was used for the focus groups in such cases.
3.7.5 Written Surveys/Questionnaires

The questions created for each participant group were provided as part of the invitational package. The parent and staff groups were given the option of either answering the written questions and returning the forms to the researcher and/or participating in an oral interview. Written responses to the questions were collected and the data was collated. If a participant chose to do an oral interview, the researcher met with the participant and utilized the written questions as starting points in the interview. The oral interview format provided the opportunity for additional questions; however, the data collected was congruent between the written responses and the oral interviews. Three staff members chose to answer the written questions and followed up with an oral interview to share specific stories about students.

3.7.6 Biographical Questionnaires

Biographical questionnaires were created for each participant group. The data collected were utilized to describe each group in terms of age, gender and race/ethnicity. Specific questions for each group were descriptors related to longevity and roles within the school. Information regarding parent levels of education and future plans was collected from student participants only.

The information from the biographical questionnaires was coded and compiled. The questionnaire information, combined with transcribed interviews and relevant material from school documents, provided multiple sources for use in triangulation of the data. The use of pseudonyms was an effort to protect the identity of participants and was adequate for student and parent participants.
Staff members often chose pseudonyms which were closely related to their personal lives. The small size of the staff and the reluctance of several staff members to participate due to perceived potential issues of administrative retribution resulted in the researcher assigning each staff member a numerical designation to protect their anonymity. Demographic information from staff members, such as specific roles or subjects taught was deleted from the file to protect individual participants. All participants signed letters of informed consent and were free to withdraw from the study at any point. Interview participants were also advised that they had the option to skip questions that felt were too invasive or otherwise objectionable.

3.7.7 Document Collection and Analysis

Documents are described as “any written or recorded material other than a record that was not prepared specifically in response to a request by from the inquirer” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 277). During the process of the study, the researcher requested and collected documents that spoke to the value, role, and function of the personnel within the district (e.g., teachers, administrators, school counselors, etc.). These documents included copies of web pages, mission statements, job descriptions, curricular units, etc. These documents were evaluated and analyzed for additional insights into the role and function of staff members, parents and other stakeholders in the support of success of the students. In essence, the documents provided information to answer historical questions about the school and community that were not available from the participant groups.

3.8 Data Collection

This study utilized a case study approach to answer the four aforementioned research questions. It was assumed that participants answered questions to the best of
their abilities and honestly. The researcher had prior relationships with many participants. Thus, she utilized the services of her doctoral peer who had no prior knowledge or relationship with any participants to conduct student focus groups only. Parents and staff members were allowed to choose to participate through anonymous completion of a written survey or a personal interview. One-on-one personal interviews with non student participants were conducted by the researcher.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data occurred on a continual basis, beginning with the initial collection. The research took copious field notes throughout the data collection process (Creswell, 1998). Snow, Lofland, Anderson, and Lofland (2005) encourage researchers to compose the basic information for their field notes no later than “the morning after” so as not to forget or distort specific impressions, details, or perceptions. As interviews were completed and surveys collected, the researcher had the data transcribed and conducted a multi-step coding process with the help of a research team, consisting of three people (see Appendix F), including the researcher. The research team was an important element of ensuring trustworthiness in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They utilized a grounded theory approach to analyze the data and identify themes as they emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2000). The three phase coding process comprised an initial open coding phase, followed by subsequent axial and selective coding phases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Initially, the researcher coded the data using the margins of the interview transcripts to assign labels to segments of text. After coding, the author developed an initial codebook (See Appendix S). The codebook organized and contained definitions of
the identified codes. For each round of coding, the transcripts and the most current codebook were compiled, organized, and e-mailed to the research team to analyze, review, and edit. Research team participants were provided with instructions and the necessary materials to confirm and/or challenge the author’s codes and/or provide alternate perspectives of the data. The research team was given three weeks to perform the reviews. Following the reviews, the research team discussed the findings and analyzed the data collectively.

This process was performed for the open, axial, and selective phases of coding. As this process was repeated, themes and theory emerged from the data, which were used in each subsequent round of qualitative data analysis until the analysis was completed (Glaser, 2009). The research team continued the process of coding, discussing, and re-coding, until the research team reached 100% agreement on the identification of themes and subthemes.

3.10 Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness can be described as the extent to which the inquiry’s findings are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The effort to ensure that qualitative data is credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable is a very important component of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These qualitative procedures strive to provide rich, insightful understanding of the phenomenon within the research site.

3.10.1 Installing Credibility

Credibility is defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the congruence of the views of the participants and the researcher. The most common method to ensure credibility is
data triangulation. This was accomplished in this study by collection of data from multiple sources, specifically, students, staff members, administrators, the founder/superintendent and parents. Data from multiple sources provided areas of overlap of participant perceptions and served to reduce researcher bias. Methodological triangulation was accomplished by the multiple types of data collected, which included documents, transcripts from the individual interviews and focus groups, and direction gained from the literature review.

Merriam (1998) defines triangulation as "using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings" (p. 204). Investigator triangulation was accomplished utilizing a research team of individuals who were outside of the actual study but knowledgeable of the field of study. These individuals included peers, doctoral committee members, doctoral students, practicing professional counselors, and other professors. The members of the research team helped to identify and address researcher bias and identify themes and codes as well. Member checks of the information as collected by the researcher were conducted by the participants to ensured factual interpretation of the data. The efforts of the research team continued until the identified themes reached a level of redundancy or saturation (Morse, 1995). Once saturation was reached, it could be surmised that the phenomenon has been investigated to a level of complexity and depth to be confident in the validity of the findings (Merriam, 2009).

Prolonged contact with the group under study can also add to credibility of the data. Merriam (1998) calls this "long-term observation" (p. 204). The researcher had a nine year relationship with the school under study, functioning as a volunteer, school
counselor, parent and administrative intern. As such, the researcher was able to access data and information that may not have been available to other researchers. Peshkin (1988) discussed researcher subjectivity as a potential positive in that it is “the basis of researchers making distinctive contribution; in that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (p. 18). The researcher recognized the potential for bias in the study and remained vigilant throughout the process. As a result, she utilized the objectivity of her research team members to ensure that bias was addressed and that ethical guidelines were followed. Further, triangulation of data enabled the researcher to install credibility to establish the trustworthiness of the findings of the study. Data triangulation, investigator triangulation, and methodological triangulation were all utilized in this study.

1. **Data Triangulation.** The following sources of information were utilized by the researcher:
   
   A. Male senior students who were aged 18 or older
   B. Female senior students who were aged 18 or older
   C. Parents of senior students
   D. Parents of junior students
   E. Teachers
   F. Administrators
   G. Administrative support staff including front desk and clerical personnel
   H. School founder

2. **Investigator Triangulation.** The following techniques were utilized to address investigator triangulation:
A. A research team composed of experienced, licensed school counselors and doctoral students who were knowledgeable about qualitative research and interviewing processes.

B. Peer debriefing allowed for a non-involved peer to interact and question the researcher, data and process to ensure that bias is acknowledged and addressed if needed.

C. Member checking is the process of providing the participants with an opportunity to view transcripts of their interviews to ensure the accuracy of statements and to verify that the information was reflective of the intent of the participants. Transcripts of individual interviews were sent via personal e-mail to each participant. Each participant was instructed to make changes and clarify any statements to ensure that the researcher captured quotations and information as the speaker intended. Data was added to the study only after receiving confirmation and clarification from the participant.

3. Methodological triangulation. The methods below were used to gain information for the study:

   A. Individual interviews

   B. Focus group interviews with students

   C. Biographical questionnaires

   D. Researcher journal

3.10.2. Thick Description for Transferability

   Detailed, rich and copious data were collected and maintained by the researcher to allow for transferability. This process was designed to allow for other researchers to
utilize the data from one study to inform others (Patton, 2002; Potter, 2003). A reflexive journal was maintained by the researcher to capture the thoughts, feelings, insights, impressions and attitudes of the researcher as she progressed through the study. This allowed for identification of bias, as well as providing a way for the researcher to manage subjectivity (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

3.10.3 Installing Dependability

Dependability addresses the capability of future researchers to be able to trace the logical methodology employed within the study and potentially re-create a similar study. Dependability also allows the researcher to demonstrate the rigor of the fieldwork conducted as well as providing an audit trail of the data collection procedures. The data collected to demonstrate dependability for this study and utilized as the audit trail were the following:

1. documents;
2. raw data (i.e. audio recordings, biographical questionnaire results, and field notes);
3. notes from the data reduction and reconstruction processes;
4. transcripts of written interviews;
5. transcripts of digitally recorded interviews;
6. member checking of transcriptions; and
7. reflexive journaling by the researcher.

The components of the audit trail allowed for subsequent researchers to examine all stages of the data collection process and thus added to the dependability of the data and the conclusions drawn from it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
3.10.4 Installing Confirmability

Confirmability refers to objectivity of the data and the fact that bias has been addressed and eliminated to the greatest extent possible, and it is the final component of trustworthiness but is similar to objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to this corpse of literature, a qualitative researcher should always be aware of his or her own biases and should be able to “bracket” himself or herself from potential misinterpretation of the data (Fisher, 2009). All three team members evaluated all participant data until consensus of themes and meaning was reached. Allowing group members to review the transcripts of their discussion and the peer debriefing process was also utilized to ensure a certain degree of confirmability. The data and materials collected, throughout the research study and data triangulation process, added to the demonstration of the logic and legitimacy of the findings.

3.11 Researcher subjectivity

As stated by Merriam (1998), in a qualitative study, the “researcher is the primary instrument for data collection” (p. 7). The researcher must be aware of and understand his or her personal biases and dispositions (Patton, 2002). As an example of this, the researcher has been involved with TSS for a period of nine years. During that time, she acted as a volunteer experiential site supervisor and advisor for two years; a school counselor for five years; a financial donor for nine years; a parent or four years and an administrative intern for two years. The variety of roles of the researcher has provided her with multiple perspectives, all of which were areas of discussion and research throughout the study. The multiplicity of experiences by the researcher could have significant effects on the interpretations of participant data. The researcher also had
access to student and school data at the school, state and individual level, some of which would not be appropriate to include in a study of this nature.

To address potential researcher bias among student participants, a peer doctoral student conducted all focus groups. Students were informed by the research team member about their right to withdraw from the study at any time and to skip any questions that they did not want to answer. This information was relayed in writing and verbally, prior to conduction of each of the focus groups. Each student participant received a letter of introduction and a written consent form outlining the options for participation and withdrawal.

To ensure that the research was conducted in compliance with the Office of Responsible Research Practices, approval was obtained in accordance with the policies of The Ohio State University. All data, materials, and records were stored in accordance with the Institutional Review Board policies of The Ohio State University. All research team members had to complete a CITI training course prior to participation in gathering or analyzing data associated with the research study. This course ensures that all researchers are aware of historical and potential issues associated with unethical research practices. Further, all research team members were requested to sign a pledge of confidentiality (Appendix T), prior to participating in data analysis procedures.

Researcher subjectivity and bias do not need to be eradicated in order for a researcher to be successful. Instead, a researcher needs to be cognizant of the potential areas of weakness or bias throughout the research process (Wolcott, 1990).
3.12 Conclusions

This study utilized a qualitative approach to investigate the school-related experiences of the students, parents, and staff of TSS. The goal of the study was to elucidate the practices, programs, process and policies at work within the school that both draw students into the school and encourage them to remain at the school. The study was conducted through the conceptual framework lens of invitational education and counseling utilizing an interpretivist epistemology. The study also utilized a student engagement framework, developed by Rumberger and Larson (1998) to identify specific indicators of successful efforts toward student persistence until graduation. Further, as a way to collect rich data to document the experiences of the students, parents, and staff at TSS, the study incorporated individual interviews, focus groups, written surveys and biographical questionnaires. The hope was that the results of this study would identify specific processes or combinations of praxis and policy that could be shared with other schools in their efforts to improve student success and retention.
Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the major findings of the current qualitative study, based on in-depth written responses completed by participants, individual interviews, student focus groups and biographical questionnaires. A summary of demographic information is also included and a thematic analysis of the data is presented. The purpose of this study was to explore the processes, programs, policies and practices within a specific successful urban charter school in a large Midwestern city. Specifically, the researcher was interested in exploring and elucidating the specific and unique combination of factors and practices that draw students to this particular charter school and allows them to persist to graduation.

The present study explored the following four research questions:

1. What school factors convinced students, families, and staff to choose TSS over other schools?

2. What experiences have had the greatest influence on the students’, families’, and staff’s attitudes toward TSS?

3. What processes or programs at TSS influenced students, families, and staff members to remain at TSS?

4. What changes do the students see in themselves as a result of their experiences at TSS?
4.2 Demographic Characteristics

This section outlines the demographic characteristics of each of the three participant groups: students, staff members, and parents. Each group was asked to provide data about themselves; however, some participants declined to provide information. In the race/ethnicity category, some participants identified themselves as members of more than one racial/ethnic group, thus the percentages in that category equal greater than 100%.

Table 4.1

Student gender, race/ethnicity and age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*see Appendix U for full student demographic data

Table 4.1 shows that 79% of the class identified themselves as Caucasian; 17% as African American, and 17% as “Other” which included Hispanic, Asian, and multi-racial categories. These numbers were similar to the school composition of 70.2% Caucasian; 15.8% African American and 11.2% multi-racial. The state does not calculate data for groups in with fewer than 10 students, thus the total is less than 100% (ODE, 2010).

Table 4.2

Parent participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of years have had a student attend TSS</th>
<th>Number of students attended/graduated from TSS</th>
<th>No Data provided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2 shows the composition of the parents who participated in the study. All members (100%) of the group identified themselves as Caucasian and the great majority of the participants (82%) were female. Eighteen of the parent respondents (87%) had students at TSS for 2, 3 or 4 years and 13 of the parent participants (62%) had one child enrolled at TSS. Full demographic data for this group is located in Appendix V.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of years teaching</th>
<th>Number of years teaching at TSS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male Asian</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female Caucasian</td>
<td>7-10</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male Asian</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>6-10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 describes the demographics of the staff participants in this study. 93% of the participants identified themselves as Caucasian, and 7% identified themselves as Other. Number of years teaching was fairly evenly split while 46% of the participants had been at TSS for 2-5 years. The complete demographic data for staff members can be found in Appendix W.

4.3 Emerging Themes

As detailed in chapter three, the data analysis began as soon as the research project began. A multi-step coding process was followed, beginning with the assignment of open codes developed by the researcher. The codes were developed based on the
research literature and the guiding conceptual framework of invitational education and relational trust. A thorough review of the individual interview transcripts, transcripts of the focus groups, written surveys, biographical questionnaires, combined with repeated hearing of the focus group and individual interview recordings was completed by the researcher and initial codes assigned to units of meaning as described by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 56).

After initial code development by the primary researcher, a codebook was developed. The codebook, explanation of codes, transcripts of individual and focus group interviews were e-mailed, to the other members of the research team. Each research team member was instructed to code the raw data and record their findings electronically. The research team met virtually to compare and contrast their interpretations until 100% agreement on assigned codes was reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each team member was encouraged to discuss their rationale and thought processes utilized to arrive at decisions, as well as to question interpretations of participant responses.

Utilizing the grounded theory approach the research team examined the data and remained open to the emergence of themes from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The 100% agreement of themes among the research team members added to the trustworthiness of the interpretations. As a result, three major themes and multiple subcategories emerged:

1. People and Relationships
   A. Teachers are main points of contact
   B. All staff members act as advocates and advisors
   C. Relationships demonstrate caring and trust
   D. Acceptance of diversity

2. School Climate and Culture
A. Small school  
B. Informal approach to education  
C. Sense of community  
D. Voice in decision making  
E. The challenge of expectations

3. Student-Centered Curricula  
   A. Individualized learning  
   B. Academic flexibility  
   C. Focus on special education  
   D. Concerns about academic rigor  
   E. Experiential education  
   F. Walkabout  
   G. Growth and change

4. 4 People and Relationships

Although each group had slightly different emphases, data from students and parents cited people and their actions as most influential factors in selecting TSS. The students often mentioned the staff as a key factor in selection of TSS as their school of choice. Many of the parents suggested the same thing.

4.4.1 Teachers are main points of contact

“Teachers and staff are friendly and approachable”

From a student perspective, the first line of school-level interaction was at the teacher-level. Many of their comments indicated an educated difference in the appeal and approach taken by TSS teachers, as opposed to those they had encountered in their past school histories. Thirty-eight percent of the student participants indicated that teachers were the main reason they chose to attend TSS. Further, student responses to the question about the most influential reason for choosing TSS included statements, such as this:
When I came here to tour the school and talk to people, [it] was the first thing I realized that was different… that was what made me want to go here, up until that point, it was [like]… teachers suck… I’m gonna go smoke pot and not do anything (mentality), and, you know, it took me a little [time to adjust]. I think, by the time, I started my junior year I realized that teachers at [TSS] weren’t like the rest of the teachers I’d had for my entire life. So, I think that was what did it. (Darby, Caucasian male, 18 years old)

Students alluded to the sense of respect and caring demonstrated by the teachers and staff members as well. The following quotes speak to how teachers at TSS reacted in an encouraging manner to students who were not at the top of the class. The statements also identify how these students perceived TSS teachers as different from their previous experiences:

Bob (Caucasian male, 20 years old) stated: They don’t care about your grades…if you’re the lowest grade in the class they’ll help you more than the person who has the highest grade in the class…here they want every student to be successful

Nap (Caucasian male, 20 years old) asserted:…the teachers actually work with you and go over everything…there’s no frustration from them… they’ll keep going over the same subject if you don’t understand.

Fifteen of the thirty parent respondents (50%) cited teachers, their enthusiasm, and student-centered approach as primary reasons for choosing TSS for their children. Peppermint (female, 50 plus years old, 2 TSS students), a parent with two very successful students who have attended TSS, stated: “the staff at [TSS] is wonderful. They really care about each student as an individual, and they are willing to work with you. They are [also] dedicated to each student being successful.”

Teachers were also cited as the main contacts by parents for a negative reason. The administration was cited by several parents as non-responsive as demonstrated by the following quote:
Pixie (female, 57 years old, 1 student at TSS) I love the enthusiasm of each teacher. I think the principal is useless. Nothing seems to promote trying to reach for a goal—pushing yourself to be better. I just wish I was more informed with goings on. I check the website regularly.

Parents that were actively involved with the school also cited frustration with the administration and the overall lack of communication:

Mrs. D (female, 45 years old, 1 student at TSS) The only concern we have with the school is a lack of communication between parents and staff

VW (female, 47 years old, 1 student at TSS) We don’t feel very connected with school, other than the teachers we communicate with regularly

Betty (female, 41 years old, 1 student at TSS) I feel very disconnected from the school. Parent input hasn’t been recognized or followed through upon for the past 2 years in regard to social planning

While the school structure intentionally expected teachers to be the main points of contact with families, the policy may have resulted in a negative outcome in terms of parent satisfaction with the level of regular communication from the administration.

4.4.2 **All staff members act as student advocates**

*Their advisors are key or should be key advocates and supporters, each teacher and staff (member) is encouraged to have real, meaningful relationships with students to help find individual incentives and provide support*

The organizational structure of the school was student-centered, and every full-time teacher also functioned as a grade-level advisor. This student-centered focus was consistent with Rogerian client-centered counseling theory (Rogers, 1951). At TSS, it was an expectation, upon hiring, that each staff member would interact with students on a meaningful level. Further, teachers were frequently encouraged to build trusting relationships with students. Q, (female, 50 plus years old, 2 TSS students) observed:

…it seems to me that every student at [TSS] is observed and noted by the staff, ‘Is this child connecting with someone and forming relationships?’ With our son, it just happened to be the school nurse that he formed a
bond with. He loved some of his teachers as well, but, personally, I think it was this woman who helped him build his confidence, (at TSS) you can’t fall through the cracks, you can’t hide and you (the student) are out in the open and encouraged to develop yourself… that’s what happens.

School counselors can play a significant role in the academic, personal and social success of high school students (ASCA, 2006). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling in 2005 which provided a framework for professional practice. Within the ASCA National Model (2005), school counselors are viewed as professionals who design comprehensive developmentally appropriate programs which are data driven and based on standards in three domains: personal/social, academic, career development. The goal of professional school counselors is to promote and enhance learning for all students. Professional school counselors work with students, staff and faculty members, parents and the community to create and promote a positive school climate in which students can be successful. All staff members within TSS were encouraged to act as student advocates and in many cases were able to provide services typically associated with the role of professional school counselors.

When parents were asked about who they would contact if their child was having a problem or if they had a specific concern, they provided many responses. The question was broken down into the three counseling domains: (a) personal/social; (b) academic; and (c) career.

Table 4.4

*Parent responses of contact person in case of concerns/issues*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of issue</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Administrator</th>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>Advisor*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal/social</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advisors and teachers are listed separately because types of issues may determine if a parent needed to interact with a content-area teacher as opposed to a grade-level advisor.

Q (female, 50 plus years old, 2 TSS students) responded to this question with details about how she utilized staff members at specific times and for specific reasons:

I would start with his teachers...there are other support people at the school like the school counselor or the dean of students (administrator) that I felt I could approach and talk to at anytime. ...our son had an advisor who understood his ADHD issues extremely well and she did a video which really helped him understand himself, in that case, his advisor was the main contact...with my daughter her advisor was able to motivate her in ways I wasn’t.

Table 4.5

Student responses of contact person in case of issue/concern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of issue</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Administrator</th>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>Friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal/social</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Student responses included many teachers but in a narrative fashion as opposed to a role or positional response*

While the teacher category received few role-related responses in the question, the discussion among the focus group participants revealed that students primarily chose to interact with teachers on most issues and concerns. Seventeen percent of the students named one teacher as the person they would seek assistance. For example, Nighthawk (Caucasian, male, 19-years-old) stated: “anyone can relate to this person [referring to a teacher]. He’s funny, he’s accepting, [and] he jokes with everyone.” He further stated: “I just can’t think of anything negative about him at all.” Others were less specific, but their responses exemplified how the school staff served in the role of student support/advocate. The series of comments below came from one focus group:
Becca (African American female, 18-years-old) asserted: It just basically depends on who you find comfort in… in having help you at that moment.

Nap (Caucasian male, 20-years-old) stated: I’d have to say it’s the person that welcomes you… with open arms…whenever you got a problem. …it’s whoever… can come up to you and relate to you.

Juice (Caucasian male, 20-years-old) lamented: I agree with that. I think that the fact that we have a community here leaves it open to, for anybody, to be kinda like your mentor. I feel comfortable enough to talk to pretty much anybody in the school about my personal vendettas (sic).

Angelina (Caucasian female, 18-years-old) asserted: Sometimes, I might choose certain teachers, but I think that most people are comfortable talking to anyone here.

Cornelius (Caucasian male, 18-years-old) posited: I also found that even if you’re not having a problem… Sometimes, the teacher will say, ‘Are you okay?’ And, they’ll ask you, without you even having to hint, that you’re not doing okay. So, they actually care.

The positive component of this style of student support was that students had a variety of people from whom they could seek assistance. Help seeking has been identified as a positive influence in student retention to graduation (Lee & Shute, 2009). In essence, students felt that they were not limited to seeking help from a pre-determined person who work in a specific role or position. The negative component of this style of student support was that not every teacher felt comfortable in the role of advisor; some teachers expressed some concerns about the lack of intentional training for this role. As an example of this, one school personnel Staff member 11, (male teacher, 47-years-old) stated:

… the training for the administration and advisors is insufficient to adequately and more effectively address the needs (of students) in my professional opinion. Although this also seems to be a big reason why some students remain at TSS, because they feel cared for and heard.

Staff member 5, (female advisor, 50 plus years old) asserted:
…a lot of times when, there's some kind of crisis going on with a kid but no one is available…I'll step away from my desk and I'll fill in, but... it would be better to have somebody who is specifically trained in that area to handle that.

The positive aspects of having teachers and advisors act at student advocates had many advantages and the focus was on the multiplicity of potential student supports. The negative component of this practice was in the lack of intentional training of staff members to act in the role typically associated with a professional school counselor. An additional area of concern was that of devaluing the role of the specific education and counseling skills associated with the role of professional school counselors.

4.4.3 Relationships demonstrate caring and trust

*Students and staff (members) are far more connected than in most school settings; they have mutual trusting, safe relationships.*

Relationships can be described as how people get along with each other, how they treat each other and how they regard each other as individuals. Within a school, relationships exist between and among multiple stakeholders, including students, parents, administrators, and other school staff. Relationships are also paramount in building a safe school climate (Hernandez & Seem, 2004) and have also been cited as an important predictor of student persistence to graduation (Lee & Burkam, 2003) Overall comments from the staff members regarding relationships among stakeholders provided additional insight into how the school functions as a whole.

Staff member 7 (female administrative assistant, 26-years-old) described her perspective of staff/student relationships. For example, she asserted: “For the most part, exceptional. I think the relationships here and effort to maintain sincere relationships are what sets the school apart in its mission and values.” Staff member 12 (male
administrator, 32-years-old) discussed relationships between staff members and students, as well as staff to staff. More specifically, he posited:

…the relationships at the school are strong. Students and teachers get along very well… most people know each other. Teachers and staff get along very well. There are limited times outside the school environments for these relationships to develop, but they do happen…Among students, there is a great level of acceptance and support. Students often are the ones helping out with other student issues… because of the care and concern for one another. There are times when there are rumblings and grumblings… there are high points and low points of collaboration. I think part of that is on my own shoulders as an administrator/co-administrator in terms of much we have been allowing staff to be integral to that process.

Staff member 12 (male administrator, 32-years-old) further elaborated:

But that is something that is foundational to the school…something we need to keep moving…I know a staff member that left a couple of years ago because of lack of collaboration on certain components of our curriculum and I think we have moved a few steps forward in progress from that point… there is collaboration but I think there is a lot of room for growth and encouragement and opportunity.

While Staff member 12, quoted above, above mentioned positive relationships, he also alluded to the issue of collaboration between teachers. Thus, teachers expressed some negative comments about the level of collaboration within the school. Staff member 15 (female teacher, 38-years-old) stated that there is “not much collaboration or teamwork,” and Staff member 3 (female teacher, 33-years-old) agreed but provided more details with the following statement:

I’m actually disappointed about the level of collaboration among staff,. When I came in, it sounded like there was going to be a lot more. We all can talk to each and approach each other; however, we don’t have any structured time to collaborate, and, sometimes, we don’t have our own planning periods…as far as collaboration is concerned, very little is taking place even between the people I talk to frequently. I think we could do quite a bit better on this point.

Student Cornelius (Caucasian male, 18 years old) talked of relationships between peers as
well as with teachers at TSS,

I think that everybody doesn’t want to be just another number in a big high school. I think people want to have more personal relationships with the people they’re around seven hours a day, five days of the week, and I think it’s really important to have good relationships with the people you’re learning from and the people around you.

Overall, relationships among stakeholders in the school were seen as positive and encouraging. However, there were some concerns about the level of and opportunities for meaningful collaboration among staff members.

4.4.4 Acceptance of diversity

There are no major ‘clicks’ at the school…they (students) generally function as a whole.

The students who attend TSS came from a variety of schools, family situations, socio-economic statuses and academic histories. Exclusionary cliques did not form within the small school environment as there were simply too few students. Relationships among students were very important in TSS. Staff perceptions of student relationships expressed the importance of acceptance of diversity and safety within the school community. Staff member 13 (male teacher, 58-years-old) asserted:

For the most part, [there is] a diverse population that feels accepted here…we have a very diverse population here that tends to be very warm and accepting to the students who, for whatever reason, haven’t fit in well at other schools… Most of the students [here] tend to accept each other and look after each other

Diversity can be defined in many ways. Typically, racial or ethnic diversity is the first to be used to describe individuals. The definition of diversity was examined and explained by Staff member 12 (male administrator, 32-years-old). For example, he asserted:
I think that as a student body ours is very diverse. That’s diverse in regards to race and probably income level but I also think we are diverse in terms of student background regarding religion and spiritual beliefs even issues, gender issues, sexual preference, there’s a lot of exploration; more so than in some of the environments. I think that we have created an environment in which students do feel accepted here… for the most part we are an environment (in which) students feel safe to be who they are whatever that definition of diversity is for them.

Student Ninja (Asian male, 18 years old) summarized what he appreciated about diversity at TSS with one simple statement, “I’m glad I came here because it’s not like everywhere else and I know I’m not a carbon copy.”

**4.5 School climate and culture**

The terms *school climate* and *school culture* are often used interchangeably, when used to describe the atmosphere of a school. They are closely related, yet they are different in what they emphasize. The major distinctions between school climate and culture are based on what components are used to describe them. The concept of *culture* refers to the shared beliefs, customs, and behaviors of a group and describes “how we do things around here.” School culture examines: expectations, philosophy, relationships, curriculum, extra-curricular activities and decision-making processes that go on within the school as well as how they are each carried out on a daily basis (Deal & Peterson, 1998).

Moos (1979) defines *school climate* as the social atmosphere of a setting or "learning environment" (p. 81) in which students have different experiences, depending upon the practices created by the teachers and administrators. It can also be described as how the school “feels” when one walks into the building. Moos further divided social environments into three categories:
1. *Relationship* includes involvement, connections and interactions with others in the classroom, and teacher support;

2. *Personal growth or goal orientation* includes the personal development of all members of the environment; and

3. *System maintenance and change* includes the orderliness of the environment, the clarity of the expectations and system rules, and the consistency of the teacher and administrator in enforcing the rules.

The previous section (4.4.3) discussed the importance of relationships within TSS. This section focuses on the components that most represent the culture and climate of the TSS.

### 4.5.1 Small school

*It’s a small school and kids are known by all the teachers. No one is invisible.*

TSS was a small school by design, with the maximum enrollment of 250 students. The annual enrollment, as calculated by the state, varied between 220 and 240 students over the past 4 years. It was the belief of the founder that a small school environment supports the building of relationships among staff members and students (E. Meers, personal communication, 2010). This small school ideal aligned with work conducted by Bloom, Thompson and Unterman (2010) on behalf of the Gates Foundation (2000) and the work of Lambert, Lowry, Copland, Galucci and Wallach (2004) as part of the Small Schools arm of the Coalition of Essential Schools. However, it is important to note that size alone does not engender relationships alone and caring relationships. Past research, at the University of Chicago by Bryk and Schneider (2002), found that successful small schools created strong relationships between students and teachers, as well as structures to support such work. Several other studies also found a relationship between
personalized school environments and student achievement (Lee et. al. 1993; Lee & Smith, 1995; Wasley & Lear, 2001).

Students within TSS did form relationships and bond with teachers. Thus, these students were likely to receive the benefits of the small size of TSS. The educational mission of TSS encompassed a small and informal learning environment with a goal of provision of an individualized education with an experiential focus. This notion was evident by the mission statement (refer to section 3.2.1). Parents appreciated the small school environment as captured in the following quote expressed by Selina (40-year-old female, 1 student at TSS). She stated: “[It’s a] small environment; the school is not as large as a school in our home district.” The philosophical aspect of the small school appealed to parents and staff alike. The physical size of the school did elicit some negative comments.

Students did not indicate that the size of the school made a difference in their choice to attend TSS. However, during a focus group, two students did mention that, at times, there were negative issues related to the physical size of the school.

Melanie (Caucasian female, 18-years-old) stated

I think physical boundaries are an issue here …Sometimes, with 30 people in a classroom I see a lot of things like physical fights, pushing. You’re just really close to people and you have to learn to put up with that. It’s hard, but you [learn to] accommodate. I think throughout the day people get tired of seeing the same people…it’s such a small school.

Patty (Caucasian female, 18-years-old) asserted:

It does get hard being in the same classroom with the same people, but after four years I’ve learned to ignore faces that I don’t like to see. …going to a small school you learn that you have to deal with people.
In addition, parent participant Joy (50 plus years old, female, 1 student at TSS) indicated that:

What I find at [TSS] is that the building is not set up as a school and it makes it difficult for everybody to manage the physical environment is a challenge and creates some difficulties; the size of the hallways, location of offices and stuff like that.

Staff member 13 (male teacher, 57 years old) identified the size of the school as one negative aspect of his experiences at TSS:

The only thing I might say, which is actually kind of big in some cases, is the lack of spaces, facility especially with the outdoor things I do but also with the indoor things.

The physical size of the school played a part in the challenges mentioned by parents, students and a staff member. Limitations of the size of the school were not problematic enough to force a student or teacher to leave the school but there were definite issues of concern.

4.5.2 Informal Educational Philosophy

“(I was attracted to the) alternative approach to education and school’s reputation”

TSS was modeled, after a successful existing alternative high school located in a nearby suburb. The founder of TSS was a staff member at the neighboring suburban high school (SHS) for more than two decades. She indicated that SHS was one of the “oldest surviving alternative schools from the 1960s.” She wanted to create a school that preserved the best practices of SHS, without the bureaucratic challenges (E. Meers, personal communication, 2010). Based on the data collected, it was clear that her beliefs had been incorporated into the philosophy and culture of TSS. Many of the parents commented on components of the school’s educational philosophy and its informality as
important factors in their decision to have their students attend TSS. For example, Callie (48-years-old female, 1 student at TSS) posited that “the unique educational philosophy. Informal approach, respect for students, experiential programs” as the main reasons she chose TSS. This sentiment was echoed by T.T. (54-year-old female, 3 students at TSS) who liked the “alternative teaching method” and Betty (41-year-old female, 1 student at TSS) who was impressed with “the innovative approach to course work presentation combined with experiential.”

Teachers were also drawn to TSS because of its philosophy. This was indicative by the following statements:

Staff member 12 (male administrator, 32-years-old) asserted: I was introduced to the school by a friend and fell in love with the philosophy and approach to education. My personal and professional background, as well as my education fit well with the school.

Staff member 9 (female teacher, 50 plus years old,) stated: Size, curriculum, philosophy of the school were all appealing.

Staff member 6 (male administrator, 34-years-old,) posited: [The] structure of school and philosophy, lack of politics, small setting, freedom professionally.

Staff member 13 (male teacher, 58-years-old) emphatically stated: School philosophy, atmosphere, and the staff I met [were all reasons I chose to work here].

The educational philosophy of TSS was a definitive attractant to staff members and parents. The way in which the philosophy was enacted helped to create a sense of community within the school.

4.5.3 Sense of Community

“...I believe there are not just rules but an attitude and shared belief in the philosophy of the school and sense of community”
The sense of community, as expressed by both staff member and student participants, spoke to the behaviors, expectations and general feeling of inclusion. Staff member 10 (female advisor, 50 plus years old) described the atmosphere at “human and familial” while Staff member 2 (female teacher, 50 plus years old) described TSS as, “…a place where individuals are accepted for who they are; a caring, open, familial atmosphere.” Teachers who demonstrate a strong sense of affiliation with a school tend to be committed to their students, colleagues and school (Hoy & Hannum, 1997). Research demonstrated that teachers who are committed to their schools spend extra time with students, make themselves available to students and have a desire to make the school into a positive learning environment for students (Ames & Miller, 1994). The desire to create an inclusive environment was paramount at TSS. Research has also shown that a positive, inclusive environment without academic press does not increase student achievement (Hoy, Smith & Sweetland, 2002). At times, social freedoms and academics at TSS were at an impasse as described by Staff member 11 (male teacher, 47 years old):

The nature of the school is pretty open and relaxed, so students have more opportunities to socialize. Many times this is detrimental to their academic engagement, but does help to foster student community.

Staff member 5 (female advisor, 50 plus years old) tied expectations to the sense of community at TSS: “…if there was just going be one expectation, to be part of the Scarlet School community would be a good one because that encompasses a lot”.

Students also alluded to the feeling of family within TSS. Angelina (Caucasian female, 18 years old) asserted: “It’s, like, a family-type community”

Simon (Caucasian male, 18 years old) stated:
I’ve got friends that I’ve made here that I’ll probably have for a long time because it’s like a family here…you have all the memories…all the friends and the education and it’s just totally worth the time.

The focus of the second year of experiential learning was community with the intentional goal of building a true community of participating members who had ownership in the school. Community participation was an important component of TSS and having a voice in decision making was a vital element.

4.5.4 Voice in Decision Making

“I wish I had taken more advantage of town meeting, when we got people together and came up with more ideas”

TSS practiced a democratic ethos in which all stakeholders have a voice in how the school functions. Students were invited to suggest ideas and rule-changes that affect all areas of the school with the exception of curriculum and health/safety. The primary vehicles for student participation in school operations were the student board and the town meeting. Students were elected to student board by their peers and served for a full school year. Town meeting involved the entire school, teachers, administration and students, in a weekly venue. Staff member 11 (47 year old male, teacher) gave voice to the history and concept of town meeting:

One of the unique concepts at TSS is the idea of Town Meeting. It occurs once a week in our big room involving all students and staff. Students have the opportunity to make announcements, proposals for changes at the school, voice concerns or lead topics of discussion. Students also use some of this time for performances involving music, dance, comedy routines etc.

Students also talked about the importance of town meeting, even though the focus group questions did not include a question about student voice within the school. Patty (Caucasian female, 18 years old) asserted:
Town Meeting, separates us from other schools… it’s a place where we sit down and the students come up with things that they want to change about the school [using the] democratic process. It’s student-run and students vote on it and [teachers and administrators] just let us run with it. The fact that we have an opportunity to change our school and our environment really makes this place feel like home. We have a lot of ownership and it’s a student-led, student-run school.

Patty explained a challenge involved with having a voice and seeing initiatives through,

…even though Scarlet is great… it’s hard to get things done sometimes. Scarlet is awesome in many ways, but it’s also like an ADHD person; there’s so much going on at once they can’t focus on anything, and it is difficult to get things done….

Patty’s comments demonstrated that while there were components of having a voice that were empowering and exciting, follow through of ideas was a challenge to all those involved.

Teachers alluded to the challenge of follow through as well, Staff member 10 (female advisor, 50 plus years old) stated: “follow through can be tough” and Staff member 15 (female teacher, 38 years old) said “[there is] not as much support for expectations—follow through is lacking”. Expectations were an area of concern for staff members as there was a noted, persistent lack of clarity from administration.

4.5.5 Expectations

“The school’s laid back atmosphere often gives students the impression that they don’t have rules”

Expectations were set for both behavior and academics with TSS. Formal expectations were found in policy manuals and informal expectations determined how the organization functioned on a daily basis. The concept of expectations within TSS was one that had the most variability in explanation within this study. Each group had unique perspectives.
Students were asked what types of rules and boundaries were in place within TSS. Students expressed a much more implicit understanding of rules and expectations than did the adults who participated in the research study. In one focus group, a series of comments captured much of what students perceived about the behavioral expectations and rules within TSS. Nighthawk (Caucasian male, 19 years old) asserted: “It’s not a particular set of rules, it’s more common sense, “don’t be an idiot”, if you’re stupid, you’ll fail”. Others picked up on Nighthawk’s theme and expanded on the developmental nature of the understanding of behavioral expectations within TSS.

Shadow (Caucasian male, 18 years old) asserted:

I think that most of the people who come here as freshmen have always had someone tell them about how it used to be… but people would do stupid things so they had to tighten up on rules… The real thing is “don’t be stupid”. There are clear expectations, but it depends on how you act.

Simon (African American female, 18 years old) stated:

…it’s like watching these younger kids and you’re just, like, “What are they thinking?” But there’s still those unspoken boundaries [sic] where “you don’t do that.” There’s things you can and can’t say. I feel like most of the kids here understand that and we don’t have any serious issues with bullying or anything like that…

Becca (African American female, 18 years old) posited:

I’ve been here since my freshman year and like Simon, I was wild and crazy, did whatever I wanted…once I realized that I wasn’t gonna graduate on time I realized that I needed to start doing something different…

Pablo Diaz (African American male, 19 years old) asserted

I just feel that we have boundaries, but it’s not something that we have to talk about [all the time] We just know what to do and the teachers, they know that if we’re messing around in class, once the teacher starts talking we know to start relaxing and pay attention…

The students’ expression of their understanding of the behavioral expectations of the school was refreshing and impressive given their youth. The repeated statements of
how they learned to appreciate boundaries and model expectations were indicative of the level of respect and maturity of the senior students.

Some parents were not as certain of the behavioral expectations like Pixie (female 57 years old, 1 student at TSS) who stated that, “there don’t appear to be any expected behaviors. Because my child does whatever she wants to at school” and Jackie (female 57 years old, 1 student at TSS) had “never seen a policy manual.” On parent gave a specific example of her confusion:

VW (female 47 years old, 1 student at TSS) stated:

…we feel that for our son, that there has not been enough structure at this school. We understand the philosophy of fewer rules/boundaries and letting the kids learn from their mistakes; however, these are teens and they also learn when adults are modeling appropriate behavior, telling them what appropriate dress is etc. When this message only comes from home it is challenging.

Staff member perceptions of expectations were mixed; based on their roles within the school. Administrators were aligned with each other but not always with the staff. Most staff members who had shorter tenures at TSS had different perceptions than those who had been involved with the school for a longer time. Staff member 12 (male administrator, 32 years old) stated:

Expectations are the core of our grading system. Similar to a pass/fail system, students either exceed or meet expectations, which is passing or they approach expectations or are just beginning, which is failing. …narratives accompany these grades and expectations are set forth and clear for students in their academic pursuits. [Behaviorally], our school has basic rules such as no violence, no drugs, and no weapons. I believe that these expectations for our students help to build a strong level of personal confidence.

Staff member 6 (male administrator, 34 years old) stated emphatically, “[Expectations play an] enormous role- our whole grading system is based on expectations that are developed by teachers/advisors and students…”.

Staff member 15 (female teacher, 38
years old) touched on what can be a strength and weakness at the same time, “expectations are individualized for each student depending on their strengths and weaknesses.” Staff member 7 (female administrative assistant, 26 years old) essentially stated the same sentiment, “there are general expectations, but I feel as though this is perhaps the biggest lacking area. We let them grow if *they* want to grow but sometimes the push for those that do not is lacking.”

Further, staff member 1 (26 year old female, teacher) asserted that “expectations seem to be very flexible and I think one of the characteristics of TSS is that so many things are individualized and because of that individualization expectations can be very unclear because they are not the same across the board.” Staff member 5 (female advisor, 50 plus years old) asserted: “Some of our expectations are not as clear or transparent as they need to be to be beneficial to the kids [and staff] that come here.” Staff member 8 (female teacher, 34 years old) described her perceptions of the actual practice compared to the written policies:

> I feel that the expectations are not there. In the literature it’s there, but as to in the classroom…it’s not clear and decisive…I feel like that is something that we’re lacking right now…a clear expectation for [students], because a lot of them are feeling failure and defeat.

Expectations were an area of concern for teachers and parents. The definitions of academic and behavioral expectations were cited as lacking in clarity and difficult in practice. However, expectations were also exemplary of the focus on individualization of education at TSS.

### 4.6 Curriculum

Curriculum refers to both the content (the material to be learned), and process of learning (the actions and resources involved in teaching and learning) (Herod, 2002). TSS
had a unique curriculum, composed of two components: academic and experiential. The academic component comprised 60% of the total curriculum and the experiential component comprised the remaining 40%. Students must pass all requirements in both components in order to graduate from TSS.

The academic curriculum was composed of state mandated subject area course offerings but the classes were all one-hour long and took place on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Students were in mixed grade classrooms, with no required sequences of courses with the exception of math and foreign languages. Students were advised to take courses of beginning, intermediate and advanced levels throughout their academic careers but classes within those levels were not specified. The emphasis on student class selection was an integral part of the philosophy of TSS and was done to encourage student ownership of education (E. Meers, personal communication, 2010).

The experiential curriculum took place on Tuesdays and Thursdays and involved year-long partner-based internships with organizations throughout the community. The program was developmental in nature and included an intentional advisory component in which a teacher was assigned to a group of 14-15 students for the year. As students matured and gained a better understanding of the intent of the experiential program, they were afforded more choice in internship placement and less on-site supervision from TSS staff members.

TSS had, as part of its mission statement, the goal of individualizing education for students (see section 3.2.1). The individualization of education for each student was challenging, as alluded to by some staff members in section 4.5.5, yet it was also a core component of what drew students and parents to TSS.
4.6.1 Individualized Education

“the individualized approach to education builds on each student’s unique strengths”

The desire of parents to find a school in which their children could be successful was a powerful incentive for selecting TSS. Many of the students who attended TSS reported negative school experiences prior to finding the school. Ten percent of the parents surveyed, indicated that the individualized education was a significant factor in their selection of TSS. Marlena (female 38 years old, 1 student at TSS) spoke of her daughter, “she was unhappy and not doing well at her current school.

TSS seemed like it could work with her individual needs” while Christa (female 58 years old, 3 students at TSS) lauded “the focus on each individual student: offering a course of study which was individualized; helping students to have “ownership” over their studies”

Students echoed the parent sentiments with statements such as,

Juice (Multi-racial male, 20 years old) “[curriculum] that is personalized for us, or individualized, is why I keep coming back here” and

Melanie (Caucasian female, 18 years old):  I came here because they offer different learning styles for different students.  I like that they accommodate different students’ needs as they come in.

Individualization of education took several forms at TSS. Flexibility of academic requirements was another area that received much attention from stakeholder groups and emerged as a sub-category.

4.6.2 Academic flexibility

“This school is more open to doing different things--you can do--achieve the same grade through different ways”
Academic flexibility was demonstrated in many ways at TSS. The most straightforward was that of multiple ways to earn academic credit as described by Pierce (African American male, 18 years old):

Some people are better at drawing or writing or doing interpretive dances. However you want to do it you can get the same grade—you can use your own style to get there instead of doing the same thing everyone else is. [It’s easier to be] interested in the subject.

Pierce’s mention of being “interested” in the focus group spawned discussion of other types of academic flexibility; class selections and academic freedom:

Juice (Multi-racial male, 20 years old) posited:

… I was able to take classes that I was interested in and that weren’t just cut and dry English or Social Studies. The courses that we offer here are more like college courses…. I was interested in the course that I was taking.

Ninja (Asian male, 18 years old) stated:

… when I was in middle school I wasn’t interested by what was being taught…the curriculum was all straight out of a book. But here the teachers do whatever they want… it’s a lot different, because they can teach it however they want and it’s a lot easier to be more interested in it. It make is easier to learn.

Teachers agreed that having the freedom to teach what they wanted and essentially how they wanted to teach was important. The freedom to select what they taught, the materials utilized and the assessments of learning were all part of what made TSS attractive to multiple staff members. The sense of teacher empowerment, as demonstrated by the academic freedom afforded to staff members was an example of an important component of teacher trust, as identified by Sweetland and Hoy in 2000.

Teacher empowerment was strongly related to higher reading and math scores among middle school students (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Staff member 8 (female teacher, 34 years old) stated, “I like the freedom of being able to make my own things, do my own
things and not have as much oversight as you would normally have in a typical public school setting”.

Staff member 3 (female teacher, 33 years old) started with academic freedom but segued into the challenges of meeting the needs of exceptional students:

TSS had a lot of non-traditional students using non-traditional teaching methods created by teachers...[it] wasn’t a set curriculum, teachers were trusted to design their own stuff. I have a lot more freedom in dealing with students who have significant life difficulties that put them in that at risk category. [I’ve] had a lot of opportunity to work with those students, and individualize to try and help them.

Parent, Lucy M. (female, 58 years old, 2 students at TSS) stated the following about her daughter:

I think she generally feels safe and supported at school. She went through a period of school phobia when she could not come to school. TSS was extremely flexible and supportive in working with her to keep up academically and gradually resume school attendance.

4.6.3 Focus on special education

“Until 9th grade, my son was shoved aside, “put in a corner”. Now he is recognized publically as a great person”

A significant group of parents (27%) chose TSS to meet the special needs of their children. They indicated that they wanted to have appropriate learning opportunities and environments for their children that they were not able to find in other schools. Some student challenges were academic; some students were on IEPs and some had other issues:

Soul Mother (female, 57 years old, 1 student at TSS) asserted: “My son has learning differences which other schools failed to address successfully.”

Midvale (male, 47 years old, 1 student at TSS) stated: “TSS provided the opportunity for [my] son when our home school district was unwilling to accommodate or even care when he had an illness at the start of his freshman year.” George (male, 47 years old, 1
student at TSS) proclaimed: “We were looking for a school that could meet the needs of our daughter—intelligent with a learning disability”.

VW (female, 47 years old, 1 student at TSS) asserted:

Our son has been in special education classes since 3rd grade. In 9th grade, he was placed in resource rooms much more. He was angry and bullied. We felt he would not receive any education.

Sam (female, unknown age, 1 student at TSS), stated:
My daughter felt overwhelmed and unrecognized at her previous high school of 3000. She is bi-polar and has a chronic medical condition which made her vulnerable to lost time at school. She never received the tutoring or support she needed from the larger school. When we visited TSS, they recognized and accommodated her needs.

TSS was able to meet the needs of many students with identified learning differences and had a reputation of being an environment in which students could find success. The school was projected to have 25% of the student body with active Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for the 2010-2011 school year. To address the many needs of growing population of exceptional students, the school purchased an alternative curriculum, additional assistive technology, and access to on-line programming. They also hired a third instructional specialist and an administrative assistant to handle the copious amounts of paperwork associated with IEPs.

The graduating class of 2010 included ten students who had active IEPs (21%) and two (4%) with active 504 plans. Of the twelve identified exceptional students, five were attending 4 year colleges and 3 were attending community colleges this fall. While several graduating students were accepted to a variety of 2 and 4 year institutions, there was some concern about the academic rigor with TSS.

4.6.4 Concerns about academic rigor

“I wonder at times if the amount of time spent focusing on the emotional issues, in place of academics is unbalanced”
Exposure to rigorous academics has been identified as a key to college success (ACT, 2009; College Board, 2010). The TSS mission statement indicated that the curriculum was rigorous; however, there were some exceptions to that perception among the study participants.

Staff member 5 (female advisor, 50 plus years old) expressed her concern but also provided an explanation:

We say that we have rigorous academics, but I think that it's watered down sometimes because we have so many different needs of students and we take them where they are...how do you really expect to get rigorous academics out of a student who's not sure where they're sleeping tonight?

Student Darby (Caucasian male, 18 years old) said, “I have a few things I would change, such as a higher level curriculum; The History of Rock and Roll is interesting but so is existentialism”. Parent Jackie (female 58 years old, 1 student at TSS) was “very disappointed in quality of academics at TSS” and Midvale (male, 47 years old, 1 student at TSS) expressed concern about the “academic ceiling for college preparation”.

The academic rigor within TSS was not equal to that of many large public schools in terms of offerings of AP classes, IB classes; however, a significant component of the curriculum at TSS was designed to develop social and life skills.

4.6.5 The experiential education program

“*I thought that was pretty cool that I could go get my hands dirty and not be in a classroom all day*”

Experiential learning is learning by doing. It is often referred to as “hands-on” learning or service learning. It was a large component of the learning at TSS and comprised 40% of the curriculum. The academic-experiential ratio was 60:40 with academic classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and experiential internships on
Tuesday and Thursday. Efforts to integrate the two components (academic and experiential) of the school have been ongoing and have met with varying success. The school required that all students earn between 3 and 6 credits of experiential education prior to graduation. One of the goals of the founder of TSS was to create access to experiential learning to urban students (E. Meers, personal communication, 2010).

The experiential program was unique in its structure and was cited by 20% of the parents and 50% of the students as a significant reason for selecting and remaining at TSS. Several students (17%) liked the weekly 3 academic days:2 experiential days dichotomy. There were some students who initially misunderstood the program and thought that there were no grades or “real work” associated with the experiential component of the school.

Students were required to complete written papers describing their internship locations; they had to produce at least one project related to the internship site; and all students had to create skills resumes, practice interviewing skills and present to their peers as part of their experiential grades. Students who failed the experiential component of the school were required to complete alternate assignments or repeat the entire year, depending upon the reasons for failure.

Staff member 11 (male teacher, 47 years old) expressed the potential of student participation in the experiential internship program:

The experiential program provides certain students, who struggle in a traditional academic setting, the opportunity to excel in other areas. They gain a sense of accomplishment in a different setting, increasing their confidence and sense of self worth as well as gaining trust by another adult. As a result, at times this carries over into other aspects of their lives including the classroom.
Structurally, experiential learning groups were also the advisory groups. The teachers who spent time with students at experiential sites were able to learn about and form relationships with students in a non-typical academic environment. These teachers acted as site and academic advisors for their groups. Students were arranged in experiential groups based on developmental levels, with freshmen with the greatest level of supervision and seniors participating in the culminating Walkabout experience.

4.6.6 Walkabout

“I came to this school for the Walkabout program”

The culminating senior internship experience was called Walkabout, after the rite of passage of the Australian Aborigines. Similar to that cultural journey, the TSS Walkabout was an opportunity for adolescents to challenge themselves to survive in the adult world. One focus group had an extended discussion about Walkabout and attempted to provide an explanation for the focus group moderator:

Nap (Caucasian male, 20 years old): I thought the experiential program was pretty cool, you find out what the real working world is like...[the first three years you choose from established internships] then in your senior year you get to do walkabout.

Nighthawk (Caucasian male, 19 years old): It’s where you can go anywhere, you might have to finish off your credits or if you already finished off your credits, you can take a half year and take the time to do anything you want to do..

Shadow (Caucasian male, 18 years old) “or you can do something academic”.

Rachel (Hispanic, female, 18 years old) “or you can do something you know nothing about”.

Shadow (Caucasian male, 18 years old) “yeah, like right now, I’m working on cars, I didn’t know anything about cars [before] and now I think it’s really cool to learn... I really want a career in it, go to college for it.”
All students who graduated from TSS had to complete and pass the Walkabout experience, although the experience was modified to fit the needs of individual students. Some Walkabout experiences were part of transition programs for students with IEPs and others were training programs for students who were self-supporting or teen parents. All Walkabout experiences were designed to help students become more independent and self-confident. Many students planned Walkabout experiences that took place out of the state or even the country. Students were required to create budgets and raise funds for these learning experiences. Many students also connected with relatives who lived in other states or worked at institutions that offered volunteer opportunities for teenagers such as hospitals, libraries and recreation centers. The majority of students; however, did remain in the state, with 6 of them taking advantage of the opportunity to take college classes through the Post Secondary Educational Options Program (PSEOP).

4.7 Growth and change

“You really get that feeling that they want you to succeed and graduate and everything”

While some students were defined as at risk of not graduating because of previous academic failure, several were at risk of not graduating due to chronic health conditions and/or mental health diagnoses. Some of these students were on active IEPs but most did not qualify for IEPs because of their academic success and achievement levels. These students were provided with accommodations in terms of extensions for assignments, alternate assessments and alternate assignments. The lack of attention and accommodation for mental and physical health issues were cited by 4 of the parent participants as specific reasons for choosing TSS over their home schools. The following comment by parent Sam (female, unknown age, 1 student at TSS)
I truly believe that without this school my daughter would have been lost. Her intellectual gifts were outweighed by her psychological issues before she came to this school. Being socially marginalized was destroying her; at this school, she finally felt not so alone. The fact that her teachers encourage her to grow and challenge herself without judgment on her exterior is the most valuable asset for her.

Many students who attended TSS were at risk of not graduating from high school. Four students (17%) of the study population indicated that they would not have graduated if they had not attended TSS. Nighthawk (Caucasian male, 19 years old) stated in a focus group, “No, I probably would have dropped out and gotten my GED. Maybe I’d be better off getting my GED earlier but I like the experience I got here, I’m glad I chose this.” In addition to achieving high school graduation, students demonstrated growth and maturity during their high school experience at TSS.

The conversation within one focus group was particularly illustrative of the experiences of students who felt they matured as a result of their time at TSS:

Bob (Caucasian, male, 20 years old) I started out freshman year [with], no dreams, didn’t know what I wanted to do, and really didn’t want to do anything. Now I know what I want to do. I want to go to Japan. I want to teach English. I want to graduate. I want to be able to get a higher education than both my parents.

Isabel (Caucasian female, 18 years old) I’ve grown up a lot and I started appreciating things a lot more…during the experiential program I started working with kids who have life-threatening illnesses, and homeless families, I never would have [had that opportunity]at a regular school

Alvin (African American female, 18 years old) I’ve become more friendly and open-minded; I’m not quick on judging people…I’m more open-minded to a lot of things and new people and new cultures

John (Caucasian male, 19 years old) I don’t think I would have been able to graduate from high school if I would have stayed at my old school…here it saw me mature a lot…
Parents also mentioned that they noticed differences in their children’s attitudes and maturity as a result of attending TSS. Marlena (female, 38 years old, 1 student at TSS) said that her daughter felt “more comfortable to be herself”. Similarly, Cheryl (female, 52 years old, 1 student at TSS) said of her son, “The environment gives him the confidence to speak up and be himself. He feels safe there and knows he won’t be rejected”; Soul Mother (female, 57 years old, 1 student at TSS) attributed the change in her son’s performance to “the teachers encouraging them [students] to dig deep and discover their talents and uniqueness”

TSS provided the opportunity for students to grow as human beings in addition to helping them achieve academic goals. The interaction of the supportive environment, caring staff members and a unique curriculum created a pathway for success and persistence to graduation where one did not previously exist.

4.8 Conclusion

Students at TSS came from a variety of experiences, home lives, and educational histories. When they chose to attend TSS, they entered an educational environment that was student focused and staffed by teachers and administrators who believed all students could succeed. The school was designed to individualize education to meet the needs of students, regardless of their educational, physical or mental health circumstances. The openness and efforts of staff members to develop meaningful relationships with students and parents was a hallmark of practice that attracts clientele to TSS.

The impact and importance of individual relationships and interactions between and among stakeholders was the definitive driving force in the success of TSS as an educational institution. The actions of staff members, including administrators,
determined how successfully and completely programs, policies and expectations were implemented and modified. Daily interactions and relationships also dictated the level of caring, trust, and engagement within the school. Variances in perceptions of issues among staff members were based on positions within the school and the number of years of employment with the school.

Data from parents and students cited the personal attention and culture of respect and acceptance as the main reasons that they remained at TSS. There were some areas of disagreement about understandings of expectations. There were also concerns about the limitations of the physical facility as well as with the level of communication between the administration and parents. Parents cited their appreciation for the specific support of their students with special needs as well as the flexibility and support for students who suffered from physical and mental health issues which were not addressed by their home school districts.

Students expressed their appreciation of the differences inherent in the structure and functioning of TSS and described how they changed as a result of attending the school. Students alluded to their previous academic failures as reasons for leaving their previous schools as well as the feeling that they were less likely to be found if they left the school grounds during the day. Some students also cited the fact that they had been bullied and felt that teachers did not spend time with them because they were not academic stars as reasons for leaving their home schools. One student stated that, “at my old school I wasn’t learning anything, so they (teachers) just gave up on me within about a month. I was told that I’d have to repeat the 9th grade if I came here but it was a better choice than to stay where I was.” The level of eloquence by the students spoke to the
positive outcomes possible with a supportive combination of student centered practices, processes, policies and programs.
Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Overview of the study

This qualitative case study explored the policies, programs, practices, processes and programs within one urban charter high school. The school has existed for ten years and has a history of attracting and retaining students, some of whom were described as “at risk” of academic failure in their previous school placements. This study was designed to provide an in-depth, rich understanding of the procedures and routines that support student success and retention within this school context.

This study utilized focus groups, individual interviews, and demographic questionnaires to elucidate the motivation of students, families and staff members in their selection and persistence at this particular school. The lived experiences of the stakeholders, as well as their perceptions of the culture and atmosphere within the school provided insight about the significance of personnel, programs and policies as factors for supporting student success.

As detailed in the previous chapter, three major themes emerged from participant responses: (a) people and relationships were of primary importance; (b) school climate and culture are influential and; (c) curriculum. Using invitational education and counseling as a framework, the primary findings were related to the 5 P’s beginning with the significance of how all personnel associated with the school were integral to the success of the programs, processes, practices and policies of the school.
The inclusion of a secondary framework of student engagement defined specific individual, family and school factors that have been demonstrated to predict the potential for dropping out of school. The model of student engagement, developed by Rumberger and Larson (1998) combined with identified dropout risk factors (Hammond, et al, 2007; Jerald, 2006; Rumberger, 1998, 2001, 2004) allowed the researcher to evaluate participant responses from the perspective of potential areas of challenge and the existence of supportive factors decrease the potential for dropping out of school.

The following section specifies how the three main themes provide insight into the aforementioned research questions that were the main premise of the study.

5.1.1 Research Question 1

*Why did you choose The Scarlet School?*

The importance of people within the framework of invitational education and counseling was exemplified in the responses of all participant groups. Overwhelmingly, students in this study chose to attend The Scarlet School because of parents and friends. The level of parental involvement in the choice of schools was interesting and insightful and several students mentioned that their mothers gave them no option other than to attend TSS. For example, one student stated that he started at TSS to “prove his mother wrong” and ended up staying for four years and graduating. Research about reasons students drop out indicated that forty percent of dropout risk factors are related to family backgrounds and home experiences (Bridgeland et al, 2006). Bridgeland et al (2006), Rumberger (1995) and Gleason and Dynarski (2002) all found that parents of students who dropped out spent very little time interacting with the school or talking about school
with their children. Obviously, the parent population of TSS not only talked with their children about education but was very vocal about their suggestions.

Emotional engagement focused on student attitudes, feelings and values which were exhibited by students’ sense of belonging and identification with the school and teachers (Finlay, 2006; Fredricks, et al., 2004; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Students specifically attested to the personal interactions and friendliness of the staff members as the most noticeable difference in the environment of TSS upon their initial contacts. They cited the ease with which teachers interacted with them, the first-name basis and the openness with which teachers and administrators presented themselves. The importance of the welcoming and inviting atmosphere was deemed significant and noteworthy by students as they selected TSS from a myriad of potential schools.

Teachers served as representatives of the inclusive policy of the school, defining its culture and demonstrating the level of personal attention that would be given to each TSS student. These school professionals also displayed a genuine interest in students and expressed a curiosity in learning about them as people, not just numbers in a classroom. The behaviors and expressions of interest from the teachers indicated that they had reflected on and practiced how to be inviting to each other as well as to students. The importance of this component of Purkey’s (1996) invitational education and counseling cannot be overlooked or minimized. Students were quite sophisticated in their ability to describe what specific actions and demeanors attracted them to TSS over other schools.

Parents initially chose to send their children to TSS, based on recommendations from friends (60%), health and/or educational professionals (23%), and the proximity of TSS to their homes (10%). Word of mouth and personal connections were the primary
reasons for selecting TSS although how the school specifically appealed to parents varied. Several parents indicated that their children were disengaged from typical school settings and were struggling academically. Poor school performance (test scores, poor grades, failure to do homework) was identified as a significant dropout risk factor by several researchers (Alexander, 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Jerald, 2006; Rumberger, 2001; Wagner et al., 1993). Academic engagement and academic achievement were two components of Rumberger and Larson’s (1998) model of student engagement. The consequence of student academic disengagement is most often demonstrated as academic failure, which in turn can lead to greater academic disengagement (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Breaking the cycle of academic disengagement and academic failure required interventions from teachers in the form of teacher efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk, Hoy, 2000). In some cases, students new to TSS had not experienced such proactive support from a school or its teachers.

The framework of invitational education and counseling continued to play a prominent role in the areas of emphasis of the parent responses related to why they chose to send their children to TSS. The parent responses closely paralleled the 5 P’s as identified by Purkey and Novak (1996). Parent responses were divided into categories related to the school culture; policies; processes, practices, programs and people. The school was perceived as possessing a safe, relaxed atmosphere within a small school environment. Policies that were noted by parent respondents included individualized, informal education with an emphasis on respect and creativity. Several parents
mentioned the attraction to the philosophy of the school as an important component of their school choice as well.

Teachers and staff members were identified as the main points of contact for parents and were described as inviting, enthusiastic and dedicated to student success. Parents also described teachers as approachable, responsive and provided a feeling of optimism in students that had been absent in previous school situations. Parent responses indicated that they recognized the teachers and staff members as representative of how students would be treated and cared for within the TSS community.

Some of the parent participants had students on active IEPs and chose to send their children to TSS because of its reputation as a school in which exceptional students could succeed. Students with disabilities, whether they were cognitive, physical or emotional in nature were found to be more likely to drop out of school (Wagner, et al., 1993). Students with disabilities were more likely to have multiple risk factors which led to social and or academic disengagement and eventually to dropping out (Wagner, et, al). The percentage of students identified with special needs increased from 8% in 2001 to a projected 26% for 2010-2011 (E. Meers, personal communication, 2010). The school had, in some ways, become a victim of its own success and meeting the specific requirements of the special needs population caused some stress among staff members. The school administration has had to hire additional intervention specialists, modify the curriculum, purchase a developmentally appropriate parallel curriculum and change the daily schedule to accommodate the diverse needs of learners. Most parents, however, indicated that the learning situation was better at TSS than that of previous schools, as
verbalized by a parent: As an example of this, Lucy (female, 58 years old, 2 students at TSS) stated:

Each of my kids received the individualized support they needed to overcome various challenges and be successful in school. I don’t believe they would have been given the same level of support and encouragement at any other school they may have attended in the area. They undoubtedly would have floundered and fallen through the cracks.

To address the needs of the large special education population, TSS teaching staff included 3 full-time instructional specialists who collaborated with general education staff to meet the needs of their student population. In addition, an alternative curriculum was purchased and made available to support the needs of special education students. During the second semester of the 2009-2010 school year, the Monday, Wednesday, Friday academic schedule was modified to enable inclusive classrooms and leveled learning activities in an effort to better meet the needs of the special education students as well as students who were identified as struggling at the end of the first semester of the school year. The recognition of the specific needs of the students with disabilities and the resultant changes enacted by the school counselor, general and special education staff was a vital component of proactive, supportive interventions which helped TSS continue to be successful in retaining students at the school until they reached graduation. One hundred percent of the 2010 senior with active IEPs and 504 plans graduated (ODE, 2010).

The escape from typical schools also ranked high among parents as a reason for selecting Scarlet although there did seem to be a semantic issue in that many people described Scarlet as a non-public school. As a charter school, TSS was a public school, paid for through state and federal monies and was required to meet the same
accountability measures as all schools within the state. The perception of TSS, as a non-public school, may have been based on the lack of overt bureaucracy and hierarchical management practices. Research on mobility indicated that students who move frequently were more likely to become socially and academically disengaged with schools and schooling (Fowler-Finn, 2001; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2010; Rumberger, 1995). High mobility was also identified as a dropout risk factor. Sixteen of the 24 student participants in this study began their high school careers at TSS and graduated on time.

The experiential focus of TSS was the third most cited reason for selecting the school and was identified as a major component of the school curriculum. The experiential education component of TSS was a specific program that comprised 40% of the total curriculum in the school. Responses to questions about the experiential education program indicated that it was viewed by the school staff as an integral educational opportunity with ties to 21st Century skills and social skills development. The parents viewed the program as a job-training opportunity. The experiential program addressed the complaint heard from many dropouts about the lack of relevance in their educations (Bridgeland et al., Lehr et al., 2004; 2006; Marks, 2000). The connection between hands-on internship experiences and the general curriculum provided not only educational relevance but an opportunity to increase student social engagement at the same time.

Students also viewed the experiential program as a job-training/skills building opportunity as stated in their expressions of the variety of work experiences they had to put on resumes. Clarity of the intent of the program from the school perspective versus
the practical perceptions of the program from parents and students may be an area which needed to be addressed by the administration. Policies which did not receive much mention in parent responses were the later starting time (9:00am) or the individualized mastery-based alternative grading scale of Just Beginning (JB), Approaching Expectations (AE), Meeting Expectations, (ME) and Exceeding Expectations (EE). These policies were all mentioned in each open-house/recruitment fair and they were often cited as critical differences by the administrative staff. These two policies were integral to the planned structure of TSS yet did not elicit responses when specifically asked about policies within the school. It was not clear if this was due to the fact that these policies were perceived as non-negotiable or if they were simply accepted as standard procedure. An alternative interpretation may be that those policies, while important to the school, were not deemed as important or “deal-making” by the parents or students.

Part of the alternative grading policy was mentioned as a positive by three parents in that they viewed the written narrative component of the grades as insightful and informative. However, the translation of the grades for school transfer, PSEO and college entrance purposes caused some concern. Numerous students and parents spoke of the difficulty in acceptance of credits by other school systems and in terms of college scholarship opportunities and voiced by Jackie (female, 58 years old, 1 student at TSS) “[my daughter is staying because] she’s a senior and there are no other alternatives at this point, and Betty (Caucasian female, 41 years old, 1 student at TSS) stated: “It seems due to the way classes are a blend of all grade levels and not in any set schedule i.e. English I, II, III and IV it would be detrimental to transfer a student to a more “mainstream” school.
As the school counselor, the researcher was responsible for all college counseling activities including calculation of grade point averages. Efforts were made to help college admission departments understand the alternative grading system. In most cases, colleges wanted the alternative grades translated into a typical A-F system, which resulted in EEs becoming As and MEs becoming Bs. JBs and AEs translated to Fs.

While the concept of grading students against themselves as opposed to others was, in some cases an empowering idea that fostered individual responsibility for learning, it often took students a semester or longer to understand the grading system and how it translated into passage of classes. In addition, the connection between what the grades translated to became an issue when students reached junior status and began completing standardized test registration forms, insurance forms for good student discounts and eventually college applications. Students who had previously been satisfied with straight ME grades were surprised to learn that they had a 3.0 equivalent grade point average which was not as competitive as they had hoped.

The school administration was aware of the challenges associated with the grading system and how it translated to the “outside” world but they also believed that the system represented what they valued in terms of authentic assessment. Clear and concise information about how the grading system functions needed to be an important component of the induction into the TSS community. The comments of the parent and student participants of this study indicated that more intentional effort on the part of the school was needed in this area as touched upon by Midvale (male, 47 years old, 1 student at TSS) “I was usually confused about the grading system, schedule and how it all fit together.”
Staff members were drawn to TSS by the philosophy, the small size, the stated mission of the school, academic freedom and convenience. When asked to describe the philosophy, staff members talked about the individual relationships and the focus on students as opposed to egos, salaries and promotions. Several teachers searched for a school with less bureaucratic structure than their previous locations. The small size appealed to teachers who had come from large urban and suburban districts in which several thousand students filled each high school. The attraction of teachers to the TSS mission included components mentioned in the philosophy such as individualization of educational experiences and the student-centered focus.

Several teachers noted the appeal of the freedom to create their own classes as opposed to being told what to teach and what materials to use. These teachers described their previous experiences as feeling as if they were “under the thumb of the prescribed curriculum” or feeling “handcuffed…with decisions being made for me.” The teachers stated that they felt trusted, as professionals, to create their own curriculum and they appreciated that freedom.

All three groups of respondents (i.e., students, parents and staff members) alluded to the importance of relationships and personal connections in their rationale for choosing TSS. The staff members within the school represented and demonstrated their interpretations of the policies, programs, processes, and practices of the school and thus were the critical points of connection between the three groups. Interpretation and understanding of the intent of the experiential program and the objectives and consequences of the grading system were areas where clarity of communication was lacking.
The school-wide emphasis on personal connections and the importance of meaningful, caring and supportive relationships supports the theory of relational trust as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002). Trust develops over time, and is a cognitive process in which individuals assess the intentions of others based on their interactions with them. If the interactions are positive, they lead to favorable outcomes and trust develops between the people. The effect of policies, culture and contextual conditions on social exchanges within schools can either support the formation of relational trust between role groups or it can block its development (Byrk & Schnieder, 2002).

Learning is a cooperative process and distrust negatively affects cooperation and teachers' tendency toward collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Tschannen-Moran (2004) proceeded to describe the attitudes and behaviors that school administrators and staff members could demonstrate as they worked to enhance levels of trust within schools. All educators must work to build trusting relationships with students and their parents in order to support student achievement. The principal and the teachers must work as a team to reach parents, open lines of communication, and provide parents with opportunities to be involved in decisions regarding the educational journeys of their children. If all staff members share the vision and are led by a competent leader who supports the work of building trust, student achievement will result (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

5.1.2 Research Question 2

What experiences have had the greatest influence on the attitudes of students, families and staff toward TSS?

The experiences related by students, parents and staff members, all aligned with the framework of invitational education and counseling, as created by Purkey and Novak (1996) and refined by Purkey and Schmidt (1996). Invitational education has five
assumptions, which are applied through the policies, programs, processes, places, people to create an environment that supports student growth and achievement. The five assumptions are: respect, which states “people are valuable, able and responsible and should be treated accordingly” (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p.12); trust, which depends on “reliability, genuineness, truthfulness, intent and competence” (p. 13); care, defined as “the ongoing desire to link personal, significant means with worthwhile societal ends” (p. 14); optimism, which states that “people possess untapped potential in all areas of human endeavor” (p. 14); and intentionality, described as, “human potential can be realized best by places, policies, processes and programs specifically designed to invite development and by people who are personally and professionally inviting with themselves and others” (p. 15).

The concept of respect, as defined by Purkey and Novak (1996) was well represented in the stories and findings of this study. Payne (2008) interviewed high school students in 1998 to learn what actions they perceived as respect from teachers. Her findings (Payne, 2008, p. 48) and examples of how TSS teachers demonstrated these actions are as follows:

1. The teacher calls me by my name. Pierce (Caucasian, male, 18 years old) “all the teachers know your name within the first week of school”

2. The teacher answers my questions. Nap (Caucasian, male, 20 years old) “And the teachers actually work with you and go over everything, make sure you have a good understanding

3. The teacher talks to me respectfully. Nighthawk (Caucasian, male, 18 years old) “I appreciate the first name basis with the teachers and the fact that they listen in the classroom.”

4. The teacher notices me and has “hi”. Pablo Diaz (African American, male, 19 years old) , “…the one teacher that always say “Hi,” to you every morning”
5. *The teacher helps me when I need help.* Cornelius (Caucasian, male, 18 years old), “sometimes the teacher will say, “Are you okay?” and help you without you even having to hint that you’re not doing okay.

Trust, which included the five components listed by Purkey and Novak (1996) was discussed and expanded upon in the discussion of the findings of question one, based on the relational trust work of Tshannen-Moran (2004) and Bryk and Schneider (2002). Patty (Caucasian, female, 18 years old) stated, “[teachers] were really easy to connect to and talk to and willing to listen to what you had to say” and Alvin (African American, female, 18 years old) commented “I learned to ask for help…I got to feel more free to talk with the teachers” Alice Banks (Caucasian, female, 18 years old) stated, “everyone make you feel safe and loved” and finally Cornelius (Caucasian, male, 18 years old) summarized with “I have a personal relationship with all the teachers…I can talk to them and ask them if I need help”.

Care within the confines of TSS, was tied to the democratic ethos which underscores the mission of the school and was described in the section 4.5.4 devoted to the importance of having a voice in the decision making processes within the school. Students, staff and parents all had a voice in the decision making processes within TSS, through town meeting, advisories, student board, and the open door policy of the administration. Melanie (Caucasian, female, 18 years old) declared, “Scarlet is a student-driven school. The STUDENTS run the school. The students are the ones who have the power to make the changes. Students who care about the school will do something about [whatever issues arise]”

Optimism was demonstrated in student, staff and parent stories by the mention of “second chances”, “fresh starts” and continued contact between students and school
faculty during challenging life events. The potential to re-engage students who had negative educational histories was an area in which TSS excelled. Dropout risk factors include previous academic failure and grade retention (Hammond, et al. 2007; Rumberger, 1995, 2001). Early identification and supportive actions by school staff members enabled some students to create a “new” educational history beginning at TSS. Nap (Caucasian, male, 20 years old) talked about his previous school performance compared to that at Scarlet, “[at my old school] out of eight class periods I’d only pass two…I pretty much bombed all my classes. When I came here I noticed an increase in performance”; Cornelius (Caucasian, male, 18 years old) stated, “as soon as I got into the school, my academics started getting better because I was given a choice” and Darby (Caucasian, male, 18 years old) stated simply, “I came to the Scarlet School was it was a last option for me.”

Findings from the individual oral interviews, focus groups, and written answers to interview questions indicated that the inclusive, individualized environment provided an atmosphere of acceptance and created situations in which students were able to find success. Student success, typically culminating in graduation, was the goal and intent of parents and staff members alike. The concept of expectations at TSS was one which resulted in a variety of interpretations and responses from all three stakeholder groups. The three groups did; however, all share in the goal of graduating all seniors every year.

Students described the process of learning about the implicit expectations and boundaries of the school as a rite of passage which occurred at various times depending on the individual student. Student perceptions of school rules and boundaries were expressed in their attitudes and sense of identification and belonging in the school...
(Finlay, 2006; Fredricks et al., 2004). This aligns with the concept of student emotional engagement which can then have a reciprocal interaction with behavioral engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Simon (Caucasian, male, 18 years old) stated, “we have a mutual respect thing where we know what’s expected of us and what’s okay to do and what’s not okay to do” Further, they talked of the TSS providing opportunities for them to prove themselves as capable students and mature human beings as reported by Cornelius (Caucasian, male, 18 years old), “Being here [at TSS] is a privilege and I wouldn’t have, this breathing room at any other school.” The students also cited the supportive role that teachers and staff members played in providing academic, social and personal assistance when they asked for it and even when they did not. The enveloping school culture, provided by teachers, administrators, counselors and fellow students, created opportunities for students to exhibit their competencies, challenges, passions and fascinations. This culture subsequently gave students the confidence to create and pursue their goals. The collective efficacy demonstrated by the teachers permitted students to believe in themselves as they matriculated through TSS. As stated by Peppermint (female, 50+ years old, 2 students at TSS), “[teachers] are dedicated to each student being successful.

Parents cited instances that demonstrated the willingness of staff members to work with their children as individuals. They also talked of their children forming connections with staff members as paramount to their success and happiness with TSS. Parents spoke of their children becoming engaged in their educations, recovering from previous experiences with bullying and exclusion and figuring out how to be successful in arenas that they would not have been exposed to in their home schools. Many parents
attributed their students’ successes to respectful and supportive relationships. Yoko Ono (female, 55 years old, 1 student at TSS) summarized with, “My son has blossomed at Scarlet. He went from being angry and feeling bad about himself to happy and proud.”

Staff members provided a multitude of stories about students they have had over the years, all with the underlying premise of meaningful relationships and multiple opportunities that allowed for students to demonstrate success. They spoke of students who continued to return yearly to attempt to pass the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT); students who spent 6 or 7 years at TSS, still intent on graduating; students who were away from the school for months at a time due to physical illnesses, mental breakdowns or rehabilitation programs, all of whom somehow, with a variety of supports, managed to graduate. The time, effort and belief of the staff members in the inherent value of their students were at the core of what was relayed in each of the staff stories.

The concept of intentionality, as defined by Purkey and Novak (1996) was the one area in which data from The Scarlet School was equivocal at best. The policies, processes, programs, places and people of TSS all focus on the students and try to support student success but there were definitive responses, from all three stakeholder groups, that indicated the consistency of responses and intentionality of decisions about the 5 Ps listed above was lacking. The desire to be supportive and the intent to be consistent and focused were present but the reality of the success and clarity of programs, policies and processes were variable.

Intentionality was the one area in which TSS did not meet the criteria of invitational education and counseling. The school managed to be successful in academic rankings (rated effective by the state for the 2009-2010 school year) and students and
parents felt that they could contact teachers, advisors, counselors and administrators to discuss concerns or issues as they arose. However, there was little overt intent in the plan to achieve school-wide academic goals or to provide appropriate, professional training for teachers acting in counseling roles. The intent to utilize teachers in multiple roles including personal, academic and career advisors created an environment rich in student support but some teachers expressed concern about their own level of competence to act as counselors.

5.1.3 Research Question 3

*What processes or programs at TSS influenced students, families and staff members to remain at TSS?*

Congruent responses from all three stakeholder groups listed the individualization of education, care and respect demonstrated by the staff and safety as the main policy and process-related reasons for remaining at The Scarlet School. Student responses included specific examples of how teachers provided individual support for their academic needs and how they felt that they could rely on almost any staff member in a time of need. A national study of dropouts, conducted by Bridgeland, et al. (2006) indicated that a lack of attachment to a caring adult was an important factor in choosing to leave school. Only 41 percent of dropouts indicated that they had some staff member that they felt comfortable enough to approach about personal problems while 56 percent of them indicated that they did have a staff member they could approach about school issues (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). TSS students cited an appreciation for the ability to talk with administrators when they were concerned about school-related or personal issues. Students also mentioned their awareness of the personalization of address between adults and students within TSS, one student described the relationship as “adult to adult, not adult to kid”. This
researcher always found it amusing when relaying information to educational professionals from other schools that the issue that stood out for most of the professionals was the fact that the TSS students called the staff members by their first names.

Staff members spoke of the student-focused environment and the personal relationships as their main reasons for remaining at TSS as well. They continued to provide additional detail about how cognizant they were about the excitement and pleasure they experienced as a result of working with like-minded colleagues. Staff members often formed personal relationships outside of the school as a result of shared interests as well as educational philosophies.

Parent responses to this question mentioned the environment of respect and caring as well but the vast majority of the parents focused on the experiential program as the main reason they remained at TSS. They mentioned the flexibility afforded by the school curriculum, with the 60:40 academic: experiential split; they appreciated the life-learning that resulted from the internships; many parents mentioned the social growth and maturity demonstrated by their children as a result of participation in the experiential program and the opportunity to learn about potential careers was cited by several parents. The parents’ perceptions of the intent of the experiential program were less clear, based on the data collected.

The comments of many parents seemed to indicate their understanding of the experiential program as that of job-training as opposed to an extension of academic learning in an adult-supervised environment. Not one parent mentioned the fact that the experiential program had academic components and expectations as well.
Students cited the experiential program as the main programmatic reason they remained at TSS. Several students talked about how they had the opportunity to act like an adult during their internships and they learned to make decisions and face consequences as a result of their decisions. One student in particular stated that he “doesn’t like being late anymore, he just can’t tolerate it” after being at an internship for several months. Several students also alluded to their levels of responsibility and exploration that resulted from participation in the experiential program and many of them talked of discovering or eliminating potential career ideas through the internships they had experienced over four years. Students also mentioned how their internships led to job opportunities and allowed them to have several useful job-related entries on a resume. A national survey of dropouts indicated that 81 percent of recent dropouts would have been more likely to stay in school if they had had opportunities for real-world learning with relevant, engaging work (Bridegland, et al., 2006). Some of the TSS students did view the experiential program as a job-training/exploration program as opposed to something for which they earned a grade and had academic expectations.

The culminating senior Walkabout experience was also noted by several students as quite important in terms of the experiential education program. Based on their descriptions and experiences, they demonstrated that they were beginning to realize that the focus of the experiential program was not only job exploration and training but also to develop critical thinking skills and to learn to make decisions and stand on their own feet. The growth demonstrated by the seniors as they progressed through the Walkabout process was a main reason for the creation of TSS.
The processes, practices and policies appreciated by the students and parents were focused on the personal interactions and supportive relationships between them and the staff members of the school. The model of invitational education and counseling created by Purkey and Schmidt (1996) emphasized the importance of creating policies and practices that are focused on the needs of students and the relationships within the school. Under the umbrella of invitational education, all programmatic efforts and decisions were to be made with student success as the main goal (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). In responses similar to those of research question 1, the relational trust and the way in which the trust was demonstrated by teachers through processes, practices and policies was what made TSS both attractive as an initial choice and a long-term choice for parents and students.

The experiential program and the manner in which it supported students as they developed from their freshman year through the culminating senior walkabout experience was the main reason for retention for both students and parents. This singular, unique program had the power to help students grow in areas that they were not aware of prior to their participation in the program. It helped some students discover interests, potential careers, strengths, weaknesses, and a sense of belonging and for some students, participation in the experiential program provided their first real sense of success. While the understanding of the intent of the program may not be clear, the results were often astounding.

5.1.4 Research Question 4

What changes do the students see in themselves as a result of their experiences at TSS?

This question was only asked from the student perspective. As noted in student stories about their previous school experiences, quite a few of the seniors in the class of
2010 were “at risk” of not graduating from high school. Many students had failed academically at their previous schools and had created large credit deficits which continued to cause issues throughout their high school careers. Academic failure and slow credit accrual were identified as significant risk factors for dropping out (Jerald, 2006) and are also identified within the student engagement model proposed by Rumberger & Larson (1998). Six of the student participants in this study were retained one or more years prior to arriving at TSS; however, they all graduated in 2010. Student retention is also a known dropout risk factor (Alexander, 2001; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Students who managed to graduate did so by passing all sections of the OGT, meeting all of the course requirements of the state of Ohio and all of the graduation requirements of The Scarlet School.

The majority of students described themselves as more mature, responsible, and confident as a result of their attendance at TSS. Others spoke of how they were no longer involved with drugs or gangs. Many spoke of how they learned to appreciate simple things such as health and the ability to hear or see as a result of their work with ill, blind or deaf children. Several students also spoke of how they learned to appreciate diversity and not judge others so quickly. Some even spoke of deciding to set goals and to plan for their futures. One young man spoke of learning that he wanted to “live a life that I think would be good for me, not just…surviving, but something…respectful.”

Many of these young people indicated that they planned to attend college; some who were fairly certain about or what they wanted to major in as a result of their experiential work. Of the cohort of 48 students, eleven students were accepted to multiple four year institutions; six received substantial scholarships. Eleven students chose to
attend community colleges while five students went on to specialty schools in the arts, business and hair care. Two students joined the military and several students planned to take a “gap year” to make money and explore options prior to committing to a post-secondary option.

All of the interviewed students graduated from TSS. The students demonstrated resiliency in overcoming their negative academic histories to find and achieve success at TSS. They were able to engage on behavioral, cognitive and emotional levels through their experiences with the bi-directional interactions between the people, programs, policies and practices of TSS. Numerous students stated that they would not have graduated from high school had they not attended TSS. Other students also cited the opportunities and experiences afforded them by the flexible, individualized, and experiential components of their education as reasons for their success. They also talked about the importance of supportive staff members as well as family members in helping them achieve the goal of graduation. The self-knowledge acquired by these graduates of TSS helped them make informed decisions about their futures and to set goals for themselves as they continue their life journeys.

5.2 Conclusions

The aforementioned assumptions of the researcher were validated by the findings of the study:

1. TSS provides an inviting school climate, which is attractive, safe, and engaging to students and their families.

2. TSS has an enabling structure, which includes meaningful, positive relationships between staff and students.
3. Both respect and trust are evident in the processes and mission of TSS.

4. TSS students benefit from experiential educational opportunities.

5. Each participant has his or her own story on why he or she attends and persists at TSS

6. Participants in this research study will answer questions truthfully and to the best of their abilities.

The data collected in this study supported the importance of an inviting school climate to the academic and social engagement of students and parents. The climate of the school addressed the five components (people, places, policies, programs, and processes) of invitational education and counseling, as created by Purkey and Novak (1996). All personnel associated with TSS were student focused and demonstrated respect, caring and appreciation for diversity. Through their interactions with students and parents teachers, administrators and student support personnel created an environment in which students felt safe, supported and engaged as exemplified by the following quotes:

Lucy M (Caucasian female, 58 years old, 2 students at TSS) asserted: “I don’t believe any other school in the area would provide the level of individual support that TSS does or the creative opportunities for individual growth and learning.

Cheryl (Caucasian female, 52 years old, 1 student at TSS) stated: “We feel like we have input about choices regarding our son. We have more options here and we feel like part of a team. We are all working for the good of our son together.”

Staff member 12 (male administrator, 32 years old) stated: “I would describe the school climate as inclusive, creative and relational.”

TSS was created to serve the needs of the urban community in a large Midwestern city. TSS was intended to be a small school with a student-centered focus and individualized attention to the educational needs of the students within it. An enabling
school structure is one in which administrators and teachers work together to solve problems and create solutions. Rules and regulations within an enabling structure are flexible guidelines to aid in problem solving (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). TSS did have an enabling structure that promoted and expected staff members to work with each other and with students to create meaningful relationships as alluded to by Staff member 13 (male teacher, 57 years old) “[at my previous school] there so much paperwork and bureaucracy you never got anything done. Here it’s as if they [administrators] step out of the way of anything if you have an idea.”

Respect and trust were evident throughout the responses from all three participant groups. Yoko Ono (Caucasian female, 55 years old, 1 student at TSS) specifically cited the policy of “mutual respect between students and staff” while Staff member 12 (male administrator, 32 years old) said, “Staff and students work well together and respect is something that is encouraged and typically maintained.” Student Alice Banks (Caucasian female, 18 years old) stated, “I was a shy person, but whenever I said something, I felt respected.”

It was the intent of the founders to offer a unique experiential education program to high school students during all four years of high school, culminating in the senior Walkabout experience. The experiential program was cited many times by students, parents, teachers and administrators as a main reason for choosing TSS as well as a significant factor of why they stayed at TSS. Staff member 1 (female teacher, 26 years old) spoke about her introduction to the experiential component of TSS, “The experiential program that exists here at the Scarlet school is something very different from anything that I experienced myself or that I had been taught about.” Student Nap
(Caucasian male, 20 years old) talked about why he chose TSS, “I thought the
experiential program was pretty cool.”

Parent Joy (female 50+ years old, 1 student at TSS) cited the program as a reason
she and her daughter persisted at TSS, “the 40% community based experiential [was why
we stayed] because my daughter had thoroughly engaged that from that beginning.”

The extent of the experiential program and the way in which it was enacted at
TSS was due, in part to the fact that TSS was a charter school. TSS was a charter school,
not by choice but by circumstance. The idea was proposed to the superintendent of the
local city system who liked the idea but suggested that it be implemented in four
locations simultaneously. The founder of TSS realized that the level of interaction
necessary to build trust, demonstrate respect and create a meaningful experiential
program was not possible in four schools simultaneously. The state had recently enacted
a charter school law and The Scarlet School came into being in 2000.

TSS has had an impact on the community, on alumni, parents, staff members and
current students. The experiences of those associated with the school have been as varied
and unique as those who chose to attend the school. The school has had to overcome a
reputation as a “drug school” or the “place where all the weird kids go” but within its
walls, the stakeholders found a supportive, nurturing environment with a focus on
students and their success. The founder of TSS had the idea, experience, and expertise to
create the school and was still at the helm at the conclusion of this study. One of the
primary intentions of the founder was to create opportunities for students to practice
making choices about their educations while enmeshed in exploring their passions. When
asked about why TSS had a record of success, stability of personnel, private donations
and continuity of the administrative team were cited by the founder. The founder often stated that the school was so much more than the original vision (E. Meers, personal communication, 2010).

5.3 Emerging Conceptual Framework

All processes, policies, and programs within The Scarlet School were carried out by the teachers, administrators, and support staff within the school. Students were at the center of the school and their success was the focus of all work conducted within the school and experiential program. Interactions between and among teachers, staff and students took place on a daily basis and were reciprocal in nature. Each interaction resulted in changes in the levels of trust and vulnerability among and between students and adults. The concept of interaction between the various groups on a daily basis with each interaction resulting in a change in the dynamics of the people within each group is supported by the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 1995). Epstein (1995) posited that the overlapping of school and family could result in "family-like schools" and "school-like families," (p. 702). Family-like schools exhibit an accepting, caring atmosphere and treats students at individuals. School-like families place an emphasis on the importance of school, homework, and associated learning activities. TSS displayed many characteristics of a family-like school and was even referred to as a “family” by two student participants.

Each process, policy and program within TSS was affected by the personnel within the school and each individual adult served as a representative of the school policies, programs and processes. Students learned about the school culture from their interactions with adults and they learned the boundaries and expectations by observation,
experimentation and at times pushing limits. Each process, policy and program was integrated with the others and each responded to changes and new information from each of the participants. This concept of bidirectional interactions between individual students, the school and their immediate environment is aligned with the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1989). In the context of ecological systems theory, the conceptual model of TSS focused on the microsystem which included the student, the school and the experiential program. Each of these three factors interacted with each student and through each teacher to create an individual reaction to the content, experience or issue occurring in the daily life of the child. Each student absorbed information, reacted to it and created a resultant behavior that would then be subjected to the same cyclical processes. The ecological systems theory process can and does occur in any school, regardless of the location, SES of the student body or any other factors. The difference in the TSS model was that of awareness of all school related personnel that the process was cyclical and provided an opportunity for teachers, mentors, advisors, administrators and counselors to act as role models for students. This awareness aligned with the intent of invitational education and counseling (Purkey & Novak, 1996).

The combination of interactions between students, staff member and programs, policies and practices led to an interactive self-correcting model of how the school functioned as an organization. Interactions happened at all levels and feedback between and among the individuals led to greater understanding and comprehension of the intents of each person and program. The utilization of non-school-related mentors in the experiential education program added an additional adult to model pro-social behaviors in a typically non-academic environment.
Mentors, who were typically community business owners, were helpful in the development of social skills and 21st Century skills among the students as they shared their experiences of opening successful businesses as well as their expertise in their arts or crafts. They also helped students learn appropriate customer service behaviors and attitudes as well as helping students explore their interests, strengths and weaknesses. The use of mentors to support student engagement has been shown to promote student graduation as well as aid in the transition to higher education for students (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). The real-world context of the experiential work provided relevance to student learning. Relevance in learning was often cited in student engagement literature as reason students did not find school engaging (Baines & Stanley, 2003; Bridgeland, et al., 2006; Marks, 2000).

A graphic representation of the emerging functional framework of TSS is included in Figure 2. The experiential education program was the single program that demonstrated cohesiveness of intent and practice with TSS. The way in which each advisor conducted sessions and supervised students varied based on individuality and teacher efficacy in the specific arena. The intent of the experiential program was not clearly understood by parents and students; however, it was still perceived as an integral component in their decision to attend and persist at TSS.

The policies included in this framework were those that were cited by members of all three stakeholder groups, parents, students and staff members. Additional policies existed within the school but they were not mentioned by all three stakeholder groups and thus were not included in this conceptual model. The policies of flexible academics, individualized educational programs, familiarity with adult role models and mutual
respect are all cited in dropout prevention literature as directions for improvement of student engagement and school persistence (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

The processes listed in this framework were chosen based on the number of times they were cited by study participants as well as the mention of the processes by students, members of the school staff and the parents. The processes include the meaningful support of caring adults, a school climate that demonstrates trust and caring, the opportunity for participation in school-wide decision making and the opportunity for second chances for students to become re-engaged with a school setting. These processes all allude to the comments and recommendations from dropouts, based on a national survey conducted by Bridgeland et al., (2006). Rumberger (2004) also cited similar suggestions for ways in schools can be reorganized to engage students and reduce the number of dropouts. Based on a review of the existing literature, Rumberger (2004) asserted, that the commitment and competencies of the people (teachers, administrators and other school staff members) and the organizational structure of the school (size, class sizes, curriculum and services) were components of schools which were able to keep students enrolled until graduation.

The organizational structure, flexible policies and a trusting and caring school climate all worked together to create a school which provided engaging, relevant, real-world educational experiences that helped students persist at TSS until graduation. The system and structure had some inherent challenges and there was much room for growth and change, especially in the areas of collaboration and communication. The fact that TSS managed to create an engaging school that met the needs of students from a wide variety of school districts may have been due to the reality that the school was designed
from the ground up. Dynarski and Gleason (1998) posited that it may be more difficult to transform an existing school than to create new ones.

5.4 Implications for Counselors and Educators

“The two things that move a person out of poverty are education and relationships” (Payne, 1998). The community of TSS embedded students in a network of caring adults who demonstrated caring, respect and trust. This environment allowed students to engage in experiences that fostered personal, social and academic growth while integrating career exploration. The school culture was which included significant
and meaningful connections to the community through the experiential program. The experiential program also created an opportunity for young people to form relationships with positive adult mentors. The school functioned as a community at the student level with supportive guidance from teachers, administrators, advisors and counselors. The school structure supports the work of school counselors by utilizing all full-time teachers as student advocates and advisors.

5.4.1 Counseling Implications

In many respects, the experiential education program was a perfect vehicle for counselor-led career exploration activities. There were components of the program that were influenced by the school counselor but the actual practice and depth of coverage of material are teacher/advisor dependent. The experiential program was the only time students were in grade-level groups and this is also an opportune time for the school counselor to deliver classroom and large group guidance activities. Examples of large group guidance during the past several years include whole-grade level presentations on sexual harassment, suicide, post-secondary options, college and post secondary educational planning and computer based career exploration utilizing the Career-Key program. In addition, the school counselor acted as a resource for advisors interested in teaching study skills and organizational planning.

The final component of school counselor activities tied to the experiential program design was that of OGT test preparation. The counselor provided content-specific vocabulary lists to the sophomore and junior advisors at the beginning of the school year and encouraged them to incorporate the words into their lessons and on word walls and any other creative ways that they could devise. The counselor also provided
access to half-and full-length practice tests and on-line test preparation programs as well as assisting with after school and lunch time tutoring for students. The counselor also received, analyzed and distributed the results of OGT tests and provided interpretive guidance for parents, teachers and students about the scores and options.

The structure of TSS, in essence, allowed for a single counselor to build capacity for student support within the school by training teachers to interpret transcripts, provide referrals to community resources and plan college visits. The challenge was to create the time to provide appropriate training activities for the teaching staff in a busy environment. During the 2009-10 school year, the researcher provided grade-level training for advisors as requested as well as imparting her knowledge about specific areas of student development and mental health but was unable to schedule full-staff Professional Development activities on a regular basis.

Despite the lack of formal training opportunities, the teachers were able to form relationships and act as student advocates. The data from this study demonstrated the depth of the impact of personal, trusting relationships on student growth and achievement. Research suggests that students' values develop as a result of their interactions with others, and they are more likely to internalize the values of those with whom they feel connected and who demonstrate caring and respect (Comer, 2005).

Consistency of relationships within the environment was an important factor in the success of TSS. Relationships existed on multiple levels and throughout each process and program. Teachers demonstrated individual attention within and outside of classrooms and served as academic, personal and social supports for students. Students arrived at TSS from more than 10 school districts yet they were able to appreciate each
other and the diversity that they created. The members of the school formed a community in which each member was valued as an individual and not judged based on appearance or skill set.

5.4.2 Educator Implications

In current educational reform efforts, many programs, ideas and costly “fixes” have been created; however, little attention has been paid to the importance of genuine trust and caring relationships within the school environment. The cost of creating trusting relationships between students and staff members was time, desire and effort. Professional development activities geared toward practices that build trust and help adults relate to students could advance the trust building process; however, it would not be successful unless staff members were genuine in their intent. Intentional hiring practices may be helpful in selecting teachers who not only understood content but would be able to form relationships with students, staff and parents.

The formation of a community was less complicated within a small environment but the underlying connection of each person to the goal of student success was one that could be replicated in most school environments. Research on connectedness cited the importance of a small school environment in the creation of opportunities for meaningful interpersonal interactions between adults and students (Felner, Setsinger, Brand, Burns & Bolton, 2007; McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002).

The importance of the experiential education curriculum of TSS was also a significant finding of this study and may have implications for educators and policy makers. The unique characteristics of this program provided opportunities for students to demonstrate competence and develop social and 21st Century skills in adult-oriented
work environments. The most notable components of this program were the intentional long-term relationships with site mentors and the continuous thread of support from school personnel. Students were placed in internships which were intended to last throughout the school year and teachers from TSS acted as liaisons to ensure that expectations were met by both students and mentors. The experiential program was integrated into the curriculum of TSS and was not simply a “community service hour commitment” added on to academic expectations.

The importance and significance of the experiential program within the fabric of TSS made it a primary reason that students and parents chose and persisted at TSS. The current community service programs in many schools could be improved and made more intentional through adoption of some components of the experiential program as practiced at TSS. Provision of funding and resources for an integrated program of true service learning as opposed to community service may serve schools well as they attempt to help students connect their academic learning to real world experiences (Kaye, 2004). School systems struggle to accommodate career exploration activities, 21st Century skills, integration of technology and connection to the surrounding community without sacrificing academic contact time.

The experiential education program, as designed by TSS, encompassed all of the above mentioned activities and arenas yet it did so in an organic manner so that students did not feel as if they were simply completing tasks to check them off of a list. Application of the information gained in career exploration and practice in communication, resume writing and interviewing skills could be completed utilizing technology as a tool as well as a resource. Creation of electronic portfolios, including
documentation of academic progress and demonstration of personal growth could be incorporated into existing community service programs. Service to the larger community, in the form of sustained interactions provided opportunities for engagement on a meaningful level as opposed to typical “once and done” community service events.

The creation of environments of trust and respect has the potential to provide students from a variety of educational histories with the tools to succeed. Students were able to utilize the collective efficacy and support of teachers to build confidence in their decision-making processes as well as in their academic growth. Construction of similar environments in schools is a distinct possibility and could be a significant factor in school reform efforts.

5.5 Recommendations

The current research study provided information from the perspectives of students, school personnel and parents. The information provided suggestions for ways in which counselors, administrators and parents can work together to support student persistence and success. Recommendations for counselor educators, administrator educators and teacher educators are included.

5.5.1 Recommendations for Counselors

Professional school counselors undergo rigorous training in the areas of collaboration, individual, small and large group counseling and assessment, ethics and multicultural awareness (ASCA, 2003). With such a skill set, professional school counselors can play an integral part in the creation of a positive school climate as well as provide an array of interventions and services to support student retention (ASCA, 2005). In many cases, the question of “what do school counselors do?” still persists. Data from
this study support ways in which a professional school counselor can be proactive in a student-centered environment such as that at TSS. Below is a list of what school counselors can do to promote awareness of their areas of expertise as well as providing support in a variety of areas:

1. Help administrators, teachers, students and parents understand what you do
2. Help administrators and teachers understand your training and expertise and offer to help train others
3. Offer to step into leadership roles
4. Create networks within the school and greater community
5. Create a climate of safety, respect and responsibility
6. Collect data to demonstrate the effectiveness of your interventions

5.5.2 Recommendations for Administrators

School administrators are responsible for much of the day to day operation of the school (OSU, 2010b). This typically includes hiring staff members including teachers, counselors and other support staff such as school nurses, psychologists, registrars, etc. In the creation of a student-centered school environment, some recommendations emerged from this study:

1. Intentional hiring practices to select teachers who are student-centered. This may be a search for an innate characteristic as opposed to a teachable characteristic; however, it is still important to be intentional in the selection process.
2. Professional development for all school related staff members to enhance their student support skills. Do not expect every teacher to be comfortable in the affective domain. Many high school teachers enter the profession because of a
passion for content and may be trained or feel competent in the affective arena without specific training from professionals.

3. Recognition of school counselors as professional resources for student support, professional development and parent communication. School counselors have specialized training in these areas and should be viewed as experts who can effectively create and manage programs to address these areas.

4. Create viable and consistent methods of communicating to parents. Parents want to know how their students are doing in school before grade cards come out. They also want to know what activities, events and programs are going on within the schools their children attend. Consistent communication helps parents feel connected to the school.

5. Involve students, teachers and parents in decision making processes. Including these groups in decision making can lead to an increased feeling of belonging and connection with the school (Epstein, 1995).

6. Make meaningful connections within the community as well as within the school. This helps to create a larger support network to support student retention and success as well as supporting positive perceptions of the school among community members.

5.5.3 Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers were identified in this study as primary conduits of communication and support for students and parents alike. They were often the first group of adults encountered by the students and their initial conversations and interactions were influential in helping students to decide to attend TSS. The teachers were also cited as
very important in the perceptions of parents as they chose TSS for their children. The results of this study provide some recommendations for teachers which may help them be more effective in their role of student support and achievement:

1. Focus on the student first and foremost. They are the primary reason teachers are in the classroom and student success is the primary goal.

2. Believe that all students can be successful. Students are aware of teachers’ perceptions of them, whether they are voiced or not. Be congruent in the way you act and speak to let students know you believe in them.

3. Be intentional in selecting teaching materials, homework assignments, presentation and assessment methods. Students like to have a say in what they learn. They also appreciate variety and relevance in what they are asked to learn and how they are to demonstrate their learning.

4. Communicate with parents on a regular, consistent basis. Parents want to know how their children are doing in school before grade cards come out. They want to be aware and not surprised.

5. Communicate meaningfully with administration. This entails asking questions and continuing to ask them until you receive a response, are directed to seek the response elsewhere, or are empowered by the administration to address your question.

6. Be respectful to students, colleagues, parents and administrators.

7. Be professional in all interactions with students, colleagues, parents and administrators. If you have a sensitive issue to discuss, do it in private to avoid potential embarrassment.
5.5.4 Recommendations for Parents

Parent participants in this study provided insight into their reasons for choosing TSS over other schools, including those which are rated as “excellent with distinction” by the state of Ohio (ODE, 2010). Parents cited the attitudes of teachers and school related personnel as well as the individualized curriculum as part of the reason they chose TSS. They also noted some areas of concern, including the physical facility and overall communication. Parent engagement has been shown to have an overall positive effect on student performance (National PTA, 2002). In response to parental concerns, some recommendations for parents follow:

1. Be a part of your child’s life, even in high school
2. Be involved in your child’s school as a volunteer, PTA or parent group member, help with fundraising efforts, offer to drive for a field trip, etc.
3. Make an effort to stay in contact with the school, teachers, counselors, etc. as needed. Do not wait until a situation reaches a critical point to initiate contact.
4. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Teachers love to teach and will be glad to answer questions about your child. Just be aware that you may not get an immediate answer as teachers teach throughout the day and often have to wait until the end of the day to reach a phone or computer.
5. Do not be afraid to participate. Schools can always use an extra hand to mail envelopes, drive students, make phone calls, distribute literature, etc.

5.5.5 Recommendations for Counselor Educators

Counselor educators are responsible for training the next generation of professional school counselors. They have a responsibility to help future counselors
recognize that education can happen in many environments. Future counselors need to be able to evaluate each environment and determine how to incorporate their specific skill set into the existing school framework. In order to help future counselors be able to make sense of a variety of school environments, internship and practicum experiences should be varied and include as many suburban, urban, rural, charter and private school settings as possible. While it may be impossible to provide meaningful pre-service experiences in all of the school settings listed above, it may be possible to schedule half-day visitations or some other short-term window into a variety of school settings. The short visitations may lead practicum students to seek longer internships in specific environments in subsequent years.

The researcher specifically recommends this approach as it is what her teacher educator provided for students during her undergraduate career. Short visits to a variety of school and other educational environments provided enough of a window for students to decide if that specific environment, grade level, location, philosophy, expectation was attractive or not. While future counselors may not be able to choose their eventual workplaces, they can begin to define what types of educational environments they prefer prior to graduation and actual practice.

5.5.6 Recommendations for Teacher Educators

A degree in education is, in most cases, a master’s level pursuit, only available after successful completion of an undergraduate degree in a specific major. Teacher educators are responsible for the conveyance of pedagogy, education about ethical and legal issues, and methods classes all within an 18 month time span (OSU, 2010). The
challenge of helping students learn about and practice all of the components that are required to meet HQT requirements and obtain licensure can be overwhelming.

A recommendation for teacher educators, based on the data from this study, would be for teachers to have an opportunity to learn more about what school counselors are trained to do, prior to entering the teaching profession. This could take place as part of a school personnel lecture series or through shadowing experience arranged with local school counselors. The opportunity for collaborative classes between pre-service counselors and pre-service teachers could be a benefit for all participants.

The recognition of the fact that professional school counselors are specifically trained in student development, assessment, data collection and interpretation, multicultural awareness, crisis management, and counseling techniques could help a beginning teacher feel more comfortable about referring students to counselors for specific issues. The beginning teacher may also recognize that the school counselor can be a resource for a variety of student interventions and supports as well as a potential collaborator in the creation of a positive school climate.

5.5.7 Recommendations for Administrator Educators

The state of Ohio requires students to have three years of teaching experience prior to obtaining an administrative license (ODE, 2010b; OSU, 2010b). The intent of the requirement was to ensure that administrators have some familiarity with schools as organizations prior to leading them (OSU, 2010b). Familiarity with schools; however, does not necessarily translate into an understanding of the roles or training of school support personnel. As administrator educators educate their students to meet The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards for school leaders
(Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008), they could focus on specific areas as identified by the data gathered in this study.

Emphasis should be placed on the importance of parent-school communication plans. This was identified as an area of concern and weakness on the part of administrators within TSS. The importance of clear, explicit and consistent messages about the school mission and how the activities and functioning of the school relate to the mission must be conveyed by administrators. The inclusion of parents, students, teachers and community members in the decision making process of the school was also identified as an important component of student and parent satisfaction. The importance of fostering and promoting collaboration among stakeholder groups was also noted in this study.

The significance and pervasive effects of the school climate and culture must be understood by school administrators and they should make every effort to include parents, students, teachers and community members in the creation of the school climate. The importance of building meaningful, trusting relationships between and among students, school staff and parents was a primary finding of this study. Administrator educators must ensure that future administrators have a repertoire of relationship building skills as well as an understanding of the significance of trust on student performance and sense of belonging.

The data from this study followed many of the knowledge and dispositional components of the ISLLC standards. The recommendations made above speak to specific areas which could be emphasized within the ISLLC standards as students matriculate through administrator training programs.
5.6 Limitations of the Study

While the data gathered in this study were interesting and insightful, every research study has limitations based on methodology. This study was no exception. This research project had limitations related sample sizes and potential responder bias.

Sample size is important as it helps to increase the reliability of data and the power of a study. If a research study is not able to obtain a large enough sample size to reach an acceptable level of power, then the study runs the risk of inaccurately drawing conclusions from the data. The percentage response rates for the three populations involved in this study were: 24 eligible students participated in focus groups; 30 of the parents contacted participated and 15 of the staff members participated.

The student group participation rate was acceptable and results were likely a representation of the experiences of the senior students. The participation rate of the parent group was relatively low. Of the 100 invitations sent to parents, two were returned as non-deliverable. Thus, the total parent population was 98.

Written responses to interview questions and/or oral interviews were collected from 30 parents. The initial target response goal for this group was 20 parents. Thus the participation rate was 50% greater than the initial target. The data collected indicated saturation based on responses and theme identification. A limitation associated with the parent respondents was that all data collected came from Caucasian parents. Three of the Caucasian parents adopted children who were African American, Hispanic and multi-racial. The parent responses from Caucasian parents only may have been a reflection of the fact that the project was not incentivized and thus parents may not have felt that participation was worth the time involved.
In an effort to gather as much data as possible, staff members were invited to meet at homes, over researcher-provided meals, during planning periods or any other time frame that was suggested by the participant. Despite multiple contact efforts, data was collected from 15 of the 24 invited staff members. Data indicated saturation of responses and themes within the 15 written responses to interview questions and/or oral interviews and is thought to be a true representation of the group as a whole. Ethnic and racial diversity of the school staff members was limited. At the time of the study, the staff consisted of Caucasian and those of Asian descent only. The vast majority of the staff respondents, 93%, were Caucasian. This may be a source of bias in the study in that the cultural references of the group were homogenous and thus their expectations and perceptions of students and the school may also be reflective of their similar backgrounds.

With a case study focused on a specific population, results cannot be generalized to the larger, general population. The three potential participant pools for this study each had challenges in terms of access and completion rates. The potential group of students available for the study was limited by the age criteria as dictated by the exempt status of the project. Students who had not reached the age of 18 by the dates of the focus groups were not eligible to participate. Of those who were eligible to participate, several were out of the county during the time the focus groups were conducted. There were no methods to address these issues within the time frame available to complete the data collection phase of this study.

The staff participation response rate was affected by several issues. Time was the primary factor in that the nature of the school and the multiple roles assumed by each
staff member left little time for out of school activities. The time of the year also caused some issues as the data collection for the study was conducted during the months of April and May, a very busy time in the school year. Some teachers responded via written surveys as opposed to personal interviews in an attempt to respond in a timely fashion. Several teaching staff members indicated that they did not feel comfortable participating in the study for concerns of retribution based on their comments. To protect the confidentiality of teacher responders, pseudonyms were initially changed from those selected by staff members and eventually changed to a “staff member, number designation” to provide additional blinding of identities.

Although the numerical response rates of the three participant groups involved in the project could be a concern, data collected from each of the three groups provided responses that reinforced each other and indicated a level of saturation adequate to make the researcher and her team feel confident about the veracity of the information.

Other issues related to the limitations of this study are related to responder bias. It is quite possible that self-selection of respondents resulted in an artificially positive view of the school, personnel, practices, etc. With one exception, all parent respondents were generally positive in their statements about how TSS met the needs of their students. The parent participant who had only negative responses removed his child from the school within one academic semester because he stated that “he thought the school cared about kids but it really doesn’t”. The responses from school staff may have also demonstrated bias. The four staff members who chose not to participate due to perceptions of potential retribution from the administration may have had negative comments about the administration or the school in general. It should be noted; however, that the school staff
responses were not all positive in all areas. Student bias may have been introduced through the selection of only students aged 18 and over as well as through the use of focus groups comprised of students who were in the city at the time of the study. Additional insight and opinions may be have been elicited from those students who were under age 18 and from those who were either out of town on Walkabout or simply unable to get to the school to participate in the focus group.

Additional information gathered from those who initially selected TSS and then chose to leave it would be insightful to this study as it would provide a basis from which the researcher could discern which policies, practices or programs failed to meet the needs of this subgroup as well as how these policies, practices and programs were unsuccessful. In the search for ways to engage and retain students until graduation, data should be gathered from both those who persist as well as those who disengage and eventually leave school.

5.7 Suggestions for Further Research

This research study focused on one small school and utilized a qualitative research methodology. The approach provided much information about the experiences of students, their parents and staff members in the school at one particular time, but it did little to explore the extended lives of the students. Student decisions relating to persisting in a school until graduation are complex and evolve over time. It would be interesting to follow the students who participated in this study as they continue their life journeys. A longitudinal study could provide knowledge about whether the resilience and confidence demonstrated by these students persisted through post-secondary educational experiences. A longitudinal study would also provide additional information to the
literature about how students from charter schools transition to post-secondary education. A study could also focus on students with disabilities to provide insight into how TSS students with disabilities perform in a post-secondary environment with support services more closely aligned with typical school systems. Examination of the post-secondary experiences of students who left TSS with active 504 plans would also be helpful in the process of understanding how students who experienced a very supportive high school environment manage in a larger, less personalized learning environment.

Alumni of TSS could be the focus of a longitudinal study with an emphasis on how they view their experiences at TSS through the lens of years of separation. Their experiences could provide insight about how well prepared they were for life experiences as well as for college. Previous conversations that the researcher has had with TSS graduates allude to perceptions of arriving at post secondary institutions with expertise in some areas such as history and creative writing as well as deficits in math and laboratory based sciences. The post-secondary attendance rates of TSS graduates have increased over the past three years; however, a greater percentage of students are attending community colleges as opposed to four-year institutions.

The type of teacher, counselor or administrator who is attracted to a school such as TSS is somewhat unique. These individuals tend to open minded, strong willed and student centered. These characteristics are viewed as positive in the TSS environment but could be problematic in a typical school system or in the private sector. It would be interesting to follow the staff members as they continue their journeys at TSS and beyond to measure how their experiences change over time. One staff member suggested that I ask her “next year” about how she feels about the school. There were several issues
within the staff member data that indicated a change in perceptions of the school, the philosophy and how it functioned to support students over time. The data collected indicated that staff members were most positive in their responses during the first 3 years of employment at TSS with a trend toward less positive responses after 4 years of employment. Five of the staff members who participated in this study are no longer associated with TSS for a variety of reasons. It would be insightful to determine why they left the school and what they are doing at the present time as well as to examine their perceptions of TSS from the perspective of a past employee.

The data from this study cannot be generalized to a larger population; however, it may be possible to explore the constructs of invitational education and relational trust as they are practiced in other charter schools, small schools and even within the sister school to TSS.

5.8 Final Thoughts

This study provided the answer to the basic questions of why students, parents and staff members chose to attend this particular charter school and why they stayed. The information gathered elucidated the importance of trust, relationships and openness in the pursuit of student success. The enthusiasm with which the staff members did their jobs and carried out their numerous roles spoke to the genuine passion they had for the students within the school. It also spoke to their characters in the devotion to meeting the needs of students. The overall positive expressions of parents indicated that they appreciated the differences inherent in the structure and functioning of the school. The love with which the students described their feelings about the school, its staff and their
experiences demonstrated the difference in how they view themselves as a result of attending TSS.

TSS managed to create a small, caring environment which allowed students to heal, explore, survive and thrive in ways that many had not been able to achieve prior to attending the school. The policies of individualization and flexibility in the curriculum allowed students to demonstrate learning in ways that met their needs. The democratic process of giving students a voice helped them learn that they could make a difference and that what they had to say was important. The willingness of teachers, staff members and administrators to open their doors to offer academic, social and personal support helped students learn to be vulnerable and to develop self-advocacy skills that will serve them well in the future.

TSS may not have been founded with a particular theoretical base but it did utilize practices that effectively demonstrate humanistic values and a student-focused intent which supported student success. Students gained self-awareness through participation in the experiential education program that in turn facilitated critical thinking skills and practical decision making. Students expressed a sense of confidence, competence and hope that many were without prior to attending TSS. TSS provided for many who arrived defeated and disenchanted, in the words of a recent graduate “…the roots that I need for a strong foundation in life and the wings that I need to fly away and start my future.”
References


Resilience, schooling, and development of African-American Youth (pp.65-86). 

*Education and Urban Society, 24.*


Potter, J. (2003). Discourse analysis and discursive psychology. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding


http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/24/5b/17.pdf


*Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support.* New York: Palmer Press.


Appendix A: Approval form from the Office of Responsible Research Practices
April 12, 2010

Protocol Number: 2010E0230
Protocol Title: WHY DO THEY STAY? A CASE STUDY OF AN URBAN CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL, JAMES MOORE, BREnda GERHARDT, WELLNESS & HUMAN SERVICES
Type of Review: Request for Exempt Determination

Dear Dr. Moore,

The Office of Responsible Research Practices has determined the above referenced protocol exempt from IRB review.

Date of Exempt Determination: 04/12/2010
Qualifying Exemption Category: 1, 2

Please note the following:

- Only OSU employees and students who have completed CITI training and are named on the signature page of the application are approved as OSU Investigators in conducting this study.
- No changes may be made in exempt research (e.g., personnel, recruitment procedures, advertisements, instruments, etc.). If changes are needed, a new application must be submitted.
- Per university requirements, all research-related records (including signed consent forms) must be retained and available for audit for a period of at least three years after the research has ended.
- It is the responsibility of the Investigator to promptly report events that may represent unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This determination is issued under The Ohio State University’s ORRP Federalwide Assurance #00006178. All forms and procedures can be found on the ORRP website – www.orrp.osu.edu. Please feel free to contact the ORRP staff contact listed below with any questions or concerns.

Cheri Petey, MA, Certified IRB Professional
Senior Protocol Analyst—Exempt Research

Office of Responsible Research Practices
Ohio State University
1940 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210
phone: 614.688.0389
fax: 614.688.0386
email: petey.6@osu.edu

Exempt Determination
Version 1.1
Appendix B: Student letter of introduction
April 12, 2010

Dear [Senior Name]:

I am delighted to have the opportunity to conduct research at [School Name]. Dr. Meers has granted me access to [School Name] for the purposes of conducting a non-invasive, survey and interview based research study. I am completing my Ph.D. in School Counseling at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. My doctoral dissertation is titled: "Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school." I would like to be able to collect your perceptions, comments and insights into why you chose The Graham School and why you choose to remain at [School Name].

**You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.** Participation in this research study is completely voluntary and there are no consequences for choosing not to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time. I obtained your class schedule from the master schedule maintained at the school. I used your pre-existing senior advisory class groupings as my focus group cohorts. With permission from your advisors, I will be visiting each of the six advisory groups to advertise my research project and answer any questions you may have at that time.

The information will be used only to support the research project and will be destroyed after the study is completed. All information will be presented in aggregate form with no individually identifying characteristics. Pseudonyms will be used for any informational quotes or passages taken from interviews or surveys. All focus groups will be audio taped, with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Due to the fact that a focus group is composed of several people, confidentiality of the information you choose to share cannot be guaranteed. The collected information will not be disseminated to anyone beyond my research team composed of my advisor and chairman, Dr. James L. Moore, III and Ms. Felice Kassoy, a fellow doctoral student and licensed school counselor.

If you agree to participate in this research project with me and my research team please indicate such by signature on the attached form. You may return the form directly to my home via the self addressed stamped envelope or you may place it in the secure box at the front desk.

Thank you for your support and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Brenda Gerhardt, MA, LPSC
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counselor Education
School of Physical Activity and Educational Services
The Ohio State University
Appendix C: Demographic data questionnaire for students
Biographical Questionnaire for Students

Pseudonym:__________________________________________________________

1. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female

2. What is your age?__________________________________________________

3. Which racial/ethnic group best describes you?
   a. African American
   b. White/Caucasian
   c. Other ______ (please list)

4. How many years have you been a student at TSS?
   a. One year or less
   b. 2 years
   c. 3 years
   d. 4 years
   e. More than 4 years ______ (please list)

5. What is your home school system?_____________________(please list)

6. Do you work?________
7. Have you ever been retained (held back) a grade in school? ________
   If yes, what grade(s)____________________________

8. With whom do you live?
   a. Both parents
   b. Mom
   c. Dad
   d. Grandparent
   e. Aunt/Uncle
   f. Other relative
   g. Guardian
   h. Other

9. What is your primary parent or guardian’s highest level of education?
   a. Less than middle school
   b. Completed middle school
   c. Some high school
   d. High school diploma
   e. GED
   f. Some college
   g. Associate’s Degree (2 years post high school)
   h. Bachelor’s Degree (4 years post high school)
1. More than a Bachelor’s Degree

10. What are your future plans?

11. Would you choose to attend TSS again?
   a. If yes, why?
   b. If no, why not?
Appendix D: Written questions for student focus group
Focus Group Protocol
This research project is entitled Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school. The purpose of this study is to examine the practices, policies and procedures that entice students to choose to attend this particular school and to continue to attend this school. For the purposes of this study, the school is referred to as “The Scarlet School”.

1. How did you hear about The Scarlet School?
   a) Friends?
   b) School recruitment visit?
   c) Referral?
   d) If referral from who/where/what?
   e) Other?

2. What was the most influential reason for coming to The Scarlet School?

3. What initially appealed to you about The Scarlet School?
   a) People?
   b) Place (environment)?
   c) Policies?
   d) Practices?
   e) Other?

4. How has your school performance been different at TSS than it was in your previous school?

5. Why do you think your school performance has been different at TSS?

6. Who in this school would you go to if you were having a problem?
a) A personal/social problem?

b) An academic problem?

c) A problem or concern about your future plans?

d) Other?

7. What keeps you coming to school?

8. What kinds of rules/boundaries are in place at the school?
   a) Are you clear about the behaviors expected of you?
   b) Do you feel that the rules are fair?
   c) Do these rules help you to feel safe and/or comfortable at the school?
      i. If so, how?

9. Why have to persisted (stayed) at TSS?

10. Will you graduate from TSS?
    a) Will you graduate on time?
    b) Will you graduate early?
    c) Will you graduate late?
    d) If you were at your old school, would you have graduated?

11. Would you recommend TSS to a friend?
    a) If yes, why
    b) If no, why not?

12. How are you different as a result of being at TSS?

13. What are your plans for the future?
    a) Has student attendance at TSS had any effect on your plans for the future?
Appendix E: Informed consent form for students
The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school

Researcher: Brenda S. Gerhardt, Felice Kassoy, Dr. James L. Moore, III,

Sponsor:

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.
Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:
I invite you to participate in my research project entitled, “Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school”. You are a senior student at The School in Columbus, Ohio, all of whom are being asked to share their perceptions and attitudes about why they chose to attend The School and why they continue to do so. The School will be referred to as The Scarlet School for the purposes of this study.

Procedures/Tasks:
I am requesting that you complete a short demographic questionnaire and participate in one focus group discussion. The focus group interview will be conducted by Ms Felice Kassoy, a doctoral student in Counselor Education at The Ohio State University and a licensed school counselor. The focus group discussion will audio taped and transcribed in verbatim.

Duration:

Participating in this study will take 1 hour of your time.

Your participation in this research project is strictly voluntary. Therefore, you may discontinue your participation in this research project, at any time, without penalty. Please also note that all information generated will be treated confidentially. All information obtained from your participation in the study will be stored in a secured file cabinet in my office at The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:
The potential benefits of conducting this research are that you will be given an opportunity to talk freely about your perceptions, attitudes, and ideas and how these beliefs affect your decision regarding school selection. Being able to talk about these experiences may be very beneficial and encouraging for you.

For educators, this proposed research project has major implications for school reform in terms of identifying practices, policies and procedures that entice and engage students to choose and persist in specific school environments. This study also has the potential to help urban educators – teachers, school counselors, and administrators – better understand the school experiences of students in today’s urban public schools.

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

The Office of Responsible Research Practices for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact me via telephone (614-620-2653) or email (Gerhardt.21@osu.edu).
CONSENT
Behavioral/Social Science

IRB Protocol Number:  
IRB Approval date:  
Version:  

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

If you are injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact Brenda S. Gerhardt via telephone at 614-620-2653/614-459-8380 or email gerhardt.21@osu.edu.
CONSENT
Behavioral/Social Science

IRB Protocol Number: 
IRB Approval date: 
Version: 

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

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Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

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Page 4 of 4 Form date: 12/15/05
Appendix F: Description of research team members
Description of Research Team Members

Researcher: Brenda S. Gerhardt

The researcher of the current study is an Asian American female. She is a doctoral student at The Ohio State University (OSU). She has a BS in science education, an MA in school counseling and has been involved in the field of education for 20 years. She has worked as a middle and high school teacher in traditional and informal educational environments and has served as a school counselor in a charter school for 9 years. She has supervised master’s level school counseling interns and practicum students within urban, suburban and charter schools. She has taken both qualitative and quantitative research courses. Her major academic area is Counselor Education, and her cognate is Educational Administration. She is a Licensed Professional School Counselor (LPSC). She has completed a principal licensure program at OSU and is currently an administrative intern at a charter school.

Research Team Member # 1

Research Team Member # 1 is a Caucasian female and has been the on-site supervisor of the OSU Counseling and Wellness Centers for two years. She has also co-taught the internship course for master’s level school counseling students. She has supervised master’s level school counseling interns and practicum students over the past four years. She is a Licensed Professional School Counselor (LPSC) and has been so for more than thirty years. She is currently employed as a LPSC in a suburban school district near a
large Midwestern city. She is a doctoral student and has taken courses in qualitative methods and analysis.

This research team member conducted the student focus group interviews since she had no prior involvement with the study school or the students. She has conducted many groups during her years as a school counselor and as a co-instructor of counselor education students. Her experiences and prior knowledge as a counselor provided the necessary skill set to conduct focus groups for this project. She met with the researcher prior to conducting the focus groups to practice the introductory script and expected procedures. She then conducted a total of four focus groups, each between 30 and 50 minutes in length, with a representative of the school present in the room.

**Research Team Member # 2**

Research Team Member # 1 is a Caucasian female and has been the on-site supervisor of the OSU Counseling and Wellness Centers for three years. She has co-taught internship and practicum courses for master’s level school counseling students. She is an LPSC and a National Certified Counselor (NCC). She is a doctoral candidate and has completed coursework in qualitative methods and analysis.
Appendix G: Focus group introduction script
Student Focus Group Introduction script

Hello. My name is Felice Kassoy and I am a doctoral student in Counselor Education at The Ohio State University. I am also a licensed school counselor and have been for more than 30 years.

I am part of Brenda’s research team and will be conducting the focus groups for her research project.

Brenda cannot conduct the focus groups herself as she has worked with most of you over the past several years and her personal knowledge may bias her interpretations of your comments.

You must be 18 years old or older in order to participate in this project. Your participation is voluntary and you should all have signed consent forms indicating that you agree to participate in this project.

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no consequences.

Your senior advisor will remain in the room with us during the discussion as a safeguard for you.

Are there any questions or concerns?

(anyone who is not 18 or older OR has not completed a consent form OR who does not wish to participate should leave the room)

(For all remaining students)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group for Brenda Gerhardt’s dissertation entitled “Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school”.

The purpose of this focus group is to gather your perceptions, opinions and thoughts about why you chose to attend this particular charter school and why you stay at this particular charter school.

For the sake of confidentiality, this charter school will be referred to as “The Scarlet School”.

Each of you will choose a pseudonym (a made up name) and will be referred to by your pseudonym throughout this group conversation.

Each of you will make a sign with your pseudonym so I can see your chosen made up name.

This focus group will be audio taped and then transcribed verbatim (word for word) by a paid transcriptionist.

I will call on you by your pseudonym to make the transcription process easier for the person typing a conversation she did not see or hear firsthand.

Since we are in a group, confidentially of the information you share cannot be guaranteed. Please be respectful of what others share.

Are there any questions before we get started?
Appendix H: Parent letter of introduction
March 30, 2010

Dear parents and guardians of [Redacted] School students:

I am delighted to have the opportunity to conduct research at The [Redacted] School. Dr. Meers has granted me access to The [Redacted] School for the purposes of conducting a non-invasive, survey and interview based research study. I am completing my Ph.D. in School Counseling at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. My doctoral dissertation is titled: *Why do they stay: A case study of an urban charter school*. I would like to be able to collect your perceptions, comments and insights into why you chose The [Redacted] School and why you choose to remain at The [Redacted] School.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary and there are no consequences for choosing not to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

The information will be used only to support the research project and will be destroyed after the study is completed. All information will be presented in aggregate form with no individually identifying characteristics. Pseudonyms will be used for any informational quotes or passages taken from interviews or surveys. All personal interviews will be audio taped, with permission, and transcribed verbatim. The collected information will not be disseminated to anyone beyond my research team composed of my advisor and chairman, Dr. James L. Moore, III and Ms Felice Kassoy, a fellow doctoral student and licensed school counselor.

If you agree to participate in this research project with me and my research team please indicate such by signature on the attached form.

Thank you for your support and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Brenda Gerhardt, MA, LPSC
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counselor Education
School of Physical Activity and Educational Services
The Ohio State University

Special Education • Sport & Exercise Education, Humanities, Management & Science
Counselor Education & School Psychology • Workforce Development & Education
Appendix I: Demographic data questionnaire for parents
Demographic Questionnaire for Parents/Guardians

Pseudonym: _______________________________________________________

1. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female

2. What is your age? _______________________

3. Which racial/ethnic group best describes you?
   a. African American
   b. White/Caucasian
   c. Other _____ (please list)

4. How many years have you had a student at TSS?
   a. One year or less
   b. 2 years
   c. 3 years
   d. 4 years
   e. More than 4 years _____ (please list)

5. How many of your children attend or have graduated from TSS? __________
Appendix J: Written questions for parents/guardians
Individual Interview Protocol for Parents

This research project is entitled “Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school” The purpose of this study is to examine the practices, policies and procedures that entice parents and guardians to choose to send their children to this particular school and to continue to send their children to this school. For the purposes of this study, the school is referred to as “The Scarlet School”.

1. How did you hear about The Scarlet School?
   a. Friends?
   b. School recruitment visit?
   c. Referral?
   d. If referral from who/where/what?
   e. Other?

2. What was the primary reason for coming to The Scarlet School?

3. What initially appealed to you about The Scarlet School?
   a. People?
   b. Place (environment)?
   c. Policies?
   d. Practices?
   e. Other?

3. How has your child’s school performance been different at The Scarlet School than it was his/her previous school?
If your child’s performance has been different, why do you think your child’s school performance has been different at The Scarlet School?  

4. Who in this school would you go to if your child were having a problem?
   a. A personal/social problem? 
   b. An academic problem? 
   c. A problem or concern about your future plans? 
   d. Other? 

6. What keeps your child coming to school?  

7. What keeps your family associated with the school?
   a. People? 
   b. Processes? 
   c. Policies? 
   d. Physical facility? 
   e. Programs? 
   f. Other? 

1. What kinds of rules/boundaries are in place at the school?
   a. Are you clear about the behaviors expected of your child? 
      What makes you say this? 
   b. Do you feel that the rules are fair? 
      Why or why not?
c. Do these rules help you to feel that your child is safe and/or comfortable at the school? ____________________________
   Why or why not? ____________________________

2. Why has your family persisted (stayed) at The Scarlet School? ____________________________
   _______________________________________
   _______________________________________

3. Will your child graduate from The Scarlet School? ____________________________
   a. Will he/she graduate on time, early, or late? ____________________________
      Why do you believe this? ____________________________
   b. If you were at your old school, would he/she have graduated on time, early, or late? ____________________________
      Why do you believe this? ____________________________

4. Would you recommend The Scarlet School to others? ____________________________
   Why or why not? ____________________________

5. How is your child different as a result of being at The Scarlet School? ____________________________
   Academically? ____________________________
   Socially? ____________________________
   Anything else? ____________________________

6. What are your child’s plans for the future? ____________________________
   Do you think that The Scarlet School has prepared your school for accomplishing this goal? ____________________________
   Why or why not? ____________________________

7. What else would you like to share with me about your thoughts and perceptions about The Scarlet School? ____________________________
   _______________________________________

Appendix K: Informed consent form for parents
The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Why do they stay?: A case study of an urban charter school

Researcher: Brenda S. Gerhardt, Felice Kassoy, Dr. James L. Moore, III,

Sponsor:

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:
I invite you to participate in my research project entitled, “Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school”. You are a parent or guardian of a student who attends The School in Columbus, Ohio, all of whom are being asked to share their perceptions and attitudes about how they chose to send their children to The School and why they continue to send their children to The School. The School will be referred to as The Scarlet School for the purposes of this study.

Procedures/Tasks:
I am requesting that you complete a short demographic questionnaire and participate in one face-to-face individual interview. The face-to-face interview will be audio taped and transcribed in verbatim.

Duration:
Participating in this study will take between 1 hour to 1.5 hours of your time.

Your participation in this research project is strictly voluntary. Therefore, you may discontinue your participation in this research project, at any time, without penalty. Please also note that all information generated will be treated confidentially. All information obtained from your participation in the study will be stored in a secured file cabinet in my office at The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:
The potential benefits of conducting this research are that you will be given an opportunity to talk freely about your perceptions, attitudes, and ideas and how these beliefs affect your decision regarding school selection for your child. Being able to talk about these experiences may be very beneficial and encouraging for you.

For educators, this proposed research project has major implications for school reform in terms of identifying practices, policies and procedures that entice and engage parents to choose specific school options. This study also has the potential to help urban educators – teachers, school counselors, and administrators – better understand the school experiences of youth in today’s urban public schools.

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

The Office of Responsible Research Practices for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact me via telephone (614-620-2653) or email (Gerhardt.21@osu.edu).
For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

If you are injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact Brenda S. Gerhardt via telephone at 614-620-2653/614-459-8380 or email gerhardt.21@osu.edu.
CONSENT  
Behavioral/Social Science  

IRB Protocol Number:  
IRB Approval date:  
Version:  

Signing the consent form  

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.  

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.  

Printed name of subject  
Signature of subject  
Date and time  
AM/PM  

Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)  
Signature of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)  
Date and time  
AM/PM  

Investigator/Research Staff  

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.  

Printed name of person obtaining consent  
Signature of person obtaining consent  
Date and time  
AM/PM  

Page 4 of 4  
Form date: 12/15/05  

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Appendix L: Introduction script for parent/guardian interviews
Parent interview introduction script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project titled, “Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school”.

The purpose of this interview is to gather your perceptions, opinions and thoughts about why you chose to send your child to this particular charter school and why your child has remained at this particular charter school.

For the duration of this interview, this school will be referred to as The Scarlet School.

For the sake of confidentiality, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym and will be referred to by your pseudonym throughout the interview and research project.

Any personally identifying information, including your child’s name, years at the school and gender will be eliminated from the interview in order to protect your privacy. Any personal data collected will be done so in aggregate fashion.

This interview will be transcribed verbatim by a paid transcriptionist who is not associated with the school or anyone on the research team.

If you feel uncomfortable with any questions throughout the interview, you may choose to skip them.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no consequences.

You should have a signed consent form on file indicating your willingness to participate in this study.

Do you have any questions before we proceed?
Appendix M: Staff letter of introduction
March 30, 2010

Dear staff members of The [Redacted] School,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to conduct research at The [Redacted] School. Dr. Meers has granted me access to The [Redacted] School for the purposes of conducting a non-invasive, survey and interview based research study. I am completing my Ph.D. in School Counseling at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. My doctoral dissertation is titled: Why do they stay: A case study of an urban charter school. I would like to be able to collect your perceptions, comments and insights into why you chose to work at The [Redacted] School and why you choose to remain at The [Redacted] School.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary and there are no consequences for choosing not to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

The information will be used only to support the research project and will be destroyed after the study is completed. All information will be presented in aggregate form with no individually identifying characteristics. Pseudonyms will be used for any informational quotes or passages taken from interviews or surveys. All personal interviews will be audio taped, with permission, and transcribed verbatim. The collected information will not be disseminated to anyone beyond my research team composed of my advisor and chairman, Dr. James L. Moore, III and Ms Felice Kassoy, a fellow doctoral student and licensed school counselor.

If you agree to participate in this research project with me and my research team please indicate such by signature on the attached form.

Thank you for your support and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Brenda Gerhardt, MA, LPSC
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Counselor Education
School of Physical Activity and Educational Services
The Ohio State University

Special Education • Sport & Exercise Education, Humanities, Management & Science
Counselor Education & School Psychology • Workforce Development & Education
Appendix N: Demographic data questionnaire for staff members
Demographic Questionnaire for Staff members

Pseudonym: __________________________________________

1. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female

2. What is your age?_______________________________

3. Which racial/ethnic group best describes you?
   a. African American
   b. White/Caucasian
   c. Other ______(please list)

4. How many years have you been a teacher?
   a. One year or less
   b. 2 years
   c. 3 years
   d. 4 years
   e. More than 4 years _____(please list)

5. How many years have you been a teacher at TSS?_______________________________
Appendix O: Written questions for staff members
Interview Protocol for Staff

This research project is entitled Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school. The purpose of this study is to examine the practices, policies and procedures that entice staff members to choose to work at this particular school and to continue to work at this school. For the purposes of this study, the school is referred to as “The Scarlet School”.

1) What is your role at the school? 

   a) Why did you choose to come to work at The Scarlet School?

   b) What factors influenced your decision?

2) How would you describe the atmosphere or school climate at The Scarlet School?

   a) How is this different than any previous schools at which you have worked?

3) What kinds of incentives/supports are in place at The Scarlet School to support students?

   a) Academically?

   b) Socially?

   c) Emotionally?

   d) Career/post-secondary planning?

4) Is there anything in particular about The Scarlet School that encourages/allows students to become successful?
5) What role do expectations play at this school? ____________________________________________________________
   a) How are these expectations supported and addressed?____________________________________________________
   b) How do you think that these expectations shape students' behavior?_______________________________________

6) In general, how would you describe the relationships among people at the school?______________________________
   a) Between students and teachers?______________________________________________________________
   b) Among teachers and staff?__________________________________________________________
   c) Among students?__________________________________________________________

7) Are there people available for students to seek help from? ____________________________
   a) Do counselors/teachers/etc make clear that they're available to help students?
      ___________________________________________________________________________________
   b) How do they do that?______________________________________________________________

8) What kinds of activities (e.g. clubs, community programs, peer helping, service learning, school committees) are available to students to participate in school and community?______________________________________________________________

9) How else are students able to make their voices heard at the school?______________________________

10) Does The Scarlet School encourage family-school relationships and/or community-school relationships? ____________________________________________________________
    a) If so, how?______________________________________________________________

11) Are students clear about the behaviors expected of them?______________________________________________
    a) Do students have any role in shaping or even enforcing school rules?
b) Do rules help make school more safe and comfortable? 

__________________________________________________________________

c) Do they address specific risk behaviors (suicide, harassment, bullying)?

__________________________________________________________________

d) How effective, in general, do you think they are?

__________________________________________________________________

12) Do students believe they can succeed?

__________________________________________________________________

a) How does the school help to shape students' future plans and goals?

__________________________________________________________________

b) Can you give me any specific examples of how this occurs within The Scarlet School?

__________________________________________________________________

14) Do you have any stories about particular students that you can share with me?

__________________________________________________________________

Appendix P: Informed consent form for staff members
decision regarding school selection for your child. Being able to talk about these experiences may be very beneficial and encouraging for you.

For educators, this proposed research project has major implications for school reform in terms of identifying practices, policies and procedures that entice and engage staff members to choose specific school environments. This study also has the potential to help urban educators—teachers, school counselors, and administrators—better understand the school experiences of staff members in today’s urban public schools.

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):
- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

The Office of Responsible Research Practices responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact me via telephone (614-620-2653) or email (Gerhardt.21@osu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
If you are injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact Brenda S. Gerhardt via telephone at 614-620-2653/614-459-8380 or email gerhardt.21@osu.edu.
Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

______________________________  ________________________________
Printed name of subject         Signature of subject

______________________________  ________________________________
Date and time                   AM/PM

______________________________  ________________________________
Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)  Signature of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)

______________________________  ________________________________
Relationship to the subject     Date and time

AM/PM

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

______________________________  ________________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent  Signature of person obtaining consent

______________________________  ________________________________
Date and time                   AM/PM
Appendix Q: Script for staff member interviews
Staff interview introduction script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project titled, “Why do they stay? A case study of an urban charter school”.

The purpose of this interview is to gather your perceptions, opinions and thoughts about why you chose to work at this particular charter school and why you stay at this particular charter school.

For the duration of this interview, this school will be referred to as The Scarlet School.

For the sake of confidentiality, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym and will be referred to by your pseudonym throughout the interview and research project.

Any personally identifying information, including subject area taught, years at the school and gender will be eliminated from the interview in order to protect your privacy. Any personal data collected will be done so in aggregate fashion.

No information disclosed in this interview will be relayed to or shared with any administrative entity and there are no perceived threats to your continued employment as a result of your participation in this research project.

This interview will be transcribed verbatim by a paid transcriptionist who is not associated with the school or anyone on the research team.

If you feel uncomfortable with any questions throughout the interview, you may choose to skip them.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time with no consequences.

You should have a signed consent form on file indicating your willingness to participate in this study.

Do you have any questions before we proceed?
Appendix R: Written interview with TSS founder
-----Original Message-----
From: Brenda Gerhardt <
Sent: Fri, Jun 4, 2010 10:06 am
Subject: questions for our "interview"

Eileen,

In the interest of time and my basic desire not to transcribe many more interviews, I have attached a list of basic questions. If you have the time to complete them and return them via e-mail I would be quite delighted.

Thank you,

Brenda Gerhardt

-------------------------------------
Responses Received
Monday, June 7, 2010

1. What was your vision for starting The Scarlet School?

_The vision was that Scarlet would be an urban Linworth with an expanded experiential curriculum_

2. Did you have a specific philosophy or framework in mind when you started the school?

_"I had seen the support and growth engendered in my own children and, over the years, in other students by the Linworth philosophy and practices and hoped to be able to replicate that in the Scarlet setting"_

3. Do you think the school has achieved what you envisioned for it when you started?

_This school is so much more than I could ever have imagined. I think that this is the result of the staffing, the diverse student body composition and the expanded experiential work of the students._

4. Have the challenges changed over the 10-year life of the school?

_The over weaning challenge has remained the same; funding is the consistent and looming giant. We receive approximately $6,100 from state foundation monies and perhaps $100-200 more in title monies. We do not have the capacity to get bonding money for facilities. We spend about $9,500 to educate a student each year. That gap remains the major and ongoing challenge of the past ten years._

5. How as the population changed over the 10 year life of the school?

_In addition to the change in numbers from 65 to about 230, the major change has been in the area of special education; we have grown from about 8-10% to an estimate 25% for the 2010-11 year. That growth has been steady and accompanied by increasingly diverse needs._

6. Why do you think the school has been successful for the past 10 years while many charter schools have closed?
We have had both a unique and committed board and staff; there has been minimal turn over both of these areas. Additionally, we have shared leadership that has remained stable for ten years. We have also had significant private funding.

-----Original Message-----
From: Brenda Gerhardt <
Sent: Mon, Jun 7, 2010 4:22 pm
Subject: Re: Dissertaion Survey

Eileen,

Thank you for your words and for the answers. The only expansion I would ask is what you mean by "Linworth". I know, in general what you mean but for the purposes of my project, an explanation in your words would be very meaningful.

Thank you,

Brenda

I thought I had sent this but just found it in my draft file and so here it finally is, Brenda. If it needs further work please let me know.

-----Original Message-----
From:
Sent: Wed, Jun 9, 2010 5:48 pm
Subject: Re: Dissertaion Survey

So I just went to the website and, as I hoped, there is a comprehensive explanation for the "non-Linworth" (your readers) type. I like it but if you would like something more in my own words, I will be happy to do that.

The purpose of the program is to more fully engage students in their educations by creating **choices** and having students make choices, placing the students in situations requiring higher levels of **responsibility** and having students learn and apply what they have learned through **experiential education**.

Our mission statement is:

The Scarlet School (TSS) has a particular mission to urban students in Central Ohio preparing them for lifelong learning and informed citizenship through real-world experiences and rigorous academics. Fostering ownership and responsibility for their education prepares our students to be successful in college, the workplace, and other endeavors they undertake upon leaving Scarlet.
So how to explain Linworth?

Linworth is one of the oldest surviving alternative schools from the sixties. It is based on several premises:

- students and staff should both be responsible for learning in the school

- one of the basic ways in which student self direction occurs is through students having the right to make some of the key decisions about their education

- deliberately giving students more responsibility for their learning engenders a culture of student self-direction

- the ultimate proof of the success of the school is exhibited by students ability to use their knowledge outside of the school in a culminating experiential environment.
Appendix S: Codebook
**Codebook—Why do they stay?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MH</td>
<td>Mental health (issues including diagnoses as well as mention of MH/depression, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE</td>
<td>Physical condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROX</td>
<td>Proximity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPED</td>
<td>Special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXP</td>
<td>Experiential education, including mention of work-study/jobs program/internships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BULL</td>
<td>Bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIV</td>
<td>Individualization (of curriculum; of how students are treated, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RES</td>
<td>Respect (between and or among groups/members)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRIEND</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMALL</td>
<td>Small school/environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHIL</td>
<td>Philosophy (of school/of education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALT</td>
<td>Alternative (curriculum/approach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARE</td>
<td>Caring (between/among group members)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAFE</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS</td>
<td>Learning Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVOID</td>
<td>Avoidance (public school/large school, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED</td>
<td>Educational Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REP</td>
<td>Reputation (of school/of others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAPPY</td>
<td>Happiness (among/between/individuals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INVITE</td>
<td>Inviting (environment/staff/etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEP</td>
<td>Independence (fostered by/found/practiced by)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OWN  Ownership of education/experiences
ENGAGE Engaged (in education/classes)
FLEX Flexibility (classes/schedule/etc)
SUPP Support (from/for/groups)
COUNS (Counselor mentioned by role)
NARR Narratives in grades/narrative grading system
INF Informal
GOAL Goal setting/goal of graduating/career goal
VOICE Voices in decision making (town meeting/student board/etc)
LOYAL Loyalty (typically to school)
NEG Negative comment/connotation
NO GRAD No graduation or likely no graduation
TEACH Teachers
COMM Community
WALK Walkabout
RISK mention of risk as a goal/encouragement to take risks
Appendix T: Confidentiality pledge for research team members
Research Team Member’s Pledge of Confidentiality

As a member of this project research team, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews and focus groups. The information in these transcriptions has been revealed by research participants in this project who agreed in good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information in these transcriptions with anyone except the primary researcher of this project, Brenda Gerhardt, and other members of this research team. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Research Team Member:_________________________________________

Signature: _____________________________________ Date: ___________
Appendix U: Student demographic data
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice Banks</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>Associates college</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Good environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss Man</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>grandparent</td>
<td>BS + USMC</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Tier 2 school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelina Jolie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y/9th</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>Some HS ?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Family, community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninja</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>HS diploma work</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Good school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow Powell</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>BS College</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Different school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>BS College</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>It's my family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roth</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>BS College</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Learned life skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y/11th</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>Some college college</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>It's fun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darby</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>Some college college</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Rad school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mom</td>
<td>BS + college</td>
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Appendix V: Parent demographic data
## Parent demographic data

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*Not all parent participants provided demographic data. 30 parents provided interview/survey data; 26 provided demographic data.*
Appendix W: Staff demographic data
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