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An Investigation of
Alternative High School Students’ Perceptions
of Barriers to Education

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By

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Abstract

In recent years, research has investigated the phenomenon of high school drop outs. Research has been conducted at the local, state, national, and international levels. Data have been gathered on the gender, socio economic status, ethnic and racial status, to name just a few of the categories. Information has also been gathered about the various identifiable risk factors (Belfield, 2007; Chapman, 2007; Swanson, 2008; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

There has been little research about dropping out from the perspective of the potential dropouts themselves (Harvey & Housman, 2005). Most research focused on solid quantitative data, resulting in scores of informative facts and figures. While these hard quantitative data have provided an informative statistical landscape, they only provided part of the total picture of the high school dropout. Several researchers have written about the lack of scholarly information that encompasses the viewpoint of the high school students themselves (Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997).

Investigators cited the need for more research to be conducted to examine the viewpoint of the student (Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2002). There was a lack of research on students’ perceptions of how alternative high schools can help students stay in school. This study used qualitative methods to examine alternative high school students perception of barriers to education and how their alternative high school helped them stay in school. This study used archival data from the school, field observation notes, and interviews with 10 students.

This research attempted to answer two questions: What do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education? How is the alternative high school helping students to stay in school?
Research showed that students at this alternative high school perceived their largest barrier to education to be their home life and all of the issues they faced at home. Home issues included relationship issues with parents, frequent moves, foster homes, pregnancy, and unemployment issues. Students also felt that issues at the traditional school also were barriers to finishing their education. Most of these school issues revolved around relational aggression or co-rumination between male-female and female-female associations.

Students felt that the interpersonal relationships and support they received from their teachers and staff at the alternative high school significantly contributed to helping them stay in school. In addition to the caring attitude of teachers and school personnel, students also felt the flexible educational delivery system of a blended online curriculum also contributed to them staying in school. Students felt the individualized personal curriculum best met their needs, both educationally and circumstantially. Students had the flexibility to always have access to the online curriculum, thus allowing them the flexibility to not get behind in school work when home situations and crisis surfaced. Students could go back over their school work until they understood the concept, thus allowing for a deeper level of understanding and more success in their school work. Students could work at their own pace and choose what subjects to work on. This allowed students to maximize their opportunities to learn, while still struggling with home life issues, such as helping the family financially or through pregnancy.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the “at-risk” students who have touched my life throughout the years. I have learned more from you than you ever did from me. I admire your honesty, your brave hearts, your will to survive, and your capacity to love even in dire circumstances. I have been blessed to have known all of you.

My gratitude extends to the students I interviewed at Brennan Alternative High School. Thank you for sharing your stories and perspectives with me. In addition, I would like to thank the principal and staff for sharing your school and students with me in such a gracious manner.

My deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Nancy A. Evers, my advisor and committee chairperson. Her guidance, encouragement, and help were immeasurable, and I will always feel indebted to her. A special thank you goes to my committee members, Dr. Roger Collins, Dr. Koschoreck, and Dr. Jackie Quay. Your support, patience, and leadership have invaluable to me and I will be forever grateful.

And finally a very special thank you goes to my children, my family, and my friends. Thank you, Rob, Melissa, and Tim, for encouraging me when I was exhausted and discouraged. Thank you to my siblings and their spouses for being my biggest cheerleaders. Thank you dad, I was really hoping to be finished before you left this world, but I know you are with me. And to my friends, who stood by me, in good times and in bad times. You will never be forgotten.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Rob, Melissa, and Tim. You are the light of my life. May God hold you in the palm of His hand.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Florence Finke Sage and Avery Sage. I thank you for instilling in me the value of education, but more importantly for sharing your love of learning. I never had to look any farther than you for my heroes. I will see you on the other side.
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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem and Review of the Literature

In the 1960s and 1970s, the national dropout rate for the United States hovered between 15% to 27% (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2009). This statistic should actually be higher, due to the lack of a common definition for drop out. For the past fifteen years, the national dropout rate has consistently stayed around 10%. Probing deeper into these statistics, a disparity exists between dropout rates for white, black, and Hispanic students (terms which are used in the report) (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2009). From 2000 – 2004, the average dropout rate for whites was 6.8%, for blacks it was 11.6%, and for Hispanics it was 25.6%. In 2005, the dropout rate for students living in low-income families was about six times higher than those of students from high income families (Chapman, 2007).

The largest urban schools in the United States, when compared to suburban schools, have a disproportionately higher dropout rate. Although urban school districts serve approximately 12% of the total school population, they account for about 25% of all dropouts (Balfantz & Letgers, 2004). A student enrolled in one of the United States’ largest cities has about a 50% chance of graduating from high school. Greene and Winters (2002), of the Manhattan Institute, reported that 11 of the 46 largest public school districts in the United States had drop out rates of 40% or more. Specifically, the institute reported the following dropout rates as of 2002, Cleveland (63%), St Louis (41.2%), Chicago (48.7%), Baltimore (39.6%), Minneapolis (49.5%), Portland (42.7%), and New Orleans (45.5%). The data from the public school districts in New York, Texas, Florida, Michigan, and California were not used because they did not use the U.S. Department of Education definitions.
Of the African-American, Latino, and Native American students, half will drop out (Lawson, 2008). Females seem to fare better than males when it comes to graduating from high school. Female graduation rates are eight percentage points higher than males (Balfantz & Letgers, 2004).

Parental income level and minority status have been shown to be vital factors in determining a student’s chance of graduating from high school. Dropout rates for students from low income families are six times that of their peers from high income families (Lawson, 2008). Regarding socio economic status, the lowest 25 percent of students are 20 times more likely to drop out of high school than students achieving in the top 25 per cent (Swanson, 2008).

Minorities, such as Native Americans, Hispanics, and African-Americans, are represented disproportionately in special education programs, as well as in the child welfare system and juvenile justice system. Placement in one of these programs just compounds the risk of dropping out of school (Lawson, 2008).

High school and postsecondary graduates are less likely to be teenage parents. They are more likely to live longer and raise healthier and better educated children. In addition, they are less likely to rely on government health care, less likely to commit crimes, and less likely to use public assistance programs (Belfield, 2007). In Ohio, if all of the students who dropped out in 2008 would have earned their high school diploma, the state of Ohio would save more than $502 million in health care costs over the course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Nationally, the United States would have saved over $17 billion in uninsured health care and Medicaid (Belfield, 2007).
An estimated 75% to 80% of all inmates in prisons are high school dropouts. Nationally, the cost to house, clothe, and feed a prisoner is $22,650 per year. This is three times more per year than what we spend on educating a student per year (Children’s Defense Fund, 2008). Raising the male graduation rate by a mere five per cent would save the state of Ohio $233 million per year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008), all other things being equal.

Rumberger (2004) reports that there are several risk factors that contribute to a student’s chance of dropping out of school. They include being poor, male, member of a minority group, transitory movement in elementary and middle grades, overage for grade level, single parent families, and taking on adult responsibilities.

Researchers have long identified that academic performance and educational engagement are the two identifiable risk factors. Students who are behind in academic achievement can be an identifiable risk factor. And it is something that takes place within the confines of the school building, and not at home. Students who are behind in academic achievement also become disengaged from school and often develop disciplinary problems. This disengagement can also lead to truancy, poor peer relationships, and lower graduation rates (Jerald, 2006).

While some risk factors have been identified, even these factors are considered complex and interactive. Gleason and Dynarski (2002) researched federal programs that were funded by the School Dropout Assistance Program. Their findings were astonishing. The highest correlation they could find in any of the individual risk factors was 28%. They continued their research to see if cumulative risk factors might generate a higher correlation. They again found that the identified at-risk factors only predicted a dropout rate 28% of the time. Gleason and
Dynarski concluded, “Dropout prevention programs often serve students who would not have dropped out and (they) do not serve students who would have dropped out” (2002, p. 25).

Many agencies, including the National Dropout Prevention Center, encouraged school districts to identify their own at-risk factors. Researchers from Clemson University followed these programs and performed a regression analysis (Wells, Bechard, & Hambly, 1989). The purpose of the research was to create a “statistically generated prediction formula” (Wells et al., 1989, p. 8). The study looked at such risk factors as socio economic status, race and ethnicity, gender, number of schools attended, grades in core academic subjects, discipline referrals, attendance, and retention. The study found that the formula did identify some of the potential dropouts, but not a significant amount to warrant its implementation.

A longitudinal study published in The Journal of Educational Research (Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1997) states that a significant number of dropouts started on this pathway when they started to fall behind in school. This was exacerbated when the students became more discouraged and distanced themselves from the school environment. However, a Philadelphia study reported that one thing didn’t necessarily lead to another. Rather, their paths might meet somewhere along the path. Or as Jerald puts it, “for many dropouts, one thing can lead to another. But it is always not the same thing” (Jerald, 2006, p. 16). These studies have illustrated that there is not one common path to dropping out of high school, but several.

Alternative schools have been created to help students stay in school and graduate. Lange (1998) states that alternative schools have proven to be a viable option for at-risk students because they provide an individualized educational experience designed for the student success. Raywid (2001) also reports on the success of alternative schools. In particular, Raywid (2001)
points out that alternative schools are most successful with students who had behavior problems. In addition, she reports that many of the initiatives which were originally established by alternative schools are now mainstream practices in traditional schools.

Currently, there is little research about dropping out from the perspective of the potential dropouts themselves (Harvey & Housman, 2005). Most research has focused on solid quantitative data, resulting in scores of informative facts and figures. While these hard quantitative data have provided an informative statistical landscape, they only provide part of the total picture of the high school dropout. Several researchers have written about the lack of scholarly information that encompasses the viewpoint of the high school students themselves (Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997). Investigators cite the need for more research to be conducted to examine the viewpoint of the student (Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2002). In addition, there is a lack of research on students’ perceptions of how alternative high schools can help students stay in school. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine alternative high school students’ perceptions of barriers to education and how their alternative high school helps them stay in school.

**Research Questions**

1. What do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education?
2. How is the alternative high school helping students to stay in school?
Review of the Literature

In recent years, research has investigated the phenomenon of high school drop outs. Research has been conducted at the local, state, national, and international levels. Data have been gathered on the gender, socio economic status, ethnic and racial status, to name just a few of the categories. Information has also been gathered about the various identifiable risk factors. The researcher will discuss some of the issues which play a part in high school students dropping out of school. Some of the issues are factors which the student cannot control and others are factors over which the student can exert some control. These factors will be discussed along with practices that research has shown to be helpful in keeping students stay in school. In addition, the researcher will discuss alternative high schools and the characteristics of alternative high schools that have been shown to be successful. And lastly, the researcher will discuss the lack of research relating to the perspective of what alternative students see as barriers to education and what these students report help them to stay in school.

Dropouts

There is much information about the dropout rate and the identification of factors leading to dropout. In 1972, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) started to gather information throughout the nation, based on uniform and standardized definitions. In 1972, the national dropout rate was 14.6% (NCES, 2007). The latest information that NCES has available is from 2005, and the national dropout rate decreased to 9.4% (NCES, 2007). This means that every 10 seconds, a student in the United States drops out of school, or every school day, approximately 6,800 students drop out. To state it in another way, over a million students who enter ninth grade will fail to graduate with their cohort (Balfantz & Letgers, 2004).
Upon closer examination, the largest urban schools in the United States, when compared to suburban schools, have a disproportionately higher dropout rate. Although urban school districts serve approximately 12% of the total school population, they account for about 25% of all dropouts (Balfantz & Letgers, 2004). A student enrolled in one of the United States’ largest cities has about a 50% chance of graduating from high school.

Ohio Dropouts. The graduation rate for Ohio has been reported at 80% by the United States Department of Education and at 86% by the state reported No Child Left Behind Act (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Due to poor definitions and complicated formulas, Ohio and other states have struggled to achieve an accurate measurement of graduation rates and dropout rates. The federal government recently announced the implementation of a common formula to be utilized by the 2010-2011 school year.

Using the rate reported by the No Child Left Behind Act, this still translates to an estimated 210 students dropping out of school each day in Ohio (Swanson, 2008). That is, 37,857 students did not graduate in 2008-2009. Of the nation’s largest 50 city school districts, two of Ohio’s largest school districts, Cleveland City Schools and Columbus City Schools, ranked 48th and 46th respectively in graduation rates (Swanson, 2008).

Dropping out of school has implications beyond the school. Armstrong (2006) reports that according to the United States Department of Labor, the average income for a dropout in the United States was $17,299 per year. According to State of Ohio guidelines, this would be below poverty level for a family of three. A dropout, over the course of his lifetime, earns $260,000 less than a high school graduate. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), if the
38,000 Ohio dropouts from the Class of 2008 had earned their diplomas, they would have added an additional $9.8 billion in wages over the lifetime of these students.

The Thomas Fordham Institute (Finn, Julian, & Petrilli, 2006) reported that 99 Ohio schools (serving approximately 66,000 students) failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for six or more consecutive years. In addition, another 90 schools (serving approximately 58,000 students) failed to make AYP for five years. This information depicts the urgent need to make changes in these schools and the students they touch.

**Factors leading to dropping out.** There are many factors which contribute to a student dropping out of high school. Some factors relate to the circumstances into which a student is born, while other factors relate to the student’s mental and emotional situation (Rumberger, 2004). These factors and the effects they have on a student dropping out of high school will be examined in this section.

**Socio economic status.** There is much documentation on the ill effects that socio-economic status (SES) imposes on its young population. Parental income level has been shown to be a vital factor in determining a student’s chance of graduating from high school. Dropout rates for students from low income families are six times that of their peers from high income families (Lawson, 2008). Regarding socio economic status, the lowest 25 percent of students are 20 times more likely to drop out of high school than students achieving in the top 25 per cent (Swanson, 2008).

Intensifying this risk factor, are the added aspects of race and ethnicity (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, & Catalano, 2000). In addition to race and ethnicity, other demographic characteristics also factor into the complexity of the issue. Immigration status has also been
researched and documented as a risk factor which is intensified when added onto a low socio-economic status. The immigration issue also encompasses language and social barriers as well (Rumberger, 2004). Gender also plays into the complexity of the dropout issue. As mentioned earlier, male students are more likely to dropout than female students. However, this discrepancy is increased when added to low SES (Rumberger, 2004).

**Minority status.** Of the African-American, Latino, and Native American students, half will drop out (Lawson, 2008). Minorities, such as Native Americans, Hispanics, and African-Americans, are represented disproportionately in special education programs, as well as in the child welfare system and juvenile justice system. This placement in one of the aforementioned programs just compounds the risk of dropping out of school (Lawson, 2008).

**Gender.** Males seem to fare worse than females when it comes to graduating from high school. Male graduation rates are eight percentage points lower than females (Balfantz & Letgers, 2004).

**Work responsibilities.** Taking on adult responsibilities at a young age has also been noted as a barrier for students to graduate from high school. With economic difficulties for families, some students have had to take on jobs or work longer hours to help financially support their family (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Holding down a job while in high school may or may not have a negative effect on the student. The study found that it really depended upon the number of hours worked and the gender of the student (McNeal, 1997). According to McNeal’s study, after twenty to twenty five hours per week of working, there was a correlation between number of hours worked and
negative achievement in high school. For males, this correlation started at around 20 hours per week, and for females, around 25 hours per week.

Warren, LePore and Mare (2000) report that, “High school students who work intensively at paid jobs tend to have lower grades in academic courses” (p.943). Other studies have shown that working students decrease their chance of graduating, with an increase of work hours over 20 work hours per week (Rumberger, 2004).

Parents of at-risk students are often at-risk adults (Beyth-Marom, 1993). These at-risk parents often are so involved with the crisis of their lives that they are not able to engage in effective parenting (Steinburg & Cauffman, 1996). Therefore, at-risk students are often found to be parenting themselves and making adult decisions that greatly impact their lives (Fischhoff, 2008).

**Teenage parenting.** Becoming a teenage parent and all of the additional responsibilities that come with that can lead to dropout (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Teenage parents, especially young mothers, also have to take on adult responsibilities that go beyond work hours. There is the added responsibilities of raising a young child, attending school, and trying to keep up with school work.

Teenagers who babysit younger siblings so that parents can work to support the family unit may find themselves confronting the same barriers as teenage parents (Rosenthal, 1998).

**School disengagement.** School engagement and performance have long been documented as a predictor of a student being at risk for dropping out of school. School engagement has been defined as the student’s involvement in acceptable and appropriate behaviors (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Performance has been defined as academic
achievement and grades (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Low academic performance has usually been at the forefront of a major predictor for not graduating. Whether it be measured by course failure, low test scores, or through yearly academic grades, low students performance has been consistently at the forefront as one of the predictors for dropping out (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001, October).

Intensifying the effect of poor student performance is the effect it has on the student’s perception of himself and school. This in turn negatively impacts the students’ level of engagement with the teachers and school (Alexander et al., 2001). The National Dropout Prevention Center identified four types of disengagement, namely, social disengagement, psychological disengagement, academic disengagement, and behavioral disengagement (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

Social disengagement involves many factors inside and outside of school. Students who are disengaged from school usually do not participate in extra curricular activities at their school and often have friends who are also socially disengaged from school (Ingels, Curtain, Kaufman, & Alt, 2002). Not surprising, these socially disengaged students were often reported as getting into trouble at school and fighting with other students (Jimerson, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2000).

A student’s attitude toward school is how the National Dropout Prevention Center identified psychological disengagement (Hammond et al., 2007). Psychological disengagement takes on a variety of attitudes. Studies have shown that dropouts often felt that they were not liked by their teachers. Because of this attitude, they usually did not like school and felt that they didn’t fit in at a school environment. This in turn helped to fuel the low expectations they had for graduating from high school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).
Academic disengagement often takes the very concrete form of school absenteeism. Absenteeism can have a snowball effect, starting in the early grades and culminating in high school. Absenteeism affects achievement levels, social engagement levels, and an overall sense of well being (Rumberger, 2004). Absenteeism also encompasses truancy and student involvement in the juvenile court system, which again intensifies the other at-risk factors.

Behavior disengagement takes on many forms for a student. Behavior disengagement can take place in and out of school, within the home environment, or outside of the home environment. Regardless of where the behavior takes place, the effect has a direct bearing on school outcomes. Behavior disengagement usually takes the form of acting out in school. This behavior interacts with other risk factors that again intensifies the overall effect (Rumberger, 2004). For example, students who act out in school and at home often have peers who display the same behavior. Due to their acting out in school, these students often have disciplinary consequences for their actions which reinforces their feeling of disengagement from the school, academically, as well as socially. However, behavior disengagement does not always take the form of acting out. It can sometimes take the form of simply shutting down and not interacting with anyone or anything (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

**Family dynamics.** The National Dropout Prevention Center identified family dynamics as one of the risk factors which affects students. Family dynamics encompasses a variety of factors, such curfews, social monitoring, attitudes about education, family expectations, and permissive parenting, to name a few (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007).

Rosenthal (1998) found that parents who maintain and enforce curfews have higher achievers than parents who do not enforce curfews. In addition, the parents who enforce curfews
have less behavior issues with their children. Correlated with the lack of curfews is permissive parenting. Permissive parenting has been linked to many other at-risk factors, such as teen pregnancy, truancy, and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, & Cosio, 2004).

Parents’ attitudes about education have been shown to have a huge impact on dropping out of school. Parents that have frequent positive interaction with their child’s school, starting at younger grades, have children who have a positive view of education (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). Students are more likely to drop out of school if their parents have low educational expectations (Rumberger, 2004). Intensifying the risk factor is the family history of dropping out. If a parent has dropped out of school or a sibling, this increases the probability of the student also dropping out (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Pathways to dropout. In the past two decades, research has started to focus on longitudinal studies. The longitudinal studies that follow cohorts of students have yielded the most powerful information, since they are able to focus on school districts, as well as the cumulation of time events.

One of the landmark studies was conducted by Roderick (1993) with the Fall River School District in Massachusetts. She identified two separate groups of dropouts. The first group of dropouts she identified as early dropouts because they dropped out between seventh and ninth grades. The other group, which comprised 65% of all Fall River dropouts, she identified as late dropouts because they left school between tenth and twelfth grades. However, these two different groups had two distinct preceding educational paths behind them. The early dropouts were students that had significant lower achievement levels in elementary school when compared to
their peers. These early dropouts showed some of the risk factors as early as fourth grade. The late dropouts had attendance rates and grades, in elementary school, similar to other students who would ultimately graduate from high school. The late dropouts tended to show warning signs at the time of their transition period into high school.

Roderick (1993) found that the transition periods, from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school, had a significant negative impact on dropouts. She found that academic achievement declined considerably during these transitions for the eventual dropouts. She also found that as their academic achievement levels decreased, so too did their attendance.

In general, there is a slight decline in academic achievement for all students as they transition from middle school into high school. For the dropouts, this decline is significant. Roderick (1993) felt that this overall decline was due to several factors. One of the factors that a student faces when he transitions into a high school is that it is usually larger and the courses are more challenging. Teachers are usually not as accommodating or encouraging to high school students. In addition, potential dropouts are navigating through larger and more complicated peer groups. It is also during this time that students are given some freedoms at home or in school.

According to Jerald (2006), most dropouts follow a predictable path through the educational system. He proposes that dropping out of high school has more to do with the educational experiences of the student and the school, than it does with the home factors of the student. The Philadelphia Public School Study claims that it can identify approximately 50% of potential dropouts by the sixth grade (Mezzacappa, 2005).

Jerald proposes building an early warning system. He feels that school districts bypass methods to predict potential at-risk students, and instead, go straight to programs meant to help
them. As Jerald states, “A large school system that invests in better data to support dropout prevention can obtain much better results for hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars less than a similar system whose leaders decide to skip that step” (2006, p. 3).

Swanson and Schneider (1999) have found some factors which have traditionally been identified to put students at-risk may or may not actually influence their dropping out. Instead, what they propose is that it may affect dropping out, but in a very complex and intricate manner. They use the example that transitory movement before eighth grade can have a negative effect on education, but that transitory movement, in early high school, can have a positive effect. This is mostly due to having the student change negative peer groups.

A landmark study was conducted in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Chicago Public Schools decided to identify their at-risk students by utilizing the at-risk factors of: credits earned, GPA, attendance, and failing grades. If a ninth grade student was falling off track, as indicated by any of these factors, then the CPS took steps to do intervention. CPS also found out that eighth grade test scores were not good predictors of high school dropouts. However, they did find that ninth grade scores, along with GPA and attendance, would successfully predict 85% of the freshmen who have the potential of not graduating.

The Philadelphia Public School Study and the Chicago Public School Study have illustrated that although each individual dropout has his/her own individual path, there are some common patterns that educators should be paying attention to. However, there is not just one common path, but several.
The National Dropout Prevention Center published a comprehensive report that studied the dropout crisis in America (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). The report stated that poor attendance, retention (meaning over age for grade), low achievement, and low socio-economic status were school level risk factors that contributed to dropping out. Therefore, it was the conclusion of the report that there are several factors that lead to students dropping out of high school. The report stated that the reasons for dropping out are a combination of several of the factors and that it is a process which occurs over a period of time, rather than a single event. Circumstances for dropping out are complexly intertwined over a period of time.

The National Dropout Prevention Center suggested that schools address the needs of these students whenever and wherever possible. Multiple strategies should be implemented to increase the impact and to facilitate success. Lehr (2004) found that successful programs used a blending of academic support, environmental change, personal assets building, and family outreach.

**Practices to keep students in school.** In recent years, research has begun to focus on the schools themselves as possible risk factors for potential drop outs. Several studies have shown that individual school characteristics can have a negative or positive effect on potential dropouts (Jerald, 2006). The Consortium on Chicago School Research found that Chicago Public Schools had an array of high school graduation rates, which could not be correlated with traditional risk factors, such as race, family income, or overage. The study concluded that the graduation rates had to do with the supportive culture of the individual high school, and how well it helped a student transition from middle school to high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

Researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenburg, 2001) conducted research with Philadelphia’s public schools. Their findings were
similar to the Chicago Public School study, with regard to the importance of successfully transitioning into the ninth grade. However, in the Philadelphia Public School Study, the researchers found that Philadelphia Public high schools had a high retention rate for ninth graders. So, students tended to drop out in ninth grade, although it might be their second or third year in ninth grade. The study concluded, “Our ability to predict dropouts increases considerably when we know how students fare during their high school transition year” (Neil et al., 2001, p. 29). In addition, Neild and Balfanz (2001) found that in the Philadelphia high schools, the initial attendance rate for ninth graders was a stronger indicator than any factors exhibited in eighth grade.

Balfanz and Herzog (2005) found achievement level was an important indicator, but that a better indicator of dropping out was not standardized test scores, but rather classroom grades. In addition, they found that teachers’ comments on behavior (found on report cards) were a better indicator than suspension or expulsion rates. They found that supportive teacher behavior was a positive factor in keeping at risk students in school because the student felt a connection to the school.

Research by Lee and Burkham (2000) has shown that at-risk students succeed in schools that have more interpersonal ties between students and teachers, more rigorous curriculum, and smaller enrollments. As a matter of fact, Croninger and Lee (2001) found that dropout rates were cut in half in schools that had highly supportive teachers.

**Alternative Schools**

Since the majority of school districts who experience the highest dropout rate and lowest student performance tend to be located in urban areas where low income families live, these are
most often the school districts where alternative schools appear (Barr & Parrett, 1997). In the last
decade, alternative schools have begun to spring up across the landscape of American education.
Regardless of whether or not alternative schools have the support of the local school district, they
have come about to keep identified at risk students in school.

**Definition of alternative schools.** The U.S. Department of Education (2002) defines an
alternative school as,

> A public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that
typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education,
serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular,
special education or vocational education.

In the past decade, the trend for home schooling has increased (Bielick, 2001). From
1999 to 2003, an additional 850,000 students were home schooled for a total of 1,096,000 home
schooled students. The number one reason parents cited for homeschooling their child was their
concern about the environment of their child’s home school (31%). The second reason most
reported was for religious and moral instruction (30%), and the third most cited reason was
parents’ dissatisfaction with academic instruction at their child’s assigned district school (16%)
(Bielick, 2001).

The public school student body is changing. As more students move to the suburbs or to
home schooling, what often is left in the core of the city are the poor, the violent, and the recent
immigrants (Hodgkinson, 2001). This has resulted in disparate school districts of the rich and the
poor. What has emerged is a mosaic of alternatives to traditional public education. Online
learning, magnet schools, home schools, charter schools, and alternative schools have emerged to
fill a need that traditional public schools and their bureaucratic trappings have been unable to accomplish.

When examining these schools, the first issue which is raised is the various definitions and perceptions that exist for these alternative schools (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). The vast arrays of alternative schools have been established to meet the needs of at-risk students who have barriers to education (Lewis, 2003). These barriers often include poverty, family issues, psychological issues, learning styles, attendance issues, and some behavior issues. Some school districts mistakenly use the alternative schools as a dumping ground for all of their behavioral issues. School districts that do this often find the alternative schools ineffective and position themselves in being back where they started (Tobin & Sprague, 1999).

Alternative schools have traditionally been defined as schools that deliver education in a non-traditional way. Usually, alternative schools have a flexible environment and are tailored around the individual needs of its student population. In addition, alternative schools utilize a different approach to learning (Aron, 2006). Magnet schools characteristically have been focused on a specific premise, such as the Montessori approach. Magnet schools tend to maintain a heterogeneous student population. Charter schools are perhaps the most controversial and discoursed type of school. There have been many debates and arguments surrounding the nature, control, and funding of charter schools. Traditionally, state legislatures have allowed charter schools to receive public funding to operate schools. Usually, these schools are operated by an agency, or a group of private citizens (Aron, 2006).

**Characteristics of successful alternative schools.** Alternative schools have developed in the last decade or so. Research has focused on the types of practices that alternative schools have
proven to be effective in helping students graduate from high school. The National Dropout Prevention Center (2009) and the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008) have provided reports and data bases on best practices and effective strategies for successful alternative schools.

Choice. The idea that parents and students have a choice in the type of educational delivery system has been a powerful factor in the growth and effectiveness of alternative schools (Raywid, 2001). Parents who are attracted to alternative schools have often become disenfranchised with the traditional public schools. They often feel disconnected from a school environment which did not meet the needs of their child or their needs. Lopez (2001) uses the term “marginalized” parents to describe this relationship between the parent and the school.

The fact that parents and students have a choice in selecting their school conveys a sense of power over one’s destiny. This shift in power over one’s environment and providence alone can cause a shift in a student’s and parent’s attitude of attending school (Raywid, 2001). Parents stated their belief about having their child graduate from high school; however they also stated their belief that the traditional public school was a poor match for their child (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). The fact that parents choose an alternative school helps with a parent and student buying into their education, and therefore assists in engaging the parent and child in the educational delivery.

Effectively addressing diversity. Along with the power of choice, alternative schools seem poised to meet the challenges of diversity. Alternative schools have shown to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the needs of a recognized and respected diverse population (Barr & Parrett, 1997). One of the basic premises of an alternative school is that there is no “one
size fits all.” Traditional public schools rarely meet the needs of at-risk students or diverse student populations. Diverse populations find their needs not recognized within the public school system (Ladson-Billinngs & Tate, 2000).

As Oakes (2005) reports, “in academic tracking…poor and minority students are most likely to be placed at the lowest levels of the school’s sorting system” (p. 67). The very backbone of an alternative school’s mission is to recognize students as individuals, with distinctive needs (Oakes, 2005).

**Creating a learning environment.** Alternative schools have numerous and varied environments for learning. Although most schools have common themes, no two environments are exactly the same. Alternative schools are continuously developing learning environments which fit around the needs of their student population. As Sally Williamson, the former principal of Garfield Alternative School in Middletown, Ohio, states, “Once you stop developing, then you are no longer an alternative school. Alternative schools are ever-changing to constantly meet student needs” (Williamson, 2006).

**Low student to staff ratios.** This is an attribute which all types of schools rally for all of the time. However, alternative schools have found non-traditional ways to have low student to staff ratios. Public schools traditionally look for low student to teacher ratios. Alternative schools have found unique ways to include, not only teachers, but also community members, parents, mentors, and uncustomary types of personnel to help with educating alternative students (Tobin & Sprague, 1999).

Involving various community members not only increases students’ academic performance, but also filters into improved behavior, grades, attendance, and attitude (Lewis,
The utilization of online learning can also aid in achieving low student to staff ratio. The issue of online curriculum and learning will be addressed later in this paper.

**Social-emotional learning.** Most effective alternative schools integrate some aspect of social-emotional learning (SEL) into their mainstream curriculum. Often called social skills instruction, SEL usually incorporates various instruction in anger management, conflict resolution, problem solving, empathy, self awareness, as well as other related topics (Schaegel & Smink, 2001).

Whether it is a traditional school environment or an alternative school environment, evidence points to measurable academic gains when a social emotional learning program is integrated into a school curriculum (Parker, Creque, Barnhart, Harris, Majeski, & Wood, 2004). It seems that social emotional learning intensifies the learning experience by increasing not only attendance, but also academic achievement.

**Functional behavioral assessment.** Related to social-emotional learning is the issue of behavior management. Alternative schools approach behavior management much differently than traditional schools. As mentioned earlier, most alternative schools take a pro-active approach by utilizing a social-emotional learning program that includes a self awareness and an anger management component.

What is often surprising to most non-observers of alternative schools is the utilization of a highly defined structure of behavior management. Part of the social-emotional learning program includes self management skills. A predictable system with positive reinforcements is taught and maintained throughout alternative schools. In other words, the school and all of its various capabilities and limits are explained to students in detail. School rules are clear and are
taught to students. Alternative school students often find security in this type of predictable system. One of the major grievances that parents and students voiced about their previous public school was the inconsistent discipline policies, especially as it related to minorities and low-income students (Obasohan & Kortering, 1999).

Weaved into the behavior management structure are the individual behavior interventions based on functional behavioral assessments. This again goes back to the social-emotional learning component of alternative schools. Students are taught and encouraged to identify the causes of their behaviors, as well as positive strategies to cope with poor behavior. Intertwined into this component is also the relationship and support of the teachers, parents, and mentors.

Helping students to recognize, own, and ensue positive thoughts and behavior, allow the students to feel in control of their behavior and destiny. Behavior management has a positive emphasis, rather than a punitive emphasis (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Rewards for attendance, self-management, and academic achievement are recognized. This recognition of positive behaviors occurs more often than in traditional schools. For example, traditional high schools will recognize academic achievement at the end of each school quarter, whereby alternative high schools might recognize such achievements monthly.

**Quality academic instruction.** A misconception about the student population in alternative schools is that they are unintelligent (Elliott, Hanser, & and Gilroy, 2002). This misnomer is founded in the fact that these students were poor achievers in the traditional public schools. Studies have shown time and time again that the students who attend alternative schools are not unintelligent (Gallagher, 2001). Rather, the issue is the student’s disengagement from the traditional school environment due to barriers to education.
Alternative schools offer challenging foundation level courses, as well as college prep courses. Some online learning organizations, such as the Butler Tech Online developed by Butler Technology and Career Development Schools, have even developed Advance Placement online curriculum.

Students find they often receive more one-on-one time with teachers and staff members at an alternative school (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). When these schools use online curriculum, students can move at their own pace while learning the curriculum. It also allows teachers more time to explain and work individually with students. In addition to the obvious academic advantages, this also strengthens the student-teacher relationship.

**Service learning.** Some alternative schools also include Service Learning as part of their credited curriculum. Service Learning can be a way of extending and reinforcing academic learning, as well as social-emotional learning. Service Learning can be utilized as an extension of educational curriculum as it operates in the real world. Students are allowed to see the natural connections between academic theory and how it applies to real life situations. In addition, Service Learning extends itself well by putting students in positions of positive authority and teaching them to make moral decisions which affect the well being of others. It can also be a link between academia and the community. Service Learning connects the school to the outside world and opens doors for mentors and other community members to get involved in the school, as well as the school to get involved in community organizations.

Service Learning is also a way to reinforce and extend social emotional learning. Students have the opportunity to “feel” what empathy is. Research has shown that students who
are involved in Service Learning have better self-esteem, lower rates of interaction with the criminal justice system, and higher rates of academic achievement (Billig, 2000).

**Small school size.** The majority of alternative schools have an enrollment that is under 200 students (Elliott et al., 2002). Some students feel disconnected and isolated at large high schools. This feeling of separateness can magnify school detachment in an already disengaged student (Elliott et al., 2002). The National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone, 2001) recommends several ways to deal with this issue. One recommendation is to divide the larger high school into smaller schools or “schools within a school.” For at-risk students, the smaller school environment allows the student to connect with other students and staff. At-risk students achieve more in a small school environment (Elliott et al., 2002). They attribute this to the fact that they get to know their teachers on a more personal level and don’t feel lost in the crowd. These students feel the school is concerned about the whole student, rather than the academic student. Smaller schools are also able to develop and nurture a sense of community where students feel they belong and have a stake in their future (Elliott et al., 2002).

**Caring and demanding staff.** One of the common reasons high school dropouts cite for dropping out of school is that they felt no one cared about them (Gallagher, 2001). Hammond (2007) reports that at-risk students often deal with more complex and demanding family issues than the typical student. They often lack the family support system or value of education more so than the traditional student. Therefore, school-related adult relationships carry a higher significance for at-risk students. Not only are these at-risk students dealing with more issues, but they are doing so with fewer resources and support. When compared to traditional schools, students who attended alternative schools felt their teachers cared more about them and that they
also demanded a higher quality of work from them (Pines, 1999). Due to this personal connection, students tried to meet this higher expectation. “Friendly attention” is the term Pariser (1990) uses in his work to describe the teacher’s positive relationship that impacts the higher expectation level on students. Pines (1999) writes that the single most important characteristic of a successful alternative school is an atmosphere of caring and support for the individual.

Small schools with a caring and demanding staff can help to create a sense of community for students. This sense of community provides a supportive and safe environment for students. It also provides students with a sense of purpose and a common goal (Elliott et al., 2002).

**Relevant curriculum.** Alternative schools cover the same academic material that their home schools do, however they differ in the method of delivery. Most alternative programs utilize an individual learning plan for the student (Raywid, 2001). This plan is formulated through input from the teacher and the student. Both parties sit down together and work out a contract which states how and when certain academic material will be covered and evaluated (Raywid, 2001). This works well for at-risk students who often have job and family responsibilities which affect their schooling.

Alternative schools can be flexible in the delivery of education. Students can elect to cover just one subject area at a time, or can choose a more traditional approach whereby they are working on several subjects at the same time. As stated earlier in the paper, a majority of alternative schools utilize an electronic curriculum for their students. This type of delivery system lends itself well for individualizing the curriculum to meet students’ individual learning styles. By using this type of curriculum, students can spend more time on subject areas they have difficulty with, and can accelerate through subject areas they are more knowledgeable about.
Teachers also find they are freed up from writing lesson plans and whole class instruction time. Teachers are now able to work with individual students on specific material that students are having difficulty understanding. Teachers can spend more one-on-one time directly with students and can employ a variety of teaching methods.

Teachers in alternative schools utilize pertinent and concrete examples in the everyday world to connect and anchor the academic work to the work world (Pines, 1999). Some alternative schools interconnect their academic areas to work areas, by providing instruction and graduation credits for students working outside of school (Pines, 1999). These school-to-work programs are under the auspices of the federal Work Education and Career Exploration Program (WECEP).

This program allows students to keep up with their academics, but to also receive on-the-job training and counseling. Students are permitted to do all of this within the school day and to receive credit for their work. This blending of educational learning and on-the-job training can help to increase the level of academic proficiency. In addition, it often enables a student who has family responsibilities to stay in school.

**Shared vision.** Shared vision is also an integral part of an alternative school and it ties in with many of the previous topics. Alternative education uses a different approach to education and people involved in this type of education must be able to agree upon the definition of alternative education and to believe in its importance.

Alternative schools often enlist the assistance of parents and students to help define what their vision is. There are several purposes for this. One purpose is the agreement as to what each party will contribute, in terms of talents and responsibilities, to the school. Another purpose is to
aid in the “buy-in” or commitment the student has to the school. Students are most likely to be committed to a school where they feel they have a stake (Pines, 1999). A shared vision also contributes to the focus of a student. Since the student has been an integral part in establishing the school vision, it also encompasses his vision of what he wants to accomplish.

**Student Voice.** There is much research in the education field that focuses on the who, what, and where of high school drop outs. Much of the research has focused on ethnographic and socio-economic data. Very little research has focused on the voice of the students themselves (Harvey & Housman, 2005). Very little research has asked potential dropouts why they think students drop out of high school. There are a multitude of programs available in every state that have been established to facilitate the graduation of high school students. Robinson states the importance of gaining the students’ perspective because, “Decoding how this population of at-risk students construct their worlds may inform our knowledge of how schools can more effectively meet their needs” (1996, p.12).

Cook-Sather (2002) states, “The argument for authorizing student perspectives runs counter to U.S. reform efforts, which have been based on adults’ ideas about the conceptualization and practice of education” (p.4). Although there has been some research into students’ perspectives, there still remains a lack of scholarly information (Garnier et al., 1997) (Phelan, Davidson, & Hanh, 1992, v73). However, the question still remains, why do at-risk students think students drop out of high school? If viable solutions are to be found for the high school dropout problem, then students’ perspectives should be part of the plan. Investigators cite the need for more research to be carried out on the potential dropout and his perspective (Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2002).
The focus of my research is to delve into the minds of alternative high school dropout students to gain their perspective on what students perceive as barriers to education and how alternative schools help students stay in school.
Chapter II

Methodology

This study was concerned about alternative high school students’ perceptions of barriers to education and what alternative high schools do to help students stay in school. There has been little research that has focused on the perspective of the student (Harvey & Housman, 2005). Quantitative research focuses on the facts of dropping out of high school, but does not focus on the story behind the phenomena. Quantitative research has been able to identify the details of dropping out, but has been unable to delve into the deeper layers of the students’ perspectives.

The researcher employed the qualitative method of research to achieve an intimate and richer understanding of barriers to education and what alternative schools do to help students stay in school. It is the hope of the researcher that achieving this understanding will lead to better and more effective methods of educating potential dropouts and keeping them in school.

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

Historically, quantitative research was held in higher esteem than qualitative research, with regard to social science research (Patton, 2002). Quantitative research involves gathering objective, measurable data. Then information was extracted from the scientific data using proven mathematical methods. Supporters of quantitative data analysis believe this method is more reliable because it utilizes scientific methods to describe social phenomena.

Since the researcher wanted to do a more in-depth study of students’ perceptions, she felt that qualitative research methods would be more conducive to the research. She felt that it would yield richer and more profound information on the subject. Therefore, she chose to utilize qualitative research methods.
Qualitative research methods have been used for over a century in the fields of sociology and anthropology. In the 1960s, the phrase “qualitative research” started to come into use in the social science and education fields. Advocates of this method believe that some of the most important findings are not necessarily mathematically measurable phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Advocates believe the most vital findings are those that delve into the reasons behind the statistics.

Qualitative research is most often set in a naturalist setting. The purpose of this setting is to allow the researcher to better understand the context of the human behavior. Descriptive data is also an important part of qualitative research. The researcher painstakingly collects records, pictures, interviews, field notes, transcripts, etc., to help the researcher better understand human actions and behavior (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Processes of data analysis are followed when analyzing qualitative data. Data are collected, coded, categorized, and analyzed to show patterns in human behavior. Some researchers even draw data displays and matrixes to visually illustrate their findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Since analysis of these data helps the researcher draw meaning out of her research, the researcher of this study utilized some of these techniques while doing her study.

To help establish validity while using qualitative research methods, triangulation is used in both the research and the findings. When the researcher uses triangulation, she can verify the facts from more than one source. This gives the research and its findings more validity and strength (Patton, 2002).

The researcher would like to discuss several philosophies that serve as the cornerstones for the type of research she conducted. The first is the theory of constructivism. This theory
states that truth is relative and has multiple realities, therefore it is not absolute. It promotes that reality is contingent upon human practices based on human interactions. Constructivists support using observation as a method of research. It also states that truth is contextual and relative, and that knowledge and truth are the result of your perspective (Crotty, 1998).

Constructivism states that all meaning is constructed and that it is ever changing because it is contingent upon human interaction. It states that something doesn’t have meaning until we give it meaning. However, the meaning that is constructed is not only a personal meaning, but also a meaning which has been created by a culture. This cultural reality is also constantly fluctuating and changing. Crotty states that, “Culture is best seen as the source rather than the result of human thought and behavior” (1998, p. 53). The researcher thought this point was very important while she was doing her research.

Another cornerstone theory that the researcher thought was significant was that of pragmatism. Pragmatism originally came to be associated with constructivism through the efforts of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. John Dewey said that something is only made true when it has been verified. So even though we construct our own reality, it isn’t considered real until we can verify it. Several proponents of constructivism felt that pragmatism should not be associated with constructivism. They felt that pragmatism was unproductive and served a capitalistic society.

Recently, several authors have re-examined Dewey’s work and have written articles about their investigations. Kadlec (2006) concludes that Dewey’s work was misunderstood due, in large part, to people who called themselves followers of Dewey. Aoki (2005) asserts that Dewey was relating his theories to the nature of the world during that particular period in time.
He asserts that Dewey proposed that all social interaction was educative in nature. Therefore social reproduction is attained by conveying from one generation to the next the knowledge of how to adjust and accommodate within an ever changing world. Hence, people cannot help but pass on their own constructed meaning.

Price (1998) has added a new twist to constructivism by arguing that constructivism has its basis in critical theory. He asserts that constructivism contributes an essential element to critical theory by developing introspections into culture, moral, and social values in world politics. These perspectives allow for positive improvement in constructivism, as well as development of critical theory. Price (1998) elaborates that the theories actually complement one another and make each theory stronger by contributing each one’s strengths to their weaknesses. This intertwining makes the bond stronger.

Another cornerstone theory is that of interpretivism. Interpretivism emerged in contradistinction to positivism in an attempt to understand and explain human and social reality. It states the nature of reality is idiographic and nomothetic. It often uses ethnography and phenomenology for its methods of research (Crotty, 1998).

The researcher believes that interpretivism takes constructivism a step farther and argues that a person must look for the interpretation in the cultural and historical context of that particular social environment. It states that social reality is culturally derived and historically situated. Therefore interpretations of that culture must be framed within the confines of that culture’s norms and practices.

Critical inquiry and critical theory blend into a theoretical framework that includes implementation of the theory. Critical theory asserts that theory motivates action. Positive action
will only occur if the participant believes in the theory and seeks change through the theory. The researcher would like to state that there has to be a buy in on the part of the participant. Lather (1986) advances the theory of research as praxis by discussing the benefits of emancipator knowledge. She points out the need for spiral dialogue. By spiral dialogue, it is meant that both the participant and researcher engage in dialogue that is reciprocal and empowering. This involves both parties listening and adjusting their thoughts and actions as they go through the process. Crotty (1998) writes that Freire’s ideas of critical self-insertion and conscientisation fit within the framework of critical theory.

The researcher believes this particular part of critical theory is not only empowering to the participant, but also empowering to the researcher. This allows the researcher to evaluate the participant through dialogue, but to also raise the participant’s level of consciousness. The researcher can then dialogue with the participant about the oppression and methods of empowerment and emancipation. All of these elements must occur if true change is to occur.

Freire and his theory of verbalism also fit into the theories of critical inquiry and critical theory. Freire felt that it wasn’t enough to just look at a participant and make observations. He believed that you must take action with the participant. His verbalism promotes real exchange as part of his theory (Crotty, 1998).

Critical inquiry states that theory motivates the action. That is, there is a strong link between the theory and the action. This theory states that you must educate your participants through dialogue. Freire believed that you should use critical self-insertion (Crotty, 1998) to help you better postulate another person’s view and to help create an interactive dialogue between the
researcher and the participant. And through this dialogue, the participant’s level of consciousness can be raised. He describes this process as conscientisation or increase of consciousness.

Due to research on critical theory, the researcher decided to investigate the philosophical assumptions of ontology. Her assumption is that the individuals being studied and the researcher experience multiple realities and each reality is subjective. That is, different individuals will report their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher believes that her worldview or paradigm is the guiding set of beliefs that direct her actions. The paradigm that the researcher brings to her research revolves around the concept of social constructivism. Crotty (1998) stated that individual participants try to glean meaning out of their experiences in the world. Seeking to understand the world they live in, individuals construct their own meaning by describing their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher based the study on the qualitative research design of the philosophical assumption of ontology. The assumption is that the individuals being studied and the researcher experience multiple realities and each reality is subjective. Since the researcher used the phenomenology approach, different individuals reported their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994).

The frame work of a transcendental phenomenological approach was chosen to set aside any beliefs or preconceived notions the researcher might have had in order to hear the voices of the students. The researcher wanted to gain access to their thoughts, but more importantly to their perceptions and the essence of their thoughts.

The term *phenomenology* was used occasionally by German philosopher Immanuel Kant in the 1760’s in his works on epistemology (Kockelmans, 1967). Calling phenomenology
“descriptive psychology,” Franz Brentano introduced in 1874 the concept of intentionality by saying that, “Physical phenomena exist “intentionally” in acts of consciousness” (Stanford, 2009). Brentano’s idea of intentionality states that thought is intentional. The mind thinks about an intentional object (McDonnell, 2006). That is, “Intentionality is thus the aboutness of thought, the relation whereby a psychological state intends or refers to an intended object” (Jacquette, 2004).

Mathematician Edmund Husserl developed Brentano’s idea even further. Transcendental Phenomenology draws heavily from works of Husserl. Husserl included the idea that the object of intention may or may not exist. That is, the object of intention may be imaginary (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl and his followers believed that phenomena occur within the individual’s consciousness and should be studied and researched (Spiegelberg, 1990). Husserl believed that any phenomenon was the starting point of a science and “seeks valid determinations that are open to anyone to verify” (Moustakas, 1994, p.26). He was concerned with finding the meanings and essences of knowledge. Husserl asserted that, “Essence provides on the one side a knowledge of the essential nature of the Real, on the other, in respect of the domain left over, knowledge of the essential nature of the non-real” (1931, p.45).

This concept of intentionality is central to transcendental phenomenology. “Intentionality refers to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related” (Moustakas, 1994, p.28). Husserl (1931) explained further that an individual’s past experiences and feelings were important factors included in the comprehension of consciousness. For example, a student receives a bad report card. The report card is the matter. The report card is also perceived intentionally in the consciousness. The matter allows the report card to discern itself as an object
rather than simply exist in the consciousness. Husserl included the idea that the object of intention may or may not exist. That is, the object of intention may be imaginary (Moustakas, 1994).

Another key concept in transcendental phenomenology is the concept of “ideation” (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 80). Ideation occurs when an individual’s experience enters the consciousness and then has meanings and essences attached to it based on the individual’s intuition and self-reflection. So, now the experience has a meaning, whether new or existing, and the individual’s knowledge is expanded. There is still a relationship between between the actual worldly experience, a product of learning, and the conscious awareness, absolute reality (Moustakas, 1994).

The third key concept of transcendental phenomenology is the concept of intuition. Husserl based some of his ideas of intuition on the writings of Frenchman Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650, a French philosopher, mathematician, scientist, and writer. Descartes is famous for his quote, “Cogito ergo sum,” or in English, "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes, 1977). Husserl and Descartes both believed that humans were intuitive thinking beings. In describing Husserl’s idea of intuition, Moustakas writes, “As I come to know this thing before me, I also come to know myself as the being who intuits, reflects, judges, and understands” (1994, p. 32).

The researcher’s theoretical framework was modeled on transcendental phenomenology. In particular, the researcher utilized procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994). In his procedures, Moustakas (1994) states what phenomenon will be studied, grouping an individual’s experiences, and collecting information from several people who have experienced the same phenomenon. After this information was collected, the researcher separated the information into
themes. These themes helped the researcher develop a textural description and a structural description that developed into the essence of the experience.

This researcher concentrated her research on what alternative high school students see as barriers to education and what alternative high schools do to keep students in school. Since the fundamental purpose of phenomenology is to find the common ground of individual phenomena, this type of qualitative research was well suited to serve as a framework. The rationale behind phenomenology is that individual occurrences, as they relate to a specific phenomenon, can be projected into an explanation for the collective essence.

The researcher identified the phenomenon as that of at-risk alternative high school students. The researcher collected data from these students on what they saw as barriers to education and what they think schools can do to keep students in school. After the interviews were completed and coded, the researcher developed a description of the collective essence of what that experience was like for the collective students.

The researcher chose to use the transcendental phenomenological research method because she wanted to find out the perspective of the alternative high school student. The researcher wanted to find the common experiences and meanings these students use to describe what they see as barriers to education. Van Manen (1990, p.177) calls this to “grasp the very nature of the thing.” Moustakas (1994) writes about how the researcher gathers information from the people he is researching. From these human experiences, common phenomena start to appear. The researcher then develops a composite description of this experience. From this phenomenon, the researcher can then develop theories about the phenomena on a universal level.
Site Location

This researcher used a site location that has an alternative high school that has been operating for the past six years. This alternative high school serves a school district which has a mixture of students from various socio economic backgrounds, and ethnicities. The researcher used this site because it met the selection criteria of: (1) being an established alternative high school serving at-risk teenagers; (2) serves students from various ethnic and socio economic groups; (3) it had a principal and superintendent willing for the study to be conducted at the school; and (4) it was accessible the researcher.

All students were identified as at-risk, according to the Certificate of Eligibility, as defined by the federal government, as well as the state in which the district resides. The Certificate of Eligibility (Ohio Department of Education, 2009) states that a student is considered to be at risk for graduating from high school if they qualify for any of the following:

- scores below the 25th percentile on a standardized achievement or aptitude test;
- has a current secondary school GPA that is below 2.0 on a 4.0 scale;
- student participates in a Free and/or Reduced Lunch Program; and
- student has math, reading, or writing deficiencies below grade level.

The high school principal and superintendent pledged their cooperation with the researcher.

The alternative high school was located in a moderate sized school district that lies outside of a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. The school district serves approximately 10,000 students from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. As mentioned earlier, the students came from varied economic and ethnic backgrounds. All students were identified by the government as being at-risk to graduate from high school. The school served approximately 85 at
risk high school students. The principal told the researcher that approximately 18% of the students are African American, and 64% of students are male and 36% are female. Approximately 11% of the females students are pregnant and approximately 75% of the students come from a one parent home. A little more than 50% of the students qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. In addition, about 90% of the parents are not high school graduates. This information is consistent with literature on at-risk students.

The high school, which will be called Brennan Alternative High School, is an alternative high school which operates two sessions of classes per school day. The first session of students attends school from 7:30 until10:45AM, and then students go out to jobs and work. The second session operates from 11:15 AM until 2:30 PM, and then these students also go out and work at a job. Each session serves approximately 40 students. Brennan High School is a school of choice for high school students in the school district. Students can attend for just one semester or they can attend their whole high school career. Although students move from classroom to classroom, the students receive their academic instruction via an online curriculum that their school district operates. The teachers at Brennan Alternative High School grade the students’ online academic work and work one-on-one with students in a blended classroom environment. The school services ninth through twelfth graders. Each student is on an Individualized Learning Plan that is set up to meet the individual student’s needs. Therefore, a classroom teacher can have a classroom full of students, yet each student can be studying a different class. The teacher is there to tutor and work with individual students when the need arises.

Brennan Alternative High School receives state funding through a federal program called Work Experience and Career Exploration Program (WECEP). The state calls the same program Career Based Intervention Program (CBI). This designation allows the school to provide
weighted funding for the at-risk students. Since the school is funded through the WECEP/CBI funds, students must be taught a Career Based Intervention class. This WECEP/CBI curriculum focuses on school to work skills for the students, in addition to allowing time for academic intervention. The school to work curriculum focuses on college readiness skills and work related skills. Students typically utilize the electronic Kuder Career System which helps the students with career exploration, work skills, and resume' building skills. College readiness skills focus on getting ready for the college entrance exams, completing college applications, and writing college essays. Some students can earn further elective credit by earning work credit or through service learning. Therefore, all students at Brennan Alternative High School must take CBI classes. These classes are taught by CBI certified academic instructors.

At Brennan Alternative High School, part of the CBI curriculum involves the teaching of social emotional skills. All students must partake in this program. The purpose of the social emotional instruction is to help students mature in their emotional intelligence. The teaching of this part of the curriculum also teaches and establishes the foundation for the discipline policy of the school. Students participate in role playing, active learning, and self actualization instruction to help students succeed in their social abilities, as well as academic achievement.

**Entry and Role Negotiation**

After explaining the purpose and procedures for the research, permission was obtained from the superintendent and the principal to do research at Brennan Alternative High School. The researcher purposely chose not to do research at the alternative high school where she is serving as principal. The reason for this decision was that the researcher felt that students at her school would not be as open and honest with responses, as they would be with a researcher they
did not know. Therefore, the researcher chose to do research at Brennan Alternative High School for several reasons. First of all, all students at Brennan Alternative High School have been identified by both state and federal criteria as being at-risk. As mentioned earlier, both state and federal guidelines utilize the Certificate of Eligibility criteria which identify students as being at risk for not graduating from high school.

Once approval was received from the University of Cincinnati’s Institutional Review Board, data collection began. As mentioned earlier, permission had been granted from the superintendent and the principal to do research at Brennan Alternative High School. The researcher conducted her interviews in the winter of 2010 at Brennan Alternative High School. Before the research began, the researcher spoke to students at Brennan Alternative High School explaining her research and the purpose of the interviews. Because the researcher did not want the students to feel coerced to participate in her research study, the teachers and administrators were not present. The researcher passed out the permission, consent, and assent forms to interested students. Students who were interested in participating in the study returned appropriate forms to the school’s social worker. Teachers and administrators at Brennan Alternative High School did not know who returned permission slips. Once appropriate forms were collected, the researcher began her interviews. The interviews took place utilizing the theoretical framework of transcendental phenomenology, the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews in the winter of 2010 over a period of one week. The interviews were conducted in a small private room at Brennan Alternative High School. All interviews were recorded and then were transcribed into written word. The researcher then entered the transcriptions into the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System (2008).
Validity

It is important for a researcher to establish both internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to the accuracy of the findings in a research study. That is, the findings must be credible and accurate representations of the phenomena (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Internal validity can be assured by establishing proper research sites, appropriate participants, thick descriptions, and information rich participant responses (Patton, 2002).

To insure internal validity, the researcher interviewed high school students who were determined to be at-risk for not graduating from high school according to both state and federal criteria. All participants were high school students who attended an alternative high school. This alternative high school is a public high school that has been in operation consistently for the past six years.

In addition to recording the students during the interview, the researcher also took descriptive notes on her observations during the interview to develop substantial descriptions and information.

External validity refers to the ability of the research study to be transferable and applicable to similar situations. That is, can the conclusions of the study be transferred to other contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994)? This is accomplished when the research findings help to make sense of other situations.

To insure external validity, the researcher used a site which has been serving at-risk students for several years. In addition, the researcher chose a site that has been an established public alternative school for several years. Since the researcher interviewed at-risk students at an
alternative school, the applicability to transfer the findings to real world similar situations is established and valid.

**Reliability**

In addition to validity, it is important for the researcher to establish both internal and external reliability. Internal reliability can be established when the findings are consistent and dependable. That is, reasonable and stable findings can be scrutinized from the situation (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

External reliability refers to the objectivity and neutrality of the research study. That is, the research findings can be validated by the research participants, outside sources, and other researchers.

As mentioned earlier, all participants were identified as being at-risk to graduate from high school, according to both state and federal guidelines. In addition, all participants attended an established public alternative school. At the end of the interview, the researcher summed up the participating students’ perspective and asked for feedback from the student. This was utilized to insure external reliability. In addition, the researcher also validated the findings through scholarly outside sources.

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher respected and maintained confidentiality throughout the entire research study process. The researcher explained to all classes about the study and the steps she took to insure confidentiality. Permission, assent, and consent forms also explained the steps taken to
insure confidentiality. Teachers and administrators were not present during the presentation or interviews. The names of participants were not shared with the teachers and administrators.

Students were assigned pseudonyms to assure their privacy. The records of this study are private and confidential. The researcher has written about what she discovered from this study but the real names were not used. The information that was gathered will stay confidential unless the researcher has to reveal it based on the law (for example: mandatory reporting of child abuse or immediate danger to children). All notes, audiotapes, and records are being kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed when the study is over. Permission, assent, and consent forms are being stored in a secure place for three years after the end of the study and then will be destroyed.

Exit Strategy

When the time came for the researcher to exit her role as researcher, she spoke to each of the participants. She thanked the students for their participation and asked them if they had any questions. In addition, the researcher also asked the participating students if they would like a copy of her report when it was finished. The researcher thanked the school administrators for their help in aiding her in her research.

Identification of the Participants

As soon as the researcher received permission from the University of Cincinnati’s Institutional Review Board, she proceeded with her research. Since Brennan Alternative High School is an alternative high school, all students who attend this school are considered alternative high school students. And since all students have been identified to be at-risk by both the state and federal government, all students from that high school have had barriers to their
education, whether they are social, behavioral, or economical. Therefore, any student from the Brennan Alternative High school was considered to be an eligible research participant.

Students were made aware of the study when the researcher came into their Career Based Intervention class and talked to the students about the study. Interested students received appropriate permission, consent, and assent forms. Students were told that returning the form(s) does not necessarily mean they would participants in the research study. Students were instructed to return the forms to the social worker. If the student was 18 years old or older, the social worker confirmed this through school records. The social worker contacted the researcher and the researcher retrieved the forms. Ten students agreed to participate in the study; they were in grades 9 through 12. Seven students were female and three students were male. The participants ranged in age from 14 years old to 18 years old. Three of the participants were African-American, one participant was bi-racial, one student was Hispanic, and the rest of the participants were white. Within one school week, the researcher conducted the interviews with the participants.

**Conceptual Framework of the Researcher**

The researcher has worked with at-risk students her whole educational career of twentytwo years. The researcher taught for eight years at an inner city school in a large metropolitan area. From there the researcher taught in a suburban school, but taught in the school program for at-risk students. For the past nine years, the researcher has worked at an alternative high school. The last seven of those years, the researcher has served as principal of that particular alternative high school.
The researcher has always been amazed at the myriad of challenges and barriers that at-risk students face every day. She has noticed how some students are able to overcome these barriers, while others are not. The researcher has often thought that sometimes the school itself was the barrier to a student receiving an education. This was often the case when the researcher had a student who had to work long hours in order to help support his family, or when a teenage mother could not afford child care so that she could come to school to finish her education.

The researcher belongs to several national professional organizations and often attends conferences and seminars that focus on at-risk students and on alternative schools. However, what the researcher often found lacking was the perspective of the student. What the researcher found was plenty of quantitative data about at risk students and why students were placed in an alternative school setting. There was information about the student’s socio-economic status, information about his race or ethnicity, and information about his family background. There were all kinds of information about the student’s attendance and in what grade his achievement scores began to drop. However, there was precious little information about what the student himself had to say about all of this. The researcher was always curious if it was one thing that precipitated a student dropping out of high school, or was it a process and combination of several things. And if it was a process, when did it start. What did the student perceive to be barriers to his education? Did the student’s perspective on barriers match the educational institution’s view of barriers to education?

Did anyone ever ask at-risk students what kept them in school? Did anyone ever ask these students what things specifically did a teacher do that kept them in school? And what about the schools themselves, did they do anything to help keep a student from dropping out. Could a school be organized differently to keep more students in school?
All of these questions have been swirling around in the researcher’s head for several years now. It seems that the available information only tells you about the student, but little comes from the voice of the student himself. The researcher felt that a researcher could talk to the students themselves about their perceptions. Then schools and teachers could do things that would help students stay in school.

As mentioned earlier, the researcher used the theoretical framework of transcendental phenomenology. The researcher attempted, as best she could, to set aside any beliefs or preconceived notions she might have had in order to hear the voice of the students. The researcher wanted to gain access to their thoughts, but more importantly to their perceptions about what they saw as barriers to education and about what alternative high schools can do to help students stay in school.

This approach helped the researcher find the common experiences and meanings that alternative high school students used to describe what they saw as barriers to education. From these human experiences, common phenomena start to appear. The researcher then developed a composite description of this experience. From this phenomenon, the researcher then developed theories about the phenomena on a universal level. The goal of the research was to be able to identify barriers to education and identify methods and means that help alternative high school students stay in school.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Following IRB guidelines, all students at Brennan Alternative High School were presented with the information about the research. The school principal had agreed to allow the researcher to speak to all students. The researcher spoke to students during the scheduled Career
Based Intervention class time. The researcher presented information to the students about the study. Teachers and administrators were not present. The researcher distributed permission (Appendix A), consent (Appendix B), and assent forms (Appendix C) to students. Willing participants returned these forms to the school’s social worker. The social worker called the researcher when the forms were turned in. Teachers and administrators did not know who had returned permission, consent, and assent forms.

Those who return signed forms were eligible to participate in the study. All participants were public high school students from Brennan Alternative High School. The researcher secured proper permission, consent, and assent forms. All participants were told that their privacy and confidentiality was secured the in one-on-one interviews. Names were not used in the research. Participants were only referred to by pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted confidentially in a private office located at the school.

**Interviews**

Three types of data were collected: interview data, observational data, and archival data. At the beginning of the interview, students were asked verbally for permission to record (audio) the confidential interview. Only one student told the researcher that he didn’t want to be audio recorded. So, the researcher took notes of the interview. If students agreed to an audio recording, then the researcher stated this verbally at the beginning of the interview, with the student verbally agreeing on tape. The researcher decided to record audio, and not video, due to her experience with at risk students. The researcher felt the audio recording would be less intrusive to students, thus allowing for more genuine responses. The researcher’s past experiences have
shown that at-risk students are concerned about their responses when a video recording device is used.

Most interviews lasted for approximately 50 minutes for each participating student. Students were asked twelve questions that focused on what alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school helped them to stay in school (Appendix D). At the end of each interview, the researcher read back to the student what he/she said to make sure the researcher was accurately recording their words.

While the interview was taking place, the researcher took observational field notes and wrote down her observations of each participant and his/her non-verbal and para-verbal reactions to the questions. These notes were recorded in minute increments so that the notes could be documented and aligned with the recorded interview. The researcher had the audio recordings transcribed into a written format.

The purpose of observational field notes was to achieve a textural description and to add detail and depth to the data. This was to help the researcher understand the setting better (Patton, 2002). The observation notes were aligned with the written transcription to add description to the interview. This helped to augment an additional layer of information for the researcher.

Archival data was collected to provide the researcher with information that could be observed. Some archival data provided information about events that took place before the interview. The transcribed interview, aligned observations, and archival data provided a deep and layered account of the students’ experiences.
Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher used the NVivo data collection system. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software program that helped the researcher organize and analyze unstructured and non-numerical information for a deeper level of analysis. By using the NVivo qualitative data analysis system, the researcher was able to identify themes and as Moustakas (1994) calls it, significant statements. These Significant Statements were quotes or whole sentences that offered some knowledge of how the participants experienced the events or phenomenon.

After examining the various themes, the researcher further classified the Significant Statements into Meaning Units. Meaning Units are simply a more definitive break down of the Significant Statements made by the participants about their life experiences. The thematic breakdown of Significant Statements into Meaning Units is what Moustakas (1994) called horizontalization or clusters of meaning.

The next step was the data analysis for Textural Description. Textural Description was used by the researcher to describe what the participants’ experienced. That is, what exactly happened, according to the individual? Moustakas (1994) suggests giving verbatim examples.

For the Structural Description, the researcher wrote about how the setting or context of the phenomenon affected the individual’s experience with the phenomenon. In essence, the researcher wrote how the phenomenon or experience happened.

The concluding aspect of data analysis was when the researcher took the information from the Textural Description and the Structural Description and wrote a Composite Description that represented the essence of the phenomenon. This essence centered on the common
experiences of the participants. Polkinghorne said, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (1989, p. 46). Then the researcher was able to identify and describe the alternative high school student’s view on what are the barriers to education and what alternative high schools can do to help students to stay in school.

Significance of the Study

Currently in the United States, the dropout rates hovers at around 10%. If you are a minority, male, or come from a low income family, then your chances of not graduating from high school are higher (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2009). Lack of a high school diploma takes its toll on the person economically, judicially, and sociologically (Belfield, 2007). The American Career and Technical Education Association has reported that today’s high school graduate would need a 22 composite score on the ACT to be able to function in today’s global workforce (Hyslop, 2008).

In today’s competitive economy, it has become essential for workers to earn a high school education and degree. The researcher hopes that the information gleamed from the student interviews can help schools utilize more effective strategies, methods, and structures to help students graduate from high school. It is the hope of the researcher that the students themselves can help lend their voice and point to strategies and information that can be used so that educators and communities can help all students earn their education and high school diploma.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the limited number of students that were interviewed and due to the constraints of studying one alternative school, the conclusions from this study can only be applied to this particular setting and the at-risk students that attended this alternative high school.
The study does provide information about the students’ perspective and does provide deeper and richer information into the students’ perceptions. However, it does not provide enough information to make general statements about at-risk students or alternative high schools.

Summary

The researcher chose to use qualitative methods for her study of what do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school. She based her research model on the concept of phenomenology which states that reality is based on the participants’ perception of reality. The researcher wanted to do an in-depth study to investigate the perspective of the student, rather than the perspective of others.

Interviews were conducted with ten students from a public alternative high school in the Midwest. Students were interviewed regarding their perspective on barriers to education and what schools can do to help them graduate. The students were interviewed separately and then their interviews were transcribed into written word. Observation field notes were also taken and corresponded with the written interview tapes.

The researcher used the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System (2008) to organize, classify, and analyze the data from the interviews. From this information, the researcher was able to identify common themes and common perspectives.
Chapter III
Presentation and Analysis of Data

This chapter is concerned about answering the questions: What do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school? This chapter presents the stories of the individual students who participated in the research study and cannot be generalized to the larger population of alternative high school students.

There has been much research completed about the high school dropout and the factors leading up to dropping out of high school. Socio economic status has been identified as a strong risk factor in predicting who will not graduate from high school (Swanson, 2008). Ethnicity and race have also been identified as factors compounding the risk of dropping out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). In addition, students’ gender factors into the equation of risk factors, with males having a higher dropout rate (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Teenage pregnancy and poor economic times often force high school students to take on adult job responsibilities (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

These outside factors often compound factors within the school and the school system, thus leading to a gradual disengagement from the educational process (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Research has been conducted to identify issues and circumstances that lead to a pathway of dropping out (Roderick, 1993). The hope of that research was to identify early warning signs that would allow school and community personnel to intervene and prevent students from dropping out of school.
However, investigators have cited the need to conduct more research on the at-risk students’ perception on what they consider to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school can help students stay in school (Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2002). The goal of the study was to see what alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students stay in school. The data analysis is presented here.

For the analysis of data, the researcher looked at three types of data: data collected from the interviews, field observation notes, and archival data. The type of data the researcher looked at was the data collected from the interviews. All interviews were recorded and then were transcribed into written word. The researcher then entered the transcriptions into the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System (2008). The interviews were introduced into the electronic system for qualitative breakdown. Once the transcription was loaded into the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System, the researcher then broke down the participating students’ words into related areas and themes. Using NVivo, the researcher was able to organize, classify, and analyze the large set of data from the interviews. The word areas were broken down into hierarchical areas called Significant Statements. This information was then sorted by the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System. Using the NVivo System, the researcher was able to examine the data relationships and analyze and link related information. The researcher utilized the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System to identify themes, and organized evidence into a Composite Description that expressed the common experience.

The second type of data the researcher looked at was the field observation notes taken while interviewing students. These field observation notes were closely aligned with students’ comments from the interviews. These field observations and personal notes helped the researcher get a multidimensional look at the students and their perspectives. It gave the researcher the
opportunity to align their words with their physical behavior in order to provide a Textural and Structural Description. The purpose was to enrich the description of the participants and the setting.

In addition, the third factor the researcher looked at was the archival data of Brennan Alternative High School. This data included examining the demographics of the school district, as well as the alternative high school. The researcher examined the student handbook, student calendars, staff calendars, students of the month, school newsletters, staff meeting agendas, and notes.

Data Analysis

Each participating student was interviewed in the privacy of a small auxiliary office at the school. The researcher reviewed with each student the goal and procedure for the study. Students were reminded that their identity would remain anonymous. The interview was audio recorded, with the students’ permission. In addition, at the end of the interview, the researcher summarized what the student said and asked for the students’ feedback. She did this in order to assure the validity of the interview. The data will be presented in two phases. First, data for each student will be presented. Second, data across all participants will be presented by emergent themes from the individual interviews.

Students. The researcher interviewed ten students at Brennan Alternative High School. Each student brought his/her own experiences and perceptions to the phenomenon of dropping out of high school and what can be done to help students stay in school.

Linn. Linn was the first student the researcher interviewed. She was a sixteen year old white, female student. She was tall and lean, and she smiled at the researcher as soon as she held
out her hand to introduce herself. Linn’s clothes were clean and neat, but were very tight. Her white T-shirt did not quite meet the top of her pants, thus leaving her midriff exposed. From reading the Student Handbook, the researcher knew this was against school dress code.

Linn was talkative and her interview lasted about 15 minutes longer than most of the other interviews. She spoke in a loud voice, and the volume startled the researcher at first. The further the researcher got into the interview, the more she realized that this volume of voice was apparently normal for Linn.

Linn told the researcher that she had not done well in school until this year. She told the researcher that no matter what high school she was attending, she always got caught up in issues with other girls, which she referred to as “girl drama.” She said she had matured and was now doing well. She liked Brennan Alternative High School and credited the staff with helping her to learn how to manage the “girl drama.” Linn told the researcher that she had been kicked out of her old school for “kicking some girl’s ass.” Linn said that she thought she was “dumb,” and therefore never tried in school. However, she felt that the teachers at Brennan Alternative High School made her realize that she wasn’t “dumb.” Linn answered all of the researcher’s questions and even asked the researcher if there was anything else she could do to help her.

Monique. Monique was the second student the researcher interviewed. She was 18 years old and a young African American woman. She was pregnant with her first child which she was due to deliver in six weeks. Even though she was seven and a half months pregnant, she was not wearing maternity clothes. She was wearing a T-shirt with the name of a rock band on the front of it. Her ill fitted T-shirt was pulled over her enlarged belly, but she was unable to pull it completely over her stomach. Her pants were fitted to just underneath her abdomen. Her
pregnant stomach was exposed most of the time. She told the researcher during the interview that she couldn’t afford maternity clothes. During the whole interview, Monique kept on trying to pull her T-shirt over her belly.

Monique was soft spoken and would often look down at the ground during the interview and play with her clothes. Although Monique was talkative, she made very little eye contact during the entire interview. Instead she looked down at the floor for most of the interview. The researcher often had to repeat the questions and clarify the questions for her, but she was cooperative and talkative in the interview. During the interview, her answers often reflected her concern to graduate, her current situation, and her concern for her future and the future of her baby.

Monique said she had always done average in school until her mom decided to move back to Alabama. Monique didn’t want to go to Alabama and so she stayed with her “dad.” Upon further questioning, the researcher found out that “dad” was actually her mother’s old boyfriend. Since Monique and her mother had lived with this man for about four years, Monique considered him her father. Monique said that once she became pregnant, things started to go downhill. The “baby’s daddy” broke up with her and she got fired from her job. She didn’t feel good most of the time and was worried that she wouldn’t finish school in time to graduate.

**Kat.** The third person the researcher interviewed was Kat. She was a 16 year old white girl. She was of medium build and her clothes were wrinkled. When Kat got close to the researcher, the clothes smelled stale and of cigarettes. Kat’s hair was brown and wavy and she had pulled it back into a pony tail behind her head. Kat came into the interview with a can of pop which she plopped down onto the desk in the interview room. She then leaned back, crossed her
legs, and put her hands on her hips. The first thing she said to the researcher was, “What do ya wanna know?” Kat told the researcher, “I’ve done everything, so what do ya wanna know?” The researcher told Kat that she wanted to get her perspective on why students dropped out of high school. The researcher then spent some time with Kat telling her more about the purpose of the research.

At the beginning of the interview, in response to the researcher’s questions, Kat would often ask, “Why ya wanna know?’ The researcher would again tell the purpose of the interview. Several times during the interview, Kat would look at the door and push at it to make sure it was closed. The researcher assured Kat that no one could hear what she was saying. If there were loud noises on the other side of the door, Kat would stop talking and listen to what was being said. At one point during the interview, she even opened up the door to see who was speaking loudly on the other side of the door. While interviewing her, the researcher found out that she had lived with several foster families and had been involved in the juvenile justice system several times. Kat had been arrested several times and had spent time in jail, as well as a halfway house for juveniles. She was currently living with a foster family that made her clean her room, do the dishes, and help around the house. According to Kat, this made her feel as if she was being used for “slave labor.”

_Kari._ The fourth student to be interviewed was Kari. Kari was a 16 year old African American girl. She was well groomed and very talkative. Her clothes were clean, pressed, and stylish. Her hair was well groomed and she had the front part of her hair dyed purple. Her clothes were also purple and she had on a lot of jewelry accessories which matched her hair and outfit.

Kari was attentive during the interview. She made eye contact during the whole interview and would often use her hands while she was talking. She smiled a lot during the interview and
asked the researcher why was she interested in finding out her opinion. She told the researcher how she had struggled in her previous school before coming to Brennan Alternative High School. And she had even struggled her first year at Brennan Alternative High School, but now she was doing very well and was almost caught up in her school work.

Kari was concerned about Monique and wanted to make sure that she could help her graduate. She said she felt bad for the pregnant girls because she felt it would be hard for them to graduate from school. She said she could find nothing bad to say about Brennan Alternative High School. She said she had attended another public school in the area and they had “nothing but bad people” going to school there.

**Zeke.** Zeke was a 17 year old white student. He was medium height and thin. His hair was about two inches long and he had the top part of it spiked up to a point in the middle, which he called a “fauxhawk.” Zeke was dressed in gray and white clothes, with a pink satchel.

Zeke said he had come to Brennan Alternative High School because he was behind in credits. During the interview, Zeke told the researcher that not only had he struggled with academics, but also with the fact that he was gay and was often made fun of in the traditional school. Zeke told the researcher that he was proud of who he was and he wanted to help others feel comfortable with who they really are. He told the researcher that he really liked the alternative high school and wanted to make sure that his voice was heard. He was very talkative during the interview and was very cooperative.

Throughout the interview, Zeke would ask the researcher, “Do you know what I mean?” With this the researcher would repeat to Zeke what he had said. This seemed to affirm to Zeke that the researcher did indeed understand what he was saying. Zeke said he was very interested
in the research because he felt that it was important for students’ voices to be heard, especially gay students.

**Wint.** Wint was a 15 year old African American male student. He was about 6 feet tall and of medium build. He was dressed in blue jeans and a sweatshirt with a hood. He was very polite and held his hand out first to introduce himself. Wint spoke to the researcher and kept good eye contact, but a person of few words. During the interview, Wint would often adjust his pants legs to go over his boots and straighten out his clothing.

Although Wint was very cooperative and did answer my questions, he often had to be probed to elaborate on his answers. The interview with Wint was shorter than the other interviews. He would often tell the researcher, “That’s all I have to say about that.”

**James.** James was the next young man the researcher interviewed. James was a 16 year old bi-racial male. He was shorter than most 16 year old boys, but was very friendly and cooperative. James was about 5 feet four inches tall and he was a little on the chubby side. He wore his brown hair trimmed short to his head and he was freckled faced. He smiled during the whole interview, but was fidgety and restless.

When the researcher would ask James a question, he would ask the researcher to clarify the question before he answered it. He said he wanted to clarify the question before he answered it, telling the researcher that he wanted to make sure he gave his opinion. He would always think for a while before he actually answered the question. His answers were usually short and the researcher often had to ask him to elaborate, but James was a student of few words.

**Annie.** The next student that was interviewed was Annie. Annie was a 17 year old white girl. Annie was about 5 feet four inches tall and had an athletic build to her. She had short brown
hair which was somewhat hidden under the hood of her sweatshirt. She was wearing athletic sweatpants and a matching “hoodie” with the name of her home school inscribed on it.

While the researcher was interviewing Annie, she revealed the fact that she had been diagnosed with some mental health issues and was currently on medication. The researcher assured her that her identity would remain anonymous. Annie told the researcher that she didn’t care if anyone knew what she said. She just didn’t want anyone to know about her mental health issues. The researcher assured her that her identity and diagnosis would remain anonymous.

Annie was currently living at home, but had been a runaway in the past. She said that she planned on moving out of her house as soon as she turned 18 years old. She said that she wanted to complete her education, so she still planned on attending Brennan Alternative High School after she moved.

_Brett._ Brett was a 14 year old white girl who had never lived with her biological mother. Brett was short and petite in stature. She was soft spoken and polite. She told the researcher that she had lived with various relatives throughout her life, but never with her biological mother. Brett said that both of her parents were drug addicts and that her father had died about five years ago from a drug overdose. She was very open about the number of people with whom she had lived and how they were related to her. She was pleasant to speak with and appeared friendly and open.

During her lifetime, Brett had lived with her mother’s parents, her father’s mother, and two aunts. However, Brett told the researcher that of all the relatives she lived with, she liked living with her grandparents (on her mother’s side) the most. Brett told the researcher that she was currently living with them. She was the only one living with her grandparents and that there
was very little “drama” at their house. However, she was concerned because her grandparents 
had recently told her that their house was being foreclosed upon and that Brett would have to 
move in with a relative. Brett was very concerned about this because, depending upon which 
family member she moved in with, she might be moving out of the school district and therefore 
be ineligible to attend Brennan Alternative High School.

**Neisha.** The last interview the researcher conducted was with an 18 year old Hispanic 
student. Her name was Neisha. Neisha was short, stocky, and had long thick black hair. She wore 
jeans and a shirt that had “Obama” imprinted on it. Neisha introduced herself immediately to the 
researcher and told the researcher that she just wanted to graduate. She was very talkative and 
often the researcher would have to steer Neisha back to the research questions.

During the interview, Neisha would often veer into talking about other people and things 
that were not related to the research topic. The researcher had to steer Neisha’s conversation 
back into the direction of the research questions. At times, Neisha seemed exasperated with the 
researcher because she told the researcher that she knew everything about everybody. The 
researcher had to focus Neisha on what Neisha’s perspective was.

By the end of the interview, Neisha said she understood and was joking with the 
researcher and saying, “O.K., I get it now. You don’t want me talking ‘bout nobody’s business.” 
The researcher told her she could talk about their business, but that they needed to stay on the 
topic.

**Emergent Themes**

Before the emergent themes are presented, there are two concepts that the researcher 
would like to present. The two concepts are the participants’ definition and context of “home”
and “family.” Home, was defined by participants to include immediate blood relatives, extended family, close friends, and other people to whom the participants felt an emotional or social connection. Some participants mentioned that extended family often lived within the same dwelling place as the participant. In addition, home also encompassed the dwelling place of other family members, since the participants would often spend significant amounts of time there, depending upon financial and social situations within the nuclear and extended family. And lastly, home also included the dwelling of non-biologically related people that were still called family members. This could be a close family friend who was called an aunt, uncle, or cousin. Therefore, a mother’s boyfriend might be called “Dad,” even though he was not legally recognized as a step-father. This was the case, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation, with Monique. Monique told the researcher she was staying with her “Dad.” “Dad” turned out to be her mother’s old boyfriend to whom she felt a close parental type of bond. Another participant, Linn, referred to her sister’s boyfriend as her brother-in-law. The researcher asked Linn if this man was legally her brother-in-law. Linn told the researcher no, but that her sister had children with this man, so Linn considered him to be a brother-in-law.

Therefore, the term “family” was used more in the social and emotional context, rather than in the legal context. So, for the purpose of this dissertation, the term “home” and “family” will be used in the broader social-emotional framework, rather than in the legal sense.

A little more than half of the students who attended Brennan Alternative High School were eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program. Eligibility in this program is defined according to lower socio economic status. Defining family in terms of the social emotional connection is not uncommon in families who have lower socio economic status (Cowan & Hetherington, 1991). Part of this may be due to the fact that some of the relationships that do
result in blood relatives are sometimes not accompanied by legal paperwork. As in Linn’s
sister’s case, the mother had children without marrying the father. She may or may not have put
the father’s name down on the legal birth certificate document. According to Bianchi and
Robinson (2006), this was often the case when low income mothers received public assistance
aid if the father was not identified. So, relationships were often defined by blood or word of
mouth, rather than defined legally. The notion of defining family in the social emotional
framework has been around for a long time and is particularly used by adolescents as they
struggle to find their identity within the nuclear family, extended family, friends, and social
settings (Holmbeck, 1996).

This social-emotional connection caused difficulties with families when it came to
dealing with situations at school or with the legal system. Because school districts and the justice
system use the legal definition of family, the participant’s social-emotional “family” was often
interrupted. That is, the participant’s definition and sense of “family” did not match the legal
system’s definition of family. So when there were disputes over student enrollment, juvenile
delinquency, etc., the definitive definition used was the legal definition. Since this did not match
the participant’s working definition of “family”, the participant was often displaced in order to
align itself with the legal definition of family.

This legal definition of family turned out to be a problem for Kat. Kat had run away from
home and had been living with “family.” Her “family” was even driving her to school and
picking her up each day. Her “family” was actually her boyfriend and his mother, who also
happened to live outside of the school district’s boundaries. Kat’s mom reported her as a
runaway and she was forced into a foster family that lived within the school district.
A similar issue was brought up by one of the teachers at a Brennan Alternative High School Staff Meeting. One of the teachers stated that she knew for a fact that one of their students was no longer living within the school district. Rather, the student was living with “family” in the bordering school district. The staff discussed the boy’s recent progress at school and his current well being. The staff decided that the student was doing much better living with his social-emotional “family” than he did when he lived with his biological family. Therefore, the principal said he wasn’t going to pursue the matter of residency. The principal said he knew he was doing what was best for the student.

Using the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System (2008), the researcher was able to identify recurring themes and insights into students’ perspectives. The emergent themes are presented below.

**Why students thought about dropping out of high school.** When students were asked if they had ever thought about dropping out of high school, nine out of ten interviewed students reported that they had indeed thought about dropping out of school at some point in their school career. The reason most often cited was issues related to their home life. As a matter of fact, six out of the eight students cited home problems as the main reason for considering dropping out of school. The vernacular that the students commonly used for issues at home was “drama” at home. This is apparently an accepted use of the term because the researcher noticed that staff members also used the same term to describe similar situations.

The most common home issue students spoke about involved not getting along with their parents. Annie told the researcher that she thought her home life was not normal. She said, “I
think home life definitely is a huge thing. If my home was normal, obviously I wouldn’t be here.”

Students felt that their parents had so much drama in their own lives that it was difficult for them to act as parents. Linn talked about her parents and home life in this way:

My parents have too much drama in their own life. They fight all night and keep me up and then I come to school and want to sleep. My parents try to set restrictions on me and I’m like screw it. They act like they care, but I do what I want. I’m on my own a lot. What can they say?

This statement was somewhat in contrast to another statement that Linn made, “I don’t think it’s a parent trying to stop their kids from going to school. I feel like maybe sometimes parents don’t push their kids as hard as they should.”

Another student, Monique, also felt her home life contributed significantly to her thoughts about dropping out of high school. Monique, who was pregnant, felt that home life was more a factor in thinking about dropping out, than being pregnant. She expressed home issues by telling the researcher:

It was more my parents than anything. My parents were always fighting over money. My dad…well…he’s not really my dad. He’s my mom’s boyfriend. I don’t know my real dad. My mom had been with this guy for about four years. But I really like him. He was good to me, so I think of him as my dad. It’s just that I didn’t like it when they argued. My dad has been out of work for a while now. He got fired because of his drinking. My mom wanted to move back down south, but my dad didn’t want to. We had lived there before and moved around a
lot. I was behind in school, but they kept on passing me until I got to high school. Then I was lost. Up here, well, I like it here. But, my mom, well she finally moved back to Alabama and my dad keeps on looking for work here. I am trying to find a job to try and help my dad with some of the bills and rent. But it’s getting harder and harder for me right now because I’m pregnant. Because of all the drama at home and all that stuff made me want to drop out and get my GED, but I didn’t.

Another student, Kat, had faced major issues at home. She told the researcher that she had been put in foster homes and had served time in Juvenile Detention for consistently running away from home. Kat, who was currently in a foster home, said she had thought about dropping out of high school because:

I have a lot more stress in like my family life. So, I was just like, maybe if I dropped out of school I wouldn’t be so stressed out. It was just me constantly getting in trouble with the law. So I would always be in and out of JDC and my mom just being fed up. So always being pressured to do something like, do your work or clean this or clean that. Usually when something is going right in my life, I usually tend to mess it up by getting in trouble with the law. I just get so clogged up with the stuff at home that I just leave. And I get myself into trouble and I do something while I’m on the run, like something stupid, like random things because I’m bored. My mom don’t care what I do, until the police pick me up. Then she acts like she cares, but she don’t.
There are many factors that contribute to issues at home. For Kat, it was babysitting her little sister so that her mother could go out and work two jobs to support the family. Kat divulged to the researcher that before she was in the foster home, she “constantly watched my baby sister. I had her from when I got home from school, up until my mom got home from work late at night. She was pretty much my own child.” Kat told the researcher she would get home from school at around 11 AM and would get her little sister from a neighbor who babysat the sister. Kat’s mom worked two jobs and so she was pretty much gone from about 7:30 in the morning until about 11:30 at night. When the researcher asked Kat if she had any other responsibilities while at her house, Kat told her:

Well, I didn’t do my own laundry. I didn’t really do dishes or nothing. I helped a little bit, clean and stuff, but it was just mostly the baby. I tried to do work at home. She constantly climbed on me, so it was kind of hard to focus on the kid and see if she’s okay and do my school work. So I just didn’t do my school work. Anyway, it don’t matter anymore. I ran away from home and now I am with some crap foster family.

Another student, James, also mentioned that home issues were the main reason that he thought about dropping out of high school. He said, “My mother, my parents, when they are fighting like bad and they get distracted from me. Like one might leave for a while. They will just think like I don’t need to go to school. Why would they?” He shared that sometimes they are up late fighting and so don’t arise early enough the next morning to get him up for school, or sometimes, “they just forget.”
Brett shared with the researcher her frustration with living with various relatives over the course of her 14 years. Although she was a student who had never gotten into trouble with the law or fought that much with relatives, she had been sent to live with relative to relative over the course of her fourteen years. She said that often she would have to switch schools in the middle of the year and this would make her fall behind. She even said that sometimes she would be in three different schools in one school year because whoever she was living with didn’t have custody of her. She said:

Like I’ve had--- just like my--- I can’t explain it. In my home life, I’ve had problems with my aunts and my dad’s mom. Like what’s it called when someone owns you? What is it? Guardianship? I want my grandparents to own me.

The second most common reason the interviewed students gave for thinking about dropping out of high school was what was often referred to as “school drama.” As mentioned earlier, the term “drama” was an idiom for issues.

Wint shared with the researcher how the school drama can interfere with students wanting to come to school. He told the researcher that:

Home drama is more of an issue than school issues because when you go home, your school drama is over. But home drama is always there. Like I know a lot of people here don’t like each other. If they are in the same room, maybe one of them feels like they don’t need to come to school.

When referring to school drama, several students delineated that school drama mostly involved the female sex, thus referring to it as “girl drama.” Kari described the “girl drama” this way:
Girl on girl. I hate you. He said, she said kind of stuff. Like, you know, I don’t like the way you are looking at me kind of stuff. And so I am going to text you and everybody else and tell them you look stupid or that you’re boyfriend’s a douche. You know that kind of stuff.

Linn also cited issues at school as being a reason why she thought about dropping out of high school. In particular, Linn cited “girl drama” as a reason. She put it this way, “Definitely girl drama. You know, just like girls become girls arguing, gossip, that kind of stuff. Also boys, clothes, just silly stuff.”

Kat also talked about the drama at school and said it revolved around, “He said, she said, and constantly trying to fight females over boys.” In addition to the “girl drama,” Monique also felt that anger issues and student behavior contributed to other types of school drama or issues. Monique said “some kids have like anger problems. They go off on other people and cause drama.”

Brett, the student who had lived with various relatives, shared that she had been bullied at many of the different schools she attended. She talked about issues at school that revolved around being bullied. She shared:

I’ve actually dealt with a lot of bullies my whole school career, and just realize that you have to ignore them. Like you just have to kind of pick your battles and the people that just keep going at you, like bullies and stuff, you just got to not feed into them. You just got to ignore those and keep them off to the side.
Brett also talked about how some of the students at the school wanted her to “run the streets” at night. She said she felt peer pressure to do this and was “bullied” at school when she didn’t do this.

Linn echoed some of what Brett said by telling the researcher that, “When certain girls get picked on, they think I don’t want to go back to school, and then they stop because they get picked on. The same with guys.”

The third most cited reason for students thinking about dropping out of high school was that students thought they were too far behind in school and they struggled with the material. Kat, who struggled with family issues, also struggled with the educational material. She put it this way, “School is kind of hard for me because I’m a slower learner than a lot of people in my family.”

During her interview, Kari told the researcher that she thought about dropping out in her freshmen and sophomore year because:

I was so far behind. I really didn’t want to be in school. I didn’t do anything, so all of my grades were really bad and I didn’t do anything about it. I was so far behind, I honestly felt like school was pointless. It never helped me.

Annie also thought about dropping out of high school “because I was just really far behind in school and I didn’t know if I could catch up and graduate on time.” Neisha shared that “sometimes I just didn’t want to go. I just didn’t have the momentum to come to school every day.”
Another student, Zeke, also stated that he thought about dropping out of high school because he was so far behind. He said, “I honestly felt like school was pointless. It never helped me and I was behind too far. I was overwhelmed and immature.”

Being pregnant was also a consideration for dropping out of high school. Monique, who was seven and a half months pregnant, shared her concerns:

In my case, yeah, being pregnant, having a kid young. It’s a problem. Like I don’t know who is going to watch my baby when I try to go back to school. I guess my dad can if he doesn’t have a job by then.

Some students thought about dropping out of school in order to work and help the family financially. Monique shared that before she got fired from her job, “I was working to try and help my dad with the bills and rent.” Kat disclosed to the researcher that she also helped out with bills at home. She said, “So I was just like maybe, if I dropped out of school, I could help a lot more.”

Neisha said one of the reasons she thought about dropping out was because she didn’t like her old (traditional) school. She said, “I never got the help I needed. I probably don’t even remember any of my teachers’ names to be honest with you. They don’t care. If you don’t do something, you don’t do something. They don’t care.”

Some students found school too boring, such as Linn, “Yeah, I hated school. I just---I don’t know. I felt like the teachers were just so stiff. They were so stiff and it’s just like their way of fun was watching a science video, like a Bill Ney video.”
Why friends thought about dropping out of high school. All of the students interviewed had friends who had already dropped out of high school or who had thought about dropping out of high school. The interviewed students were much more talkative when it came to talking about other students dropping out of high school. The researcher thought that perhaps it was easier for students to talk about other people, rather than talk about themselves, especially when it came to the participant of dropping out of high school.

The reasons cited for friends thinking about dropping out of high school somewhat paralleled the reasons students gave themselves when thinking about dropping out. The first and foremost reason cited revolved around issues at the students’ homes and their home life.

Annie said, “Home life definitely is a huge thing and then even just the social aspect of school can be hindering to people who don’t fit in with the typical crowd.” Linn spoke to the researcher about a friend of hers:

She has a lot of trouble at home. You know, her mom and dad drink too much.
And I don’t know, just when you have that kind of stress at home, you don’t want to go to school you know, because I know what it feels like to have a lot of stress from home. I want to be excused. I don’t like to be around people. Like to be by myself and calm down myself.

Monique said she thought that students who dropped out “usually had things going on at home that I noticed. Most people were having trouble with family, you know just drama.” With regard to having friends who dropped out, Brett said:

I know a couple of people and I have had a couple of friends that wanted to. One of my friends is thinking of dropping out of high school now because he has a lot
of situations going on with his family and he doesn’t currently have a place to live. Like his dad kicked him out and he’s just trying to help himself get an apartment. And he says he might go back to school and get his GED after he gets situated.

Kari also knew of people who had dropped out of high school, due to issues at home. She told the researcher:

I have one of my friends that dropped out of school. I know for a fact that she dropped out because she hated school so much. She said it was like a day care for parents. A day care for the kids for that day.

The researcher asked Kari if the friends had any issues at home. Kari said:

Yeah, she didn’t get along with her family very much. She felt like school was a way for them to get rid of her when she tried to talk to them and be a family and stuff. Her dad got married to someone else who had three kids and she felt like her dad cared more about them than her. And she felt like the maid of the house, so she hated being at home, but she hated being at school.

One of the challenges related to family issues was the matter of students having to work to help support the family unit. Linn told the researcher, “The economy is horrible right now, so people are losing their jobs, getting transferred to jobs, losing money. So I have a friend who pays for the groceries for his mom.” Kat told the researcher that, “I know someone who works to pay the rent for his mom.” When further probed, she said her friend was 18 years old and was still attending school, even though it was difficult to do so.
Pregnancy was an issue that half of the participants brought up as causing friends to think about dropping out of high school. Some students pointed out the difficulty of securing a babysitter while a student was at school. Neisha pointed out that, “Once you become a parent, that is something you have to deal with for life, because you can’t just give them up like you can give drugs up.” Monique, who is pregnant, said, “My mom dropped out of high school because she was pregnant. She dropped out because she didn’t have any friends when she was pregnant in high school.”

Some of the reasons cited for thinking about dropping out of high school revolved around other issues. Annie stated that some of her friends “wanted to just have like a job or were just bored in school and got into something they shouldn’t be doing and thought those were better things to be doing than sitting at school.”

Kat said that several of her friends had already dropped out of school because they didn’t see the value of school. When the researcher asked her why, Kat said:

They just didn’t care. Two friends have like two jobs each and stuff. And I was like I’d rather go to school than work two jobs and not ever sleep. But they say it’s not really worth it because in the end they will still have a job.

The researcher asked Kat how far along her friends were when they dropped out and she said “one of my friends was in 11th and one of my other friends was in his last month in senior year.”

Linn said that some of her friends dropped out because “they just think it’s an easy way out. They get lazy. They think, Oh, I’m 18. I’m just going to take a couple of days off, and a couple days turn into a couple months.” Linn said that one of her friends:
Was really close to graduating and then just stopped going. He just got lazy and he didn’t care. He was just, Oh, I’ll finish it later, or next year. I’ll go back there and finish it, you know. I know he could have done the work. He just thought he could go back the next year and finish it, but he didn’t. It’s all about laziness. They think I’m going to take today off, and then next week you take two days off and then that starts turning into weeks. And then you say, I’m going back next week and then you don’t. And then it turns into months and then you don’t and you just stop going. You just get lazy. You just feel like you have better things to do. Some people just want to work full time, but it’s like fast foods, you can only do that for so long. Some people might have to work and some are like, oh well, this is easier than school.

When the researcher asked Linn if the work was too hard for them, she replied, “No, all of them could do the work. They just don’t want to. They just think ‘Oh, I’m 18.’ I can go back to school. But it’s not like that.”

Neisha said some of her friends just got into the “wrong crowds.” She pointed out that “some people have friends that have already dropped out and they probably see what they are doing and they think it’s okay if they do it and the same outcome will come out for them.”

Monique added that she knew some people, from her old job that had dropped out of school. “They said they didn’t like school. They said they got so far behind there was no way of making it up.”
Brett shared that some of her friends were:

Dropping out because they are bored with school or they are failing a lot of classes and just don’t want to go to school no more. Or they just have a lot of tardies and they just don’t want to go no more. And a lot of times I find that usually people that want to drop out, it has a lot to do with drugs or their grades. Some kids don’t want to go to school anymore. They don’t want to deal with it. Like it’s their attitude and stuff going on.

James talked about his brother who had dropped out of high school several years ago. “He was a bad kid. He had a lot of issues, drugs, jail, unwillingness to go to school.” He shared with the researcher that his brother is still in jail.

What do you think are barriers to education. The next area the researcher investigated was the students’ perspective on what they thought were their barriers to education. A lot of the barriers that students spoke about were some of the same reasons cited as being the basis why students thought about dropping out of high school.

The most common obstacle students cited as being a barrier for them to finish their education was their home life, their former traditional school, and issues with other students who attended the same school.

Annie stated that her home life has been the biggest barrier to her education. In addition to that, she also stated that the social aspect of school can be hindering for people who “don’t fit in with the typical crowd.” She also cited peer pressure as being a barrier because she “felt pressure to drop out when my friends are dropping out.”
Linn said she felt, “My parents should be more involved in my life. Maybe if they were like, get your homework done, then I would do it.” She also cited her laziness as being a barrier, “It was my laziness, like I was not dedicated. I was a freshman, so I’m just like I still got time to get caught up, but it’s catching up to me. So, now I’m trying to get back on track.”

Monique also said the biggest barrier to education for her was her home life, “Just a lot of drama at home. Not getting along with my mom and stuff like that.” Monique also stated:

In my case, being pregnant, having a kid young. I know that there are more people here that have kids. It’s not only being pregnant, it’s that stress that comes along with it. I think they are all pretty difficult if it’s happening to you. I don’t think there is any one thing, but just lots of things. They, it’s pretty difficult. Home, pregnancy, behavior, all of it.

Kat also echoed the same barrier, “Yeah, being in and out of foster homes. Sometimes I’m there for a long time and others not. I do like petty things and other people do bigger things.” Kat also added that she felt her home life left her feeling that she was “not being motivated enough.” She also conceded that some of the choices she made caused her to “spend time in a facility.”

Zeke stated that “family fights, sickness, deaths in my family” had been barriers to his education. James reiterated that his barrier to education was his family, especially the fighting between his parents, which often left them so distracted that they didn’t send him to school.

Brett, who had lived with several family members, said her “family situation” had been a big barrier for her because, among other things, “A lot of problems with guardianship and my
dad hasn’t been around in my life. I never know who I am going to be living with or what school I am going to be attending.”

The second most cited barrier was the students’ former traditional high school. Wint told the researcher that his former school was his barrier to education. He stated, “Well, I think traditional school was difficult. It was like you couldn’t understand some of the school work. The teachers didn’t want to help you and I failed. They didn’t help you enough with the school work. James also said that his traditional school was a barrier, “The classes were like 30 people, 25-30 people, and they just stand at the front and do a big lecture the whole time. Not too much individual.” Brett also told the researcher that her former school was one of her biggest barriers:

At the traditional school, I was frustrated all the time. And the only way I could get help was if I stayed after school, but my family just like, it had so much going on at home. I just didn’t have the extra time to stay after school.

The third most cited barrier to the students’ own education revolved around school issues or school “drama.” Linn felt that drama at school was a barrier for her, “Yeah, I don’t like the drama that comes with it, plus the work gets hard sometimes.” Zeke told the researcher that “drama, like fights at school,” had been a barrier. Zeke shared that he had been picked on at his former traditional school for “being gay. But here nobody cares, it doesn’t matter. I’m just Zeke.”

Kari said that a barrier for her had been the:

Girl on girl, I hate you. He said, she said kind of stuff. And probably, I’d probably have to say like people not encouraging you, like putting you down, saying you’re never going to make it; you’re hopeless, stuff like that. I think people have to be
encouraged, like not by other people. They have to want it. Because school work is hard, for a lot of people, it’s hard. If you don’t want it, I think that is like the barrier right there. Or if someone in your family didn’t graduate, but got a GED. And if I was like, I want to be like my mom and go get my GED. So, it could be like that, you see other people in your family and they are fine without a high school diploma. And I think sometimes that I could do what they do and I don’t need a diploma.

Work was also cited as a barrier for the students interviewed. Linn said that sometimes she has to stay late at work and then “you know, because it makes, it makes me tired and then I come to school and I’m sleepy.”

Another reason cited, by the interviewed students, as a barrier for them was the actual school work. Linn said, “The work gets hard sometimes. Just my math, mainly. I can get through anything else. I just hate doing my math. I hate that so much.” James also conceded that a barrier for him were some of the academics, “Like mine is math and it is really hard.”

**What barriers do you see other students facing.** Students were more talkative in their interviews when it came to discussing what barriers they saw other students facing. The students’ responses again echoed what they answered regarding their own barriers.

Monique felt a barrier to education for other students was “usually things going on at home that I noticed. Most people having trouble with family or like a boyfriend or girlfriend or something like that.” Kat’s comments were similar in that she felt a lot of students had “drama at home and at school.”
Linn told the researcher that a barrier for some students was that they had to work to help support their family. She mentioned that several of her friends helped out their parents “because bills are tight.” She said that, “It’s honestly like a blessing right now for a child to get a job right now---to give their parents money to help support their family.” Zeke said, “I think home life because I know friends that are borderline living on the streets. And that is just a big thing, family financial stuff like that.”

Neisha felt that being a parent while in school was a barrier for students to get their education. She said, “Maybe they can’t find a baby sitter or something. Some people are just lazy and don’t want to.” Monique stated that she knew her pregnancy and approaching delivery were a barrier, but she also said that this was a barrier for several other students at Brennan Alternative High School. She said several female students were “having to have jobs to provide for their baby.”

Kat also felt pregnancy was a barrier for students, “Because you have to worry about not stressing yourself too much over the baby.” Kari stated that pregnancy “could really, like it could slow you down. Some people come back and do their work, but it can slow you down. And some people end up giving up and just say I’m done.” Wint also felt that pregnancy was a barrier for some students, “And I see people getting pregnant at ages they don’t need to be doing.”

Annie stated that, “Peer pressure I think is a huge one. And then just like the will to fit in is a huge problem because your education lacks.” Kat felt a barrier to education for other students was, “Being in all the drama. Constantly watching their back instead of doing their work, because some people are just crazy and they will do something. So, they are constantly worrying about what they are going to do.” Wint put it this way, “Well, I see a lot of people getting in fights with people over silly stuff.”
Brett said that bullying is a barrier because:

Kids deal so much with it, like depression from bullying. So, just a lot of students just like feel bad about their self, like I have a couple friends that want to look up to their mom and dad’s achievements and they feel bad because they can’t reach their, what their mom’s are. They have to follow in their parents’ footsteps. And if they don’t, they feel bad and just don’t want to do anything anymore.

James felt that “a lot of people here don’t like each other,” and that causes barriers to education. “If they are in the same room, maybe one of them feels like they don’t need to come to school.” James also said that a barrier might be:

If a student had a serious problem with a teacher. They might deliberately not do good in school. When I was in 8th grade, I didn’t like my language arts teacher because she was just ridiculously mean. I just purposely sat in her class and did nothing the entire time. I know one of my friends who didn’t like his teacher last quarter, so he didn’t come to school a lot.

Neisha felt that “some people just don’t think they get the help or they just don’t think that they can do it, so they give up on it.” Linn felt a barrier was that:

Students think, well, I can always get the points tomorrow and tomorrow those points don’t come, and that’s a barrier for them because they just, you know, kids think, just everyone thinks they have all the time in the world to get caught up. And if they don’t, they can go to school next year, but that doesn’t always happen, you know. So that kind of puts them in a problem situation. They were not thinking about that years ago when they were just a class behind and they thought they could get that caught up in a week.
Monique stated that a barrier for some students were “problems with focusing, like ADD and stuff like that. That can cause trouble, too.” Kari said, “I know like people who have illness here. And that stops them a lot from doing their work because they are sick and they can’t get it done.”

Neisha also stated she thought, “Some people have gotten into the wrong crowds.” Wint said that, “People getting into drugs,” was a barrier for some students. Brett echoed some of the same concerns for students who:

Were running the streets at night because like if they are out on the streets there is a lot of things that can happen on the streets. And sometimes people just stay out really late and don’t want to go to school the next day and skip class. I also think that drugs get in the way and teen gangs, and like on the streets, like running the streets at night.

**What are the toughest barriers to overcome.** When it came to responding to the toughest barriers to overcome, students gave various perceptions and thoughts. The most prevalent barriers mentioned were home issues and pregnancy.

Annie said, “I think things that are outside of school, that affect you in school, are the hardest to overcome, like family drama.” Zeke also felt that family issues were the biggest barrier. He said, “I think family fights, because parents are hovering. They are like, do it my way or get out of my house.” James also felt that home issues were the biggest barrier. He put it this way, “Home issues, definitely. They affect you a whole lot more. You can have drama at school, but you don’t live at school. But if you have drama at home, well, that’s where you live, so it’s harder at home.”
Neisha felt that teenage pregnancy and parenthood were the toughest barriers for students to complete their education:

"I think being a parent at a young age is pretty hard. Anybody can get out of doing drugs. But, once you become a parent, that is something you have to deal with for life, because you can’t just give them up like you can give drugs up."

Kat also felt that the biggest barriers to education were pregnancy and family drama:

"If you’re pregnant, you have to figure out how you’re going to feed your baby, work, and still take care of your baby, especially if you’re a single mom. And where you’re going to live if your parents are kicking you out, because I know some people that are getting kicked out for being pregnant. And family, like they could have you on so much stress, it’s just hard to concentrate."

Kari also felt that pregnancy was the most difficult barrier to overcome. “I got to say pregnancy. Because even after you have the child, you have to take care of it. That is number one priority to school, but at the time, it’s not the most important thing.”

Linn felt the biggest barrier for students was what she called “laziness. Definitely the top one of all. I think at almost every point a kid gets lazy at school, I mean, some are different, but I mean that’s mainly what happens.” Monique felt that there were a multitude of factors, rather than just one or two which were the most difficult to overcome. “They are all difficult. I’m pregnant right now and my mom moved away and my dad doesn’t have a job and I’m trying to finish to school. It’s kinda everything.”

Brett said that she felt school drama was the toughest barrier:

"People feeding into other people, that’s what I think is the toughest to overcome, is to not feed into other people, like what they want you to do in peer pressure."
Like I think that is very hard not to feed into peer pressure. That’s the main one for me.

“Drugs and addicts, those are the toughest barriers,” said Wint, “if you’re addicted, it’s hard to get off that behavior.”

**What things in your life make it difficult to finish school.** When it came to answering what things in your life make it difficult to finish school, students’ responses again reflected similar issues as those perceived to be barriers to education. The most common answer revolved around family life and the issues and drama that students faced at home.

Kat shared that home responsibilities and “getting into trouble” had made it difficult for her to finish school:

> I have to watch my baby sister all of the time, while my mom works. I don’t get to do anything. I can’t go out with my friends or do anything. It’s like I’m a prisoner in my own house. That’s probably why I get into so much trouble. When I’ve had enough, I just leave and run off. But I usually get caught and end up in JDC or in a foster home. One time I spent six months in a facility. They tried to keep me away from my family, but I missed my little sister so much. Then they put me in a foster home and I ran away from there too.

Kari said issues at home made it difficult to finish her education:

> I can’t sleep at night with all of the home drama. Because I can’t sleep, I’ll just come here and get my sleep. So when I come to school I just sleep all day. Mainly it’s the way my body is. I come to school and just want to pass out.
The researcher asked Kari if this sleepiness was also an issue at her former school and Kari replied:

   Yeah, at my old school the difference was that it was bigger and a whole more people so the teachers didn’t care if you slept in class. I could get by with more. Here it’s a lot smaller. So, I can’t really do that much.”

James also felt that home issues made it difficult to finish school. He said, “I think home issues because like those affect you a lot more. Like the drama at school, you go home and it’s over.” Brett said that being bullied at school made it difficult for her:

   I have always been bullied, I don’t know why. I have come to realize that I have to, like, ignore them and go on. The bullies want you to pay attention to them. My counselor said you feed them then, so I try not to pay attention to them. I try to focus on school, but sometimes it is hard.

Annie said that a lot of things in her life made it difficult to finish school. In particular, she said cited her mental health issues. “My personality disorder is definitely a huge issue just with day-to-day stuff and then having to be in a school environment is definitely hard.”

Neisha felt her traditional school made it difficult to finish school, “I didn’t like them and they didn’t like me” was how Neisha phrased her relationship with her former traditional school.

Wint shared that his traditional school made it difficult for him to finish school. “I didn’t like the big classrooms where the teachers would just lecture on and on. The computers here and classes online, I like that, it makes it easier for me.”

Zeke said that he has a disease, colitis, which makes it difficult to finish school:
I’ve had medical issues that have interfered with school. So, I have had to spend time in the hospital and they got me behind at my old school. They were supposed to send tutors, but they didn’t come all of the time.

Linn said that her laziness made it difficult for her to finish school:

I was not dedicated. I was a freshman, so I’m just like, I still got time to get caught up, but it’s catching up to me. So, now I’m trying to get back on track. So sometimes, I have work harder and stay later.

Monique shared that being pregnant and everything that comes along with it has been the most difficult obstacle for her to finish school. She expressed her concern over who would watch her baby when she attempted to come back to school after she gave birth.

**What can teachers and schools do to remove barriers to education.** The next area the researcher investigated was what teachers and the school could do to help remove some of these barriers to education. The first part will address what students felt teachers could do to remove barriers.

Annie felt that teachers should treat students in a more adult manner:

I think that teachers should try to communicate with students that are of age, like if you try to communicate to a student on an adult level, and not just be like a teacher, but like a mentor or friend. I think it’s easier for someone to succeed in that environment versus just trying to be an educator.

Sharing that motivation would help remove barriers for students, Neisha said:

I think the most a teacher can do is keep on pushing them, you know, what’s the word, just keep on motivating them to just keep going. You know, because some people here have kids and some people here do the wrong thing. The teachers
can’t help them with that situation in many ways, but what they can do is help them in whatever they can with work or whatever, you know, questions, stuff like that. I think motivation is the big one. Because some people just don’t think they can do it.

Linn liked the way her teachers had set up a reward system according to points. She said:

It depends on if you’re getting the amount of points. Like it’s okay to come in like once a week maybe and be like, I’m kind of tired. Can I lay my head down for a little bit? But if it’s like an everyday thing, then no, they don’t reward them. The teachers tell them you need to get this amount of points done and then you may be allowed to lay your head down or something.

Monique felt that teachers removed barriers by just supporting her. She put it this way:

I know that with my teachers, I have a lot of support. My teachers know me. They ask me a lot of questions. They ask me what I need to do in school. I like that. You know, you have a relationship with your teacher. The teachers, they know about you and they know how to help.

Talking to students and motivating them would help remove barriers according to Kat. She said that teachers:

Can’t really remove everything, but they can help by---well, they can help you talk about it a little and help motivate you to do more work. Like they can tell you if you do work, you’ll probably get your mind off things at home. Well, when you go to school, you get away from pretty much everything at home and everything else. It’s a refuge, you know, a safe place.
Wint thought that teachers should enact more discipline in their classrooms, “If you catch them, expel them from school. They mess up everybody when they come back. The bad kids, they know they are failing and don’t care. We need to get rid of them.”

Improving discipline and working better with problem students, Brett said that she felt that she had:

A good relationship with most of my teachers. Most teachers here remove problem students easily, like without us even knowing there’s a problem. It’s just like---I think one way they remove a problem as a teacher is, well, if it’s like a problem between two students, you split the students up and put one in a different class, remove---like split their homeroom class, remove them. If it’s like a home problem, the teacher can’t do a whole lot with a home problem. Like they can give the student advice on what to do at home to avoid fights with parents and stuff.

Students felt school could remove barriers to education by, “Having the same kind of students in the same school,” said Annie. “You know students who have issues graduating, putting us in an options environment. I think it is really a smart idea because we all have the same goal. We all want to finish. We just have trouble doing it.”

The most common held perspective on how schools could remove barriers was to allow students to work on their own, at their own pace. Neisha felt the schools:

Should have some days where, like some people don’t have Internet at home where they can go home and do work, like me for instance. So, I think we should just have a day here, like once a week or twice a week, where we could just---kids who just want to work and not go home until a certain time. They could get longer
help. You know everybody is doing their own thing and everybody is doing something different than what you’re doing. Like here classes are smaller, and you get like more attention that you would want, that you would not get at your home school. You get more one-on-one with your teacher. You get a lot more attention.

Kari said that schools could remove barriers if they would allow all students, “…to be doing online school. You can do it at your own pace and it’s a lot easier for me. I can choose what to work on and I like that.” Wint also resonated Kari’s perspective for online curriculum. “I get more help in an online school. You know, more one-on-one. It makes it easier for me.”

James felt that the faculty and staff at Brennan Alternative High School were more accessible that staff at his other high school. “The social worker, she like really helps you with problems at school and at home. My old counselor only wanted to talk about me failing. But here, she talks about my home life with me.”

Neisha felt that help with school work made her successful.

My teachers here help me. It’s like a family here because I can go to any of the teachers when I need help and they will help me. And they don’t just care about academics, they care about me because we’ll talk about things. Like things outside of school and so they can relate to me as a person. They tell me things about themselves too. Not real personal stuff, but just things. This makes me want to come more. But here they won’t let you fail. That is just not an option.

Two students felt that schools couldn’t remove barriers. Linn said, “I don’t think a school can remove a barrier. I think a kid has to do it themselves. But I think a school can help the student remove the barrier.” Brett also stated, “I don’t think schools can do a whole lot.
Honestly, I just don’t think that schools can do a whole lot because they just want you to get your work done, really, like I think.”

Zeke thought that schools could remove barriers “by helping the students, instead of the parents. The parents are done with school, but us, we need help. That’s what needs to be done.”

Monique said that schools could remove barriers if they helped students with anger management. “Help kids with their behavior. Help them with their school work.”

**What can teachers and schools do to help students stay in school.** Another area that the researcher investigated was what teachers and schools do to help students stay in school. Most students cited the “family atmosphere”, whereby teachers cared about them, as well as the online curriculum which let them work at their own pace, as being major factors. The students were very specific about the kinds of things that teachers and schools do to help them.

Annie felt that her school and its teachers were:

Really good at staying on top of students and making sure that their work schedule is worked out and doesn’t interfere with school work. You know, the teachers give us goals. Sometimes they feed us breakfast, if we didn’t have any at home. And you know, just being strict and making sure that we get our work done or they call parents. But the teachers can also be a good friend, I guess, and understands personal problems and is really good about that. I think teachers here try to communicate with the students more. They care about us. Sometimes we get mad at them, but we know they care about us. The teachers give us goals and the school has the same type of students who have issues graduating or issues getting ahead in school, being put in this environment, I think is really a smart idea because we all have the same goal.
Working together in a cooperative environment, Neisha felt that the:

Small environment helps. Yea, everybody here is coming here for the same reason, you know. Could be grades or credits, deficiency or something like that. I think the school just works like a big team to be honest with you. Everybody works together to help everyone. Everybody just helps each other try to get through the same thing. I feel like everybody here is on the same page. The main goal here is to graduate, just get through it. But here, they just won’t let you fail. That is just not an option. I like it because I get to work at my own pace. Nobody is pushing me around. Even though there is a deadline, I don’t feel like, I don’t know, I just know that I can work fast or slow on whatever. As long as it gets done. Last year and this year, there are definitely a lot of people who motivate me. Like some people were really, really behind and they ended up graduating last year because, you know, they worked hard. Like the older kids, that is something that just stuck with me. They helped because they already went through the classes. They know what they’re talking about. Whereas you talk to somebody who has a class now, they may not understand it as much. The older kids help us out with our school work, and you know, our behavior. They tell you when to stop acting out. They say it’s immature. It’s like a little family here, you know. I get to know my teacher, like for more than a year. I can go to my homeroom teacher for anything and I didn’t have that at my old school. My teachers here talk to me. It’s not just that we’ll talk about academics, but we’ll talk about other things and she can relate to me things like that. So it makes me want to come more and more. I feel a part of this school.
Linn stated that she felt both her teachers and school were helping her. She felt it was important for them to:

I mean, they will try to help you get your high school diploma. They really will or your GED or something. I mean, no school is just going to be like you want to drop out, okay, bye. You know, like different students are different, so they are going to find a different solution for each kid that wants to drop out. So, you know, like they kind of---they see where you’re coming from and they work with that. I like that they help you at your pace. I mean, yeah, they are going to help the whole school, of course, but like when it’s a certain problem, they are going to especially focus on you for that time and just be like---like, I’m going to help you graduate. I’m going to help you. I’m not going to let you just drop out. Like here, it’s just like the teachers try to get to know you. They crack jokes with you. You know, they kind of pick on you sometimes when you have like a class discussion. They are like, okay, I’m going to pick on you today. It’s just like I feel like they actually interact with us. Our teachers are really friendly. They---when someone says, ‘Oh, I don’t want to go to school,’ they will be like---they will go talk to them. They will literally go talk to them or they’ll pull them into the office and talk with them. You know, whenever we really do need help on work, the teacher literally sits there until you get the question. Like he won’t just give you the answer. He makes you understand it. Like you have to know what you’re saying because he’ll ask you. ‘Why are you saying this?’ Why is that? You know, stuff like that. I get more one-on-one. Like the teachers are friendly, but they still discipline you. When you’re bad, they don’t kid around, and they make you get
your points. They are making sure we’re getting our work done, because they
don’t want us to fail, like they want you to be successful. That’s the whole reason
they are like—they come down on us. I think the teachers at the traditional school
have so many students that they don’t—they don’t care to get to each and every
one of you. There are a few students they might get close with. But the teachers
here, they pretty much know everything about you. Well, the main things.

Monique liked that Brennan Alternative High School had a lot of activities and that
students were rewarded for doing well. She said:

Like I get an award for attendance or when I do well in a subject. My principal
even has a Student of the Month and you get your picture with him and he calls
home and tells your dad. I liked that I could work at my job and get school credit
for it. When I was working, my teacher came and visited me at work. My boss
liked that.

Monique also shared that the relationships and feedback she got from the teachers helped her
stay in school:

The relationships here helped me stay. I know they care about me. They get to
know the kids. Taking time. Seeing what each student needs. Stuff like that. Like
welcoming you when you come in the door, just saying hi and being friendly.
They make you feel at home more. Like they tell me when I’m having a good day
or doing a good job. They tell me right away. Yeah, the feedback. I feel that they
make the school work manageable, that you have a chance to learn it. I like the
online classes. You get a lot of one-on-one help too. I noticed that staying after
too. You get a lot of help too. I tend to get a lot of work done there. You know
staying after with the teachers. It just really goes back to the whole support thing. I know that with my teachers, I have a lot of support. My teachers know me. They ask me a lot of questions. They ask me what I need to do to do good. So, just a lot of caring and helping and being there, but you have to show yourself too that you want to be there and you want to get through it.

Monique also told the researcher how important it was for her to receive feedback from the teachers on how she was doing at school. She put it this way:

I can get tutored whenever I want. Like I can go once a week, see where I’m at and what I need to do and how long it’s going to take me to get there, that kind of thing. Like if I don’t understand something, the teachers here are around more to help you. Everyone is helpful. Like I was surprised by that. Like they push you, but you can handle that. I’m going to be a mom soon, in a couple of weeks, so they use that to motivate me. It definitely motivates me. I don’t have homework anymore. I don’t lose papers anymore. They kinda let me chose my classes, I mean I can chose what I want to work on in that school day. They help me with my work, more than my old school ever did.

Kat felt that the teachers and school created a family atmosphere which was important for her and encourage her to stay in school. She said:

This school is like a family. Actually there is not a lot of drama, not as much as like a bigger school. There, they have more people, more gossip, but here---it’s---most of us are so close together---like we can’t really---there is really nothing to fight about. There’s no secrets. Everybody knows everything. The school is small.
She also felt that the teachers encouraged her and that she wasn’t lost in the crowd. Kat put it this way:

They tell me that—they try to exceed more of me. They will be like you need so many more points. You can get more. They try to push you more than what you’re already doing. Sometimes it’s hard. But I know it made me feel a lot better when I got more points and stuff. It’s kind of stressful, but not real stressful. I guess because it’s like—you can come and talk to anybody. I guess the teachers here try to stay close so they know what is going on so they can help you. Like, it’s a smaller environment and so they can keep track of everybody. And they can focus on things that we need and help us a little, but still help other kids at the same time. Like they just don’t look at us as students, as academics, they pretty much treat us like adults not kids.

Kat also said that what helped her to stay in school was that teachers and the school staff looked out for her and helped her look to the future:

Well, the teachers know what I want to do in my future life. My career. And he helps me like by just—he’ll be like if you finish this and this, then you can go to college and have your degree. And then you can become all of this that you want. But he said as long as I finish school, then it’s going to work out all right. You know, he shows me where it goes to. He guides me on the right road like. My parents don’t really do that.

Kari was very blunt and direct with the types of things that teachers and schools did to help her stay in school. She stated:
My homeroom teacher don’t put up with no missed school. She’ll find you and make you come to school. She’ll call my mom, in a heartbeat and say, ‘Okay, where is your child today?’ Like I said, she’ll call my mom. She’ll bust me. She doesn’t have a problem making home visits or calling the truant officer to figure out why you’re not in school. She won’t let me fail and she won’t give up on me. If everything else is going bad, you know you can come to the teachers here and they will talk to you and they help you through, like, any problem and they, like, help you figure out what to do with your school work so that you’ll finish on time, maybe even early.

Zeke said he liked the fact that students were encouraged to go to college from Brennan Alternative High School:

We do field trips and activities to get us interested in college, like mentors coming from colleges and telling us what college life is like and what we can achieve. At my old school, the teachers told me I would never graduate from high school. They didn’t care. They just gave up on me. No one ever talked to me about going to college. My mom’s a single mom and she didn’t graduate from high school. She doesn’t know anything about college. I never had anyone talk to me about college before. But here, the teachers talk about college and we even have mentors that come in and work with us.

Wint credited the online curriculum delivery system as the main factor that helps to keep him in school. He said:

Well, I think the traditional school was difficult. It was like you couldn’t understand some of the school work. The teachers didn’t want to help you and I
just failed the class. They didn’t help you enough with the school work. I would ask questions, but they would get mad if I didn’t understand it. And so I just left it at that. But, the work is just easier here for me. I don’t know why. I guess because it’s online. It is the same work I had at my old school, but the way it is taught is easier for me. I also think it helps because it is a smaller school. And it’s not as many people coming, so it’s easier for kids to get their work done, you know, instead of going to a big school where there is thousands of kids—-and it’s harder to do—-harder to understand—-there is more people per class in traditional schools than there is here. I can get my work done quicker and I concentrate on me and just me and no one else. The online classes really help me. I’m not only passing classes, but I’m getting more than Ds now. The teachers helped with what I needed help with, it’s getting me through quicker.

James’ perspective on what schools and teachers did to help students was that he “just liked the laid-back feel of the school. He said, “Because it’s smaller, you have people keeping an eye on you and that’s good.” James credited his math teacher with helping him pass his class. When describing what the math teacher did, James said:

He is just really good at helping people with math. If they need help, like when I start doing my math and I need help, I know that I can go to him and he’ll help me. He’ll help me until I understand it and get it done. I had thought about dropping out because the work was too hard, especially the math. I know I’m bad in math, but now, like I know I can get help. He can help me understand it.
Brett echoed Wint perspective that the online curriculum delivery system helped her tremendously:

Like I said before, like the online thing, it helps a lot of people because you work at your own pace. And sometimes when kids get to---get that opportunity, it makes them kind of---even if you’re not in school, you can still do school from home. Like if you’re sick, you won’t miss that much. And I just think it’s a better opportunity for the kids to have that too. I think that is what helps big time. I do better with the online classes. This is my best year ever. Like this is the first year I’ve had grades above a D like, yeah. So this school is like---the way it starts out, you might think it might not work, but then when you get into it more and you get to figure out the classes and just work into it, it helps a lot. What I like best about the online curriculum is that you can work at your own pace because some classes that you might be really be fast in and some classes you may be behind in. And the teachers here work one-on-one with you so it’s like tutoring all day. I think I get more help here because there are so many more kids at a traditional school and this is smaller and they focus on more kids than a traditional school because it’s so much bigger. Because this place is a very small school, you are kind of like under a magnifying glass. And so like if your teacher finds something wrong, they will jump in and try to find out what is wrong and then try to fix it. Like I’ve had this happen to me a couple of times this year, so I know it really happens.
Brett also shared with the researcher how much she liked the atmosphere of Brennan Alternative High School:

Well, the school is very---it’s like a welcoming environment. Like the environment of the school is just like, you know, that nothing---like you just feel like nothing is going to go wrong. And it’s just the way that the school is so small. You ask just---it’s kind of like a blanket, I guess. It’s like a blanket that covers you and makes you feel warm and comforted.

**What do the teachers and school do to help students feel better about school.** The next area the researcher investigated was what the school and teachers did to help students feel better about school. The answers echoed what students said helped them stay in school, mainly the friendly and caring atmosphere, as well as individualized online curriculum that allowed them to chose what they wanted to work on.

Annie felt that the teachers were “more understanding and lenient and more apt to reach out to students because we’re such a small environment.” She also credited her fellow students in making her feel better about school. She said:

The students here, the ones my age, understand more of what I’m going through on a daily basis. Even just like little things, like having someone to talk to so I can get going on my work. It’s important than most people realize to just get that off your brain, so you can get math off your brain or whatever.

Neisha felt that the teachers “just make it fun. They are not the type of teachers that just stand there and lecture you. The teachers make the online curriculum fun and they still help you with your work.” She also said it made her feel better because:
Like here everything—everybody is doing their own thing and everybody is doing something different than what you are doing. I like it because I get to work at my own pace. Nobody is pushing me. Even though there is a deadline, I don’t feel like—I can just work fast or slow or whatever. As long as it gets done. I think the teachers keep on pushing us, you know, what’s the word, just keep on motivating us to just keep going. I think the school works like a big team to be honest with you. Everybody works together to help everyone, you know, the teachers, the students, the staff, everyone. Everybody just helps each other try to get through the same thing. I feel like everybody here is on the same page. Yeah, the main goal here is to graduate.

Monique felt better about school because she was doing better at school. She said:

Everything is online. I don’t have to keep track of all of my papers. I used to lose them. Some I’d keep in my locker, some in my books, then I’d lose my books. Here, it’s all online. I can choose what classes I want to work on. If I don’t understand it, then the teacher sits down next to me and works with me.

Monique said the teachers helped her feel better about school when they:

I like the teachers because I can get tutored whenever I want. I can come as often as I want, sometimes the teacher takes me home. They helped me figure out that I can do a lot more if I just put my mind to it. The teachers push me, just not too much.

Kat said that the teachers make her feel better about school because they “know what I want to do and they talk to me about it.” She said the school makes her feel better because:
They use this point system to track my progress. And it kind of motivates people to do better. They like the feeling of being recognized. Especially me. Because they know I’m kind of a lazy person when I go home, so I---if I would drop out, they tell me that I would have to get a full-time job or a GED and me being at the grade level that I’m at, it’s not enough knowledge to get a GED. Especially just---I have a lot more support here than when I’m at home. I just pretty much do nothing.

Kari said her teachers made her feel better about school because:

They are there, because like in regular schools there are so many other students teachers cannot keep their point on like a specific student and help them. Teachers here will set everything aside, sit down with you and help you as much as they can. And they don’t---they don’t give up on you. They will help you as much as they possibly can. So it’s a reason to like school because you have somebody there for you. Yeah, it’s like mother and daughter, son and daughter, daughter and father.

Kari also said “the environment that the school provides makes me feel better. I can come here and just feel at home and relaxed and you know---just chill.”

Zeke said the teachers made him feel better about school because:

Teaching here is not like the normal high school. We joke around, but we know it’s---we know when to like stop, when it comes to like videos to watch, notes to take. We know when to have fun and we know when to work. They’re real laid back to the point to where it is just when---they know when to be up and teaching
and they know when to chill and talk to people. They are like really good at keeping us in line.

He also said the school made him feel better because:

The environment here is bright and welcoming, even though we’re in trailers. Like we don’t come here and sit at a desk for eight hours. We have posters everywhere. Like motivational posters. It’s like a bigger home of learning.

Wint said that teachers “assisted me with what I needed help with. They got me through it more quicker.” He also said, “Well, there is people to talk to if you have a problem. You can talk to anybody really about it. So if you have an issue, you can talk to anybody.”

James said the teachers made him feel good about school because “they really know me. Like I know I can talk to them if I need to and they would understand.” He felt the school made him feel better because it’s “just like the environment. It’s laid back. There is not too much drama, just with a select couple people.”

Brett said that the school made her feel better because:

I always feel welcomed here. You know, like the secretary knows my name and when I come back from being sick, she’ll ask me if I feel better. And like, she knows my home situation and she’ll ask me how I’m doing. Like she knows everyone’s name in my family.

The people that students named at their school who have helped them stay in school were first and foremost the social worker, the principal, and then the secretary. Annie said that the principal helped her by “always checking on me. He’s always asking me how I’m doing and can he do to help. I like him, he’s not mean. He cares about me.”

Are there other people at this school who have helped you stay in school?
Linn said lots of other people at her school helped her out. In particular, she singled out the school’s social worker. She said:

They all talk to you if you ever, ever consider dropping out. Like they have you go back and talk to our social worker and she’d be like, ‘Why?’ and if you say like, I don’t know. She’ll be like, ‘No really. Why?’ And she’ll get to the bottom of it. And she’ll be like—kind of get into your head like—like, no, you don’t want to do that, you know you don’t. You want to stay in school. You got what, a year left? You know, they just kind of find the right thing to say, like get in your head to make you think, I really do want to stay in school.

Monique said the social worker and the principal helped her stay in school. She said the social worker:

Talked to me a lot. She helped me solve problems that no one else did. She really supported me, telling me that I can do it, and then you know, it’s not going to be easy, but I can do it.

Monique said, “The principal also helps me a lot. He sits down with me and helps me when I need help. My other principal never did that.”

Kari said the social worker helped her a lot. “She talked to me about the problems I have and tells me like, you’re not leaving. You’ve got to stay here. She cares about me.”

Zeke also said that the social worker, principal, and school secretary helped him out. He said the social worker and principal kept on “encouraging me to come to school. They told me what I could achieve with goals. They kept me focused and told me I need to go to college and get my college degree.” Zeke also said that the secretary would also ask how he was doing and that she “would bake stuff, good stuff, and give it to me and the other students.”
Wint, James, and Brett all said that the social worker helped them out with “stuff,” but wouldn’t elaborate further.

**Summary**

Chapter Three described the participants’ view of what they perceived to be barriers to education and what teachers and schools can do to remove these barriers. Most students felt that issues within their home were the biggest barrier to finishing high school. Students felt that teachers and schools could not remove those barriers, but that they could help the students’ deal with the barriers. The students stated the small school environment and individualized curriculum helped them to be successful at school. In addition, they stated that they felt their teachers cared about them as people. In the next chapter, the researcher will discuss the findings in more detail and will discuss the implications for practice and research.
Chapter IV
Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

Summary

The purpose of the study was to research and examine what alternative high school students’ perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school helps students stay in school. Chapter One presented information on high school dropouts as well as the ramifications of dropping out of school. It examined the current literature on factors that contribute to students dropping out of high school, as well as the consequences. In addition, characteristics of successful alternative high schools were presented. The researcher proposed the need for the voices of the alternative high school students’ perspective to be heard. The researcher wanted the students to express their own perceptions and views, not those of adults.

Chapter Two presented the methodology that was used to research students’ perspectives. Using qualitative methods, the researcher conducted ten interviews with ten students who were identified as at-risk of dropping out of school at a public alternative high school. The interviews were transcribed, organized, and coded according to students’ answers using the NVivo Qualitative Research Analysis System. The researcher was then able to identify themes and organize evidence into a composite description that expressed the common experience.

Chapter Three presented the analysis of data. First, individual students were described. Second, findings were organized according to several emergent themes which were organized around the research questions of what alternative high school students’ perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school helps students stay in school.
Conclusions

From the interviews that were conducted, the researcher came to several conclusions regarding what the alternative high school students at Brennan Alternative High School perceived to be barriers to education and how Brennan Alternative High School helped students to stay in school.

**Barriers to education.** With regard to students thinking about dropping out of high school, the most prominent reason given by the students was issues at home. Students often referred to this as, “home drama.” Students, whether it was themselves or their friends, most frequently mentioned that problems at home made them think about dropping out of high school. They spoke about dealing with home problems and situations that negatively impacted their ability to go to school. The home issues covered a variety of events and situations. Events covered parental fighting, unemployment, and alcoholism. Situations included pregnancy, helping the family out financially, and the establishment of guardianship.

Students did not flourish in a school system that was not flexible with their home life or life issues that the students were facing, and home life for the students always took precedence over anything that happened at school. The at-risk students’ lives were always in a state of flux, or they were anticipating the next event that would send them into a state of flux. This state of flux could be caused by a number of issues, such as loss of a job by a parent, moving, being incarcerated, etcetera. This would often necessitate the student having to add hours onto their jobs to help the family financially. A parental loss of employment might entail moving to another apartment complex, which may or may not be, in the same school district. Students responded well to a school which could be flexible to attendance hours, thus allowing them to work through family issues.
Since parents were busy dealing with crises and situations in their own lives, they often had little time to give guidance to their children. They were not able to assist their child, whether it was with school concerns, peer concerns, or even home concerns. Because the parents were frequently absent physically and/or emotionally, they were unable to help students deal with the problems they were facing. This often left the student to deal with the issue on his/her own or to go to school personnel and peers for advice. In addition, because parents were dealing with their own issues, such as unemployment or alcoholism, they had little time or energy left to guide their child. Literature supports that parents of at-risk students are often at-risk adults (Beyth-Marom, 1993).

Another observation the researcher made was that the students, whether through words or actions, were basically on their own. Some students mentioned that there were some formal and informal rules that their parents had issued. However, for the majority of students, the “drama” at home left these rules rarely enforced. One student, Kat, said that, “My mom don’t care what I do, until the police pick me up. Then she acts like she cares, but she don’t.” This lack of rules left these students feeling pretty much on their own. Therefore, the students might have felt that they didn’t need their parents’ guidance. Literature supports this observation that at-risk students often are parenting themselves and making adult decisions (Fischhoff, 2008).

Substance abuse came up as a subject related to home issues. Substance abuse was defined to be alcoholism and/or drug addiction. Substance abuse caused the family member to be unemployed, in rehab, or incarcerated. In addition, substance abuse was also related to the lack of parental guidance because often the parent was incapable of giving guidance because he was drunk, high, or in jail. Alcoholism and drug addiction can leave a legacy of similar behavior on the dependent children (Chassin & Handley, 2006).
Another family issue was that of moving. For some participants, it was not unusual to move frequently. The whole nuclear family unit might move, the student might move in with a “family” member, or the student might move in with a foster family. This moving caused a significant impact on the student for a variety of reasons. Moves often involved changing schools and school districts. This put the student behind in their school work, as well as making new friends. Since moving around was fairly commonplace for some students, the moves had a cumulative effect whereby the student got farther and farther behind after each move. Even though a student may have received a social promotion in elementary school or in junior high school, it caught up with him/her when attending high school. In the State of Ohio, students must earn a determined amount of Carnegie Units in order to graduate from high school. In addition to the academic consequences of moving around a lot, the constant moving also affected family relationships. Students often felt that parental support was lacking due to the number of moves and with whom they moved.

Pregnancy was another issue that was brought up regarding why students thought about dropping out of high school. Pregnancy, like some other issues, had a ripple effect. One issue compounded the other issues. Pregnancy involved related issues such as employment, day care, relationships with parents, and moving. A study conducted in Philadelphia and Baltimore reported that for female high school students, 26% of them dropped out due to pregnancy (Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2002).

Students said overwhelmingly that home life made it difficult for them to finish school. James said home issues “affect you a lot more” because they are always there when you get home from school. This sentiment was echoed by other students as well. They felt that issues at
school might change or be resolved, but there were always the same issues waiting at home for them each and every day when they got home from school.

The next most common barrier mentioned was the students’ former traditional school. Students felt the traditional schools were too crowded and that teachers didn’t have time to spend with students. Students didn’t feel the educational delivery system worked for them. One student, James, said that teachers at the traditional school “just stand at the front and do a big lecture the whole time.” Students felt lost in the crowds and didn’t receive the personalized help they desired and needed.

The third most common barrier to education students mentioned concerned issues with other students at school. The students referred to these issues as school “drama.” These issues revolved around themes. The most common theme involved relationship issues between male-female or female-female. These types of relationship issues are not uncommon in the teenage years as students mature socially and emotionally into adulthood. Research has been conducted in the last decade on relational aggression, particularly as it relates to adolescent females. Relational aggression is defined as aggression negatively expressed through relationships, such as spreading rumors or divulging secrets (Rose, 2002). This relational aggression centers on negative emotions within a fairly wholesome relationship. Since there was little parental involvement or role modeling occurring in these students’ lives, they often relied on their own teenage sense of maturity (or lack of maturity) to deal with these turbulent emotional and social times. Thus, intensifying some of these adolescent experiences, which resulted in more issues and “drama.”

Since “parents” and responsible adults were physically and emotionally not available for most of these students, they tended to rely on their peer groups for moral support. To some
extent, the peer group somewhat functioned as the participants’ “family.” That is, the participants would rely on the advice and approval of peers before they would try to get advice from “parents.” Thus, the students were often influenced more intensely by their peers, than by their own “parents.”

Another barrier that surfaced during the interviews was the issue of students being bullied by other students. Although this issue would fit under the above mentioned relational aggression, it is worth noting that this was specifically mentioned by several students as being a barrier to education. Bullying was not only seen as a barrier in and of itself, but also led to other issues, such as depression and attendance issues.

When students were asked about the toughest barriers to overcome, most reported it to be home life. Students often felt powerless to change anything at home. As James put it, “It affects you a whole lot more. You can have drama at school, but you don’t live at school. But if you have drama at home, well, that’s where you live, so it’s harder at home.” The next most common barrier was pregnancy, due to all of the additional issues that come with pregnancy that compound the situation. Not only does pregnancy have effects on the immediate situation, but also has effects on the long term situation with the added responsibilities that raising a child entails.

**How the school helps students to stay in school.** Students gave a variety of opinions as to how teachers could remove barriers. Since students felt that home life was the central barrier to finishing school, the prevailing belief was that teachers could not remove this barrier. Students did, however, feel that the teachers could help them cope with home life and motivate them to do better in school. Students reported that teacher support of students was effective in helping to remove barriers, as well as motivation aimed at the students. Several students reported that it was
helpful when the teachers treated the students as adults. Since some of these at-risk students are often making adult decision about their own lives, this is not a surprising student perspective.

When asked what the school could do to remove barriers, Linn summarized students’ beliefs by stating, “I don’t think a school can remove a barrier. I think a kid has to do it themselves. But I think a school can help the student remove the barrier.” The students were very specific about the types of things that schools could do to help students remove or deal with barriers to education. The most common strategy mentioned was allowing students to work on their own and at their own pace. Since these at-risk students faced home issues which prevented them from attending school on a regular and consistent basis, this only makes sense. Literature states that at-risk students are not unintelligent (Gallagher, 2001). Therefore the issue is not whether or not the student can do the work, but rather the educational delivery method for at-risk students.

Students reported that online learning allowed them the capacity to work on their own and to work at their own pace. This was helpful when students were facing crisis at home and couldn’t make it to school. Since the online curriculum was available all of the time, students could log onto their work at anytime. If students were absent from school, students did not miss any traditional classroom teaching. The online curriculum allowed students to replay academic units over and over again until the student understood the material. This forced the student to master the material before he moved on to the next unit.

Students felt more connected to their teachers when the teachers offered to give them help. Because students felt the alternative schools were flexible and understood some of the home issues students were dealing with, the students were more apt to ask for help. The students said the teachers didn’t embarrass them when they asked questions. Because students were using
an online curriculum, the teachers would often come up to them and ask them if they needed help. Asking for help did not put the student in the lime light with everyone looking at them, or everyone waiting for the teacher to finish the explanation before the class could go one with the lesson.

Students also repeated how important the one-on-one tutoring was to them in helping to remove barriers. This type of tutoring focused in on student weaknesses. In the long run, it allowed the student to master the material in a faster time period. Students also stated that it provided them with a deeper understanding of the material.

Students felt that school, like teachers, could not remove the barriers that their home life created. However, as Linn had stated earlier, students felt that the school could help the student remove these barriers. The students felt that the delivery of an online curriculum allowed them the flexibility to overcome some of the obstacles imposed by their issues at home. Literature supports the notion that an online curriculum helps students learn who had previous difficulty with a traditional approach to education (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & & Jones, 2009).

All students felt the teachers and school did things that helped students stay in school. The most frequent factor mentioned was the small family atmosphere that students felt at Brennan Alternative High School. Students felt the teachers and the school really cared about them as people, as well as cared about creating opportunities for success at school. Students mentioned over and over again how the teachers cared about them. They liked the fact that teachers took the time to get to know them and to motivate and encourage them. The online curriculum allowed students to work at their own pace on a personalized curriculum. In addition, students thought that the feedback given by teachers also helped them. Students felt they were treated with respect and treated as adults.
Students at Brennan Alternative High School felt the teachers and the school did many things to help them feel better about school. The theme of a caring family atmosphere again resonated predominantly with the students. They felt the teachers took the time to get to know them and were able to individualize an online curriculum for them. In addition, the school was flexible in working with the student and provided a lot of help and support to the student for issues outside of school.

Students mentioned that not only did the teachers help them succeed, but that the whole staff did as well. Students said that the school’s social worker, principal, and secretary, also helped them. Students said all school staff cared about them and would help them with their problems. One student reported how the social worker told him she was not going to let him drop out, while another student reported how the principal offered to help him with his work. The underlying message of caring made an important impact on the students.

The overall theme was that students at Brennan Alternative High School felt the teachers and the school really cared about them and took the time to work with them individually, not only on their school work, but also with personal issues. The personal connection was what made a difference with the students interviewed. In a sense, the teachers and the school often served as surrogate parents to the students by nurturing them through emotional and social difficulties which ultimately positively affected their academic performance.

The school also found an effective educational delivery through an individualized online curriculum that better met their needs. Students said the online curriculum made a positive difference in their life because it adapted to their lifestyle. Their lifestyle or life situation needed an educational delivery system that would allow them to work at their own pace. Most the students interviewed attended school in a sporadic pattern, depending upon what events and
emergencies were transpiring at home. Therefore, the online curriculum allowed them to work at their own pace.

Overall, the students said they were finding success at school for the first time in their lives. They felt that the care of teachers and other school staff created a family atmosphere at their school and helped them succeed in school.

The research has shown that students feel that their home life is the biggest barrier to graduating from high school. In addition, the students feel that teachers and schools cannot remove these barriers. However, students did feel that teachers and schools could help them remove the barriers. In addition, students felt they did better in school when they feel they have a positive relationship with teachers and other staff members. Students also felt that a personalized online curriculum that let the work at their own pace helped them to be more successful at school.

Implications

Implications for practice. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested as implications for practice. Educators need to recognize students as individuals first, and learners second. Schools should be structured so that the emphasis is on the students. They need to understand students’ perspective and teach to the whole student. Teachers and staff should make a concerted effort to connect with students on more than an academic level. Schools should remove barriers for teachers that would allow teachers more one-on-one time and individualized instruction with students. And school should allow time for this mentoring to happen in a school setting. The emphasis should be on student learning and not teacher delivered instruction time. At-risk students are labeled at-risk because
they are not able to achieve academically. Students’ achievement levels will increase when students feel teachers care about them as individuals. At-risk students’ academic achievement levels increase when they utilize an individualized online curriculum and when they are in a small school environment. However, when the educational delivery system allows for an individualized educational plan and removes barriers, students are no longer at-risk academically.

At-risk students are often dependent on schools for social services. Schools should utilize programs that would help students and their families stabilize the home situation. Schools can do this by utilizing programs that teach students emotional and social learning. These coping skills would benefit the students when they are dealing with bullying issues and relational aggression issues. Schools should help students learn coping skills that will enable them to solve problems at home and school.

This past year, the state of Ohio has examined the high school Carnegie Unit. They recently abolished the seat time requirement for academic courses. In addition, they have initiated a “flex credit,” whereby local school districts can develop and implement testing measures that allow a student to test out of academic subjects and receive credit. These recent changes permit students to advance in their education in an accelerated manner and pursue post secondary education earlier.

Teacher preparation should prepare teachers who can facilitate change in ever evolving classrooms. Teachers will have to individualize instruction, using online curriculum. Classrooms will no longer be teacher centered but student centered, where a hybridized educational delivery system will be utilized. Technology will allow classrooms to mirror real life learning and will foster a deeper and more meaningful level of learning.
Implications for Research

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations are suggested as implications for research.

1. Research needs to be done on effective ways to teach social emotional coping skills to at-risk students.
2. Research needs to be done on effective learning environments for students.
3. Research should be completed on effective teacher training in an online environment.
4. Research needs to be completed on effective ways to identify at-risk students earlier in their school career.
5. Research needs to be completed on the use of technology for online instruction for at-risk students.
6. Research is needed to examine the relationship between parents’ ability to cope with social emotional challenges and the children’s ability to deal with social emotional challenges.
7. Research is needed to investigate the nature of self-efficacy among at-risk students.
8. Research is needed to see how teachers at alternative schools communicate their care and support to students.
9. Research is needed to see if there is a relationship between the amount and nature of time teachers give to students and student performance.

It is the researcher’s hope that at-risk students’ voices will be heard and acknowledged. We only have to listen to what they are telling us. They have so willingly shared their life struggles with us. We only have to listen. They have told us about their families and the issues
they face every day. We only have to listen. They have told us why they were not successful in the traditional schools. We only have to listen. They have told us what we can do to help them be successful. We only have to listen. They have told us what alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education. We only have to listen. They have told us how the alternative high school helps students stay in school. We only have to listen. And once we are finished listening, we need to act.
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Appendix A

Permission for Children to Participate in a Research Study
University of Cincinnati
College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services

Name of the study: What do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school.

Investigator
Laura Sage, B.S., M.A., Principal Investigator
University of Cincinnati
(513)598-9520
sage1@butlertech.org

What is the reason for this study?
Before you agree to allow your child to be in this study, the researcher wants you to know the reason for the study. Returning this signed form does not mean that your child will definitely participate in the study. The researcher would also like you to know exactly what will happen to your child if they participate.
Your child does not have to participate in this study and if you choose not to allow your child to participate there will be no negative consequences. Feel free to ask questions about anything you do not understand.

The purpose of this study is to investigate what do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school. Laura Sage from the University of Cincinnati will direct this study. Approximately ten students will be interviewed about what alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school. If you would like a copy of the questions, please feel free to contact Laura Sage.

What will happen?
First, your child will be given a brief explanation about the study to read. Then the researcher will talk with your child about the study. If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, you will need to sign this form giving the researcher permission to include your child in the study.

The researcher will come to your child’s school and interview your child in the social worker’s office. Your child’s answers will be audio taped and typed onto paper. You may request a copy of the questions. The records of this study are confidential. The researcher may write about what she discovered from this study, but your child’s real name will not be used.

How long will this take?
Your child’s interview will last approximately one hour.

Will anything bad happen to my children?
It is not thought that anything bad will happen to your children. You have the right to stop the researcher from interviewing your child. You may share any concerns that you have with Dr. Nancy Evers at (513)556-662) or at Nancy.Evers@uc.edu.
What will my children gain?
Your children will not benefit directly from this study. But the information gathered will be useful for developing better alternative schools, better teaching methods, and curriculum.

Is this study confidential?
The records of this study are confidential. The researcher may write about what she discovered from this study but the real name of your child will not be used. The information that is gathered will stay confidential unless the researcher has to reveal it based on the law (for example: mandatory reporting of child abuse or immediate danger to your children). All notes, audiotapes, and records will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed when the study is over. Consent forms will be stored in a secure place for three years after the end of the study and then will be destroyed.
The researcher makes every effort to protect the privacy and confidentiality of what she sees and hears in the interview. However, there is no guarantee of confidentiality if your child discusses the interview with other people.

Will my child receive anything?
Your child will not receive anything from this study. But the information gathered will be useful for developing better alternative schools, better teaching methods, and curriculum.

Can my child quit at anytime?
Having your child in this study is entirely your choice. If you allow your child to take part, you may choose to stop their participation at any time. Your child can also choose to not participate and can stop the interview at any time.

Who do I call if I have questions?
If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact Laura Sage at (513) 598-9520. The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences reviews all non-medical research projects that involve human subjects to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences at (513) 558-5784. If you have concerns about the study you may also call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or you may write to the Institutional Review Board -Social and Behavioral Sciences, University Hall, Suite 300, 51 Goodman Drive, University of Cincinnati Medical Center, P.O. Box 210567, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45221-0567, or you may email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

Signature
I have read this permission form, which explains the reason for and details of this study. I have had time to review this information. I have been encouraged to ask questions and have received answers to my questions. I understand that I do not have to allow my child to participate in this study and may end their participation at any time. I give my permission to have my child in this study. I have received a copy of this form for my records.

Child’s Name Child’s Date of Birth

Signature of Participant Date

Signature and Title of Person Obtaining Consent Date
Appendix B

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
University of Cincinnati
College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services

Name of the study: What do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school.

Investigator
Laura Sage, B.S., M.A., Principal Investigator
University of Cincinnati
(513)598-9520
sagei@butlertech.org

Introduction:
Before you agreeing to participate in this study, it is important that you read this consent form and understand the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study as well as your right to withdraw from the study at any time. Please note that no guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results of the study.

Purpose of Study:
The purpose of this study is to investigate what do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school. Laura Sage from the University of Cincinnati will direct this study. Approximately ten students will be interviewed about what alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how is the alternative high school helping students to stay in school. If you would like a copy of the questions, please feel free to contact Laura Sage.

Procedures and Duration:
First, the researcher will give you a brief explanation about the study to read. She will talk with you about the study. If you agree to participate in this study, you will need to sign this form giving the researcher permission to include you in the study.

The researcher will come to your school and interview you in the social worker’s office. Your answers will be audio taped and typed onto paper. You may request a copy of the questions. The records of this study are confidential. The researcher may write about what she discovered from this study but your real name will not be used.

Risks/Discomforts:
It is not thought that anything bad will happen to you. You have the right to stop the researcher from interviewing you. You have the right to decide whether or not to remain in the study. You may discuss discomfort and risks with the Principal Investigator, Laura Sage at (513) 510-0250 or the Investigator’s Advisor, Dr. Nancy Evers at (513)556-6623 or at Nancy.Evers@uc.edu

Benefits:
You will not benefit directly from this study. But the information gathered will be useful for developing better alternative schools, better teaching methods, and curriculum.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study are private and confidential. The researcher may write about what she discovers from this study, but real names will not be used. The information that is gathered will stay confidential unless the researcher has to reveal it based on the law (for example: mandatory reporting of child abuse or immediate danger to children).
All notes, audiotapes, and records will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed when the study is over. Consent forms will be stored in a secure place for three years after the end of the study and then will be destroyed. The researcher will make every effort to protect the privacy and confidentiality of what she sees and hear in the interview. However, there is no guarantee of confidentiality if you discuss the interview with other people.

**Compensation:**
You will not receive anything from this study. But the information gathered will be useful for developing better alternative schools, better teaching methods, and curriculum.

**Right to refuse or withdraw:**
Your participation is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to participate or may discontinue participation at any time.

**Who do I call if I have questions?**
If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact Laura Sage at (513) 598-9520. The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences reviews all non-medical research projects that involve human subjects to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences at (513) 558-5784. If you have concerns about the study you may also call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or you may write to the Institutional Review Board -Social and Behavioral Sciences, University Hall, Suite 300, 51 Goodman Drive, University of Cincinnati Medical Center, P.O. Box 210567, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45221-0567, or you may email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

I HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE. I VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM FOR MY INFORMATION.

__________________________________________ ________________________
Signature of Participant Date

__________________________________________ ________________________
Signature and Title of Person Obtaining Consent Date
Appendix C

ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN
Assent to Participate in a Research Study
University of Cincinnati
College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services

Name of the study: What do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school.

Investigator
Laura Sage, B.S., M.A., Principal Investigator
University of Cincinnati
(513) 589-9520
sagea@bentleymail.org

What is the reason for this study?
The purpose of this study is to investigate what do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school. Laura Sage from the University of Cincinnati will direct this study. Approximately ten students will be interviewed about what alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how is the alternative high school helping student to stay in school. If you would like a copy of the questions, please feel free to contact: Laura Sage.

What will happen?
First, you will be given a brief explanation about the study to read. Then the researcher will talk with you about the study. If you agree to participate in this study, you will need to sign this form giving the researcher permission to include you in the study.

The researcher will come to your school and interview you in the social worker's office. Your answers will be audio taped and typed onto paper. You may request a copy of the questions. The records of this study are confidential. The researcher may write about what she discovered from this study but your real name will not be used.

How long will this take?
Your interview will last approximately one hour.

Will anything bad happen to me?
It is not thought that anything bad will happen to you. You have the right to stop the researcher from interviewing you. You may share any concerns that you have with Dr. Nancy Evers at (513) 558-8623 or at Nancy.Evers@uc.edu.

What will I gain?
You will not benefit directly from this study. But the information gathered will be useful for developing better alternative schools, better teaching methods, and curriculum.

Is this study confidential?
The records of this study are confidential. The researcher may write about what she discovered from this study, but your real name will not be used. The information that is gathered will stay confidential unless the researcher has to reveal it based on the law (for example: mandatory reporting of child abuse or immediate danger to you). All notes, audiotapes, and records will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed when the study is over. Consent forms will be stored in a secure place for three years after the end of the study and then will be destroyed.
The researcher makes every effort to protect the privacy and confidentiality of what she sees and hear in the interview. However, there is no guarantee of confidentiality if you discuss the interview with other people.

**Will I receive anything?**
You will not receive anything from this study. But the information gathered will be useful for developing better alternative schools, better teaching methods, and curriculum.

**Can I quit at anytime?**
Participating in this study is entirely your choice. If you take part, you may choose to stop your participation at any time.

**Who do I call if I have questions?**
If you have any questions about this research study, you may contact Laura Sage at (513) 598-9520. The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences reviews all non-medical research projects that involve human subjects to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences at (513) 558-5784. If you have concerns about the study you may also call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or you may write to the Institutional Review Board -Social and Behavioral Sciences, University Hall, Suite 300, 51 Goodman Drive, University of Cincinnati Medical Center, P.O. Box 210567, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45221-0567, or you may email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

______________________________
Student Name

______________________________
Student Signature Date

************************************************************************
FOR RESEARCHER USE ONLY:

Parent name ____________________________ Permission received? ____________

_______________________________________________________ ___________
Signature of research team member confirming permission/assent Date
Appendix D

Laura Sage

“What do alternative high school students perceive to be barriers to education and how the alternative high school is helping students to stay in school” Research Proposal

Proposed Interview Questions

A. Have you ever thought about dropping out of high school? If so why?
B. Have any of your friends thought about dropping out of high school? If so, why?
C. What do you think are barriers to education, and why?
   Barrier is defined as something that gets in the way or stops a person from doing something.
D. What things in your life make it difficult to finish school?
E. What barriers do you see other students facing?
   Barrier is defined as something that gets in the way or stops a person from doing something.
F. What are the toughest barriers to overcome?
   Barrier is defined as something that gets in the way or stops a person from doing something.
G. Can teachers remove these barriers?
   If yes, how? If no, why?
   Barrier is defined as something that gets in the way or stops a person from doing something.
H. Can schools remove these barriers?
   If yes, how? If no, why?
   Barrier is defined as something that gets in the way or stops a person from doing something.
I. Do the teachers at this school help students stay in school?
   If yes, what do they do?
J. Does this school help students stay in school?
   If yes, what does the school do?
K. Do teachers at this school make you feel better about school?
   If yes, what do teachers do to help you feel better about school?
L. Does the school make you feel better about school?
   If yes, what does the school do to help you feel better about school?
M. Are there other people at this school who have helped you stay in school?