VOICES FROM THE MARGINS:

TOWARDS A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO MEASURING SUCCESS IN

TYPE I ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION CAMPUSES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This critical participatory action research study lays the groundwork for a bottom-up evaluation framework for dropout recovery high schools, also known as Type I Alternative Education Campuses (T1AECs). By gathering qualitative data documenting the unique experiences and goals of T1AEC students, the research seeks to amplify the voices of young adults who reclaim their educational journey in alternative settings. The findings aim to construct an evaluation framework that centers on students' needs, supports meaningful engagement, and captures a broader range of outcomes than traditional accountability measures allow. The study holds potential to inform policy recommendations, improve school evaluation practices, and ensure that alternative education programs meet the diverse needs of students who are disenfranchised by traditional high schools.

For my mother, who told me when I was nine that it is tradition to dedicate your first

book to your mother.

Thank you for never doubting that I would get around to publishing something

eventually.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTATIONS

AEC	Alternative Education Campus
BCHF	Buckeye Community Hope Foundation
DEW	Department of Education and Workforce (Ohio)
DOPR	Dropout Prevention and Recovery
ED	Economically disadvantaged
ESL	Early School Leaver/Early School Leaving
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015
IEP	Individualized Education Plan
NACSA	National Association of Charter School Authorizers
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
NHCI	New Horizons Career Institute (pseudonym)
ODE	Ohio Department of Education
OGT	Ohio Graduation Test
OST	Ohio State Test
PROHS	Phoenix Rising Opportunity High School (pseudonym)
RLA	Renaissance Learning Academy (pseudonym)
SEA	State Education Agency
SES	Socioeconomic Status
T1AEC	Type I Alternative Education Campus

It is reasonable to assume that a student who has been attending school for 13 years will be able

to provide functional insights into school improvement. (Darling & Price, 2004, p. 71)

Introduction

This critical participatory action research study seeks to collect street-level data from students and other shareholders to inform the development of an evaluation framework that more fully captures the range of outcomes experienced in Type I Alternative Education Campuses (T1AECs), which are charter schools (also known as community schools) that aim to provide a path to graduation for students who have disengaged from traditional school settings. The framework will be developed for internal use in assessing the implementation of T1AECs' programs by the Buckeye Community Hope Foundation, a community school sponsor that provides oversight and technical support to such programs; however, this study seeks to recommend change at the state level as sponsors' technical support and accountability practices are informative to state educational policy in Ohio.

Statement of Problem

Charter schools have been a part of the Ohio landscape since the late 1990's, and among these diverse institutions are schools aimed at serving students who are at risk of leaving school without earning a diploma. Referred to as Dropout Prevention and Recovery (DOPR) programs, these schools represent a specific niche among charter schools, serving a majority "students who are not younger than sixteen years of age and not older than twenty-one years of age, [and]... are at least one grade level behind their cohort age groups or experience crises that significantly interfere with their academic

progress such that they are prevented from continuing their traditional programs" (*O.R.C. 3314.35*, 2014). In 2014, Ohio formally recognized the unique nature of these schools by offering a temporary waiver shielding them from closure under the accountability laws that govern charter schools (*O.R.C. 3314.36*, 2014). The number of DOPR charter high schools in Ohio can be reasonably anticipated to grow since Governor DeWine signed legislation in 2021 to strike down geographic restrictions on where charter schools can open across the state (Ohio Am. Sub. H.B. 110, 2021).

The Buckeye Community Hope Foundation (BCHF), a nonprofit charter sponsor[1] that provides oversight and technical support to public community schools, is poised to grow the DOPR portion of its portfolio. During the 2023-24 school year, BCHF authorized 52 community schools, 14 of which were DOPR campuses. It can be anticipated that more operators will apply to open DOPR high schools now that charter schools are permitted to do so in any district in Ohio, as early school leaving (ESL) is a statewide concern and not restricted to the "challenged districts" that were previously the only locations permitted to operate charter schools (Balfanz et al., 2009; Ohio Department of Education, 2017).

BCHF reviews, reflects upon, and updates its internal evaluation frameworks and operating procedures annually. As part of its oversight duties, BCHF performs no fewer than two biannual reviews each year of every school in its portfolio, with additional comprehensive school reviews for incubating schools and others that need additional support (Buckeye Community Hope Foundation, 2022). While BCHF's summative evaluation for T1AECs is distinct from their traditional schools' evaluation reporting in

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[1] Note: "sponsor" and "authorizer" are synonymous and may be used interchangeably.

alignment with the differentiated state requirements for DOPR and traditional schools, the biannual review process is currently the same for all BCHF schools. Biannual reviews are intended to assess schools' implementation of their Comprehensive Plan, a document submitted annually that articulates instructional strategies and their rationale. The framework used to perform biannual reviews of all its schools is meant to be sufficiently open-ended to capture the successes and needs of a diverse range of programs, reflecting the autonomy that is at the heart of the school choice movement and allowing schools to develop program-specific SMART goals that are tailored to their individual missions and foci.

This review supplements state accountability data in informing school leaders' decisions surrounding school programs as well as BCHF's goal-setting and technical support priorities. However, as BCHF's efficacy as an authorizer is evaluated in part based on the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's (DEW, formerly ODE) accountability measures for its sponsored schools, BCHF must navigate the annual evaluation process largely within the confines of DEW's evaluation framework, which is informed by many of the same accountability metrics as the traditional School Report Card. The metrics emphasized by DEW are often problematic. For instance, DEW measures graduation rates based on the Every Student Succeed Act's (ESSA) verbiage that defines these statistics based on a student's 9th-grade cohort year. Under ESSA guidelines, a student who enrolled in 9th grade at a traditional high school in Fall 2018, left in 2020, then re-engaged at an AEC in Spring of 2022 will hurt that AEC's 4-year and 5-year graduation rates simply by not finishing at the same time as their original cohort, regardless of the progress they make at the AEC.

DOPR programs are especially unique among community schools: the needs of–

and desired outcomes for–ESL students are unlike those of the traditional, STEM, early

childhood, and dual-immersion schools that make up the rest of BCHF's portfolio. When

considering two different systems that each have different inputs and desired outputs, it

would only be appropriate to consider using a different set of tools to evaluate these

systems; BCHF's summative annual DOPR evaluation report does use a distinct format

from the reporting format for traditional schools, but the full range of tools that inform

sponsor and school leader decision-making–including the biannual review–should be

differentiated for the sake of alignment. Limited documentation of students' own

narratives of their experiences, needs, and challenges currently exists to illuminate the

specific outcomes such tools would need to address. Therefore, this study seeks to

amplify the voices of the most critical stakeholders in this process: students who are at

risk of leaving school without a diploma, students who have disengaged from traditional

school, and students who have identified their own reasons to re-engage by enrolling in a

DOPR program.

Overview of Framework, Methods, and General Research Questions

An education equity mindset is the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that support

working towards equitable education for all students (Nadelson et al., 2019). As this

orientation is closely aligned with the defining mission of AECs, which arose from a

commitment to supporting students who might otherwise slip through the cracks, the

education equity mindset framework underpins my research questions and methods.

Framed through an education equity lens, I offer the following research questions: (a) To

what degree do current AEC programs align to needs for asset building, equity, and

"street level" needs of students, and (b) how can an evaluation framework uplift bottom-up "street data" to fully capture the impact AECs have on students? To address these questions using an equity mindset, I will take a participatory action research approach, collecting information from stakeholders about what a successful AEC experience consists of so that I may develop a construct to measure an AEC's strengths and needs in delivering such outcomes.

Review of Related Literature

Frameworks Informing the Study

Nadelson et al. (2019) delineated the education equity mindset as six attributes that reflect a commitment to access to opportunity within education systems: a belief in the potential for success for all learners, valuing and cultivating informal leadership, facilitating student-centered learning, knowing and understanding student population needs, a sense of personal responsibility for promoting equity, and culturally responsive teaching. An education equity mindset is not only essential for ensuring that outcomes and intentions are aligned, but it is also critical to establishing the support that all students need to achieve their highest abilities (Buckner, 2021; Nadelson et. al, 2019). As the Ohio ESL crisis disproportionately impacts male students of color and low-socioeconomic status communities (NCES, 2022), an education equity framework is critical to addressing this problem.

In addition, I seek to develop a method of assessing the strengths and needs of DOPR high schools that is conducted from an assets-based perspective. Traditional discourse surrounding ESLs, including the term "dropout" itself, casts them from a deficit viewpoint, defining students by the skills and experiences that they are missing. Deficit-

based models have been shown to foster inequity, systemic oppression, and ignorance of the impacts of school policy on underserved students (Welborn et al., 2022). If we wish to promote an assets-based perspective of these students, we must move away from the deficit language used by the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce to discuss ESLs. Stuart (2020) pointed out that even the more neutral "Early School Leaver" label implies that the students are the ones who choose to do the leaving, when in many cases it may be more accurate to describe them as having been "pushed" or "facilitated" out of school, implying that the label still has room to evolve. The Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group's report likewise recommended that terminology used in state policy be changed to reflect a more positive view of these students and programs (Ohio Department of Education, 2017). If applied to state policy, replacing the term "Dropout Prevention and Recovery High School" with "Alternative Education Campus" would also better align the state of Ohio with terminology used across the nation (Ohio Department of Education, 2017).

Safir and Dugan's (2021) Street Data framework advocate a bottom-up approach to constructing educational systems–including the process of assessing such programs–with "street-level" formative data that situates students' needs at the center. An extension of Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucrat framework, which elevates the knowledge of client-facing professionals who effectively create policy when they exercise discretion during day-to-day operations, Street Data amplifies the voices of student stakeholders and makes decisions from data gathered at the level of instructional delivery from teachers. Piiparinen (2006) likewise advocated a bottom-up approach to developing workforce programming in which student-clients' needs are placed at the center of the planning

process, as students often feel that traditional top-down initiatives are out of touch with their needs and do not show them respect. Such top-down approaches tend to apply "across the board" measures that do not consider the needs of students as individuals, resulting in less retention.

These three essential frameworks offered guiding principles that illuminated a process to develop a stakeholder-centered evaluation process; along with the literature review, the frameworks also drive the initiation of the process by informing the development of questionnaire items and interview/focus group questions. A visual model of the Stakeholder-Responsive Evaluation Cycle can be found in Appendix A. This model will be discussed in greater depth in the Action Research and Design section that follows the literature review.

Related Research

Strictly speaking, AECs represent three different types of programs; this study concerns only one. Ohio DOPR schools are an example of Type I AECs (T1AECs), schools of choice providing alternative paths to graduation. They are distinct from Type II AECs, often called "last chance" schools, that enroll students on a compulsory basis who have been facilitated out of traditional settings as an alternative to involvement in the judicial system. Type III AECs are designed to support students with intellectual, emotional, or behavioral disabilities whose needs cannot be met in a traditional setting, even with the support provided by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in place (Raywid, 1994). Type II and Type III AECs are correctional in nature: the former corrects from a disciplinary perspective, while the latter corrects from a therapeutic one (Aron, 2003). Type I AECs, however, represent true educational alternatives, and Raywid

(1994) found that these alternatives tend to boast a greater rate of success than the other two types.

Several themes emerged in a review of existing literature about T1AEC high schools. Much effort has been made to identify and document the reasons high school students leave school early, and a great deal of discourse exists surrounding the measures stakeholders in traditional high schools and afterschool programs may take to prevent ESL. In contrast, less research has been published addressing comprehensive, self-contained alternative education institutions. Research into the prevention of ESL is often connected to the special needs of specific student populations served by AECs (Flueckiger, 2021; Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1993; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Steinka-Fry et al., 2013), particularly Type III programs. While less formal academic research exists concerning the evaluation of AEC programs–and with little of the sparse extant research addressing T1AECs specifically–stakeholders such as state education agencies and charter authorizing professional organizations have published some recommendations grounded in research.

Depth and Impact of the Problem. 2.0 million people between the ages of 16 and 24 were status dropouts in 2020, an overall rate of 5.3 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). While early school leaving is a nationwide issue, 70 percent of ESLs are concentrated in 17 states, one of which is Ohio (Balfanz et al., 2009). It is well-documented that not graduating from high school is linked to a number of negative consequences, including reduced earnings, higher unemployment rates, higher rates of institutionalization, and worse health outcomes (McFarland et al., 2020; Munk et al., 2021). This impacts the whole community: compared to an individual who completes

high school, the average early school leaver costs the economy $272,000 over their lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, higher reliance on government-subsidized benefits, and higher rates of criminal activity (Levin and Belfield, 2007). Without question, then, it behooves us to facilitate the completion of this invaluable credential for as many young people as possible. To help address this concern, in 2014 the Ohio General Assembly approved the formal designation of Dropout Recovery and Prevention charter high schools as a distinct category among community schools, though charter schools designed to help vulnerable or otherwise underserved students graduate from high school in a nontraditional setting have existed in Ohio for longer.

In addition to receiving a DOPR Report Card evaluation from DEW, T1AECs are evaluated–as are all charter schools–by their sponsors. To provide a more holistic view of each school and its implementation of instructional strategies, BCHF performs a review at least once per semester that synthesizes input from school leadership, teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders with classroom observations and compliance reports. The review report supplements quantitative accountability data to provide a narrative of each school's strengths, needs, and progress toward mission and goals. BCHF's current biannual review framework is the same for all types of schools. The biannual review protocols are intended to be open-ended enough to capture a wide range of school missions, goals and outcomes and were developed to be applicable to all types of community schools, but the School Improvement Team at BCHF recognizes a need for a separate framework tailored to Alternative Education Campuses (AECs). Furthermore, much of the data BCHF analyzes to help determine a school's tier of support–or even whether the school should remain open–must be drawn from the problematic

accountability measures provided by DEW; at minimum, BCHF aims to develop an

approach to evaluation that maximizes alignment and actionability across BCHF's

accountability and support processes for T1AECs.

A 2019 report from the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group of the

State Board of Education recommended separate measures for DOPRs that factor in

many additional variables other than raw achievement, as well as an increase in authority

of sponsors to oversee decisions regarding DOPRs. The current state accountability

framework relies on flawed factors such as the 9th-grade-cohort based graduation rates

defined by ESSA. Moreover, as agencies like the Dropout Recovery Work Group have

pointed out, DEW's DOPR Report Card framework is primarily centered upon academic

achievement and fails to capture outcomes like career credentialing and post-graduation

skills attainment. Overall, the DEW framework is not aligned with the mission-specific

SMART goals oriented around professional certification and credentialing that drive most

T1AECs. The DOPR Report Card similarly fails to acknowledge the wraparound services

many AECs provide to support students' holistic physical, mental and emotional health

needs both in and outside of school. As a representative of one of the state's largest

sponsors of DOPR schools, my best route to effecting change in this area would be to

develop a robust, outcomes-aligned framework that BCHF can present to inform state

policy.

Currently, no framework that fully considers the 2019 Dropout Recovery Work

Group recommendations and other best practices is readily available in Ohio. Other

frameworks that may have been developed largely remain unpublished. BCHF has up to

this point tried to develop a narrative framework that fully captures the wide range of

successes and challenges across its diverse portfolio of schools, but no matter how an authorizer may try to temper DEW's quantitative accountability measures for DOPR schools in their oversight procedures, the sponsor evaluation process demands that these measures remain a central consideration. Most notably, the voices of students served by AECs have been largely excluded from the development of this process.

One of the current professional development and advancement priorities of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is to promote the use of equitable design frameworks to develop community-centered schools that empower stakeholders and give them a voice in their school's vision and processes. NACSA's recommendation is that sponsors tailor their processes to the needs and program goals of their individual portfolios. This study seeks to refine a set of steps that other authorizers may be able to employ to develop responsive evaluation processes that document the successes and needs of schools with nontraditional instructional models and programs.

Reasons for Early School Leaving. Ohio schools must primarily serve students ages 16-22 in order to qualify as a DOPR, but students often find themselves confronted with factors that set them at risk of leaving school at an earlier age. Specifically, the decision whether to promote a ninth grader to the tenth grade on their first attempt is highly predictive of a given student's likelihood of graduating, with students who must repeat the 9th grade becoming very susceptible to disengaging (Blonsky, 2020). An abundance of research has sought to identify factors that predict ESL, including indicators ranging from elementary-level grades and absences (Hess et al., 1990) to affective, academic, behavioral and cognitive engagement (Alexander et al., 2001; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Barry & Reschly, 2012; Finn, 1993; Osterman, 2000).

The prevailing conclusion that can be drawn from this literature is that the relevant

factors are complex and variable. Students may leave school for a vast number of

personal, school, systemic, family, or community reasons, but typically the most common

reasons for leaving school fall into four categories: life events; fade-outs, in which

students grow disillusioned and stop seeing the point of going to school; push outs, in

which students with chronic academic, behavior or attendance issues are facilitated out of

school by administration and staff; and failure to succeed in school (Blonsky, 2020).

Moustakim (2015) examined the language used to discuss youth "disaffectation"

through the lens of critical discourse analysis and found a mismatch between teachers'

deficit-based narratives of the students and students' counter-narratives, which frame

their disengagement as a rational response to their perceptions of conflicts with teachers

and de-motivating curricula. He found that positive relationship-building between

teachers and students was an effective approach to re-engaging students experiencing

factors that increased their risk of ESL. Positive teacher-student relationships have been

shown in other studies, too, to reduce the number of students who leave school early

(Felner et al., 2007; Riehl, 1999), and that they are especially powerful for mediating the

mental health factors that can contribute to ESL (Holen et al., 2018). Schools lacking a

culture of inclusion and acceptance have also been found to facilitate ESL, especially

when combined with other risk factors, and ESLs often cite a lack of feeling of

belongingness in their process of becoming disengaged (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lewis &

Basford, 2020; Markovic-Cekic et al., 2017; Ozmusul, 2016). Students who enjoy a sense

of belonging tend to be more resilient, a trait that is negatively correlated with ESL

(O'Sullivan, 2018).

Swadener (2000) deconstructed the rhetoric of risk that is often attributed to students and families inhabiting the "margins" of society, noting that it is part of a larger pattern of vocabulary centered on deficits and failure. During the 1990s, the "at-risk" label fell into common usage to describe the same groups who had been considered "disadvantaged" in the 1980s, which in turn was intended to create distance from the painful baggage accompanying more overtly problematic terminology like "culturally deprived" or "culturally deficient" that dominated discourse in the 1960s and '70s. She recommended replacing the language of deficiency with vocabulary that encourages people and institutions working with these families to look for strengths to build upon. While simply substituting assets-oriented phrases such as "at promise" or "at potential" alone is obviously not sufficient to shift societal views of "othered" youths and families– let alone remedy the systemic challenges that create difficult circumstances for such children–intentionally shifting this discourse to affirm the human potential of all students, regardless of their life circumstances. Society and schools need to work together to support at-promise students and pay attention to more than just their academic performance: factors such as family, socioeconomic background, systemic factors within schools, and students' perceptions of the workforce as a potentially better source of belonging and security all require our consideration (Hachey, 2016).

To properly meet the challenges facing ESLs, we must understand the factors that lead to disengagement. Insight into these factors is a starting point in ascertaining Type I AEC students' needs, particularly those left unmet in traditional school settings. However, fewer studies have devoted attention to factors involved in students' re-engagement, a phenomenon that is equally worthy of attention. It is critical to fully

illuminate the processes students participate in when they decide to alter their trajectory and persist to graduation if we hope to highlight and capture the ingredients that define a successful T1AEC.

Preventing Early School Leaving & Promoting Re-Engagement. Since the 2001 passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the majority of states have codified measures designed to lower dropout rates and increase graduation rates (Almeida et al., 2008). These include a wider range of initiatives to identify at-promise students and intervene early, transform or replace high schools with low graduation rates, and establish a broader variety of in-school, standalone, and community programs offering wraparound services to students. There is a broader recognition of the systems contributing to ESL, and that helping prevent ESL is the responsibility of not just a school, but the entire community (Cantelon & LaBoeuf, 1997; Hachey, 2016; Markovic-Cekic et al., 2017).

To develop an effective framework for evaluating DOPR-designated high schools, we must have a working understanding of what a successful Type I AEC looks like. Lewis & Basford (2020) outlined a case study of an exemplary AEC that they proposed could be generalized to an overarching model for serving adolescents who have had adverse childhood experiences. This AEC's five core defining characteristics were (a) a family-style atmosphere; (b) a small, close-knit community; (c) creative responses to attendance problems; (d) flexibility and patience on the part of teachers in the classroom; and (e) innovative programs focused on providing students with trade skills that would make them competitive in the workforce. Notably, the AEC in the case study had a flexible model of earning credits in which students could spend a highly variable amount of time earning a "capstone." Ohio does not currently permit such a system; students

must earn credits on a semester or quarterly system, though the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group's 2019 report recommended the state adjust its policy to permit DOPRs to offer flexible credit models to meet the unique needs of individual students. Another case study of a midwestern, urban charter AEC by Iachini et al. (2013) also cited a small size and small classes, a tight-knit school community climate, and an individualized approach to teaching and learning as factors that students identified as critical to their re-engagement. These factors, along with a carefully selected and trained staff, wrap-around services and flexible planning for intermittent attendance, were likewise cited in a case study of a proven Minneapolis-area dropout recovery high school by Basford, Lewis & Trout (2021), who coined the term *institutional plasticity* to define these practices.

Lim (2022) studied the characteristics of ESLs who re-engaged through vocational education and training (VET) and found that ESLs who had engaged in VET at the age of 15 were more likely to re-engage with education through VET at a later time. His finding was that career-planning activities like VET can help develop career aspirations for both students and their parents, giving them a reason to push towards graduation and obtain a credential. Portela Pruaño et al. (2022) also identified both "push" and "pull" reasons students who leave school may decide to later re-engage, revealing that the interplay between these factors is complex but that students' beliefs regarding these factors as well as their sense of agency are key to the re-engagement process. They found that although programs that prevent ESL before it happens have demonstrated the best outcomes (European Commission, 2011), T1AECs remain

necessary because, among other reasons, transitions between education and the workforce tend to be complex, prolonged, and involve multiple movements.

Case studies and research into the attributes and outcomes of successful AECs provide clues about what can be generalized to become part of a formula DOPR-designated schools might follow to achieve the best outcomes. Since sponsor evaluation frameworks will inevitably be prescriptive to a degree, BCHF's framework will need to consider the commonalities–and make allowances for the differences–across programs that have proven to be effective and sustainable. Such a framework has the additional utility of providing guidance and support to school leadership as well. There is still a lack of documentation of ESL students' voices, though, and this guiding framework should support the needs and outcomes valued by the students themselves.

Alternative Education Campuses in Ohio

In 2019 designated-DOPR schools served approximately 15,000 students across the state. AECs of choice represent a powerful answer to the crisis of early school leaving. While students who attend T1AECs report experiences in traditional schools that are isolating, disengaged, and marked by a lack of respect from teachers and staff, their experiences in T1AECs are often reported to be the opposite: students feel respected and trusted by teachers, and that they are given more responsibility, control and trust to make more decisions about their own trajectory (Glavan et al., 2022). House (2017) performed a cost-benefit analysis of Ohio's DOPR schools and found a net positive balance, concluding that students and communities would suffer if these schools were to be shut down.

Until 2014, schools with the DOPR designation were protected from closure by a waiver shielding them from Ohio's mandate to close charter schools with poor academic indicators (*O.R.C. 3314.36*, 2014). When this waiver expired, however, the need to develop some sort of accountability framework that did not punish AECs for serving youth who had been or were at risk of being facilitated out of traditional high schools became urgent. The DOPR Report Card that was developed as a result utilizes many of the same accountability measures as the traditional school report card, though an alternative grading scale is applied. According to a report made by the Ohio State Board of Education's Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group, the development of a distinct DOPR Report Card represents movement in the right direction; however, it is still inadequate to measure and communicate the outcomes and successes of alternative education campuses (Ohio Department of Education, 2017). For instance, one of the basic accountability measures DEW uses is the Progress Measure, which consists of measuring student growth over two test administrations of a state-selected, norm-referenced test in reading and math. The content of this test is not aligned with career tech pathways, so students see little to no relevance of the testing to program completion or graduation, while the high mobility rates of students necessitate that schools administer the tests as quickly as possible (the minimum time between tests is 13 weeks) in order to ensure completing the mandated two testing sessions for each student. An analysis performed by BCHF found that most students do not stay at a DOPR school for longer than 2 years, so it is not realistic to expect them to provide full remediation in academic skills when the most urgent outcome is typically career readiness, not necessarily college readiness.

While the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted or delayed many educational reforms, ODE did engage in a process to develop new accountability measures, including ones that were more appropriate for DOPR-designated schools. The 2019 report made by the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group to the State Board of Education observed that the early measures the state was taking to develop a specialized DOPR accountability framework left more work to be done to ensure these schools were evaluated fairly to properly capture the positive outcomes seen in T1AECs. The DOPR Report Card that is currently in use addresses some, but not all, recommendations made in the report. Specifically, the new DOPR Report Card puts more emphasis on graduation rates and promises to unveil a new career readiness measure as early as 2025, but still is partially reliant on traditional academic performance indicators, albeit on an adjusted scale.

Nearly a quarter of the students in DOPR-designated schools in Ohio attend a school that is sponsored by BCHF, making it one of the largest sponsors of DOPRs in the state. Given that the processes used to evaluate sponsors heavily weigh academic achievement at schools overseen by each sponsor as documented by DEW's accountability measures, sponsors will find a disincentive to approve and authorize too many of these much-needed schools unless changes in this accountability process are made. In order for sponsors like BCHF to be successful during the sponsor evaluation process, they currently must balance DOPRs that underperform according to the state's metrics with more "high-performing" traditional schools in order to maintain an "effective" or "exemplary" rating. Current evaluation frameworks privilege traditional measures of success, which penalize these students–along with any organization that is tied to their success–as what is "traditional" has already been shown to be ineffective for

them. Therefore, there is a disincentive to open charter T1AECs, even though many communities might benefit from their programs. Furthermore, DOPRs might hesitate to implement programs that can help students be career-ready or obtain wraparound services in favor of policy and curriculum that ultimately make the programs more closely resemble what is done in traditional high schools, which have already failed to meet the needs of these students.

From this understanding of Ohio's history and policy with DOPR schools, two pressing sub-questions emerged: (a) *What is missing from existing DOPR accountability measures?* (b) *Which accountability measures might be misleading as they are currently applied to DOPRs?*

Best Evaluation Practices of AECs and Dropout Prevention Programs. Given that the reasons for ESL are broad and complex, the research domain for prevention programs would include evaluations of any program provided to students for which ESL is an outcome variable, regardless of whether the program's stated purpose is ESL prevention. Therefore, to fully represent research on this topic, a very broad scope of programs might be included (Wilson & Tanner-Smith, 2013). Because this research is interested in the holistic services and support provided by T1AECs, however, this section will focus on the evaluation of self-contained and standalone programs.

Fortune et al. (1991) investigated evaluation practices of school-within-a-school dropout prevention programs and in-house initiatives to predict and prevent ESL, which were at that time the only two widespread approaches to combating early school leaving, and found that the evaluation process is confounded by the fact that ESLs have varied characteristics. Moreover, relatively few evaluations of dropout programs had been

published, and the ones that exist had generally measured changes in attendance, achievement, or attitudes towards school, depending on the specified goals of the given prevention program rather than tangible achievement outcomes like persistence to graduation. The challenges of evaluating programs serving ESLs, then, had emerged well before AECs were common in the United States.

The passage of NCLB in 2001 initiated growth in the repertoire of school reforms, including strategies used to reduce ESL rates and increase graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2009). There has also been a shift in the discourse surrounding ESLs as perspectives of these students have changed: there is a greater understanding that students don't always leave simply because they have a "poor attitude" about school, but often because schools fail to counteract the pull of the labor market with strategies to instill a sense of belonging and engage students (Balfanz et al., 2009; Stuart, 2020). Aside from establishing AECs to offer an alternative for ESL and at-promise students, strategies proposed and implemented in some states to increase high school completion rates include capacity-building to implement appropriate reforms, funneling federal funds to districts and states with the most urgent ESL problems, and abandoning the rhetoric that "nothing works for these students" to attempt to transform schools with low graduation rates (Almeida et al., 2010). As innovation has increased, though, there remains a glaring gap in the literature surrounding how to evaluate the success of these various initiatives. Evaluations of AECs are typically done on an individual school basis and are rarely published beyond the Ohio School Report Card and sponsor annual reports.

Laurie Schroeder and Heather Ross of Innovative Quality Schools, a Minnesota authorizer, developed the Next Generation Assessment Portfolio System framework

(2022) for balanced accountability measures with schools like alternative education campuses in mind. In addition to more traditional academic performance measures, their framework considers social-emotional learning, career readiness, and school-specific goals. Of particular note is that within IQS's NGAPS framework, each school defines its own goals for growth and identifies means of measuring progress towards each goal in its individual contract with the sponsor. For instance, one of the T1AECs in the IQS portfolio developed a "one-year graduation rate" metric based on students' rate of credit completion during their final year of high school relative to the percentage of time that the student attended the school that year (Paladin Career Technical High School, n.d.).

As for quantitative academic growth measurement instruments, Angrist et al. (2022) developed the race-balanced progress measure to calculate school efficacy. With a simple regression adjustment, they found a method for calculating a school's causal effect on achievement that largely accounts for the effects of race-based selection bias. Using state test score data from two school districts where students are assigned to schools by a centralized assignment system, they calculated the impact of racial selection bias on progress measures, then developed an algorithm to determine the impact a school has on student achievement that subtracts the effect of this selection bias. This tool was developed using middle school data to help work towards desegregating schools, so there is still a need for the group's research to be replicated across other settings, including AECs, but these findings nonetheless hold promise for potential generalizability.

While discussion of evaluating AECs of choice in particular has been limited, the extant literature as a whole supports an evaluation approach that uses a mixture of quantitative and qualitative indicators. It additionally underscores a need for measures

that are aligned to well-defined outcomes; invariably, these outcomes have been defined by policymakers and administrators, not students. In order to develop evaluation frameworks that support AECs in fully meeting students' needs, we must align our metrics with the outcomes of value to the student. For instance, many studies of programs designed to prevent ESL assessed program outcomes by measuring changes in students' attitudes toward school. If we were to ask these students what unmet needs needed to be addressed by an intervention program, I would challenge the researchers conducting these studies to find a student who would reply, "My real problem is that I need to have a better attitude towards school." To progress beyond a surface understanding of the push and pull factors that can affect disengagement or re-engagement, it is necessary to hear students' perspectives of their needs and obstacles. As the most important stakeholders in T1AECs, they are entitled to a voice in defining the outcomes documented during the evaluation process.

Action Research Design and Methods

To address my problem of practice from an emancipatory perspective, I selected a critical participatory action research design following a phenomenological approach. While the broader project utilized mixed methods, the data collected for this study was primarily qualitative in nature; during this phase, a quantitative survey was also piloted to maximize the quality of the qualitative data collection process by suggesting insights into the relative importance of themes, specific phenomena worthy of deeper exploration, and guiding questions that point to potential avenues for future research.

Research Role and Positionality

My own personal experiences as an educator of primarily traditionally underserved populations affect how I view matters of the profession, offering both advantages and challenges that impacted my approach. On one hand, my familiarity with the field of education and this student population aided my questioning and helped me identify markers and cues signaling a need for elaboration; however, I was also susceptible to inserting my own experiences and beliefs into the dialogue and data interpretation. I have developed my own notions about what a successful AEC does and needs, which may or may not contradict students' perspectives. I also must recognize that I was a student who was successful by traditional measures within the education system and benefited from the privileges conferred by my ethnicity and socioeconomic status, so in many important respects I was an outsider where T1AEC students are concerned. As a result, I approached this population from an etic perspective.

In working with administrators, however, I was positioned as less of an outsider. While I was not a member of these school organizations myself, I was a representative of an organization that is interested in their success; although I have never worked as a school administrator, most of the representatives on my team have some experience as department, school or district leaders. As a result, some school leaders may view me as an insider to the world of school leadership, while others may perceive me as a "critical friend" providing oversight and advice (Appleton, 2011). Over time I have worked to build trusting relationships with these school leaders and establish that I am not there to catch them making mistakes, but I remained mindful of how my relationship with them as sponsor representative could color our interactions. As it was typically a school leader

who would broker introductions between myself and students, a number of memos in the margins of field notes documented reflections on these dynamics.

Positioning the Study

To better understand the needs and lived experiences of ESLs, I adopted a postmodern ontological point of view, which argues that reality is constructed–and limited–by the linguistic structures we use to define and constrain it (Hatch, 2018). In other words, reality exists through discourse (Nkoane, 2012). Finding it also necessary to understand how students' experiences are situated within the systems in place that impact their lives in and outside of school (Paris, 2012), I aligned my study with an emancipatory paradigm aimed at developing a more complete picture of these systems to dismantle the obstacles preventing ESLs from fully accessing educational opportunity. To date, the discourse of ESLs themselves has been largely absent from the literature documenting their experiences. Overall, my alignment with postmodern philosophy makes me predisposed to qualitative methods for research into the lived experiences of ESLs, as a full picture of their lives moving within these systems cannot be separated from the contexts in which they live and learn or be meaningfully measured solely with straightforward numerical constructs.

To inform the development of an evaluation framework for T1AECs, this action research sought to study the aspirations of ESLs through their counter-narratives about their disengagement and re-engagement journeys. According to Reason & Bradbury (2008), participatory action research "seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and

their communities." In other words, it is an empowering approach to improving communities by engaging the involvement of key stakeholders throughout the research process, disrupting traditional hierarchies by reducing the power dynamic between *researcher* and *subject.* It also breaks down the distinction between those who construct new knowledge and those who are impacted by research.

Critical participatory action research deepens the connection between education and social change, revealing the ways that societal systems perpetuate disempowerment and injustice in the process (Kemmis et al., 2014). It is a social practice that sets out to change social practices, a process for opening up space for all voices to be heard within the public sphere. Kemmis et al. (2014) argued that action research might concern itself less with the pursuit of contributing to *knowledge* and more with contributing to *history,* i.e., critical action research seeks to align research goals with positive change that uplifts the individuals and communities we study. This research study embraces this vision.

A phenomenological approach seeks to document and understand the lived experiences of participants with respect to the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Grenier, 2019), in this case students' goals and processes surrounding re-engagement in T1AECs. A survey of re-engaged T1AEC students will be used to develop questions for focus groups and interviews. These focus groups and semi-structured interviews will solicit counternarratives from ESLs elaborating on their personal goals as well as the push and pull factors that drive disengagement and re-engagement. Furthermore, surveys and semi-structured interviews will be conducted with administrators and teachers in T1AECs to develop an understanding of challenges and technical support needs that might be addressed with an informative, impactful biannual review.

This study aimed to democratize the development of knowledge by amplifying the voices of often-marginalized students, setting the stage to involve all stakeholders in the process of developing a framework that maximizes the quality of technical support provided by the school sponsor. Since the study was focused on the needs of students with histories of being underserved in traditional schools, a critical participatory action research approach was identified as the most appropriate way to frame answers to questions about how these students are facilitated out of traditional school systems, what factors lead to re-engagement, what outcomes these students hope to achieve, and how T1AECs can best support students as they pursue these outcomes.

Site and Session Descriptions

The sites where this research study took place include three BCHF-sponsored DOPR high schools in two urban metropolitan areas and one semi-rural micropolitan region, as well as sites chosen to conduct interviews or focus groups and engage in other data collection methods. The target population for this study included ESLs who had experienced different aspects of the disengagement/re-engagement journey, with participants representing three categories: (a) students who had enrolled in a T1AEC immediately upon entering high school after being labeled "at-risk" in middle school, (b) students who had transferred directly from a traditional high school into the T1AEC without spending a considerable period of time as status dropouts, and (c) students who had spent a period of time disengaged from school before deciding to re-engage by enrolling in a T1AEC to make up missing credits and graduate.

While all focus groups and interviews reflected a sequence informed by Dewees's (2006) Relational Model, the format and procedures for each session organically evolved

to mirror the structural norms and organizational culture of their respective research sites, which are profiled below.

Renaissance Learning Academy.[*] Located in a medium-sized urban setting, Renaissance Learning Academy (RLA) was nearing the end of its third year of operation when six students met with me in the meeting room of a public library near the school. While some students in this group had transferred into RLA more recently, several of these participants had been present since the school's inaugural year. As is typical of culturally diverse U.S. cities whose neighborhoods were impacted by discriminatory lending practices, the legacy of redlining haunts the surrounding community in the form of persistent racial segregation; approximately 90% of RLA's enrollment are students of color, while 100% of RLA students are classified as economically disadvantaged.

Students at RLA enjoy several options for Career Technical Education (CTE) pathways, including Construction, Health Science, Arts and Communication, and Business Administration. Of the three T1AECs that served as research sites in this study, RLA is the school that most closely resembles a traditional high school at first glance: students begin classes at 8:30 in the morning, attend eight 40-minute blocks of instruction, and are dismissed at 2:30. In addition to its career tech offerings and scheduled periods set aside computer-based independent credit recovery, however, RLA also distinguishes itself with a House System modeled after the culture-building initiative developed and championed by the Ron Clark Academy (2021). On their first day of school at RLA, each of the school's 160 students (and ten teachers) is assigned at random to one of four communities within the school that engage in friendly competition and

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[*] Pseudonym chosen by researcher

team building. Members of RLA belong to their House for the duration of their tenure at the school, fostering a sense of community that transcends the boundaries of the classroom setting. The school's mission also emphasizes interdisciplinary project-based learning (PBL), though the frequency and degree of PBL implementation varies from one teacher to another.

RLA is located near a large public library branch where students often gather after school to socialize and use public computers. With the school leader's cooperation, six students agreed to participate in a 90-minute focus group session in a meeting room at that library during school hours.

New Heights Career Institute.[*] At the time of this study, New Heights Career Institute (NHCI) was in its first year of operation. Located in a semi-rural, micropolitan setting, NHCI is among the first T1AECs to capitalize upon the loosening of geographic restrictions for new community schools in Ohio. Because no tuition-free, brick-and-mortar alternatives to traditional public schools were available, high school students seeking a different route to earning a diploma typically had few, if any, options besides virtual schooling. Many of the students who eagerly enrolled at NHCI as soon as it opened its doors recounted negative experiences with attempting to complete high school online, with a significant share arriving without having successfully obtained any credits at all. Recalling the six months he had spent in school online, Bando[†] described the experience as isolating, "like being in jail, but with no people." Jesse[*] also struggled to sustain engagement with online schooling, noting that it was challenging for him to find the motivation necessary to complete assignments: "When I was doing online schooling,

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[†] Pseudonym chosen by participant

I didn't pay attention at all. I didn't do any of my work. That's just me being honest with you." In fact, whenever I inquired with NHCI students whether they might be willing to participate in a survey–whether as part of the pilot sample, or during a general administration in the future–the general consensus was that students would be quite willing to complete a survey, but only if it were offered in a pencil-and-paper format; they were resolutely uninterested in expressing themselves by typing into box prompts in a browser window.

Student demographics are reflective of the local population of residents, which is mostly White and blue-collar. With approximately 50 students enrolled during its first year, students enjoyed a comfortable, family-style atmosphere. Regular academic classes met for 45-minute periods during the first part of the day, while afternoons offered flexible opportunities for students to spend time focusing on career-based intervention and credit recovery. CTE pathways outlined in the school's Comprehensive Instructional Plan for the 2023-24 school year included Hospitality & Culinary Arts, Media Communication, Business Administration, and Early Childhood Education.

I invited NHCI students to sit for interviews, either alone or in partners or small groups, and ultimately was able to sit in a vacant classroom for one-on-one sessions with two students that each lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Phoenix Rising Opportunity High School.[*] First opening its doors in the fall of 2005, Phoenix Rising Opportunity High School (PROHS) is one of the oldest schools in BCHF's portfolio. Alongside its sister locations–which technically hold operator contracts with the same small education management organization but are in practice autonomously directed by their respective building leaders–PROHS enjoys a positive

reputation in large part due to its strong ties with community organizations and businesses, many of which support the school's mission by providing experiential learning opportunities, "earn-and-learn" placements that can lead to industry-recognized credentials, and a variety of wraparound services to address students' needs both in and out of the classroom. In addition, PROHS distinguishes itself with its academic outcomes: compared with other DOPR-designated high schools across Ohio, PROHS students are nearly twice as likely to pass high school graduation assessments (Ohio Department of Education & Workforce [DEW], 2023). In addition to Business Administration, Information Technology and Human Services CTE pathways, opportunities to earn high school credits through work-based learning exist for PROHS students who are employed in construction and childcare fields.

During the 2022-23 school year, the demographics of the approximately 600 students enrolled at PROHS were largely representative of the cultural diversity of the city in which it is located, with approximately half of its body identified as students of color. Most of the students served by the school were classified as economically disadvantaged. Consistent with its mission, annual reports, press releases and promotional materials for PROHS use assets-based language that emphasizes student choice and empowerment, and celebrations of students' successes both in and out of school are central to the staff's focus on cultivating a school culture that prioritizes positive relationships among students and staff. PROHS is open to students for extended hours, which enables students to flexibly arrive and leave school at times that can be balanced with work schedules. As the school is located in a large city with a diverse economy, vibrant culture, and relatively low cost of living, the area's resident

demographics skew younger than average. Consequently, PROHS students are generally more likely to belong to a supportive social network of peers as well as a broader range of employment opportunities than are enjoyed by the majority of teens and young adults who live in the rural community served by NHCI.

PROHS was selected as the site for the pilot survey because compelling evidence for the school's success could be observed across a wide range of metrics: various measures of academic achievement, student satisfaction, community reputation, graduation rates, employment and postsecondary educational outcomes, and staff retention all cast a spotlight on PROHS as an example of a sustainable and effective T1AEC program. In addition to encouraging students to complete the survey, the principal of PROHS set aside an office space in the school where I could chat with students, and for just over two hours, I held court while students stopped by throughout the afternoon.

These visits unfolded in much the same way they students' class at PROHS: they would drop in while traveling from one place to another, share their insights with me for a while, and then move on whenever they had either finished telling their stories or realized they had somewhere else they needed to be. The shortest visit took about fifteen minutes, while the longest student lingered for nearly an hour; in total, six students shared their perspectives with me, with most visits lasting 25-35 minutes.

Ethical and Political Considerations

Participatory action research paradigms seek to build non-hierarchical research relationships that bridge social divisions between researcher and subject (Cotterill, 1992). To achieve this aim, I had to reckon with a power differential between myself and

the participants. I have benefitted from significant socioeconomic and educational privileges compared to most at-promise and ESL students. Students in two of the three participating schools had seen me observing their classrooms and talking to their principal, activities that most likely contributed to an initial impression that I must be in a position of authority. Even without such impressions, any attempts I made to present myself as open and approachable by dressing or speaking casually during interview sessions would unlikely fully offset my advantaged status as a middle-aged White lady conducting doctoral research, a reality that set me apart as an outsider to this population. To try to mitigate this, I took time to build rapport during focus groups and interviews by asking icebreaking questions and mirroring the participants' own words when asking for elaboration, while emphasizing that their participation and responses would not be disclosed to their school or its sponsor. Moderate use of simple verbal and nonverbal techniques have been shown to enhance rapport and encourage interview subjects to speak more openly about difficult topics (Novotny et al., 2021), so I adopted strategies such as disclosing commonalities within my own life and mirroring participants' body posture when exploring personal topics; when used in moderation, these strategies are easy to implement without becoming overly burdensome to the cognitive load of the interviewer and detracting from the quality of data collection and reflexivity processes (Novotny et al., 2021). While I was intentional about how I presented myself, though, my most important priorities were to conduct myself with transparency and authenticity, frequently return to reflect upon my own potential biases and assumptions while remaining vigilant in protecting this vulnerable population of student participants.

While I addressed my professional relationship with the school and its leadership during introductions, I emphasized that I was working outside my role as sponsor representative and that their participation and responses would remain completely confidential. Findings were only shared with BCHF staff as aggregated data, anonymized excerpts, and broad patterns. While some teachers and leaders in participating schools decided to offer students a few extra credit points or other small academic incentives to encourage students to participate, students were informed both verbally and in writing that this was between themselves and their teachers: I clarified with students that I personally had no power to impact a student's grades or graduation progress, and that I would not discuss any aspect of their participation with staff at their school. Likewise, I affirmed to staff and administrators that nothing that they or their students might tell me would affect the way they are treated by BCHF (unless an administrator explicitly asked me to relay something that would help my team fulfill its technical support responsibilities) as their responses would be anonymous. I also transparently informed participants at the beginning of focus group and interview sessions that I am a mandated reporter, meaning that like any teacher, mental health counselor or therapist, I am legally bound to report actionable incidents of abuse or mistreatment that might be discussed during focus groups or interviews.

All participants in focus groups and interviews signed a consent form, and survey participants agreed that by completing the survey, they were confirming that they were eligible to participate, meaning that they were either at least 18 years of age or that I had given verbal approval after confirming receipt of a completed digital consent form from their parent or guardian. Consent forms used for this study are compiled in Appendix B.

Data Collection Methods

      Survey. A small group of students from one research site participated in a pilot survey, which will be refined by the School Improvement Team before being disseminated to a broader sample of current and potential T1AEC students across Ohio during the next stage of the cycle. Given that the full-scale survey's objective will be to inform the development of a process that accurately captures success in a T1AEC setting, I piloted the survey with a purposive sample of students from a school that is considered exemplary on the basis of its graduation rates, academic growth indicators, and ratings of student satisfaction.

      To access the pilot study, students could either scan a QR code or click a link directing them an Invitation to Participate (see Appendix B) that outlined the purpose of the study as well as the rights of participants and any anticipated risks before completing the survey (see Appendix C). Surveys collected demographic information, information about factors that inhibited engagement in traditional school settings, factors that inspired participants to re-engage in their AEC, supports they would identify as effective in facilitating their success, and the outcomes they hope to attain through their AEC. In addition to identifying opportunities to improve the survey instrument before it is disseminated at full scale, the pilot survey provided an additional layer of insight into the relative importance of themes that were explored during focus groups and interviews. Most survey items were either multiple-choice or Likert-style affective questions, though several optional, open-response items offered students additional space to elaborate on their responses or introduce new constructs I might wish to consider. The survey was formatted so that the number of items depended on participants' responses, as sections

exploring topics that did not apply to a given participant would be skipped, but participants would respond to no more than 25 multiple-choice or brief open-response questions and a maximum of 12 longer open-response questions.

Interviews and Focus Groups. Focus groups were composed of up to six participants and lasted 60-90 minutes, while individual interviews took approximately 30 minutes. Toner (2009) offered support for the use of very small focus groups, particularly when discussing issues related to marginalization among vulnerable or minority groups, noting that groups as small as two participants can yield rich and thick data without compromising validity. An additional benefit of smaller focus groups is that it is often easier to establish intimacy and reduce the sense of hierarchy (Toner, 2009).

Students were offered the option of participating in focus groups and/or via the Zoom platform, but all participants indicated they would prefer to meet in person during school hours. Sessions took place in spaces that participants indicated would be comfortable and accessible; most were conducted in a vacant classroom or office within the school's facilities, though one focus group met in a meeting room at a public library branch located a few hundred feet from their campus. I collected detailed narratives from fourteen students at BCHF-sponsored DOPR schools exploring participants' previous biographical and educational experiences, factors that have influenced their current educational trajectory, and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Sessions were semi-structured, leading with questions similar to those listed in Appendix D while leaving space to explore additional themes or topics participants introduce as they arise naturally. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) identified semi-structured protocols as an approach to data collection that allows the researcher to keep

conversations focused, but also offers the flexibility to explore unexpected ideas that arise during the course of the session. Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups made with an external voice recorder were transcribed using the Rev automated service. Participants were provided with access to transcripts for member checking.

Data Analysis Procedures

My approach to coding the qualitative data was informed by Saldaña's (2016) conception of this process as occurring in two major stages, though some elements were borrowed from Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis. As I made a cursory initial pass through transcripts to reacquaint myself with participants and their narratives, approximately ten broad provisional codes were assigned to segments of the discussion. This list of provisional codes–which emerged from a combination of salient themes from literature review, key concepts from frameworks guiding the study and a few hunches I had developed after spending time visiting DOPR schools–provided annotations that functioned as topical "landmarks" that were helpful in parsing student narratives.

During the first cycle of coding, versus codes were used to label conflicts and contrasts among individuals, groups, institutions, systems and processes (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2016). These codes highlighted dichotomies that ranged from power struggles between groups within schools (*students vs. teachers*), competing personal priorities ("*take school serious" vs. "just have fun"*), patterns of social domination (*reinforcing hierarchy vs. seeking common ground*), social-emotional concepts (*autonomy vs. submission*), misconceptions and changes of belief (*childhood dreams vs. practical aspirations*), attitudes and perspectives (*growth mindset vs. complacent*

stagnation), or key differences between traditional and alternative high schools (*"like a thousand kids" vs. "better bonds"*).

The additional cycles of coding sought to identify patterns and cluster individual codes into categories or themes (Miles et al., 2020), which were then assembled and organized through a process of code mapping (Saldaña, 2016). The key themes that emerged from this process became the basis for an operational model diagram depicting the disengagement-re-engagement-outcome process (Saldaña, 2016). The aim of this model would be to display relationships between analytic categories, which can be augmented during future phases of the developmental cycle as additional stakeholder input is appended to the student-centered model.

Procedures to Address Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Transferability

As the purposes for collecting quantitative data during this phase of the project support preparations for a larger-scale survey effort that will be undertaken as the pool of enrolled and potential T1AEC students in rural communities is expected to rapidly expand over the next two years, methods to test and confirm reliability, validity, generalizability and internal consistency will not come into play until the second phase of the cycle and therefore fall outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, several measures recommended by Shenton (2004) were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of my research.

Credibility, Authenticity, and/or Trustworthiness of Qualitative Data

Credibility. Findings will be triangulated on an ongoing basis as additional data from other stakeholders are added to the initial model diagram. Furthermore, participants were invited to participate in member checking and provided with access to transcripts,

which they could annotate with comments, corrections and feedback to ensure that their thoughts and ideas were captured accurately. In addition to emphasizing the confidential and voluntary nature of their participation, I explicitly clarified to that I was acting outside my role as a representative of the school sponsor to engage in this research.

Colleagues on the BCHF School Improvement Team who were familiar with these schools and their students were also invited to pose questions and critiques of findings through peer review, with particular consideration for input from the team's Dropout Recovery specialist. Furthermore, a detailed audit trail was maintained through digital records stored on a network cloud drive. Throughout all phases of data collection and analysis, I prioritized reflexivity (Patnaik, 2013) to maintain an openness to differences in participants' experiences. This was most frequently documented through memos with separate columns or designated sections to distinguish between description and interpretation, as well as journal entries reflecting on events and insights that were surprising, challenging, contradictory, or otherwise suggestive of potential biases that I might need to interrogate and mitigate.

Transferability. My intention is to use thick description to outline the study's design and implementation in detail to help others determine whether my findings may be transferred to their own contexts (Hesse-Biber, 2017). While the scope of this study is limited to at-promise, ESL and re-engaged students in Ohio, the use of thick description will allow others to form their own judgments about whether any of these findings may be informative to authorizers, LEAs, SEAs, etc. in other states, or any others who may benefit from a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and aspirations of similar student populations. The limited size and geographic scope of the participant sample

dictate that generalizations based on these findings must be made with caution (Hesse-Biber, 2017), so I have attempted to treat findings as context-specific where appropriate in order to maintain transparency about the likelihood of a particular insight or phenomenon being transferable or of broader relevance.

Dependability. I have attempted to provide a thorough description of this study's design and methodological procedures so that it may be repeated across different contexts (Hesse-Biber, 2017). While the findings of this study (as well as the evaluation framework that the School Improvement Team plans to develop as a result) will be specific to students, institutions and policies in Ohio, the Stakeholder-Responsive Evaluation Cycle itself could be used to develop evaluation procedures for a broader range of programs.

Confirmability. To establish objectivity, I reflected upon my own biases and assumptions as well as the power dynamics between myself and participants. These factors were disclosed in this study. In addition, the collection of memos, journal entries and audit trail that was compiled throughout this process has documented my reflections and commentary surrounding the various ways these factors have surfaced throughout the process (Birks et al., 2008). To address any gaps between data collection and analysis, I jotted down memos of thoughts, insights and interpretations made during focus groups and interviews, contributing a layer of affective and analytical depth without coloring the original data prior to engaging in the coding process. These memos also supported my efforts to document the progression from concrete description to interpretation and explanation (Birks et al., 2008) as I progressed through stages of analysis, while simultaneously providing an opportunity to mitigate bias and subjectivity (Patnaik, 2013).

In addition to directing a reflective gaze inward, I also sought external insight from "critical friends" (Appleton, 2011) both within and outside of BCHF in the form of peer review of my survey questions, interview and focus group protocols, and data analysis.

Post-Study Revision and Communication Plan

Following the completion and reporting of this study, BCHF will continue to work with Board Members, school leaders, and other stakeholders to collect additional data and continue to build upon the student-centered operational model diagram. Interviews with school leaders, administrators, and operator representatives in T1AEC schools will help triangulate student data and provide additional insights into challenges and considerations that might inform an evaluation process. Topics discussed will include strengths and criticisms of both the Ohio DOPR Report Card and BCHF's existing framework; beliefs about the trajectory of alternative and career-technical education programs; how students' needs and assets inform program design; and the types of data, measures, and insights that would be beneficial for decision-making.

The finished model will drive the development of a multifactored evaluation framework, which will be piloted over the course of at least two biannual review cycles that include stakeholder feedback and revisions. A summary of findings and resulting actions will be shared directly with participants who provided contact information as well as leaders and operators of BCHF-sponsored DOPR schools. School leaders will also be provided with a URL and printable QR-code that can be disseminated to staff, students, parents, Board Members, community partners, or other interested stakeholders if they wish.

Finally, the findings, outcomes and evaluation framework resulting from this project will be shared with audiences that could include authorizing professional organizations, community schools and sponsors in other states, and allies in the Ohio Legislature and Department of Education & Workforce.

CHAPTER TWO

RESULTS OF RESEARCH

To me, a successful outcome from school feel like— Mm, that's a good question. That's a question nobody asks… (Serenity[*], 18)

The following sections display and explain the information gathered through qualitative and quantitative data gathering. Qualitative data was gathered via focus groups and interviews and transcribed using Rev's AI-based automatic speech recognition service. In addition, some quantitative data was gathered with Google Form surveys and processed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Representations of descriptive statistical data is consistent with the template prescribed by Creswell and Guetterman (2019).

My aims for data collection were to: (a) document salient themes in discourse surrounding goals and outcomes important to T1AEC students; (b) identify commonalities and patterns across the types of competencies, knowledge and skills that T1AEC students would consider important for high school graduates; and (c) build a deeper understanding of how students perceive the role their alternative high school experiences play in advancing them towards their desired outcomes.

Qualitative Results

Once a cycle of pattern coding was complete, patterns of versus codes were arranged into a conceptually clustered matrix that, though a process of factoring patterns into broader categories and themes, ultimately evolved into a preliminary operational model diagram (Miles et al., 2020) (see Figure 1). Three overarching themes (Autonomy, Structures, Bond) that unified different patterns of versus codes emerged, with a fourth

theme (Relationships) functioning as a mediator spanning across categories. Each theme

encompasses ranges of both engagement and disengagement factors that evolved from

first cycle versus codes. In contrast, the mechanisms and social dynamics that underlie

these factors are identified in the model using the "Drivers" label. Each theme also maps

to a progression from internal to external locus of control: Autonomy factors occur at the

Student level, while Structure factors operate at the school (Institutional) level; Bonds,

which dictate how students relate to the outside world as a whole (Community), represent

factors that exist beyond the scope of both students and schools. Drivers represent the

purposes, objectives, and intentions that distinguish whether a factor is multiplicative

(i.e., nurtures engagement) or zero sum (i.e., sows' disengagement). Drivers also tend to

operate as underlying forces with a deterministic effect on students' progression towards

graduation and beyond. While the model is primarily descriptive in nature, at least some

aspects of the diagram might be alternatively viewed as a composite sequence analysis

ordering common participant experiences of engagement or disengagement as they

progress through their school experiences and emerge as adult participants in society.

Figure 1:

Preliminary Operational Model Diagram
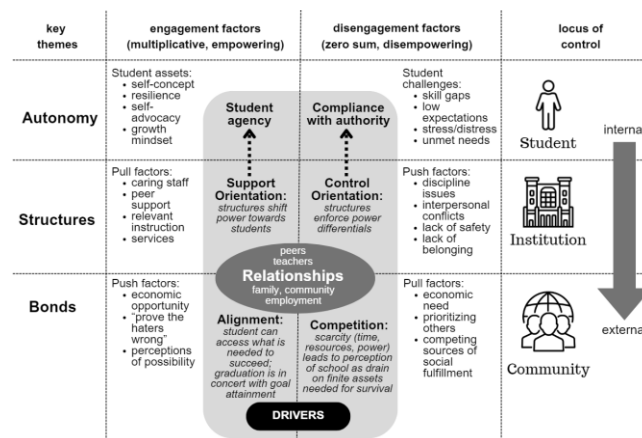
Theme 1: Autonomy. Factors that mostly operate at the student level fall under this categorical theme, consisting of dynamics that are primarily internal in nature.

Table 1:

Theme 1: Autonomy-Subthemes and Representative Quotations

Subtheme	Representative Quotations
Making own academic choices vs. being told what to do	"But that leads me into why I love working on my own time. I hate being rushed, but if I decide to rush myself, then I'm perfectly fine with it. I don't know how to explain it, but if someone else is rushing me, then I won't do it." -Jesse[*] "It's different because it is on my own pace. I can do everything on my own speed, so ain't nobody hounding me about do this, do that. It's like, I do it on my own, so I get stuff done... it gives me more, like, an opportunity to do what I need to do, and then also come here and do what I need to do better." -Brooke[†] "You want to skip and I don't have to even worry about skipping. Like you could choose what period you want to go to, choose what you want to work on… I don't have to worry about turning it in late. I can bring it home, take my time, study on it and then bring it back. If I having problems, I can just go to any one of my teachers, you help me with this, they help. And then I'll bring it back to them and they'd be like, okay, good job. Here's your score. I'm like, oh for real." -Serenity[*]
Making own social choices vs. "in everybody's face"	*Brooke:* It is not a typical high school where I'm not trying to be plain, but I don't like being in everybody's space. I don't really care to know everybody at school, so that's why I like it. It is not pressuring me to be everybody's friend or nothing like that. *Treyden*[†]: Yeah, I just go and do what I need to do and get fuck out. *Treyden, on future plans:* I don't let nobody know where I live when I move. *Researcher*: [*laughs*] You want privacy, then. Privacy. Noted. *Treyden*: Like, walk outside fucking naked type privacy, though. "I picture myself being like a, I ain't going to lie. I picture myself being like a small town type of girl. I don't want nobody. I don't want to be nobody's neighbor. It is my land." -Brooke
Ability to choose vs. not having options	*Treyden, waving at stacked boxes*: Our caps and gowns is in there. I wish it would've been more colors than just fucking red. *Researcher*: So you don't like red? *Treyden*: No, I like red, but I just wish we would've had more colors. I wish it would've just been more colors than just flat ass red.

Growth and progress vs. achievement benchmarks	*Serenity:* Success to me could mean a lot of things. It could mean growth. It could mean growing in intelligence, growing in an environment. It could mean better decisions or decision making. Success to me in all is just more so you started from something that you started somewhere, but you grew and made it somewhere else better. That's what success to me is. *Researcher*: Gotcha. So like growth, rather than checking off, 'I hit this benchmark, I hit this, I mastered this standard.' *Serenity*: Exactly. Because you can achieve success inside of a jail cell. You can go in one person and come out successful and be a whole different person and make something better of yourself successfully could be different.
Social priorities vs. academic priorities	"I got kicked out of my last school. And then I was running around, I wasn't doing shit for like two months, cause my brother had got shot when we was at home. We was in the house, and then niggas just came through, shot the crib up type shit. So I was at the hospital with him every day…. for them two months I'm like, fuck, two months. I'm like, fuck school. I might as well just be here for my brother because my mom can't do it. My grandparents can't do it, so fuck it. I'm just going to be here every day. It ain't like I'm doing shit anyways. I already got kicked out of school, shit, it ain't like I got to go. So basically, I just stayed with him until he recovered." -Treyden
	"People are like, oh, you need to take freshman year serious. I didn't take freshman year seriously. I just had fun, which led to me feeling so then I had to come here so I can get my credits… but I did fail because I was in the bathroom playing Beyblades. [*all laughing*] Ok? I definitely failed because of Beyblades. I'm letting you know that, Beyblades was my worst. They were the best things in the world back then, but they was my downfall." -Zapzo[†]

Significance for Research Questions

1. Alignment with student needs	Successful T1AECs provide students with the autonomy to make choices in how they engage with schooling, which participants perceive as one of the most important considerations for nurturing a sense of ownership and self-efficacy in their goal attainment.
2. Implications for evaluation framework	When developing interview protocols and questions for school leaders and operator representatives, the line of inquiry should aim to connect the dots between student choice, organizational structure & post-graduation outcomes.

Theme 2: Structures. Factors operating at the school or institution level were largely structural in nature. Some structures were developed formally and intentionally, such as school schedules and procedures, while others were implicit and arose more organically, such as social norms and unwritten expectations.

Table 2:

Theme 2: Structures-Subthemes and Representative Quotations

Subtheme	Representative Quotations
Clear expectations vs. ambiguity	"Because we only gotta work our packets and shit. At the other charter school I was at, they were still giving out work like it was regular public school, having to turn in a million and one assignments every week. I couldn't keep track of that shit… [With the packets] you don't got to worry about what assignments you got to turn in tomorrow, and what assignments you got to do next week, and what big projects you got to do at the end of the school year that's worth a thousand fucking points." -Treyden
Credit standing vs. where students "should be"	"I don't think I would be where I'm at right now if I didn't come to this school. I didn't even know my grades was as lower they were when I first got here, I didn't know I was at a ninth grade level. I was like, whoa, I'm in 12th grade, y'all saying I got ninth grade status. That's crazy." -Serenity
	"I should be senior this year, or I should have already been a senior and graduating this year… you know, it's ok. One more year I get to play basketball again, at least, and we're not gonna lose this time." -Zapzo
"Getting lost" vs. sense of belonging	"I have better bonds with the teachers because, you know, like at [the public school] they got like a thousand kids, and [teachers] can just pick and choose between, like, certain kids. But here, it's less kids, so they can build bonds easier and stuff like that." -Geeker[†]
	"I would say we all mess around with each other, but all the students here, we're kind of like a tight family. We all know each other, everything. And we'll take care of each other." -Jesse
	"I was at [public school] my freshman year and like, I didn't like it, for real, at all. Like, it was just too much going on. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know where to go. I was lost every day. Um, getting stuck in traffic jams, [getting] jumped, getting penalties [for] being late to class and stuff like, that cause they were so big… When I came to RLA…it made me more persistent… I wasn't late to class no more because I could just like, you know, take two steps out of my class. [*laughs*] -Geeker

Social distractions vs. focused environment	"See because at other schools that I've been to, it's more, so, different periods. The bell's ringing, more kids, they come to slap up in your face, doing a lot… [At my old school], distractions everywhere. Everybody knows everybody. Everybody's in everybody's business. And I knew if I was to stay at that school that I was going to get far because of all the distractions that was around me. I knew I had friends that wanted to skip class and if they was the one to go skip, I was going to be with them. So I was just like, you know what, I got to graduate, I got to get out of here to graduate. If I don't get out of here, I won't." -Serenity
	"When I came here, it was a different environment. It was like, yeah, there's a lot of kids that go to this school but not everybody's in here. At one time I didn't know anybody, so nobody's constantly in my face." -Serenity
	"I left that because I kept getting in trouble. I kept recording fights. I was always instigating fights. So I left there." -Brooke
	"I was going to go to [a different alternative campus closer to] where I moved to at the time. But then I was just like, no, I'm going to figure out a way to get away from everybody. Isolate myself. So I can actually focus and get this done." -Serenity

Significance for Research Questions

1. Alignment with student needs	The finding that alternative high school students need structures to reduce ambiguity and clarify expectations might initially seem to contradict Theme 1 inferences surrounding choice and flexibility. However, structuring procedures and tasks to prevent cognitive overload empowers students by highlighting task boundaries, which frame the spaces where students are free to exercise their own preferences.
	Participants recognize that specific people and features within their environment may be detrimental to their success, but they can name these influences without casting themselves as passive victims or deflecting blame to teachers, administrators, or peers with whom they experience conflict. Students who can identify their own reasons for re-engaging at an alternative high school are typically able to recognize when their surroundings are unlikely to draw out the best versions of themselves as students, and they perceive changing an unsupportive environment as being their own responsibility.
2. Implications for evaluation framework	While the *why* behind organizational routines in T1AECs consists of a set of student needs (authentic relationships, safety and belonging, consistency and transparency) that appear to be relatively universal, the *how* will look different depending on the respective economic, social, and geographic contexts in which students in each T1AEC exist each day. The evaluation framework will need to reflect this by providing space for diverse structures and instructional approaches.
	In addition, traditional accountability measures focus on student achievement results, which typically represent lag measures. For this reason, biannual sponsor reviews performed by the School Improvement team emphasize alignment and implementation over outcomes as their purpose is to offer school leaders and Board members insights that are more immediate and actionable. Sponsor evaluations reported to DEW at the end of each school year for state accountability purposes, on the other hand, are more focused on summative results. While not every evaluation process must necessarily explicitly measure implementation outcomes, the role that institutional structures play in understanding and shaping results

should be given consideration in any conversation about continuous improvement in T1AECs.

Theme 3: Bonds. When participants discuss their disengagement and re-engagement journeys, their perceptions about their relationships with people and institutions in the "real world" play a prominent role in motivation. Students derive a sense of pride from belonging to marginalized and "othered" communities as a source of resilience, and participants frequently voiced a desire to "give back" to these communities of origin by improving the lives of their families and neighbors by increasing their access to opportunity. Participants expressed a desire to gain access to the power that is conferred by being able to move through dominant and mainstream spaces, but not at the cost of giving up their "othered" identities. Essentially, re-engaged students neither seek to whitewash any of their challenges and experiences that come with the emotional baggage of social stigma, nor do they view defiantly rejecting the norms of those who previously rejected them as a path to liberation. The goal is rather to develop a type of sociological biculturalism, which includes the proficiency to code-switch and move fluidly between mainstream and marginalized spaces. Re-engaged students recognize developing this proficiency as a means of gaining access to power without losing themselves in the process, as well as maximizing the quantity and quality of their real-world bonds by connecting with as many people as possible.

Table 3:

Theme 3: Bonds-Subthemes and Representative Quotations

Subtheme	Representative Quotation
Adult expectations vs. student outcomes	*Researcher*: Was it [your grandmother's] idea for you to come here? *Treyden*: Mhm. She ain't dealing with no fucking dropouts. "It makes me so happy every time too, I'm be like, bro, I'm getting so far it feels good to feel like I'm achieving something because when you grow up and you got everybody doubting you more stuff, I'm about to [rub] this in y'all face." -Serenity
Providing for family vs. economic instability	"So in five years I feel like I'm going to be rich off doing waxes and eyebrows, facial stuff. I feel like I'm going to be wealthy by then. I feel like I'm going to start my family, get married, have my kids. Yeah, I'm feel like by the time that happens I'm going to build my house." -Brooke *Brooke*: I want to live in Paris. Imma get me a Paris man. A French man in my life… *Researcher*: All right, so let's fast forward 10 years. You've got your Paris man, you've got your life, by this time, fluent in French. *Booke*: By this time, I feel like I'm probably going to have me a little farm. I feel like I'm going to have me a little cows, probably going to be selling things. I don't know. I feel like I'm going to be sending money to my peoples here. "My kids probably going to be a little bit older, and I'm probably going to be to the point–in 10 years, I'm not going to want to get up to move to do shit. But I'm going to be financially stable for sure. Money going to be there, but I'm not going to want to get up and move to do shit. I'm going to want to be a stay-at-home type ass dad." -Treyden
Giving back to community of origin vs. conforming to dominant norms	"Oh, I would've told you I wanted to be a lawyer. I don't want to do that stuff... Well, I only thought I wanted to be a lawyer because I used to watch 'Law and Order' and stuff like that. I love that shit. And I used to always think because, I ain't going to lie, my people, they criminals. So it's like, they need them a lawyer. So I was going do it for them, but it's like, I can't do all that, really, and all that school… But I could debate. I'm good at debating. I could debate on what I believe in basically. But then I thought about being an activist or something like that. Then I wanted to be a social worker. I think I still wanted to that though." -Brooke *Explosion Deku*[†]*:* Even though we don't like cops, I wanted to be a cop. *Treyden:* Shit, we all wanted to be a cop when we little.
School contexts vs. "real world"	"Success to me would be, being more wiser about decisions and environments. I feel like school really taught me a lot about the real world in a way, because school and the real world, it's two different environments. But at the same time, you come to school, you're in a population full of different people. You're in a diverse area, you're in the community… I'm really trying to find how to work [among both]." -Serenity

| "Real life" skills vs. school skills | *Batman*[†]: I think school should teach you how to be a person in the world… like, how to be a mature person, how to be, how to be around people, how to, instead of just— I don't know.
Geeker: Like, social skills?
Batman: Yeah, they should teach, like, personal skills, social skills, how to be responsible for yourself… how to be independent in the world, how to be an adult."

"I think people should have at least base level knowledge of vehicles. Just simple stuff. How to change your tire, how to do an oil change, just stuff like that. I helped multiple people on the side of the road because they didn't know how to change your tire… Either that, or culinary skills, safety, practical stuff… I somehow manage to blow people's minds when I say that I know how to cook, work on cars, I can do construction and pretty much everything."–Jesse |
| Personal responsibility vs. lack of accountability | *Geeker*: Just like, a lot of people are not accountable.
Zapzo: Yeah, I should be a lot more accountable about things I do, but, you know?
Researcher: How do you define 'accountable?' Like, accountable to who?
Zapzo: Yourself. Be accountable for yourself. |

Significance for Research Questions

| 1. Alignment with student needs | Students who may not find conventional educational settings to be engaging or meaningful often experience this disconnect as a lack of alignment between what is emphasized and valued at school and their own lived realities in the context of the "real world." Students also place a high value on self-management skills and resilience, which they see as key factors in achieving success through a growth mindset lens.

In addition, while participants may not have approached their education with an academically competitive mindset, most were not just showing up to earn a piece of paper with their name in calligraphy that would get them better jobs, either. T1AEC students tend to have a holistic view of education and learning, believing that their high school experience should foster independence, maturity, self-actualization, and other forms of growth that are personally meaningful to them. |
| 2. Implications for evaluation framework | A crucial antecedent for T1AEC students to be on track for success are feelings of self-efficacy, or more specifically, a sense that they are empowered with adequate skills and resources to navigate an attainable path to success. A well-documented attitudinal barrier to this sense of empowerment is the common perception that marginalized students must "escape" the poverty and conflict of their community and assimilate into mainstream norms to be successful. The notion of biculturalism, however, illuminates a route to attaining socioeconomic stability without compromising one's identity. The inclusion of student satisfaction measures in school evaluation is not a particularly novel concept, but additional artifacts that might be used to capture biculturalism mindset and student empowerment could include evidence of student-led goal-setting, scales based on existing instruments used to measure acculturation (SAMHSA, 2014), and direct and/or proxy measures of self-determination (Mumbardó-Adam et al., 2023). |

Secondary Theme: Relationships. The importance of trust and relationship-

building for T1AEC students has been well-established in the literature, so the emergence

of this theme among the study's findings was not a surprise. It was interesting to note that threads of insight and appreciation surrounding positive educator-student relationships were repeatedly woven throughout discussions spanning all three key themes. The preliminary model hypothesizes that relationships carry a catalytic or modulating role in processes related to disengagement, re-engagement, and persistence.

Table 4:

Secondary Theme: Relationships-Subthemes and Representative Quotations

Subtheme	Quotation
Hierarchy vs. commonality	*Treyden:* I can have my freedom of speech with these teachers and I don't get sent out of the classroom. *Brooke*: They don't be like, 'Oh, don't say that' or 'Don't do that.' They just be like, 'Shit, we do it too.' [laughs] … I feel like the teachers here are peers, I don't know how to explain it— to me, they just same as me. *Treyden*: Yeah, sittin' there, like, another one of my classmates. For real, honestly.
Understanding vs. judging	"A lot of the teachers here, they'll help you graduate early. That's why I like it. They're not judgmental. The teachers here, they understand people go through stuff, so they just give you little stuff to not be stressful about it." -Brooke
Administrators as punishers vs. administrators as allies	*On traditional school experiences:* "Only time we ever talked to the principal if we got sent to the principal's office [for discipline], or if we were doing more announcements." -Explosion Deku "My administrator [at my old school] suggested it to me. She was like, 'You're not doing very good.' She was like, 'I think PROHS is a good school for you.' And I was like–because I didn't like her, she was always yelling at me about something, it didn't matter what it was, it was always the teachers doing something–so I looked at her and I was like, 'I don't know about that'… but she just kept saying that she think I'll do better at PROHS." -Serenity
Caring vs. apathy	"With an environment of the teachers don't care because the students don't care? You're not going to get nowhere… The teachers at [my old school] were checked out. The students didn't care, wanted to cuss the teachers out. They was like, but I ain't going to care either. Y'all cuss me out, Imma cuss y'all out too. When they're not in a caring environment, you're going to get nowhere. I don't like that." -Serenity "It's important because if you have a teacher that cares if you get behind, they will go around and make sure that everyone is up to pace. And if you have one that doesn't, then they'll just say whatever. Probably give you an okay grade, just enough to pass so they don't have to deal with you the next year. And then you still won't have any clue what you're doing with that subject. These teachers here, they actually go around, make sure everyone's caught up. S'okay. If they see that someone didn't do as good on a paper, sometimes they'll pull you off to the side and ask you if you need help with anything. Which I like that." -Jesse

Significance for Research Questions	
1. Alignment with student needs	This finding is consistent with a large body of literature documenting the importance of intentionally nurturing caring relationships between students and adults in T1AEC schools.
2. Implications for evaluation framework	Relationship-building is emphasized throughout the text of the various Comprehensive Instructional Plans from DOPR schools in the BCHF portfolio, affirming that it is a key component of the missions of these schools. Some potential metrics that might be considered in relation to this include proxy measures: a number of extant frameworks could inform ways to measure constructs such as feelings of belonging and connection (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Willms, 2003), while literature from the health disciplines can offer insights and suggestions about how our framework might approach constructs such as self-advocacy (Kleman & Ross, 2023) and empowerment (Náfrádi et al., 2017).

Analysis of Integrated Themes

Conceptualizing Constructs as a Process Model. While the preliminary operational model was initially conceived as a descriptive thematic network representing interactions among factors impacting AEC students, it could also be viewed as a process model illustrating conditions that influence disengagement and re-engagement at different stages of a journey (Miles et al., 2014). When deciding to seek an alternative route to a high school diploma and enrolling in a T1AEC, students draw on personal assets such as sense of self-worth, resilience, and temerity as they adopt a belief in their own capacity to shape their future and overcome obstacles. In doing so, they identify their own motivations for re-engaging with school. While progressing through school, they draw upon support from teachers, peers, instructional scaffolds, and other external sources. Supportive institutional structures continue to shift power toward students, who in turn experience a growing sense of agency. As they feel more confident in their abilities to manifest their goals and their locus of control begins to broaden, students develop a deeper understanding of the roles external factors can play in their progress Finally, as they approach graduation, students focus more on economic factors, social

networks, and external responsibilities. It is the bonds they have built in the "real world" that motivate them and help secure new opportunities.

Defiance vs. Disconnect: Environmental Mismatches Fueling Disengagement.
I would posit that patterns observed in participants' narratives could suggest that many students in traditional school settings who elicit behaviors that are interpreted as defiance or willful disruptiveness may, in fact, be responding to a deeper mismatch between their needs and the school environment. Behaviors that would often be perceived as oppositional can arise when a student recognizes that the structure and demands of the school represent a mismatch with their perspectives, learning needs, or aspirations. When students sense that their learning environment does not support their growth, they may seek to advocate for changes to these conditions. However, students who attempt to negotiate the boundaries of their environment to better suit their needs will often meet resistance from adults who perceive these behaviors as willful disrespect. What may begin as self-advocacy can thusly spiral into a vicious cycle: students recognize the mismatch, attempt to challenge it, are met with disciplinary actions, and further withdraw or are pushed out. In sum, students may be forced into a role of non-compliance simply because the structures in place do not accommodate their realities.

In contrast, T1AECs that intentionally shift power toward students offer a means of escaping this cycle. School systems that acknowledge and adapt to student needs empower students to thrive on their own terms. While institutional structures oriented around enforcing compliance exacerbate disengagement, supportive structures disrupt this dynamic by instead addressing root causes.

Adapting Research Methods to Reflect Flexible School Structures. Unlike traditional schools with rigid schedules to dictate the movement of students, Type I Alternative Education Campuses offer students the flexibility to attend classes on their own terms. This flexibility was mirrored in the dynamics of student interviews and focus groups conducted for this study, which organically evolved to reflect the fluid structures governing participants' daily routines. For example, at PROHS, where students are permitted to come and go to accommodate obligations such as employment and caregiving, I had anticipated that focus group sessions would need to adapt to this fluidity. What surprised me, however, was the extent to which the adaptability of the school environment was reflected in focus group dynamics.

Although students entered and exited the session at different points, I found there was little need for me to backtrack in the progression of group development relational phases. The focus group operated as a microcosmos of PROHS's open and individualized culture: while students participated on their own terms and timelines, they nonetheless maintained a shared connection to the broader purpose of the school (and focus group) community. Despite the rotation of participants, those joining later were quickly able to assimilate into the ongoing discussion. The group's progression through the planned relational phases remained relatively smooth, with participants fully engaging in candid conversation without the constraints of a rigidly structured interview protocol.

By adapting focus group and interview protocols to meet students where they were, my research methods became more authentic and reflective of the T1AEC students' nonlinear–and often unpredictable–lived experiences. When the research process provides student-participants with space to exercise personal agency and engage on their

own terms, it nurtures feelings of trust and psychological safety that support more meaningful engagement. The overlap between these implications for qualitative research and those for educational practice is clear: flexibility, autonomy and student ownership are key to fostering authentic participation and trust, whether in the classroom or in a research setting.

Quantitative Results

Descriptive Statistics

12 PROHS students completed the pilot survey. In terms of credit completion status, the majority (58.33%) of respondents were in 12th grade. The respondents were equally split between students who had spent time disengaged from school before enrolling at PROHS (Re-Engaged, 50%) and students who had never been status dropouts (At-Promise, 50%). Gender representation was almost balanced, with a slight majority of females (58.33%) compared to males (41.67%). Ethnically, the majority are either Black (50%) or White and non-Hispanic (41.67%), with only one Hispanic participant (8.33%). Most of the pilot respondents are 18 years old (83.33%). Employment status varies, with some working full-time (41.67%) and others either working part-time or seeking employment. Two respondents stated they had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (16.67%), while the majority did not have an identified disability that would qualify them for an IEP or a 504 plan. One respondent was a parent (8.33%), and two were identified as English Learners (16.67%). Table 5 summarizes pilot survey demographics, omitting categories that did not receive any responses including nonbinary students, former English Learners who had attained

proficiency status and exited their English language development program, or students selecting other ethnic identities.

Table 5:

Pilot Survey Respondent Demographics

Demographics	N	10th	11th	12th	Unsure
Grade Level					
10th	2	2	0	0	0
11th	2	0	2	0	0
12th	7	0	0	7	0
Unsure	1	0	0	0	1
Status					
At-Promise	6	1	1	3	1
Re-Engaged	6	1	1	4	0
Gender					
Female	7	0	1	5	1
Male	5	2	1	2	0
Ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	5	1	2	2	0
Black	6	1	0	4	1
Hispanic	1	0	0	0	0
Age					
17	2	1	1	0	0
18	10	1	1	7	1
Employment Status					
Working full-time	5	0	1	3	1
Working part-time	2	0	1	1	0
Seeking full-time	1	1	0	0	0
Seeking part-time	3	0	0	3	0
Prefer not to say	1	1	0	0	0
Disability Status					
IEP	2	0	0	1	1
Neither IEP nor 504	9	1	2	6	0
Prefer not to say/unsure	1	1	0	0	0
Parenting Status					
Yes	1	0	0	1	0
No	11	2	2	6	1
Multilingual Status					
Currently EL	2	1	0	1	0
Never EL	10	1	2	6	1

Results from Inferential Statistical Tests

The data I plan to collect from a broader sample of re-engaged, disengaged, and at-promise students across Ohio in early 2025 is likely to yield more useful inferences, including some that may help triangulate preliminary findings via factor analysis. In the

meantime, a preliminary examination of affective responses from the PROHS pilot sample using Kendall's τ^b coefficient suggests some interesting possibilities worthy of future research.

For the most part, protective factors tended to exhibit stronger and more significant relationships with other protective factors compared to other types of factors. Similarly, challenge factors and pull-disengagement factors were more predictive of factors within their own respective categories. This pattern might suggest that many students can generalize their experiences and perspectives using overarching themes about previous or current schools or interrelated life struggles, though it may alternatively be attributed to aspects of the survey design such as the phrasing or grouping of items. In any event, the inter-item correlation tables provided in Appendix E only show relationships within these respective factor categories, though a brief discussion of some statistically significant relationships stood out as promising topics for additional study follows below.

Caring Adults and Student Self-Advocacy. Students who agreed with the statements, *There was at least one teacher or staff member who really looked out for my interests and went out of their way to help me succeed* and *At least one teacher or staff member seemed to truly care about me and liked me as a person* were found to also be likely to express agreement with the statement, *I learned how to advocate for myself* (τ^b = 0.68, p = .006 and τ^b = 0.74, p = .003, respectively). If this finding is repeated in data from the full-scale survey, it will support Khalifa's (2013) self-advocacy framework in which educators occupy a crucial role in training and encouraging marginalized students and their parents to participate as champions for their own inclusion at school.

Extracurricular Activities and Relevance of Instruction. Participants who

cited clubs, sports and other extracurriculars as factors that supported persistence in

traditional schools were likely to also be motivated by learning content that they

identified as relevant to their lives (*Sports, clubs or other extracurriculars I enjoyed* x

When I learned things that sounded useful or relevant to me: $\tau^b = 0.93$, $p < .001$). As it

currently stands, this preliminary result is ambiguous at best; however, it will be

interesting to see if the finding is replicated in a more representative sample. If it were to

reoccur at scale, the existence of such a relationship would imply numerous questions

surrounding concepts that include extracurriculars supporting persistence, the role

experiential learning may play in nurturing engagement, or even whether we might infer

latent variables impacting students' perceptions of instructional relevance. Additional

questions about extracurriculars and other relevant programmatic factors might therefore

be included in the next iteration of the survey.

Teacher Investment and Student Sense of Belonging. Among students within

this sample, agreement with the statement, *There was at least one teacher or staff*

member who really looked out for my interests and went out of their way to help me

succeed had a strong inverse relationship with agreeing with the statement, *I just didn't*

feel like I belonged ($\tau^b = -0.52$, $p = .038$). Interestingly, the inverse relationship between

lack of sense of belonging and supportive friends and classmates was neither as strong,

nor did it pass the same two-tailed test of significance at $p < .05$ ($\tau^b = -0.47$, $p = .059$).

This is consistent with qualitative findings highlighting the importance of teachers

nurturing positive relationships with students, particularly given that a lack of belonging

was found to be the single factor that was found to be most predictive of concerns about

safety at school (*I just didn't feel like I belonged* x *I did not feel safe at my school:* $\tau^b =$ 0.83, p = .001).

Action Plan

        The four phases that make up this action plan consist of additional data collection and analysis to refine the operational model, development and revision of the evaluation framework, and engagement in advocacy to incite change in the discourse surrounding Type I Alternative Education Campuses and their students. The following sections summarize how study findings informed each phase.

I. Expand Data Collection

        To help us discern what differences might exist between at-promise and re-engaged subgroups of students and compare profiles of their respective needs and challenges, the survey had initially been constructed to identify this distinction with a set of items asking respondents to discuss whether they had at some point left high school without graduating before deciding to re-engage and resume their journey to completing a diploma. One key recommendation of the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Work Group (2019) was to create separate designations for campuses with a mission focused on dropout prevention and those oriented around credit recovery. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine that a 14-year-old 9th grader who is identified as in need of intervention to counteract disengagement risk factors would likely have vastly different educational needs from a credit deficient 21-year-old, making it challenging to serve both students together in a single program.

        However, both the pilot survey and qualitative data affirmed the existence of a third subgroup of T1AEC students whose enrollment status had not lapsed at any point,

but who had nonetheless accumulated a significant credit deficiency over time. While

students like Serenity had never technically met "status dropout" criteria, their needs

might more closely resemble those of re-engaged students than those who faced

challenges that made them vulnerable to disengagement but had not yet fallen behind in

credits. In other words, despite never having formally been disengaged from school on

paper, this subgroup would likely be better served by a program with a credit recovery

mission than one that is oriented around dropout prevention. Future iterations of the

survey can include an additional item asking students to indicate which year they first

enrolled in ninth grade (currently used to calculate graduation cohorts under ESSA

guidelines) to assign respondents to three subgroups, or Progress Profiles, using the

criteria indicated below (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:

Flowchart for Assigning Participants to Progress Profiles

```
┌─────────────────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Did the respondent at one   │              │ In terms of credit          │
│ time meet status dropout    │──[NO]──────▶ │ completion, is the          │
│ criteria? (i.e., is there a │              │ respondent's current grade  │
│ Yes response for Item 26?)  │              │ level status more than one  │
│                             │              │ year behind the grade level │
│                             │              │ that would be typically     │
│                             │              │ expected based on their     │
│                             │              │ original 9th grade cohort?  │
└─────────────────────────────┘              └─────────────────────────────┘
           │                                    │                    │
         [YES]                                [YES]                 [NO]
           ▼                                    ▼                    ▼
   ┌───────────────┐                  ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────┐
   │  Re-Engaged   │                  │ Credit Recovery  │   │  At-Promise  │
   └───────────────┘                  └──────────────────┘   └──────────────┘
```
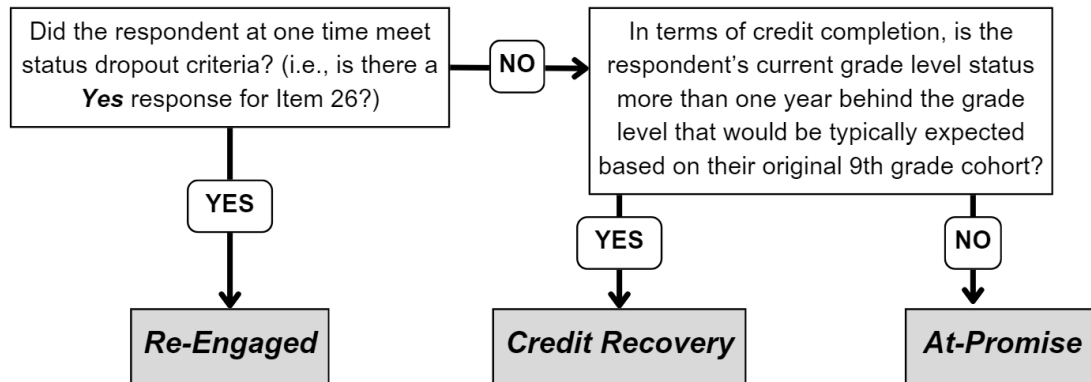
Descriptive and inferential analysis of data collected using the full-scale survey can help us better understand and compare the needs of Re-Engaged, Credit Recovery, and At-Promise students in urban, suburban and rural settings.

In addition to collecting quantitative data from a broad sample of current and potential DOPR students, we plan to seek input from school administrators, management representatives, and other leaders who serve T1AEC schools. Semi-structured interviews with these stakeholders will serve to triangulate findings from student data while also providing additional insights into challenges and considerations that would inform an evaluation process. Specific topics of interest include strengths and criticisms of both the Ohio DOPR Report Card and BCHF's existing framework; beliefs about the trajectory of alternative and career-technical education programs; how students' needs and assets inform program design; and the types of data, measures, and insights that would be beneficial for decision-making. The objective for these interviews will be to gain a deeper understanding of the roles that teacher and administrator practices may play in moving T1AEC students towards success.

II. Augment and Refine Model

As additional student and administrator data are collected, coded and tested against the preliminary operational model, we will make improvements and adjustments as needed to address any contradictory findings that arise and ultimately develop a set of prescriptive implications for evaluation practices. Specifically, our model should help us identify performance indicators and meaningful metrics that would be appropriate measures to capture the ways T1AECs advance students towards the outcomes that matter to them. From here, the School Improvement team will develop a set of protocols for evaluating T1AECs that is flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of program models and structures, but also sufficiently rigorous and actionable to meet both accountability and programmatic support needs.

III. Implement Cycles of Feedback and Revision

Because the Buckeye Community Hope Foundation's Education Division includes process revisions in response to changes in state regulations and student population needs as part of the organization's annual work cycle, embedded evaluation processes grounded in principles of continuous improvement (Bryk et al., 2015) are already a core feature of the School Improvement team's practices. We will continue to collect feedback and revise the protocol for a minimum of three biannual review cycles, with particular attention given to identifying and studying areas of alignment and contradiction between our protocols and state evaluation measures.

IV. Advocacy

Many groups and individuals are already engaged in ongoing work to address many of the questions that are connected to this study. The final phase of this project

begins with obtaining feedback and buy-in from expert allies in nonprofit and professional networks such as the Reaching At-Promise Students Association (RAPSA), the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA,) and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) as well as critical friends representing specific authorizers, school leaders and operators of AECs in states outside of Ohio. From there, the BCHF Education Division leadership can develop a strategy in consultation with a state lobbyist to present recommendations to the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce surrounding future revisions to the Ohio DOPR Report Card.

I also hope at this point to bring this project full circle by inviting students to get involved in this advocacy. Students can share lived experiences and perspectives that are often overlooked by policymakers, and by amplifying their voices we can create a more equitable and accurate representation of success that reflects not only academic achievement but also personal growth and resilience. With such a rich tapestry of narratives recounting experiences confronting and overcoming educational barriers, T1AEC students can offer crucial insights into how schools should be evaluated based on their ability to support students in overcoming such challenges. Participation in advocacy could consist of delivering testimony at legislative hearings or participating in advisory boards with the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, co-authoring articles or policy briefs, participating in social media campaigns, creating video documentaries, or expressing their stories through a variety of other creative media.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION

The practice of actively involving pupils in decision making should not be portrayed as an option which is in the gift of adults but a legal imperative which is the right of the child. (Lundy, 2007, p. 931)

Intervention Process Description

The purpose of this study was to document and describe the alignment between Type I Alternative Education Campus (T1AEC) programs and students' needs in order to reimagine existing school evaluation approaches through a lens of bottom-up backwards design. The next phases of the project aim to expand and test the preliminary operational model, ultimately developing a set of meaningful and actionable measures to capture the successes, challenges, needs and opportunities to improve alternative high schools.

Timeline

The timeline below articulates key actions and objectives to be taken by the School Improvement Team and other interested members of the Buckeye Community Hope Foundation's Education Division within each phase of the action plan, including a description of additional stakeholders who will be involved as well as anticipated work products and results.

Phase I. Expand Data Collection

January 2025–March 2025:

- Perform interviews of school leaders, teachers, operator representatives and board members to gain perspectives surrounding strengths and weaknesses of the Ohio DOPR Report Card, how other evaluation

processes inform decision-making, and other insights about how various success measures should align with organizational goals.

- Disseminate full-scale student survey, including revisions discussed in Chapter 2, to gather comprehensive data on students' educational experiences and perceptions.

Phase II. Augment and Refine Model

April 2025–June 2025:

- Code and test data from the most recent set of interviews against the preliminary operational model.

- Using confirmatory factor analysis, identify key patterns and relationships in survey data and triangulate qualitative findings.

- Reconcile contradictions in data, expand and refine diagram components.

June 2025–August 2025:

- Identify performance indicators and metrics that align with the expanded model.

- Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and templates to support implementation of evaluation framework.

Phase III. Implement Cycles of Feedback and Revisions

September 2025–October 2025:

- Pilot evaluation framework during fall biannual review cycle.

November 2025–December 2025:

- Gather feedback from key stakeholders and develop revisions for the spring review cycle.

January 2026–March 2026:

- Implement updated model and processes during second biannual review cycle.

April 2026–May 2026:

- While viewing results of evaluation framework alongside comprehensive reports prepared the SI team's data analyst using a variety of metrics and performance indicators, facilitate discussion about any additional revisions that may improve construct validity and internal consistency of evaluation framework components.

June 2026–July 2026:

- Form a work group that includes members from various teams across the Education Division to refine SOPs and templates as needed.

September 2026–November 2026:

- Complete third biannual review cycle, assessing framework implementation and outcomes.
- Finalize evaluation framework; prepare for publication and sharing.

Phase IV. Advocacy

October 2026–April 2027:

- Recruit T1AEC students interested in advocacy and storytelling; consider nurturing partnerships that integrate Career Tech Education (CTE) learning with advocacy efforts (e.g., students pursuing Media Arts pathways may earn credits by producing a video documentary).

- Present framework to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) and other expert allies for feedback; obtain buy-in from influential experts who can aid and amplify our advocacy efforts.

May–November 2027:

- Meet with lobbyist to develop strategic approach for state-level advocacy, including identifying key policymakers and aligned legislative priorities.

Analysis of Organizational Change and Leadership Practice

In addition to its potential significance for school oversight and authorizing practices, this process and the evaluation framework that is expected to result suggest several implications of interest to the continued growth and development of both BCHF's Education Division and my own personal leadership practices.

Organizational Change Analysis

Implementation of the Stakeholder-Responsive Evaluation Cycle is closely aligned with existing initiatives in BCHF's strategic plan that are focused on educational equity and innovative authorizing practices. For instance, the organization has recently "flipped" its new school application process by interviewing prospective school founders and leaders to understand their talents, mindset, and community engagement *before* inviting them to complete a detailed, 200-page application. Such initiatives that take a more human-centered and holistic approach to school oversight are at the philosophical heart of what community schools are meant to be. As a bottom-up process prioritizing responsiveness and adaptiveness, this project and its resulting evaluation framework are deeply aligned with BCHF's values.

Type of Organizational Change. Traditional schooling conceptualizes students as passive recipients of knowledge to be conferred by adults, who emphasize compliance and control under the premise that students lack the capacity for productive agency in their day-to-day existence (Longmuir, 2024). Appadurai (2004), on the other hand, posited that not only can students make valuable contributions as current citizens, but that educational approaches that prioritize student voices are in fact necessary to effect the societal transformation and innovation that must take place for future generations of citizens to remain in step with the demands of our evolving global knowledge economy. The notions of student voice and agency–as understood within traditional conceptions of schooling–are often framed as outcomes that will enable future citizens to engage with complex issues after they have graduated and entered the "real world." In reality, though, matters such as learner autonomy, curricular relevance, and collaborative contributions are of pressing importance to students in the present (O'Reilly & O'Grady, 2024).

Hiatt's (2006) ADKAR model offers a framework for understanding organizational change through five outcomes that must take place at the individual level for changes at any scale to be successful: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. In addition, changes occur on both project and people dimensions (see Figure 3). These changes can each be approached by identifying the outcomes of change management activities, then anticipating potential obstacles and areas of resistance.

Figure 3:

ADKAR Model

Note: The human dimension of this change model is delineated at the top of the image, while the project dimension sequence is below. (Source: Prosci, 2024, p.6).

The ADKAR Model is well-suited to this project because it aligns with backwards-design principles that are at the heart of BCHF's approach to school improvement, outlines sequences of outcome in both project and human dimensions, and proactively anticipates obstacles that are most likely to emerge at each change checkpoint.

Reflection on Leadership Practices. The Stakeholder-Responsive Evaluation Cycle (SHREC) is aligned with Spillane's (2006) framework of Distributed Leadership, which consists of the elements of *practice, interactions,* and *situation.* While it is not an inherently prescriptive framework, it offers a perspective that focuses on what leaders *do* rather than roles, functions or traits. Defining leadership as an activity provides space for leadership to originate from virtually anywhere in an organization or project, and furthermore situates it as a skill or behavior that can be continuously improved through practice and reflection. Leadership practices unfold as interactions among all individuals who participate in leadership: it is not something that is "done to" followers, but rather is collaboratively constructed and involves influence in both directions between leaders and

followers (Spillane, 2006). Finally, situational aspects such as tools, routines and structures are included as important factors in interactions. Situational aspects can define leadership practices, but the converse is equally true. Most significantly, Distributed Leadership was developed for the specific purpose of centering co-construction of knowledge creation among students and teachers as a central school improvement imperative. In addition to conferring benefits such as empowerment and shared ownership to these stakeholders, conceptualizing leadership as a set of dynamic and collaborative practices also ensures that school evaluation processes are adaptable to the evolving needs of the learning community.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The SHREC process seeks to cultivate alignment between student-defined success outcomes and measures of school quality. However, this project offers some relevant takeaways for other disciplines and applications.

Prescriptive Implications for Practice

As the policy landscape of community school authorizing continues to evolve– and the contexts and needs of students served by our schools follow suit–evaluation approaches that are grounded in street-level data allow people and institutions involved in school oversight to stay focused on methods that are aligned to what matters most: our students. While there is very little evidence to be found in either my findings or prior literature that would support the notion that academic indicators for T1AECs should be disregarded altogether, the measures currently prioritized by the Ohio DOPR School Report Card reflect more long-term patterns in academic achievement and opportunity. Given that typical DOPR students are only enrolled in an alternative high school for

relatively short periods of time, overreliance on long-term lag measures has reinforced systems that produce data that serve only to reflect the achievement levels and behavior of students who are sent to a T1AEC rather than providing meaningful insights into the AEC's added value. If we wish to obtain valid added-value measures, evaluation approaches with a greater emphasis on short-term performance indicators would be more appropriate for schools that serve populations with a high mobility rate. Achievement, behavior, and attendance data should be measured monthly, not just calculated annually; metrics of student engagement might be scaled to measures of gains made over a 30-day period, while those of student achievement might be scaled to 90-day gains.

As the School Improvement team already collects student input as part of its biannual review procedures–a practice that is incentivized for all Ohio authorizers by the state's Sponsor Quality Practices Rubric, which promotes the collection of feedback from multiple shareholders during site visits (DEW, 2024)–the team is positioned to begin experimenting with methods of measuring constructs such as sense of belonging and student agency almost immediately. Affective items like "I feel important here," "I feel like my teachers care about me," and "My ways of learning are valued here" could be added to our student surveys. Likewise, during visits when a sample of students sits for an interview with sponsor representatives, questions might include "Do your classes help you feel smart? Why?" and "How often do you have a chance to show what you have learned and can do in a way that is different from a test or quiz? What is it like, and how does it feel?" (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

Students in T1AECs in suburban and rural settings–a sector of Ohio community schools that is currently expanding rapidly–have needs that are often best supported in

ways that are different from what happens in urban AECs. Essentially, the Comprehensive Instructional Plans of various T1AECs will often share many of the same *whys;* it is the *hows* that are vastly different from one another. The full-scale survey will be able to include a larger sample of rural and suburban respondents, who are likely to represent the intended enrollment demographics for a significant share of new school applicants since the recent fall of "challenged district" geographic restrictions, making it an informative test of our preliminary model. Regardless of what new insights we gain about how to meaningfully capture the outcomes and value added for DOPR-designated schools, however, the underlying issues created by top-down, managerial models of school leadership cannot be ignored when the support and oversight we provide as an authorizer is ultimately held accountable to measures dictated at the state level. The advocacy component of the action plan will be necessary to reconcile these issues, which might be addressed by incorporating climate surveys, inspections, administrative data analysis and process measures into school accountability processes (REL, 2024). Transparency can foster accountability, even in the absence of high stakes (Chaplin et al., 2014; Gill, 2017).

An additional change in state-level accountability practices that would inform improvement efforts across *all* public schools in Ohio–not only DOPR schools–concerns the way dropout rates are calculated and reported. When "status dropouts" are counted in Ohio, re-engaged students are currently subtracted. This practice weakens the utility of dropout rates as a measure of how successful a school or district is in keeping students engaged and preventing early school leaving. One possible solution would be for DEW to track two distinct dropout rate measures: (a) the count currently in use that excludes

students who re-enroll later, and (b) an additional count that includes all ESLs, regardless of whether they subsequently re-engage.

Likewise, both traditional and alternative schools should be held accountable for students' long-term achievement. Alternative schools can send students' achievement data back to their home school to strengthen the incentive for traditional schools to try to meet students' needs rather than improve their own performance data by sending their "problem students" elsewhere, while also addressing problems with the validity issues posed by T1AECs' small enrollment numbers and high mobility rates. Meanwhile, a separate program of accountability for T1AECs would increase the visibility of these programs, encourage more actionable feedback about schools' strengths and needs to be collected and communicated with school leaders and operators, and generally monitor the efficacy of these programs. I would propose that DEW's accountability practices for DOPR schools should pursue both approaches in Ohio. The dynamics at play between traditional and alternative high schools are complex, and students ultimately benefit most when the relationship between an alternative school and its neighborhood traditional counterpart is cooperative rather than adversarial. T1AECs are most successful when they complement traditional high schools rather than attempting to compete with them (Warren, 2016).

Implications for Theory

In addition to moving away from deficit-based terminology such as "dropouts" and "dropout recovery schools," achieving meaningful transformation in societal conceptions of alternative high schools demands a shift in the discourse surrounding early school leaving itself. Longmuir (2024) proposed a reframing of "disengagement"–a

problem in which responsibility is largely situated with students and their families–

instead as "disenfranchisement," which evokes a more complex and nuanced interplay of

systemic factors and societal constraints.

Another concept whose time has come for reconsideration or reimagining is that

of "student voice." Despite the term's widespread usage, understanding of what student

voice entails is ambiguous in theory, and is all-too-frequently superficial or tokenistic in

practice (Longmuir, 2024; O'Reilly & O'Grady, 2024). Like the concept of agency,

student voice must be defined and operationalized through meaningful processes that

inform teaching and learning practice. Stickney & Ventura (2024) conceived of school-

based initiatives to amplify student voice as a pyramid: the vast majority of initiatives fall

towards the bottom level of *consultation,* in which adults seek opinions and input from

students but ultimately are the ones making decisions and developing solutions; the

second level is *symbolic,* in which students are empowered to act to a degree, but mostly

within boundaries established by adults; finally, the top level of the pyramid is

transformative, as the extent of adult direction is largely limited to inviting participation

and acting as a facilitator, cheerleader, and mediator while students choose the issues

they wish to work on and authentically engage in developing and implementing solutions.

The advocacy phase of this project represents an opportunity for us to walk our talk by

moving the project upward from its current status as a *consultation* initiative. When

considering all possible avenues for meaningful student participation, an ideal starting

point for engaging students in this work would be to take a Funds of Knowledge

approach to co-constructing learning opportunities (Rodriguez, 2013). One example of

such an approach would be to facilitate the production of student-created media that

invites the public to view their world through a lens that demonstrates to mainstream audiences who these students are, what they are about, and how success can be realized from outside the bounds constraining traditional notions of student achievement.

Opportunities for Additional Investigation and Research

In addition to further exploration of the needs of students within progress profile subgroups to explore the benefits of delineating "prevention" and "recovery" as separate objectives calling for distinct program types (Wilkins, 2011) and revisiting the questions raised by the pilot survey's inferential results listed in Chapter 2, some additional opportunities for research surrounding school improvement initiatives can be identified. One problem of practice that falls outside the scope of the data collection encompassed by this project is a lack of alignment between many schools' career-readiness offerings and actual market demand; for instance, some of the most widely-offered Industry-Recognized Credentials (IRCs) among Ohio high schools are part of the RISE Up (Retail Industry Skills & Education) program, which offers foundational skills in retail sales and customer service from the National Retail Federation. Because this IRC is relatively easy for students to earn–and is inexpensive for schools to offer–it can be considered "low-hanging fruit" in terms of accountability measures for Career Tech Planning Districts (CTPDs). However, long-term employment projections for the retail sector indicate that opportunities in this field are shrinking (Ohio Department of Job & Family Services, 2024), suggesting that the ubiquity of RISE Up programs may be due to the credential's potential to improve the fortunes of schools, not their students.

While a number of accountability measures that DEW prioritizes for CTPDs differ from the performance indicators that appear on the DOPR Report Card, the issue

illustrates dangers of overreliance on superficial, satellite-level data that is not grounded in adequate contextual factors, and these dangers are indeed relevant to T1AECs. In fact, this phenomenon illustrates a broader problem of practice that applies to all U.S. public schools that are subject to external accountability: satellite data provide system leaders and decision-makers with flimsy justifications for sweeping policies that are far removed from the realities of classrooms, serving narratives that appeal to constituents but fail to capture nuance and consider root causes. Moreover, such practices reinforce the same myopic discourse of achievement that perpetuates biased assumptions about "under-performance" and "achievement gaps" among marginalized socioeconomic and ethnic groups, contributing to a long history of systemic bias in education (Safir & Dugan, 2021). While the problem of practice that inspired this project was initially framed around local DOPR high schools, my research questions could easily be reframed to represent opportunities to investigate other manifestations of systemic bias across K-12 schools.

Implications for Other Organizations

Simplistic ESSA definitions and band-aid policy solutions have created a disincentive for schools to enroll a large share of older students arriving with fewer earned credits, which is part of a broader pattern of systems punishing schools and teachers for working with the most hard-to-serve students. Rather, State Education Agencies (SEAs), districts and individual schools should instead be rewarded with additional support and resources for serving students whose challenges may seem especially daunting. One possibility would involve implementing some type of scale that acknowledges student challenge factors; for example, schools might be given more

"points" when they enroll a credit-deficient 20-year-old than they would receive for enrolling an at-promise 14-year-old with fewer accumulated risk factors and adverse life experiences. Other possibilities include replacing or supplementing metrics based on ESSA graduation cohorts with a one-year graduation rate (Paladin Career Technical High School, n.d.), "resetting" the clock for students who are far behind in credits at the beginning of their junior year with a two-year graduation rate metric, or calculating graduation rates based on the year when students arrived at the T1AEC.

The SHREC process is also relevant to other organizations that function in an oversight role within street-level bureaucrat (SLB) disciplines, particularly with respect to improving alignment between top-down and bottom-up management systems. Any organizational change effort that seeks to amplify stakeholders' input could potentially benefit from backwards-design thinking, including contexts from outside the K-12 sector.

Resolving a Problem of Practice with Street-Level Data Frameworks

When metrics like test scores and grade point averages are allowed to represent a complete definition of success, then the premise that such metrics determine the future prospects and potential of a child will remain unchallenged, reinforcing what Safir and Dugan (2021) characterized as a perpetuated "pedagogy of compliance for children at the margins" (p.99) operating in parallel to a status quo of affirmation for the privileged students who benefit from systems that were designed for them.

If educational equity is not a sufficiently compelling rationale to inspire some policymakers and school leaders to challenge such assumptions, though, I will instead put forward an economic one: American educational reforms seeking to rationalize schools through top-down bureaucratic management entrenched in industrial practices and

postpositivist paradigms have failed, because teaching and learning are inherently not like factory work (Mehta, 2013). Wrought by the assumption that "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber, 1919/1946, p. 139), traditional school systems have come to resemble Weber's infamous metaphor of an "iron cage" in which measurability trumps meaning and matter.

Hirschman's (1970) seminal model of consumer behavior has been applied across disciplines to provide a generalizable understanding of the ways individuals may engage with organizations that are out of alignment with their personal values or interests by either disengaging ("exit") or protesting their dissatisfaction ("voice"), with the moderating factor of "loyalty" affecting their perceptions surrounding the feasibility and accessibility of either option. Some level of empowerment is needed for an individual to act on dissatisfaction, so there are two mechanisms that perpetuate the status quo in educational systems: first, students who fit the norms of the dominant culture benefit from such a system and are therefore likely to exhibit loyalty to existing arrangements; and second, students who are marginalized are less likely to feel that an enactment of voice can be expected to have productive results (Longmuir, 2024).

Shifting our evaluation practices to more fully embrace street-level data has the potential to disrupt marginalizing pedagogies and nurture conditions that support student agency. We can reimagine alternative high schools by challenging top-down managerial structures if we are willing to depart from the comfort of familiar approaches that seek to order and standardize. If we fail to meet this moment by making such a pivot, however, we will find ourselves indefinitely chasing external solutions that fail to address the root causes of educational inequity.

Conclusion

      This research began with the aim of amplifying the voices of students who were silenced by systems that did not simply fail to meet their needs, but that actively pushed them out and sidelined them from opportunity. The results certainly contradicted many of the assumptions that are frequently made about so-called dropouts: that these students are defiant delinquents, that they lack motivation, that they are "quitters." On the other hand, disengaged students are not simply passive victims of circumstance, either; rather, these are reflective learners who crave meaningful educational experiences, and who can offer compelling insights into how their school could—and should—work for students like them.

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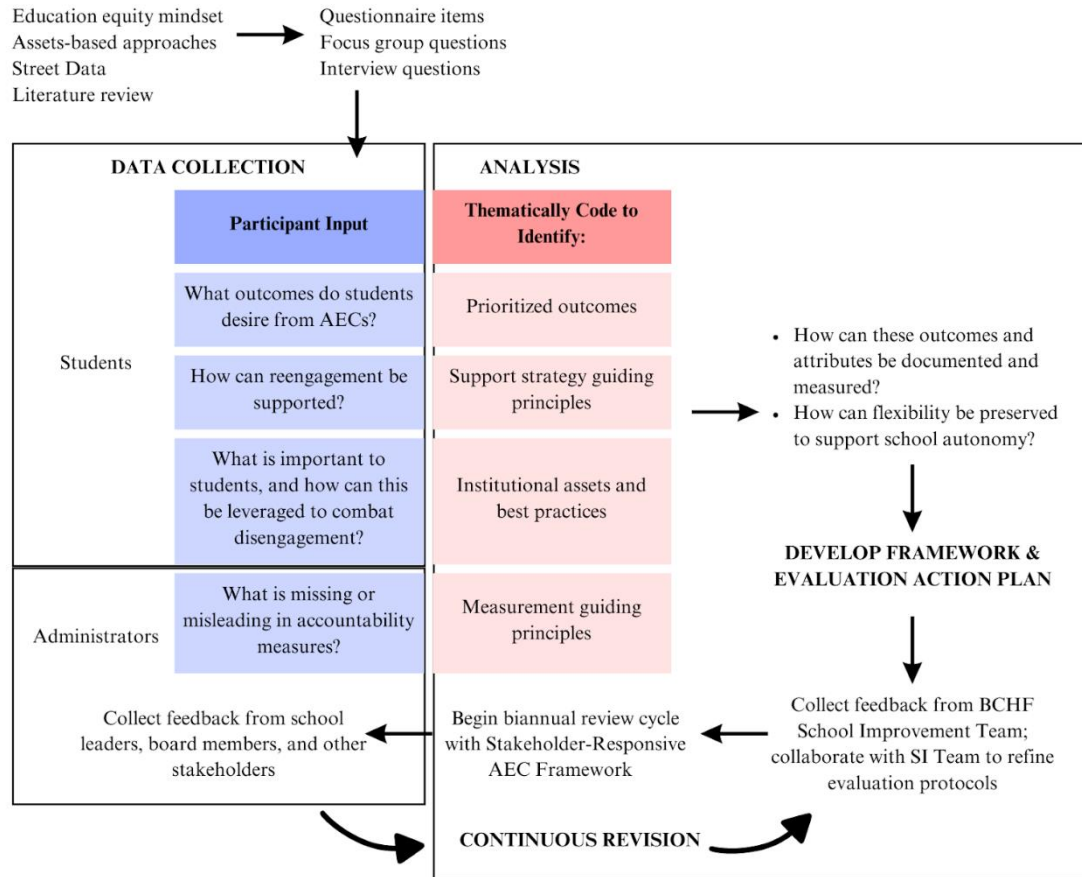| https://doi.org/10.5243/jsswr.2013.23

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APPENDIX A: Stakeholder-Responsive Evaluation Cycle

Education equity mindset
Assets-based approaches
Street Data
Literature review

Questionnaire items
Focus group questions
Interview questions

DATA COLLECTION

Participant Input

Students

What outcomes do students desire from AECs?

How can reengagement be supported?

What is important to students, and how can this be leveraged to combat disengagement?

Administrators

What is missing or misleading in accountability measures?

Collect feedback from school leaders, board members, and other stakeholders

ANALYSIS

Thematically Code to Identify:

Prioritized outcomes

Support strategy guiding principles

Institutional assets and best practices

Measurement guiding principles

Begin biannual review cycle with Stakeholder-Responsive AEC Framework

- How can these outcomes and attributes be documented and measured?
- How can flexibility be preserved to support school autonomy?

DEVELOP FRAMEWORK & EVALUATION ACTION PLAN

Collect feedback from BCHF School Improvement Team; collaborate with SI Team to refine evaluation protocols

CONTINUOUS REVISION

APPENDIX B: Invitation to Participate & Consent Forms

Invitation to Participate & Consent Forms

Survey: Invitation to Participate

Thank you for your interest!

My name is Zoe Plotnick, and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education and Health Sciences at the University of Dayton. This survey is part of the research I am conducting for my dissertation, so I really appreciate that you took the time to follow this link. I also work for the Buckeye Community Hope Foundation, which is a not-for-profit sponsor that provides oversight and technical support to your school.

My project: The State of Ohio currently uses a system to rate the quality of alternative schools that doesn't really line up with students and their goals. I would like to develop a system that sponsors like BCHF can use to measure the strengths and needs of alternative high schools so that we can give school leaders and charter school management companies the information they need to help make their schools better. We want to develop this system around what success actually looks like to an alternative high school and its students, and we hope to share it with the Ohio Department of Education so that they can improve their rating system, too. It happens so often, though, that people in power decide what is best for students without ever asking the students themselves. I want to know more about the goals, dreams, hopes, and life experiences of students who attend our alternative high schools.

Some details you should know:
The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the experiences and aspirations of students who have left school early without a diploma, but later re-engaged by enrolling at an alternative high school. (I am also interested in hearing from students who either left school early and are not currently enrolled, or who are currently enrolled in a traditional school but considered "at risk" of leaving school early without graduating.)

You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. It is important for you to fully understand your rights.

•   Adults who are enrolled in schools designated by the Ohio Department of Education as Dropout Prevention/Recovery Schools are eligible to participate in this survey. (If you found this survey through a QR code or link from your school and you are at least 18 years old, then yes, you are eligible.)
•   Your participation in this research is voluntary. This means that you don't have to do it, and if you do choose to participate you can change your mind and stop at any time, for any reason at all. The survey can be expected to take about 15 minutes. If you change your mind partway through the survey, you can close the window without submitting and your responses will not be recorded.
•   At the end of the survey, you will be asked whether you might be interested in being interviewed, either one-on-one or with a small group of other students in similar schools. This is also completely voluntary, and you can change your mind at any time. You are welcome to take the survey but say "no" to the interview. If you do agree to be interviewed but later change your mind, I will not ask why or be upset with you at all. You can quit at any time without penalty.

• I am not able to pay you for your participation. However, I will provide refreshments (drinks, treats and snacks) to anyone who participates in an interview or focus group in person. I appreciate your time!

• Participants' names and identifying details will be kept completely confidential. Survey data will be aggregated (meaning I will write about the overall results together at once, not publish individual responses), though I may include excerpts of some responses without any details that could identify you. Participants in interviews and focus groups will also be kept anonymous with any identifying details removed. The names of schools participating in the study will not be reported in my dissertation, and the names of cities schools are located in will also not be reported other than the fact that they are located somewhere in Ohio. If I quote anything you say, you will be given a pseudonym (fake name).

• If you participate in an interview or focus group, audio from the session will be recorded and transcribed either by Zoom or by Rev, which is a service that uses artificial intelligence to automate transcriptions. Rev does not store these recordings, and transcripts will be kept secure. I will edit transcripts to make sure they are accurate and fix any mistakes made by automated transcription services. Only myself and my faculty advisor will have access to recordings and transcripts, and these will be stored securely on a cloud drive and protected with a password.

• Participants in interviews and focus groups will have access to transcripts of sessions they participate in. In fact, the transcripts will belong to participants just as much as they belong to me. If you decide to participate in an interview or focus group, you will have a chance to view transcripts of your words and make corrections or notes if there is something you feel I missed or that did not get transcribed correctly. It is important to me that I capture your thoughts and stories accurately and in a way that feels true to you.

• Your decision to participate (or not) in any portion of this study will not impact your grades, credit completion, or graduation progress, and your participation will not be discussed in any way with anyone who works at your school or BCHF.

• Anyone who participates in research is entitled to know about any risks that might come with participation. The survey questions and interview protocols for this study have been reviewed by the University of Dayton's Institutional Review Board, which makes sure any research being done at UD is conducted responsibly and in such a way that avoids harm to participants. No significant risks are expected with this study, though it is possible that some questions might touch on unpleasant memories or make you feel some negative emotions. Again, you may refuse to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

• You are ONLY eligible to complete the survey if you are over the age of 18. This is because I cannot ask minors to participate in research without written permission from a parent or guardian. However, if you are under 18 and think you might be interested in participating in an interview or focus group, please write down or screenshot my contact information (below), exit the survey, and reach out to me. I am very interested in what you have to say, but I would need to follow a couple of extra steps to get parent/guardian permission to talk to you.

Please contact me or my advisor with any questions or concerns:
Me: Zoe Plotnick, zplotnick1@udayton.edu, (937) 303-1132 (voice or text)
My advisor: Dr. Matt Witenstein, mwitenstein1@udayton.edu, (937) 229-3447

Thank you for reading all of that! If you are eligible and all of this sounds good to you, please click below to indicate you are ready to begin.

◯ Sounds good! I have read and understand the above information. I am eligible to participate and agree to take the survey.

APPENDIX C: Survey Questions

By completing this survey, you are confirming that you have read the Invitation to Participate and that you are at least 18 years of age. The survey should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

"Traditional school" means a public, private, or charter school that follows a typical academic program.

"Alternative high school" means a school for students whose needs have not been met by traditional schools. Students at alternative high schools may have at one point dropped out of another high school, are missing a number of credits needed to graduate, or were for whatever reason considered to be at a higher risk of leaving school early without graduating. These schools are structured in such a way to provide a different approach to help students earn a diploma.

First, I'd like to know a little more about you.

A.   Demographics & General Information

*1.   Which school do you currently attend? Mark only one oval.

[student selects from list of participating schools]

◯ Other:

*2.   In terms of credit completion, what grade would you say you are in? Mark only one oval.

◯ 9th

◯ 10th

◯ 11th

◯ 12th

◯ Not sure

◯ Other:

*3.   Please specify your ethnicity: Mark only one oval.

◯ American Indian / Alaskan Native Asian

◯ Black or African American

◯ Hispanic or Latino/a/x

◯ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

◯ Two or more races

◯ White or Caucasian Unsure

◯ Would rather not say

◯ Other:

*4.   What is your gender? Mark only one oval.

○ Cisgender female

○ Cisgender male

○ Transgender female

○ Transgender male

○ Nonbinary

○ Genderfluid or genderqueer

○ Would rather not say

○ Other:

*5.   How old are you?

[short answer field]

6.   Please list the languages that are spoken in your home:

[short answer field]

7.   Are/were you classified as an English Learner? Mark only one oval.

○ Yes, I am currently an English Learner

○ I was an EL, but I exited from TESOL services

○ No, I have never been an English Learner

○ Unsure

○ Prefer not to say

8.   Do you have a disability for which you have a 504 Plan or an IEP? Mark only one oval.

○ Yes, 504 Plan

○ Yes, IEP

○ No

○ Unsure

○ Prefer not to say

9.   What is your employment status? Mark only one oval.

◯ Employed full-time

◯ Employed part-time

◯ Seeking employment - full-time

◯ Seeking employment - part-time

◯ Neither employed nor seeking employment at this time

◯ Prefer not to say

◯ Other:

10.   Are you a parent (or have you taken on a parenting role)? Mark only one oval.

◯ I am a parent

◯ Not a parent, but I frequently provide care to a minor who is not my biological or legally adopted child

◯ No

11.   What is the highest level of education your mother (or other guardian) obtained? Mark only one oval.

◯ Elementary school

◯ Middle school

◯ Some high school, did not graduate

◯ High school diploma

◯ 2-year degree or vocational credential

◯ Some college, did not graduate

◯ Bachelor's degree

◯ Some graduate or professional school

◯ Graduate or professional degree (master's, doctorate, etc.)

◯ Not sure

◯ Other:

12.   What is the highest level of education your father (or other guardian) obtained? Mark only one oval.

◯ Elementary school

◯ Middle school

◯ Some high school, did not graduate

◯ High school diploma

◯ 2-year degree or vocational credential

◯ Some college, did not graduate

◯ Bachelor's degree

◯ Some graduate or professional school

◯ Graduate or professional degree (master's, doctorate, etc.)

◯ Not sure

◯ Other:

   B.   Your Goals and Passions

13.   What do you plan to do once you graduate? Mark only one oval.

◯ Begin my career right away

◯ Enroll in a vocational program to earn a professional credential (example: trade, childcare, culinary, cosmetology, etc.)

◯ Enroll in a community college

◯ Enroll in a 4-year college

◯ Enroll in a community college, then transfer to a 4-year college later

◯ Enlist in military service

◯ Work for a while, then enroll in some kind of postsecondary education later

◯ Not sure yet

◯ Other:

14.   What job(s) or career field(s) interest you the most?

[long answer field]

15.   What do you hope your life will be like 5 years after you graduate?

[long answer field]

16.   What do you hope your life will be like 10 years after you graduate?

[long answer field]

17.   What are some types of knowledge or skills that you think are important for you to have by the time you graduate? These can be academic, career, or life skills.

[long answer field]

18.   Is there anything else you would like to share about your goals and dreams?

[long answer field]

C. Prior Educational Experiences

19.   How many other schools did you attend before you came to your current school? Mark only one oval.

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5

○ 6+

○ None, I was homeschooled

○ Not sure

○ Other:

20.   How many times have you changed schools in the middle of the school year? Mark only one oval.

○ 0

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3+

21.   Think back to when you were in a traditional school. What helped you feel supported or successful back then? Rate your agreement with these sentences from a scale of 1-5.

1-Strongly disagree
2-Somewhat disagree
3-Neither agree nor disagree
4-Somewhat Agree
5-Strongly Agree

A) The was at least one teacher or staff member who really looked out for my interests and went out of their way to help me succeed
B) At least one teacher or staff member seemed to truly care about me and liked me as a person
C) There was a counselor or other mental health specialist who helped me
D) I learned how to advocate for myself
E) There were times when I was proud of what I accomplished
F) There were sports, clubs or other extracurriculars I enjoyed
G) There was at least one class I really liked
H) I got to do things that were related to my personal interests
I) When I learned things that sounded useful or relevant to me
J) My family helped me feel supported
K) My friends or classmates helped me feel supported
L) The school provided academic services that helped me
M) The school provided other services (connecting me to resources, providing for my basic needs, health services, counseling, etc.)
N) I received other services for students who were considered to be "at risk"
O) My family would get mad at me if I left
P) I felt like I had to stay in school for another reason (please explain below)
Q) Nothing, really
R) I've never been enrolled in a traditional school
S) Other: [with space to explain below]

22.   What was negative about your experiences in traditional schools? Rate your agreement with these sentences from a scale of 1-5.

1-Strongly disagree
2-Somewhat disagree
3-Neither agree nor disagree
4-Somewhat agree
5-Strongly agree

A) I did not feel safe at my school
B) I had trouble performing well in classes
C) I did not have a supportive group of friends
D) I did not get along with teachers
E) I kept getting into trouble
F) I didn't see myself as a good student
G) I should have been receiving services (for a disability, English language learning, or other supports) that were not being provided to me
H) Stressful things going on in my life impacted how well I did at school
I) I just didn't feel like I belonged
J) I was expelled or asked to leave
K) Other: [with space to explain below]

23.   Is there anything you can think of that was missing or could have been changed that might have helped you have a more successful experience in a traditional school?

[long answer field]

24.   Did you ever have to repeat a year? Check any that apply.

◯ some time during grades K-2

◯ some time during grades 3-5

◯ some time during grades 6-8

◯ 9th grade

◯ 10th grade

◯ 11th grade

◯ 12th grade

◯ Not sure

◯ Not a whole year, but I've repeated individual classes as needed

◯ Other:

25.   Is there more you would like to share about your experiences with traditional schools?

[long answer field]

*26.   Have you spent time out of school? In other words, did you at one point decide to

leave school without graduating? Mark only one oval.

◯ Yes   [Skip to Section D/Question 27]

◯ No   [Skip to Section E/Question 32]

   D. Disengagement Experiences

27.   What year did you leave school? Mark only one oval.

◯ 9th grade

◯ 10th grade

◯ 11th grade

◯ 12th grade

◯ Other:

28.	What factor(s) caused you to leave school? For each statement, click the bubble for the column to indicate whether this statement applied to you and, if so, how much of a factor it was in your decision to disengage from school.

1-No, this does not describe my experience
2-This might describe my experience, but it didn't really impact my decisions about leaving school
3-This describes my experience, but I am unsure if it contributed to me leaving school early
4-This factor somewhat contributed to me leaving school early
5-This was a major factor that led to me leaving school early

A)	Financial pressures: I needed to work instead of attending school to make ends meet
B)	I preferred going to work instead of going to school
C)	I became a parent
D)	I had to help take care of an adult family member
E)	I had to provide care for a child in my family or household (not my own child)
F)	I did not feel a sense of belonging at school
G)	I did not get along with teachers
H)	Other students didn't seem to understand me / I did not have a lot of friends at school
I)	I wasn't like the other students at school
J)	What was being taught in school didn't seem to apply to me
K)	I was bored in my classes
L)	I was bullied
M)	I got into trouble for missing school
N)	I got into trouble for other things besides missing school
O)	I wasn't getting the support I needed for a learning difference or disability
P)	I did not feel like I could be academically successful at school
Q)	I did not feel like I would ever be able to complete the requirements for graduation
R)	Most of my friends did not go to school
S)	I didn't really see a point in attending school
T)	My family forced or pressured me to leave
U)	A spouse or dating partner forced or pressured me to leave
V)	School staff forced or pressured me to leave
W)	I experienced physical health challenges
X)	Someone in my family or home experienced physical health challenges
Y)	I experienced mental health challenges
Z)	Someone in my family or home experienced mental health challenges
AA)	I experienced addiction or substance abuse challenges
BB)	Someone in my family or home experienced addiction or substance abuse challenges
CC)	I experienced a challenging life event
DD)	I did not have a stable housing situation
EE)	I did not have a reliable way to get to school
FF)	Things in school weren't taught in a way that best would help me learn
GG)	School was simply not for me
HH)	Some other factor related to my life outside of school (please explain below)
II)	I lost interest in school for other reasons (please explain below)
JJ)	I felt "pushed out" by the school for other reasons (please explain below)
KK)	Other: [with space to explain below]

29.	Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences leaving school?

[long answer field]

30.   For how long were you out of school? You can list your age(s) or the span of months/years when you were not enrolled in school.

[short answer field]

31.   What factors led to your decision to go back to school and finish your diploma?

[long answer field]

E. Transfer Experiences

32.   What grade were you in when you first enrolled in an alternative school? Mark only one oval.

○ 9th

○ 10th

○ 11th

○ 12th

○ Other:

33.   Please describe some of the factors that led to you transferring to your current school.

[long answer field]

F. Re-Engagement Experiences

34.   Were you ever enrolled in a different alternative school before you attended the one you are in now? If so, how many? Which schools, and for how long?

Please describe your history with previous alternative schools.

[long answer field]

35.	Why did you choose your current school? For each statement, click the bubble for the column to indicate how much of a factor it was in your decision to choose your current school.

1-This does not apply to my school OR I didn't know this applied to my school when I selected it
2-I knew this applied to my school when I chose it, but it didn't really make me want to come to the school
3-I heard about this and thought it might be nice to have, though it wasn't a big deal to me
4-This factor somewhat contributed to me choosing my current school
5-This was a major factor that led to me choosing my current school

  A)	Smaller size
  B)	Smaller classes
  C)	This school seemed safer
  D)	Teachers and staff are more flexible
  E)	The school's structure is more flexible
  F)	The teachers and staff seem to really care
  G)	The teachers and staff are specially trained to help students like me learn and succeed
  H)	I can learn at my own pace
  I)	It sounded like the school's staff understands students like me
  J)	The school offers credentials, certifications and/or work skills I was interested in
  K)	My school will help me find work opportunities
  L)	It seemed to be the only option available to me (explain below)
  M)	There are other students like me here
  N)	It felt like a good fit for older students
  O)	I like earning credits the way they are offered
  P)	The school has a unique program focus that sounded interesting to me
  Q)	The school schedule fits in with my work schedule
  R)	I just felt like this school makes it possible for me to graduate
  S)	Another student or graduate recommended it
  T)	I heard good things about it from other people
  U)	The school will help me transition to college, vocational training, or other postsecondary education
  V)	The school offers academic services that sounded good
  W)	The school offers other services that help me with life outside of school
  X)	The school offers mentorship opportunities
  Y)	The principal or school leader drew me into the school
  Z)	The location was convenient
  AA)	Someone from my old school suggested it would be a good fit for me
  BB)	My family chose it for me
  CC)	Other: [with space to explain below]

36.	What do you like about your school now?

[long answer field]

37.	If you could change anything about your school, what would you change?

[long answer field]

38.   How confident are you that you will finish your diploma requirements and graduate (whether at your current school or elsewhere)? Mark only one oval.

Not at all confident   Extremely confident

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5

39.   Are you thinking of transferring to a different school?

Mark only one oval.

○ Yes - a traditional high school

○ Yes - a different alternative high school

○ Yes - some other type of school

○ Yes, but I'm looking at a few different options

○ No, I expect to graduate from my current school

○ No, I might not graduate

○ Not sure right now

G. Conclusion

Hooray!

You've made it to the end!

*40.   Would you be willing to participate in a focus group or interview to tell me more about your experiences, goals, and hopes for the future? These would take 60-90 minutes and take place either via Zoom, at your school, or in another location that is convenient and comfortable for you.

This is completely optional. If we meet in person I will provide snacks! Here is a picture of me so that you know I am a real human. :)

○ Yes - I'm interested in answering questions with a group of other students like me

○ Yes - I'm interested in being interviewed one on one

○ Yes, and I'm open to doing either one (don't worry, nobody will be expected to do both)

○ Maybe - could you reach out to me so I can get more info or ask some questions first?

○ No thank you

41.   If you answered "yes" or "maybe" above, please provide me with how I can contact you (email and/or phone number).

[short answer field]

42.   How would you prefer to be contacted if you answered "yes" or "maybe" to an interview or focus group?

Mark only one oval.

◯ Send me an email

◯ Text me

◯ Call me

Required questions are denoted with an asterisk (*)

APPENDIX D: Potential Questions for Interview & Focus Group Protocol

This sequence was informed by the Relational Model of group development (Dewees, 2006). While this model is more typically applied to groups that meet regularly over a period of time, Toner (2009) posited that small groups formed around a shared attribute or experience can foster sufficient intimacy to demonstrate temporal group development characteristics, particularly when they are formed around an expressed need for social action.

Questions and protocols will be refined after the survey phase is complete.

Phase I: Pre-affiliation
At this stage, members are often ambivalent about joining the group. Responses may be primarily directed at the researcher at this stage.

1. *Icebreaker:* Group members share their names and cities, briefly share what they hope to do after graduation, and state whether they would rather face one tyrannosaurus-sized goose or an army of goose-sized tyrannosauruses in combat and their rationale for this choice.

2. Researcher/moderator introduces self and restates the purpose of the project, emphasizing that the goal is to try to help their school's sponsor (and maybe even DEW) move away from putting so much emphasis on math and reading test scores, which don't have a whole lot to do with the goals that it sounds like most of them actually care about. Emphasize that the goal of this research is to answer the question, "What does a successful alternative high school look like?" by learning more about these schools' students and their experiences, goals and needs. Reaffirm confidentiality and that participation is voluntary, and emphasize that diverse perspectives and different opinions are encouraged. Discuss participation norms, encouraging participants to decide together which norms they would like to follow as a group (e.g., you can keep your microphone unmuted the whole time, but feel free to mute if there is a lot of background noise; if you need to get up to use the restroom or stretch your legs, go ahead and do so; keeping cameras on is encouraged since we'll have a better conversation that way, but if you need to turn yours off for a bit then that's okay; we can go back and revisit questions if you think of something you'd like to add later).

3. What questions do you have for me right now?

4. What would you say makes your school different from a more traditional high school?

5. What are some things you like about your school?

6. What are some things you wish were different about your school?

Phase II: Establishment of relational base
Strong, affective connections are built among group members.

1. What kinds of events and factors led to you enrolling in your current school?

2. What are the most important things you'd like to get out of your education?

3. What are some things you think graduates of alternative high schools absolutely should know and be able to do by the time they graduate?

4. Let's talk about teachers, school staff and administrators that you've worked with who have really made you want to do your best. What did those people do to help you feel motivated?

5. What else motivates you?

6. If one of your friends from outside your current school told you they were thinking about enrolling there, what would you tell them? Do you have advice for them?

Phase III: Emergence of mutuality and interpersonal empathy
Group members' connections deepen and a shift towards discussing collective experiences and shared goals for change occurs.

1. What role do you take in making decisions about your course of study?

2. Finish the sentence, "If only it were possible, I would…"

3. *Explain what is meant by "push" and "pull" factors leading to disengagement.* What were some "push factors" during your past school experiences?

   a. How has this changed between then and now?

4. What were some "pull factors" during your past school experiences?

   a. How has this changed between then and now?

5. What would you say were the final deciding factors that finally made you decide you were done with your old/traditional school?

6. If you spent time not enrolled in school, what was that like?

7. What happened that made you decide to try again at your alternative school?

8. If you have attended more than one alternative school, what made you decide to switch?

   a. How are the different alternative schools you have attended similar to one another, and how are they different?

Phase IV: Movement toward challenge and change
Group members recognize differences and may challenge one another to spur growth and further develop ideas.

1. *Following a prompt that includes guiding questions to help them think through specific details, students draw a picture/diagram/illustration or write a description of their ideal school–first individually, then they work together to collaboratively describe/illustrate such a school. This exercise will yield data in the form of these participant-created artifacts as well as the dialogue they engage in as they discuss and debate their ideas.*

2. *Students each make a list of the attributes that are most important for an alternative high school to have. Then they will collaboratively (consider splitting into smaller groups depending on focus group size) develop a "Top 5" list of the most important things an alternative high school should have or do. This exercise will yield data in the form of these participant-created artifacts as well as the dialogue they engage in as they discuss and debate their ideas.*

Phase V: Termination
As the session draws to a close, discussion shifts to more informal information exchange and begins to wind down.

1. Are there any questions you wish I had asked you? Is there anything else you would like to share?

2. *Solicit referrals for additional participants who may be at other stages of the disengagement-re-engagement journey. Offer participants who think they may have a referral the chance to contact that other person first; provide cards with my contact information that they can share with their friends.*

3. *Explain next steps - participants will be given access to transcripts for member checking.*

APPENDIX E: Inter-Item Correlation Using Kendall's τ^b Coefficient

Traditional School Protective Factors Results

Item	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	0.82**	0.63*	0.68**	0.55*	0.53*	0.55*	0.50*	0.58*	0.85**	0.35	0.69**	0.60*	0.33	0.29	0.37	0.02
2		0.60*	0.74**	0.69**	0.41	0.52*	0.34	0.51*	0.67**	0.15	0.58*	0.56*	0.22	0.18	0.32	0.02
3			0.42	0.51*	0.32	0.57*	0.50*	0.43	0.65**	0.51*	0.56*	0.65**	0.50	0.35	0.29	0.39
4				0.70**	0.49	0.28	0.29	0.56*	0.48	0.08	0.41	0.48	0.17	0.42	0.08	-0.13
5					0.70**	0.58*	0.47	0.82**	0.37	0.00	0.67**	0.74**	0.35	0.51*	0.48	0.08
6						0.64*	0.69**	0.93**	0.48	0.28	0.75**	0.70**	0.43	0.53*	0.62*	0.08
7							0.69**	0.69**	0.63*	0.45	0.81**	0.76**	0.57*	0.39	0.66**	0.40
8				.				0.67**	0.65**	0.51*	0.83**	0.77**	0.38	0.32	0.55*	0.23
9									0.45	0.18	0.75**	0.83**	0.50*	0.54*	0.54*	0.15
10										0.55*	0.71**	0.54*	0.31	0.17	0.46	0.12
11											0.37	0.29	0.60*	0.49	0.22	0.49
12												0.85**	0.45	0.33	0.77**	0.16
13													0.63*	0.43	0.56*	0.36
14														0.72**	0.34	0.65*
15															0.17	0.45
16																0.15

*$p<.05$. **$p<.01$.

Traditional School Challenge Factors Results

Item	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	0.44	0.61*	0.56*	0.28	0.31	0.12	0.50*	0.83**	0.42
2		0.67**	0.82**	0.66**	0.64*	0.25	0.58*	0.51*	0.58*
3			0.59*	0.42	0.39	0.32	0.59*	0.55*	0.47
4				0.59*	0.18	0.62*	0.54*	.052*	0.30
5					0.92**	0.31	0.32	0.39	0.75**
6						0.22	0.35	0.34	0.63*
7							0.46	0.29	0.64*
8								0.57*	0.40
9									0.59*

Item Keys

Table 6–Traditional School Protective Factors Items:
1. There was at least one teacher or staff member who really looked out for my interests and went out of their way to help me succeed.
2. At least one teacher or staff member seemed to truly care about me and liked me as a person.
3. There was a counselor or other mental health specialist who helped me.
4. I learned how to advocate for myself.
5. There were times when I was proud of what I accomplished.
6. There were sports, clubs or other extracurriculars I enjoyed.
7. There was at least one class I really liked.
8. I got to do things that were related to my personal interests.
9. When I learned things that sounded useful or relevant to me.
10. My family helped me feel supported.
11. My friends or classmates helped me feel supported.
12. The school provided academic services that helped me.
13. The school provided other services (connecting me to resources, providing for my basic needs, health services, counseling, etc.).
14. I received other services for students who were considered to be "at risk."
15. My family would get mad at me if I left.
16. I felt like I had to stay in school for another reason (please explain below).
17. Nothing, really.

Table 7–Traditional School Challenge Factors Items:
1. I did not feel safe at my school.
2. I had trouble performing well in classes.
3. I did not have a supportive group of friends.
4. I did not get along with teachers.
5. I kept getting into trouble.
6. I didn't see myself as a good student.
7. I should have been receiving services (for a disability, English language learning, or other supports) that were not being provided to me.
8. Stressful things going on in my life impacted how well I did at school.
9. I just didn't feel like I belonged.
10. I was expelled or asked to leave.

APPENDIX F: Participant Demographics and Follow-Up Form

Participant Information

Your first name (this will <u>not</u> be shared in my study): _____

Would you like to choose a fake name for Zoe to use if she quotes your words in her dissertation?
☐ Yes, please use this name for me: _____ ☐ Nah, Zoe can pick one

Your age: _____
Are you working right now? If so, where? Part-time, or full-time? If not, are you currently looking?

_____

How would you describe your ethnicity? _____

What is your gender? _____

If there is anything about you that you would like me to know, but that you didn't mention during our conversation? If so, you can write it here:

_____
_____
_____
_____

And here is the last question:
Since your time is valuable, I would like to show my appreciation by sharing some of my own time with you! Which of these sound like something you'd be interested in?

☐ Help me with ELA/writing
☐ Help me with math
☐ Help me with job hunting stuff (improving my resume, preparing for interviews, etc.)
☐ Give me a tarot reading
☐ Teach me some belly dancing moves
☐ Show me how to use some free AI tools in ways that are helpful and can save me time, but that wouldn't piss off my teachers
☐ Show me super-secret, insider knowledge about things I can do for free with my library card (this one is less boring than it sounds, I promise)

How would you like me to reach you to set this up?
☐ send an email   ☐ send a text   ☐ give a call

Put your email or phone number here: _____