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GRADUATION SUCCESS: IDENTIFYING AND OVERCOMING

CHALLENGING DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS TO

REDUCE HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of students completing high school with a diploma is the focus of increasing social, economic, and political attention across the United States. Posing a strong challenge to efforts to increase graduation rates are several key demographic factors. This study examines, through a case study, an Indiana high school that overcame the challenge of negative demographic factors to achieve a graduation rate above the state average for four consecutive years (2006-2009).

Researching databases maintained by the Indiana Department of Education revealed specific demographic factors that had a strong correlation to graduation rates in Indiana. The four demographic factors with the strongest negative correlation to graduation rates were percent of students on free lunch, percent of students from single parent families, percent of children in district with at risk mothers, and percent of families in district below the poverty level. The high school examined, through the case study in this project, exhibited student numbers at or above the state average in each of those four negative demographic factors and also achieved a graduation rate at or above the state average for the four consecutive years studied.

To overcome the challenges of those negative factors, the high school maintains a child-centered focus that seeks to address both affective and academic needs of students. Seizing every opportunity every day to help every child is not only a stated goal, but a pervasive attitude. Two alternative schools, a vocational career center, online classes for credit recovery, smaller classes targeted for at-risk freshmen, after school tutoring programs, and involvement of

community resources are some of the programs employed by the school to reduce dropouts.

Staff members of the school work cohesively in support of both students and each other. The

demonstrated successes of this high school provide models for other high schools to emulate.

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Families usually get thanked at the end of acknowledgments, but I want the most important people in my life to go first. My wife, Gena, and my children, Ashley and Jordan, have given unwavering patience, support, and encouragement through this process. My wife and son assumed added responsibilities and made unselfish adjustments while Dad was consumed with coursework and writing over the two year period. My daughter in New York never failed to offer encouragement during her many "check-ups" on how I was doing. Our family is strong thanks to the foundational rock maintained by my wife. Words cannot adequately express my love and appreciation for my wife and children.

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CHAPTER 1

The Problem

"Don't even think about dropping out of school. Don't even think about it" (Obama, 2009b, p. 9).

An individual's attainment of an excellent education is a critical, if not the most critical, factor in determining a person's opportunities throughout adult life in terms of employment, income, health status, housing, recreation, and many other basic essentials and amenities in life. A precise definition of an excellent education does not exist. Experts debate the relative importance and hierarchy of high student performance on standardized tests; performance on international comparisons of achievement; mastery levels of proficiency in key subjects; the ability to solve problems and analyze complex situations; or adaptive skills that enable a person to work cooperatively with others. Any measurement of educational excellence, however, must include the minimal criterion of a high school diploma. High school graduation captures both the cognitive and non-cognitive attributes that are important for success in adulthood (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2006). A high school diploma is a prerequisite for engaging in further training and education. All stages of employment, including securing an entry level job, maintaining some level of career stability, and realizing any advancement in employment almost universally require the attainment of a high school diploma. "Higher educational attainment

increases a student's future income, occupational status, and social prestige" (Muennig, 2006, p. 2). In their study for the state of Washington, Shannon and Bylsma (2006) concluded school dropout statistics represent

> thousands of young people who do not have the benefit of a full educational program to prepare them for their adult lives…More important than test scores is for all students to have the knowledge and skills to be able to learn, live, and work in our world, both now and in the future. (p. 72)

The Washington Education Reform Law of 2003 stated the goal of schools in the state of Washington is to "provide students with the opportunity to become responsible citizens, to contribute to their own economic well-being and to that of their families and communities, and to enjoy productive and satisfying lives" (as cited in Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p.72). The Center for Market Labor Studies (2009) also noted:

> America is currently in the throes of a persistent high school dropout crisis that has been a long time in the making. In the current global economy, having a high school diploma is a critical first step for achieving employability at decent wages and avoiding poverty and a college degree is a prerequisite for a well-paying job. (p. 5)

Even an extremely limited and precursory examination of the economic ramifications of dropping out of school, both to individuals and to society as a whole, is staggering. The Alliance for Excellent Education has produced numerous studies detailing the calculated economic impact of dropping out. In 2005, the average annual income by educational attainment was $9,634 more for a high school graduate than for a dropout. A person with a bachelor's degree earned $35,372 more per year than a high school dropout (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b). The same report noted if the students who dropped out of the class of 2009 had graduated, the nation's

economy would benefit from nearly $335 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b). Over a lifetime, a high school dropout contributes about $60,000 less in taxes (Rouse, 2005). A 2006 Columbia University study compared the costs of prevention and intervention programs to the economic benefits for American society of having a student graduate (Levin et al., 2006). The study calculated each new high school graduate would yield a public benefit of $209,000 in higher revenues and lower government spending for an overall investment of $82,000, a net economic benefit of $127,000 per student (Levin et al., 2006).

While highlighting the significant benefits of graduating from high school, numerous studies also reveal the serious ramifications of dropping out. The impact is both personal and societal, and affects quality of life as well as economics. Students who leave school without a diploma cost an average $13,706 (in 2005 dollars) more in Medicaid and expenditures for the uninsured over the course of their lifetime (Muennig, 2006). In the same study Muennig (2006) estimated if the 1.2 million dropouts in the United States in 2006 would have earned diplomas, the nation could save more than $17 million in health care costs over the course of those young people's lifetimes. Similarly, high school dropouts are more disposed toward criminal activity than graduates. Male inmates are twice as likely as their counterparts in the general population to lack either a high school diploma or an equivalency certificate (Harlow, 2003). Moretti (2005) contends a 10% increase in the male graduation rate would reduce murder and assault rates by about 20%, motor vehicle theft by 13%, and arson by 8%. If the male graduation rate were increased by only 5%, the United States would see an annual savings of $4.9 billion in crime-related costs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006).

The 2006 Columbia University study examined the economic impact of graduates and dropouts among 20-year-olds. The conclusions are sobering.

Over a lifetime, male high school graduates earn $117,000-$322,000 more than dropouts. For males with some college the income differential is $500,000; for college graduates it is over $1 million. For females, high school graduates earn $120,000-$244,000 more than dropouts. Female college graduates earn $752,000-$850,000 more than dropouts. For income taxes, male graduates contribute $90,000-$146,000 more than dropouts. Male graduates with a college degree contribute $479,000-$642,000 more in income taxes than dropouts. Female graduates contribute $62,000-$80,000 more than dropouts. Female graduates with a college degree contribute $350,000 more than dropouts. (Current Population Survey March 2003 and 2004, as cited in Levin et al., 2006, pp. 7-9)

The Columbia University study concludes that, in the aggregate, if the dropout rate of only one year's high school students were cut in half, the nation's economy would realize over $49 billion in additional revenue over the course of those students' lifetime (Levin et al., 2006).

With consequent impact on both the future lives of individual students and the social and economic stability of our country, it is not surprising students dropping out of high school present a growing concern from the White House to the State House to the local barber shop. In his first address to a Joint Session of Congress on February 24, 2009, President Barack Obama stated "…a good education is no longer just a pathway to an opportunity – it is a pre-requisite" (Obama, 2009a, p. 6). The president further stated "…dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country – and this country needs and values the talents of every American" (Obama, 2009a, p. 7). In his speech, President Obama remarked, "For we know that economic progress and educational achievement have always gone

hand in hand in America" (Obama, 2009b, p. 3). Even the direction of domestic public policy has entered the debates on educational reform and the economic vitality of our country (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2009).

The numbers of students leaving school without a diploma are substantial and have remained much the same over the past 30 years (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). With *A Nation at Risk* passing its 25th anniversary and *No Child Left Behind* facing uncertainty as it approaches its 2014 target, mediocre (at best) graduation rates continue to dominate headlines across the country. An estimated five million 18- to 24-year olds lack a high school diploma (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). In an article written for Indiana newspapers, Indiana State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett stated "…every 26 seconds another American student drops out of high school" (Bennett, 2009). All states have a school dropout problem, and every state has schools where at least 40% of their 9th graders fail to reach 12th grade in three years. Five states have more than 100 of these 'dropout factories' (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). The state of Indiana has taken steps to address this growing crisis, and the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE, 2009a) held a summit bringing teams of educators and community members from every county in the state together with policy leaders and education experts. In May, 2009, the Indiana State Legislature passed a bill creating a Dropout Prevention Fund to appropriate money for schools to identify students at risk of dropping out and to develop prevention programs (House Enrolled Act 1343, 2009).

It is imperative that factors which cause students to drop out of school be examined within a multiple context of identity, elimination, and future prevention. "A society that provides fairer access to opportunities, that is more productive and with higher employment, that has better health and less crime is a better society in itself" (Levin et al., 2006, p. 68). Levin et

al. (2006) adds "That the attainment of such a society is also profoundly good economics is simply an added incentive, albeit a large one" (p. 68). Profound and pervasive change is needed in America's schools. A focused and comprehensive approach to dropout prevention and recovery will help schools and states and our country realize benefits that are both substantial and significant.

> Lowering dropout rates exapands opportunities for more youth, paving the way for success in college, career, and life. It engenders stronger communities, enhanced civic life, and an improved workforce. In the long run, achieving graduation for all puts states (and our nation) on the path to economic growth. (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009, p. 5)

Statement of the Problem

Dropping out of high school remains a critical education crisis as we leave the first decade of the 21st century. Although programs to keep students in school are being developed and implemented across the country, students continue to leave school without diplomas at alarming rates. Studies and data have identified critical demographic factors that have strong correlation – both positive and negative – to low graduation rates. If these identified demographic factors with negative correlation are truly predictive of low graduation rates, are there steps high schools can take to overcome these factors and retain more students?

Purpose of the Study

Numerous studies and analyses of available data have revealed school demographic factors that have a strong correlation, both positive and negative, to graduation rates. The purpose of this study was to identify three Indiana high schools that have overcome many of these challenging demographic factors with strong negative correlation to achieve a successful graduation rate. The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase data on Indiana

schools was collected and analyzed to identify high schools that (a) exhibit above average numbers of students who fall into one or more of the demographic factors identified by the state of Indiana as having a strong contributing relationship to low graduation rates in Indiana and (b) exhibit graduation rates above the Indiana state average. Three Indiana high schools were selected for a case study, which was conducted as the second phase of this study. In the second phase qualitative interviews were conducted to discover the means by which the Indiana high schools selected for study overcame demographic factors that have a strong contributing relationship to low graduation rates and achieved an above average rate of graduation.

Research Questions

1. (Phase 1, part a) What demographic factors have the strongest contributing relationship to low graduation rates in Indiana and what Indiana high schools have the largest concentrations of students who exhibit those factors?

2. (Phase 1, part b) Are there Indiana high schools identified in part a of Phase 1 that exhibit graduation rates above the Indiana state average? (Three were identified for a case study.)

3. (Phase 2) What role does administrative staff play in contributing to the graduation rate success of the selected Indiana high school(s)?

4. (Phase 2) What roles do teachers and other staff play in contributing to the graduation rate success of the selected Indiana high school(s)?

5. (Phase 2) What other factors contribute to the graduation rate success of the selected Indiana high school(s)?

Researcher's Role

It is important to recognize the researcher's role in the preparation of this study. In qualitative research, researchers "become part of the process, continually making choices, testing assumptions, and reshaping their questions" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 4). Having served as a high school teacher, high school assistant principal, high school principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent, the researcher has spent his entire educational career closely associated with high school students, staff, and academic achievement. These experiences become intrinsically intertwined with both the collection and the analysis of data. "The experiences of whoever is engaged in an inquiry are vital to the inquiry and its implicated thought processes" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 4). Although keenly interested in the results of this study, the researcher has either no or very limited professional connections to any of the high schools considered for identification for case study. Because the researcher spent the last 20 years in the same corporation, including the last 17 years in a central office administrative position, connections to any high schools under examination in this study were unlikely, and no high school within the researcher's district was used in the study.

An expedited review was sought from the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board on the basis of using the following procedures for the study from the list of Research Categories (Expedited Review Research Categories, Form C):

Research Category 6: Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Research Category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity,

language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research

employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human

factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Permission to study the high schools identified for the case study was sought by

approaching the corporation superintendent with a summary of the proposed study. A general

list of participants sought for the case study (administrators, teachers, staff, students, community

members) was presented to the superintendent. Once approved, each high school principal's

input was sought in identifying appropriate participants to interview. During the interview

process identities were kept confidential (in fact as anonymous as possible) by not asking for

names and attaching no identifying characteristics to notes. When quotes from participants were

used, they were identified in a generic manner, such as, "a student said," or "a teacher

remarked."

Because identification of positive programs, outcomes, and efforts were sought, ethical

considerations were minimal. Students were not asked to identify weaknesses or failings in

specific teachers, and employees were not asked to identify weaknesses or failings in their

superiors.

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been identified for clarification in understanding this study:

Cohort: For the purposes of this study, the IDOE definition of cohort is used: a class of

students who attend the same high school and are first considered to have entered grade 9 in the

same year (IDOE, 2010a).

Demographic factors: For the purposes of this study, demographic factors are defined

within the context of data prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau as reported to the IDOE, as well

as IDOE statistical data collections. Demographic factors are cited as percentages of people who exhibit the identified criteria. Factors used in this study and the corresponding U.S. Census reporting timeframe or IDOE data collection date include: Students Passing ISTEP+, IDOE data 2008-09; Stability Index, IDOE data 2007-08; Student Attendance Rate, IDOE data 2007-08; SAT scores, IDOE data 2007-08; Seniors Taking SAT, IDOE data 2007-08; Per capita Income of Corporation, 1999 Census data; Students on Free Lunch, IDOE data 2008-09; Students with Single Parent Families, Census 2000; Children with At Risk Mothers, Census 1990; Families Below the Federal Poverty Level, Census 2000; Suspension/Expulsion Rate for Corporation, IDOE data 2007-08; Minority Students, IDOE data 2008-09; Adults with less than a High School Education, Census 2000 (IDOE, 2009c).

Dropout: For the purposes of this study, the IDOE definition of dropout is used: a student who was enrolled in school during the current school year or the previous summer recess, who left the educational system during the current school year or the previous summer recess, who has not graduated from high school, and who does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: (a) death; (b) temporary absence due to suspension or a school-excused absence; (c) transfer to a public or nonpublic school (IDOE, n.d.).

Dropout rate: For the purposes of this study, the IDOE definition of dropout rate is used: the number determined under Step Three of the following formula:

Step One: Determine the number of students enrolled on October 1 or the date closest to October 1 that school is in session.

Step Two: Determine the number of students who drop out of school during the current school year and the previous summer recess.

Step Three: Determine the quotient of: (A) the amount determined under Step Two; divided by (B) the amount determined under Step One. (IDOE, n.d.)

Graduation: For the purposes of this study, the IDOE definition of graduation is used: the successful completion by a student of a sufficient number of academic credits, or the equivalent of academic credits; and the graduation examination or waiver process required under IC 20-32-3 through IC 20-32-6, resulting in the awarding of a high school diploma as defined in 511 IAC 6-7. The term does not include the granting of a general educational development diploma under IC 20-20-6. The term does not include the granting of a certificate of completion under 511 IAC 7-43 (IDOE, n.d.).

Graduation rate: For the purposes of this study, graduation rate generally means the percentage of students within a cohort who graduate during their expected graduation year. When specifically examining Indiana students, the IDOE definition of graduation rate is used: the number determined under Step Three of the following formula:

Step One: Determine the dropout rates for Grades 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Step Two: Determine the remainder of: (A) 1.0; minus (B) the amount determined under STEP ONE for each of the above four (4) grades.

Step Three: Determine the product of the four (4) amounts determined under Step Two. (IDOE, n.d.).

High school: For the purposes of this study, high school is defined as a grade configuration that includes grades 9 through 12, whether or not all those grades are physically housed in the same location.

ISTEP+: For the purposes of this study, ISTEP+ is defined as the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress Plus.

Principal: For the purposes of this study, principal is defined as a properly certified person who is assigned as the chief administrative officer of a school.

Superintendent: For the purposes of this study, superintendent is defined as a properly certified person who serves as the chief administrative officer of a school corporation.

Teacher: For the purposes of this study, teacher is defined as a properly certified, licensed person who is assigned to instruction of students.

Summary and Organization of the Study

The importance of students completing high school with a diploma is the focus of increasing social, economic and political attention across the United States. Posing a strong challenge to efforts to increase graduation rates are several key demographic factors. Discovery of three Indiana high schools that have successfully overcome demographic factors identified as specific to Indiana and achieved a strong graduation rate provides a resource for other schools to study and assimilate as appropriate. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the study, including a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, and a definition of terms. Chapter 2 presents a review of current and pertinent research related to what causes students to drop out and programs to prevent them from doing so. Chapter 3 provides information regarding the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study and addresses the study's research questions. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings, a discussion of those findings, the researcher's interpretation of those findings, and implications of the study with recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Dropping out of school and the consequent impact on high school graduation rates has

become a focal point to the level of being labeled a 'crisis' in education across the United States.

The costs of dropping out of school are substantial – for individual students, families,

communities, and our nation as a whole. Raising educational standards and demanding

accountability for those standards is an integral part of every education agenda from the White

House to the local school board. The ability of the United States to sustain a strong competitive

position in the global economy also serves to intensify the focus on keeping students in school so

they may later become productive members of society. A review of literature pertinent to the

dropout and graduation rate issue will focus on two areas: factors that impact a decision by

students to drop out and types of programs that are being implemented to prevent students from

dropping out.

Why Students Drop Out

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009a) noted there is no single reason that students

drop out and notes "while there is no single reason that students drop out, research indicates that

difficult transitions to high school, deficient basic skills, and a lack of engagement serve as

prominent barriers to graduation" (p. 3). A study of 196 high schools in Kentucky identified the

strongest correlations to dropping out of high school to be failure to pass the state standardized

assessment, attendance rate, suspension rate, retention rate, and the percentage of students on free and reduced lunches. Suspension and expulsion rates, percentage of white students, and enrollment size of the high schools were also determined to have strong correlations to graduation/dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009a) has supported numerous publications designed to encourage high school reform and increased student achievement and attainment of a high school diploma. The Alliance notes the path to graduation is forged in middle school, and specific risk factors such as low attendance and failing grades can be identified as early as sixth grade. Ninth grade is often the point where students find they have insufficient academic skills for high school work, and one third of all dropouts occur in the ninth grade (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a). Balfanz and Legters (2006) found up to 40% of ninth grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat ninth grade, and only 10 to 15% of those students graduate. The Alliance Fact Sheet concludes "both academic and social engagement are integral components of successfully navigating the education pipeline. Research shows that a lack of student engagement is predictive of dropping out, even after controlling for academic achievement and student background" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a, p. 3).

A study was conducted for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to discover why students drop out. Students who had dropped out of high school were directly interviewed to examine the dropout crisis from their unique perspectives (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Bridgeland et al. (2006) noted "…dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement, often both academically and socially…" (p. 8). Students indicated they started becoming disinterested in high school as early as 9th and 10th grades. Students noted they would go to school late, take long lunches, or skip classes or school

altogether. Parents did not oversee their children, and only one-fifth of parents were identified as *very* involved in their child's attendance. The study listed the top five reasons identified by dropouts as factors for leaving school: bored with school (47%); missed too many days and could not catch up (43%); spent time with people who were not interested in school (42%); had too much freedom and not enough rules in their lives (38%); or were failing in school (35%). Interestingly, 70% of the dropouts interviewed indicated they were confident they could have graduated had they tried harder. Family issues and other real life events were also cited by many students as reasons they did not graduate. One-third (32%) indicated they had to get a job and make money; 26% said they became a parent; and 22% said they had to care for a family member (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

In a parallel study in 2009, the perspectives of teachers and principals related to the dropout problem were examined through a similar interview process (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009). In this study the top reasons for students dropping out from the educators' perspective were: not enough support at home; missed too many days and couldn't catch up; spent time with people who aren't interested in school; not prepared for high school and started off behind; and bored/did not find school work interesting. Although most of the educators interviewed recognized that teachers and schools bear at least some of the responsibility for students dropping out, few placed much of that responsibility upon themselves (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

A 2009 report from the Education Division of the National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices was titled *Achieving Graduation for All: A Governor's Guide to Dropout Prevention and Recovery* (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). This report cites many of the same factors as the Civics Enterprises studies. Princiotta and Reyna (2009) identified four

primary reasons for students dropping out of school: academic failure, disinterest in school, problematic behavior inside or outside of school, and life events such as pregnancy, getting a job, or caring for an ill family member. Many students who fail courses lack resources to help them get back on track or recover credits, leading to dropping out of school. As noted above, almost half the students surveyed in a national poll indicated the main reason they left school was because classes were not interesting (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In our technologically advanced world students expect schools to serve their needs and to do so quickly.

Fights in and out of school, suspensions and expulsions, criminal behavior outside of school, and drug and alcohol use indicate an increased likelihood to drop out of school. Life events that make it difficult for students to attend class and also meet their other responsibilities also increase the likelihood of dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Princiotta and Reyna (2009) also noted most schools do not have adequate systems in place to identify students who are at risk of dropping out, and state systems to reengage students after they have dropped out are insufficient or nonexistent.

Interaction of Multiple Risk Factors

Multiple risk factors, and an intricate interaction of those factors, are cited in several studies as contributing to a student's decision to drop out of school. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) looked at the problems posed when high school students drop out of high school. They noted, "a student's decision to drop out of school…is affected by a number of complex factors and is often the culmination of a long process of disengagement from school" (p. 77). Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) concluded a complex set of relationships between student, family, school and community impact the dropout decision. The final decision to drop out is often not one made suddenly as the result of a recent or single factor, but rather one formulated over time. The risk factors they

identified which best predict dropout are high absenteeism, being over-age by two years, having

low grades, and having a child. They also found minority and low-income students are

significantly more likely than well-to-do white students to drop out of school.

Staff and Kreager (2008) identified the complex influence of peer groups as a high risk

factor. They found that disadvantaged boys with high status in violent groups are at a higher risk

of dropping out than other students. Low parent education levels were also seen as a strong

contributing factor to dropping out. Unable to attain desired social status through educational

and economic attainment, Staff and Kraeger found that boys from low social economic

backgrounds often drop out of school because they can achieve peer approval from an alternative

and oppositional status system.

Suh and Suh (2007) also found exposure to multiple risk factors increased the likelihood

of dropping out. The top three risk factors they identified were academic risk, low

socioeconomic status, and behavioral problems. Five significant risk factors of students with

low social economic backgrounds were identified: students' expectations to stay in school; age

of first sexual experience; limited educational enrichment activities and resources; risk of harm

from the students' physical environment; and household size. Additional factors identified in

students with behavioral problems included absenteeism; association with college-bound peers;

unhealthy community and family environment; the possible impact of living with a non-

biological parent; the effects of living in a metropolitan area; participation in fights at school;

and whether the student had been threatened with harm at school.

School, Family, and Community Factors

An extensive study for the Department of Public Instruction of the state of Washington

identified numerous factors in a student's decision to drop out of school (Shannon & Bylsma,

2006). The study noted although research could not determine a definitive causal relationship among the factors, they are closely related and interact with one another. Student, family, and community factors identified were:

- Family has income below poverty level

- Student is a member of a minority

- Student has frequently changed schools

- Student has poor academic achievement

- Student has poor attendance

- Student has repeated one or more grades

- Student's primary language is not English

- High school is located in a large city

- Student has relatives or friends who have dropped out

- Student has an illness or a disability

- Student is pregnant

- Student has low self-esteem (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Shannon and Bylsma (2006) also discussed school factors that contribute to low graduation rates. They noted "discipline and grading policies, school organization and size, program assignments, course content, the type of instruction, school climate, and adult-student relationships can all influence students to drop out" (p. 4). They also listed the school-related factors disseminated by the National Dropout Prevention Center:

- Conflict between home and school culture

- Ineffective discipline system

- Lack of adequate counseling

- Negative school climate

- Lack of relevant curriculum

- Passive instructional strategies

- Inappropriate use of technology

- Disregard of student learning styles

- Retentions/suspensions

- Low expectations

- Lack of language instruction (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.).

A 2002 federal government report detailed multiple factors associated with dropping out and found that dropping out of school is a long term process that occurs over time and actually begins in early grades (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002). The report identified two main types of factors: family characteristics and school experiences. Family characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, single-parent families, siblings' educational attainment, and family mobility show a strong correlation to the likelihood of dropping out. Other home aspects such as level of parent involvement and support, parents' educational expectations, parents' attitudes about school, and stability of the family environment impact a student's decision to drop out. For example, "students from low-income, single-parent, and less-educated families often enter school less prepared than children from more affluent, better educated families and subsequently drop out at a much higher rate than other students do" (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002, p. 3). School factors, such as poor academic performance, chronic absenteeism, disciplinary problems, frequently changing schools, and being retained one or more times were all found at high rates in students who drop out. Characteristics of schools themselves, such as

school size, level of resources, and level of support for students with academic or behavioral

problems, were also found to influence dropout rates (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Barton (2006) conducted a study wherein he examined student conditions and life

experiences to determine their correlation with failure to complete high school. He found three

factors accounted for almost 60% of the variation in state graduation rates: socioeconomic

characteristics (i.e., family income, education, and occupation); two-parent families; and the rate

at which students change schools (Barton, 2006). Barton also cited the 2002 General Accounting

Office report that low-income students and high-mobility students are at a high risk of dropping

out, and that low achievement and grade retention are precursors to leaving school. The factor

Barton identifed as most predictive of a student dropping out was coming from a single parent

family (Barton, 2006).

Dropouts in Canada

A study of dropouts in Canada revealed characteristics in students similar to their

American counterparts (Tilleczek, Ferguson, Rummens, & Boydell, 2006). In 2001, 18.4% of

Canadian men and women between the ages of 20 and 24 did not have a high school diploma

(Tilleczek et al., 2006). That problem was made worse by the fact that a large proportion of

Canadian youth who left school before graduating did so at an early age and thus had low levels

of education. Approximately one third of early school leavers dropped out with grade 9

education or less, and almost two thirds dropped out with Grade 10 education or less (Tilleczek

et al., 2006). Four in 10 early-leavers left school by the age of 16. Identified student risk factors

included coming from low income families, not living with a primary caregiver, having repeated

at least one grade, high absenteeism in secondary school, and discipline problems (Tilleczek et

al., 2006). Through interviews the researchers found that "before leaving school early, students

entered into a process of disengagement" (Tilleczek et al., 2006, p. 20). Students themselves

described school related risk factors: rigid school policies counterproductive to keeping students

in school or helping them return; negative relationships with principals and teachers; curriculum

that was too difficult; lack of support with school; and a climate that was not enjoyable and not

conducive to learning.

Poverty and Ethnicity as Factors

Students from low income families are three times more likely to drop out than students

from more affluent homes (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Female students who come from families

in the lowest economic quartile had a dropout rate five times that of females in the highest

economic quartile. Male students had a two and a half times greater dropout rate in the same

comparison. The National Center for Education Statistics reported students from families with

incomes in the lowest 20% were six times more likely to drop out of school than students from

families in the top 20% of income (Kaufman & Alt, 2004).

Poverty was identified as the fundamental driver of low graduation rates in a study by

Balfanz and Legters (2006). They found a near perfect linear relationship between a high

school's poverty level and its tendency to lose large numbers of students between ninth and

twelfth grades. Amos (2008) found high school students from the wealthiest family backgrounds

are nearly seven times more likely to graduate from high school than students from poor

backgrounds.

The U.S. Department of Education issued a report on dropout rates from 2007 which

identified low income and ethnicity as two major contributing factors to students failing to

complete high school (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). Kids Count Data Books,

published annually across the country, routinely cite poverty as a significant detriment to the

economic stability and the mental, physical, and social well-being of youth (Chaille, Klein, Smith, & Campo, 2008). Statistics indicate students from low-income families and ethnic minority students are less likely to graduate than their peers (Chaille et al., 2008). While examining the impact of high school size on math achievement and dropout rates, Werblow and Duesbery (2009) noted social economic standing and ethnicity actually had a more significant impact than the size of the school on both math achievement and dropout rates.

In discussing ethnicity as a strong contributing factor to high dropout rates, Shannon and Bylsma (2006) noted that nationally 28% of Hispanics between 16 to 24 years old had not earned a high school credential, including a GED. In other ethnic groups, 13% of African-Americans and 7% of whites had not earned a high school credential. Northeastern University in Boston listed dropout rates for ethnic groups in 2007 as 27.5% for Hispanics, 21.0% for African-Americans, and 12.2% for whites (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). The United States General Accounting Office (2002) cited similar statistics for 2000: 27.8% for Hispanics, 13.1% for Black non-Hispanics, and 6.9% for whites.

Lower graduation rates among minority students were also noted by Amos (2008). While 77.6% of white students graduate on time, he found only 57.8% of Hispanic students, 55.3% of African American students, and 50.5% of Native American students graduate on time. Amos (2008) also noted that 50 years ago many students, both high school graduates and dropouts, were able to land good factory jobs and support their families. Many schools were planned and built to meet those limited needs of the early and mid-20th century. Without changing, however, those schools were not able to prepare today's students for the high-tech, knowledge-based, increasingly competitive global economy of the 21st century (Amos, 2008). That failure to

change led to further disconnect for students and disinterest in school, decreasing the likelihood students will remain in school and earn a diploma.

While poverty is cited by many studies as a – or the – primary contributor to low graduation rates, attaining a high school diploma can be a major factor in helping students rise above poverty levels for themselves and their families. Nearly one quarter of adults without a high school diploma live in households where the income level falls below the poverty line (Swanson, 2009). Swanson noted earning a diploma cuts a person's chances of experiencing poverty in half, with the poverty rate falling from 24% for persons without a high school diploma to 12% for persons with a diploma. In studying metropolitan areas Swanson found graduating from high school reduces the likelihood of living in poverty by at least a third.

The Washington state study cautioned, however, against seeking only simplistic views about dropouts.

> The problem involves many populations beyond inner-city minority groups, and the correlational studies that emphasize race and home status as risk factors overlook the complex reasons that can lead to a student dropping out……Students may be at risk for other reasons but are overlooked because they do not meet these identifiers. (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p. 22)

Beyond the obvious impact of poverty as an economic factor, Shannon and Bylsma (2006) note students working 15 or 20 hours a week are at increased risk of dropping out, primarily due to the negative impact working had on academic progress. Traditional incentives for completing high school to attend college to later get better paying jobs may not motivate students who live in communities where few good jobs exist. Rigid school policies and procedures that emphasize punishment and quick discharge of *troublemakers* and other *no*

tolerance policies lead to higher dropout rates. "High standards, grading practices, and 'get tough' policies to end social promotion may also contribute to student dropout" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p. 34).

In July, 2009, the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University issued a report that focused on a subset of 17 states that produce approximately 70% of the nation's dropouts (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Fox, 2009). The states represented diverse demographics: some were densely populated; others were largely rural. Together these 17 states also account for 68% of the nation's children and youth living in poverty, a cited factor in low graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2009). In fact, the most common feature of low-graduation rate high schools was that they educate large proportions of low income students. Another widespread feature of schools with high dropout rates was that they serve primarily minority students. Half or more of the students who attend low graduation-rate high schools attend schools that educated student populations that were at least 40% low-income and 80% minority. School size was also cited as an important variable in efforts to turn around schools with high dropout rates: it influences the nature of student-teacher, peer, and adult interactions. In large high schools it was found students were more likely to get lost in the system and never get the help they need. The report noted the most challenged low graduation-rate high schools tend to be those with large enrollments and high student-teacher ratios (Balfanz et al., 2009).

High Stakes Testing and Retention

Concerns about the potential impact of the current high stakes testing and high standards movements throughout the country on graduation also should not be ignored. "Some studies suggest that states that have the most severe consequences attached to testing have more dropouts than do states that have low or moderate consequences attached to testing" (Shannon &

Bylsma, 2006, p. 34). In a research project for Arizona State University, Amrein and Berliner (2002) defined high stakes testing as "tests from which results are used to make significant educational decisions about school, teachers, administrators, and students" (p. 3). These researchers note high stakes tests have grown in popularity because it is perceived these tests will raise standards, particularly in a state's lowest performing schools. In their study they noted the dropout rate increased in eight of 13 states after high school graduation exams were implemented. Similarly, the high school graduation rate decreased in 10 states after high school graduation exams were implemented. Another report concluded the requirements for the New York Regents' examinations have had a negative impact on the graduation rates for English Language Learners (Advocates for Children of New York, 2002).

Controversy over the negative impact high stakes testing can actually have on students graduating from high school is widespread across the United States. Baltimore, Maryland had a *no exception* policy that held students back at every grade if performance standards were not met. As the numbers of students failing to meet standards grew, the city school system recanted in 2003 and promoted over 2,700 failing students (Goldberg, 2006). Similar retreats from rigid policies occurred in New York and Florida after strong protests from principals, parents, lawmakers, and students. More disturbing have been instances of manipulating delivery systems and testing results and even fudging dropout figures. Testing irregularities were cited for 71 schools in 22 districts in Michigan. A tampering case in Austin, Texas went to criminal court.

In Boston, the maneuvering started in 1998, just before students had to start passing the
Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test to graduate. Districts
across the state began holding back more ninth-graders than usual, preferring to flunk

students rather than make them take the high-stakes tests and classes which they were not

ready to take. (Goldberg, 2006, p. 12)

Many recent scandals involve manipulating dropout rates and forcing low-achieving

students out of school – with questionable exit data – so test results are artificially inflated.

President Bush and U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige cited Sharpstown High School as the

most *miraculous* story in the Houston, Texas miracle.

Sharpstown had a freshman class of about 1,000, which fell to under 300 by senior year.

And yet – enter the miracle – not even a single dropout. And this wasn't even unusual in

Houston. Two other schools reported no dropouts, and another dozen of the city's

poorest schools reported dropout rates of less than 1%, better than the record for some of

the nation's most successful schools. (Goldberg, 2006, p. 13)

A check of the records of 5,458 students who left Houston schools in 2000-01 found 2,999 of

them had wrong or missing information and were reclassified as dropouts. "A remarkable 55%

of the students were reported incorrectly, surely more than a clerical error" (Goldberg, 2006, p.

13).

Related as a consequence to high stakes testing, retention is often cited as a strong factor

in increased dropout rates. "While there may be selected individual cases in which retention had

a salutary effect, the overwhelming number of retained students continue to do poorly in school

and are more likely to drop out when they are old enough" (Goldberg, 2006, p. 15). Citing

National Association of School Psychologists data, Goldberg noted as many as 15% of American

students are held back every year, and 30 to 50% are retained at least once before ninth grade.

Students who are retained are much more likely to drop out of school than students who were

never retained, and the probability of dropping out increases with multiple retentions (Goldberg,

2006). In data maintained by the United States General Accounting Office, students retained in kindergarten through fourth grade are nearly five times as likely to drop out, and students retained in fifth through eighth grade are nearly 11 times more likely to drop out than students who have not been retained (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Other studies previously noted cited retention as a factor in decisions by students to drop out, including Barton (2006), Bridgeland et al. (2006), and Christle et al., (2007). The National Dropout Prevention Center lists retentions as a school-related dropout factor (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.), and the U.S. General Accounting Office cites grade retention as a precursor to students leaving school (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002).

Preventing Dropouts and Barriers to Effective Prevention

Developing programs designed to prevent students from dropping out, or to help them successfully return to school after dropping out, are becoming a more prominent focus of local, state, and national efforts across the country. In a speech to the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on March 10, 2009, President Obama addressed education and noted his budget

> …invests in developing new strategies to make sure at-risk students don't give up on their education; new efforts to give dropouts who want to return to school the help they need to graduate; and new ways to put those young men and women who have left school back on a pathway to graduation. (Obama, 2009b, p. 9)

The Center for Labor Market Studies (CLMS) believes "…America's youth will take advantage of opportunities and pathways back to a good education and a well-paying career if only we could provide more of them the chance" (CLMS, 2009, p. 3). The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University also stresses the importance of creating new options for young people who have already dropped out (Balfanz et al., 2009).

Resources from the National Dropout Prevention Center include an extensive list of effective strategies schools and communities should explore to prevent students from dropping out of school (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, n.d.). Shargel and Smink (2001) developed a list of what they consider to be the 15 effective strategies that have the most positive impact on the high school graduation. The list includes:

Early Intervention

- Family Engagement: cited as providing a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and as the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school.

- Early Childhood Education: birth to five interventions that will enhance brain development. These early interventions should be followed by the best possible classroom instruction through the early primary grades.

- Early Literacy Development: early interventions to help low-achieving students recognize reading and writing skills as the foundation for effective learning in all subjects.

The Basic Core Strategies

- Mentoring/Tutoring: Mentoring is described as a one-on-one caring and supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also one-on-one, focuses on academics.

- Service-Learning: promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility. Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning.

- Alternative Schooling: to provide potential dropouts with options that can lead to graduation. Programs should focus on each student's social needs as well as academic requirements for a high school diploma.

- After-School Opportunities: after-school and summer enhancement programs to address information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas, and help fill the afternoon gap time with constructive and engaging activities.

Making the Most of Instruction

- Professional Development: teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need support as well as avenues to develop skills and techniques, and learn about innovative strategies.

- Active Learning: as educators show students there are different ways to learn, students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners.

- Educational Technology: technology provides some of the best opportunities to engage students in authentic learning and provides viable ways to address individual student learning styles.

- Individualized Instruction: a student's unique interests and past learning experiences should be considered when developing individualized instructional programs. These individualized programs should allow for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies.

Making the Most of the Wider Community

- Systematic Renewal: a continuous process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures and their consequent impact on diverse learners.

- School-Community Collaboration: when all groups in a community provide collective and combined support to the school a strong infrastructure is formed that sustains a caring environment where youth can thrive and achieve.

- Safe Learning Environments: a comprehensive violence prevention plan which includes conflict resolution designed to deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. Daily exercises are needed at all grade levels to promote positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills.

- Career and Technical Education (School-to-Work): youths need specific skills to prepare them for the challenges of today's workplace. A quality guidance program is essential (Shargel & Smink, 2001).

The National Dropout Prevention Center (n.d.) also provides links to resources as well as model programs for these strategies.

Programs to Increase Student Success

In studying dropouts and how to prevent them, Shannon and Bylsma (2006) noted the importance of increasing student success at all levels to keep students from dropping out of school. Change is needed throughout a school system. "Reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates require comprehensive, concerted efforts that include systematic planning and the willingness to change existing schools and create new programs and approaches to education" (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p. 43). High performing schools should exhibit many of

the same characteristics cited by Schargel and Smink (2001) as strategies to prevent and recover dropouts. The nine characteristics identified are:

1. Clear and shared focus

2. High standards and expectations for all students

3. Effective school leadership

4. High levels of collaboration and communication

5. Curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned with state standards

6. Frequent monitoring of learning and teaching

7. Focused professional development

8. Supportive learning environment

9. High level of family and community involvement. (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p. 45)

Many researchers cite the most successful programs as being small: 80-150 students. They have experienced principals and teachers and focus on learning in the real world (CLMS, 2009). School size also influences the nature of student-teacher, peer, and adult interactions. In general, students feel more anonymous and less supported in larger schools, making it more likely students will fall between the cracks and never get the help they need (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Other research indicates small school size matters most to low-income and struggling students, both of which are populations that are overrepresented in failing high schools (Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre, & Easton, 2006). CLMS (2009) also stresses the importance of adequately funding these programs, which often include comprehensive after-school and summer activities. Research by Shannon and Bylsma (2006) also supports the importance of both small schools and small class sizes. When small school buildings are not viable, small school environments can be

created by strategies such as schools within a school, teaming, and student support through mentors, advocates, advisors, or tutors.

School Factors for Reducing Dropouts

Other critical factors for preventing students from dropping out, many of them similar to the list prepared by the National Dropout Prevention Center include:

- Strong Teachers: Having the best teachers in the classroom is essential to helping students achieve and successfully graduate from high school. Structural features of schools, such as smaller classes, can boost the ability of teachers to develop better relationships with students and promote more positive student-teacher interactions. Teachers' perceptions about their own efficacy in the classroom – their general confidence in the ability of students to learn and in their own capacity to effectively teach – are also important. There is a strong connection between a teacher's sense of efficacy and increased student achievement, student motivation, and students' own sense of efficacy.

- Alternative Learning Environments: Educators strongly favor alternative learning environments to reduce the dropout rate. Educators feel alternative environments provide at-risk students more choices and a learning environment that facilitates a greater degree of success. Alternative programs with flexible schedules, smaller student-teacher ratios, modified curricula, and a commitment to providing all students with a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for college or a family-wage job are the most promising.

- Hands-on Learning: Connecting classroom learning to real world opportunities, especially through service learning, is seen by educators as a tool to reduce the

number of dropouts. Project-based learning can make school more relevant to the lives of students.

- Increased Parental and Mentor Involvement: High expectations by parents of their children are associated with increased academic achievement. High school students who are mentored generally have higher graduation rates, fail fewer courses, have lower absenteeism, and spend more time on task when in class (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

Recognizing early warning signals is critical to reducing the dropout rate. Absenteeism is a strong predictor of dropping out and schools should have a reliable list of students who failed to attend school, should notify parents or guardians immediately, and should take appropriate action to ensure students attend school and have the support they need to remain in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The so-called ABCs of predicting dropouts, absenteeism, behavioral problems, and course failure, can be identified as early as elementary school and grow to 85% accuracy by the first year of high school (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Kennelly and Monrad (2007) found that 80% of sixth graders who attended school less than 80% of the time, or received a poor final behavior grade, or failed in math or English, did not graduate within one extra year of their expected graduation date. Schargel and Smink (2001) listed early intervention as a key strategy in preventing students from dropping out of school.

Research studies as well as surveys among educators differ, however, on the impact of more rigorous standards on dropout rates. High stakes testing was cited earlier as a factor in increasing the number of students dropping out of school. Two-thirds of the dropouts interviewed for the Civic Enterprise study on the high school dropout problem stated they would have worked harder if their high school had demanded more of them (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

According to these students, increased rigor and higher standards would have encouraged them to become more engaged in their education and helped them stay on track to graduate (Bridgeland et al., 2009). They expressed frustration as they were not challenged more and their classes and teachers were not inspiring. A quarter of them (26%) indicated they did no homework and 80% indicated they did less than an hour of homework each day (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

Addressing Geographic, Political, and Social Barriers

Understanding the geographic spread and concentration of low graduation rate high schools within a state is important to devising strategies that are most likely to improve graduation rates there. Transforming numerous low graduation rate high schools all located in a single large urban city is an entirely different task than transforming the same number of schools scattered across a state and crossing urban, suburban, and rural school districts. In the 2009 study for the Everyone Graduates Center, it was noted a number of factors can fuel tensions between local and state leaders (Balfanz et al., 2009). Many times the department of education is physically and often culturally located a substantial distance from the school districts in need. For example, Chicago and New York are not easily or directly supported from Springfield or Albany. Because the graduation rate is, on average, considerably higher across the rest of the state, the situation in the urban centers may not have the same urgency beyond those urban cores (Balfanz et al., 2009).

The federal government can play a strong role in removing barriers and providing incentives to both allow and encourage state and local leaders to use dollars more strategically. Funding could be provided to youth and public care agencies to help them collaborate with school districts in implementing more effective programs to improve school attendance,

engagement, and success. Collaboration will require changes in rules and regulations, better funding, and often changes in long standing practices among agencies, including those focused on education, juvenile justice, foster care, mental health, and housing. In communities most heavily impacted by economic and population trends, increased federal and state resources and technical assistance will need to accompany community-level strategic planning (Balfanz et al., 2009).

Another barrier to turning around low graduation rate high schools is the exodus of students with parents who have the economic means to enroll their children in private schools. Losing these students – and more importantly their parents – reduces the number of people invested in changing the quality of the public school system (Balfanz et al., 2009).

Summary

"The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens – and my fellow Americans, we have everything we need to be that nation" (Obama, 2009b, p. 4). We need to offer America's youth who have dropped out of school more opportunities and pathways back to a good education. "If we do nothing, the cost of inaction will be steep – not just for the 6.2 million high school dropouts, many of whom will remain jobless and with low incomes, but for the economic and social well-being of our nation as a whole, for years to come" (CLMS, 2009, p. 3). The *Silent Epidemic* is perhaps the most appropriate description of the growing crisis and devastating impact, from both social and economic perspectives, of our nation's alarming dropout rate (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Our nation must work to transform or replace the 2,000 high schools that produce more than half of the dropouts in the United States. We must face the challenge of big cities, where low graduation-rate high schools are concentrated in one or two metropolitan school districts

within a state (e.g., Chicago, Illinois; New York City, New York; Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). We must develop programs to address low graduation-rate high schools clustered in low to modest concentrations spread across some states, from urban districts to small towns to rural areas (e.g., Alabama, Arizona, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas). We must carefully examine and prioritize reform efforts on states that have high concentrations of high schools with low graduation rates widespread across the state (e.g., Florida, Georgia, Nevada, New Mexico, and South Carolina). We must look at the districts, the schools, and the students themselves. School size, student-teacher ratios, the proportion of students living in poverty, and the proportion of students from minority backgrounds, as well as how these characteristics interact, are all critical factors. We must consider how the broader socioeconomic, demographic, and political trends in the community and state shape the possibilities for reform. The vibrancy of the local economy, the amount of population growth, and the expansion of community cultural diversity all affect the feasibility of collective reform action, as do the community's commitment to public education and the labor market for young people (Balfanz, 2009).

> The following quote perhaps best summarizes the plight of dropping out of school:
> Individuals who fail to earn a high school diploma are at a great disadvantage, and not only when it comes to finding good-paying jobs. They are generally less healthy and die earlier, are more likely to become parents when very young, are more at risk of tangling with the criminal justice system, and are more likely to need social welfare assistance. Even more tragic, their children are more likely to become high school dropouts themselves, as are their children's children, and so on, in a possibly endless cycle of poverty. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a, p. 1)

There is no single, pervasive cause of students dropping out of high school. High absenteeism, low grades, discipline and behavior problems, lack of involvement in class and school activities, pregnancy, retention, transferring from another school, transition into the ninth grade (Bridgeland et al., 2006) – these factors are a good beginning to the lengthy list of causes of students dropping out of school. There is, even more critically, a devastating array of interacting consequences that threaten the social and economic stability of our country. We must work together as governments, as educators, as parents, and as students to keep our children in school and make high school graduation a minimum achievement for every child. Because addressing this issue is so vital to our nation, it is also critical to guard against implementing quick, governmental forced remedies "that seem to be driven more by ideology than by educational research (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006, p. 504)."

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

Dropping out of high school has been identified as a critical national education issue, with consequent impact on the social, economic, and political well-being of our nation. Although programs to keep students in school abound, students continue to leave high school without completing diploma requirements at alarming rates. Demographic factors that have strong correlation to low graduation rates have been identified through numerous studies and data analysis. This study sought to discover three Indiana high schools that have overcome many of these challenging demographic factors identified as having a strong contributing relationship to low graduation rates in Indiana and maintained a successful graduation rate above the Indiana state average.

Qualitative Inquiry

This study was conducted as a qualitative study using case study strategies to conduct an in depth exploration of three identified Indiana high schools. Qualitative research "is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Qualitative analysis is a "process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). By utilizing case study strategies, descriptive details sought by the researcher can be obtained while getting close to the subjects in the study in a natural setting.

Qualitative researchers "gather what they see, hear, and read from people and places and from events and activities" in the real world (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 4). Case studies are appropriate when the researcher is interested in "insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 2009, p. 42).

Many of the special characteristics of qualitative study cited by Stake (2010) are integral to this study:

- Interpretive, keying on the meanings of human affairs as seen from different views.

- Experiential, emphasizing observations by participants; and empirical, by examining what they see more than what they feel. Qualitative study is "in tune with the view that reality is a human construction" (p. 15).

- Situational, oriented to objects and activities, emphasizing that each object, activity, place, and time has a uniqueness that works against generalization.

- Personalistic, working emphatically to understand individual perceptions. (Stake, 2010, pp. 15-16)

A social constructivist lens was used to guide the study (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). Constructivists assume individuals "seek understanding of the world in which they live" (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Open-ended questions permit the researcher to listen carefully as individuals interviewed seek to identify and understand programs and strategies that have led to success. The participants' views of the situation are an essential focal point of a social constructivist worldview. Varied and multiple views expressed by the participants guide the researcher to uncover the complexity and interactivity of those views (Creswell, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase data available through the

IDOE was analyzed to identify three Indiana high schools exhibiting above average numbers of

students who fall into each of the four demographic factors identified as having the strongest

contributing relationship to low graduation rates in Indiana and also exhibit a graduation rate

above the Indiana state average.

In the second phase, collection of data in the natural setting of three Indiana high schools

was planned. The selection of individual high schools for a case study meets Merriam's

parameters of a bounded system (a single entity, such as an institution, around which there are

boundaries) (Merriam, 2009). A case study of the identified high schools was planned to

discover what factors have contributed to the ability of each high school studied to overcome

those challenging demographic factors.

General Procedures – Phase 1

Phase 1 was used to identify three Indiana high schools that were the subject of an

intensive case study. Three tasks were completed to accomplish Phase 1. The first task

identified demographic factors with negative correlation to Indiana graduation rates and which

Indiana high schools exhibited the greatest numbers of students in each of those negative factors.

This task addressed the first research question (Phase 1, part a): "What demographic factors have

the strongest contributing relationship to low graduation rates in Indiana and what Indiana high

schools have the largest concentrations of students who exhibit those factors?" The second task

examined Indiana high school graduation rates for the four consecutive years of 2006-2009 and

determined which high schools had a graduation rate above the state average in each of those

four years. In the third task, the data from the first two tasks was compared to address the

second research question (Phase 1, part b): "Are there Indiana high schools identified in part a of Phase 1 that exhibit graduation rates above the Indiana state average?" Careful analysis of the third task further resulted in the identification of three high schools for case study.

Task 1: Identification of demographic factors with negative correlation to graduation rates. The IDOE (2009b) maintains databases that contain numerous performance statistics as well as demographic indicators on every public school corporation in the state of Indiana. Individual statistics or demographic factors can be selected and compared to other school corporations in the state. When a statistic/factor is selected, the ranking of the school corporation being examined is listed, as well as the "highest ten" and "lowest ten" corporations in the selected category. Additionally, Pearson *r* correlations of all other statistics in the databases greater than 0.3 or less than -0.3 to the statistic being examining are listed. By looking at the Pearson *r* correlations, it can be determined which factors in the IDOE databases have the strongest negative correlation to graduation rates in Indiana.

Identifying which Indiana high schools exhibit above average numbers of students in each of the top four identified *challenging demographic factors* was accomplished by carefully examining the *Top Ten* lists for each of the demographic factors with a negative correlation to graduation rates. All Indiana high schools with student numbers above state averages in each of those four factors were identified and ranked.

Task 2: Ranking of Indiana high schools by graduation rates. Other databases maintained by the IDOE detail graduation rates for all Indiana High Schools (IDOE, 2009c, 2010b). Graduation rates for every Indiana high school for the years 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 were obtained. High schools were then ranked on the basis of those graduation rates, each year separately, and schools above the state average in graduation rate were so noted.

Task 3: Merging the data to select high schools for case study. The two databases generated from the first two tasks were compared to determine if any high schools ranked above the state average in each of the four challenging demographic factors and also ranked above the state average in graduation rates each of the previous four years. These rankings of high schools were used to determine the three high schools selected for case study by determining which three high schools had the highest total rankings in the four challenging demographic factors and also had the highest ranking in graduation rate for the previous four years.

General Procedures – Phase 2

Once it was determined which high schools would be studied on the basis of the above criteria, the case study process was implemented. Four site visits, each lasting a half to a full day each, were planned. One visit was designed to focus on administrators and staff, one on students, one on community members, and a final visit was designed as a follow up in areas where needed. Staff members, students, and community members were selected at random by the principal. Both individual and focus group interviewing techniques were utilized. During the interview process identities were kept confidential (in fact, as anonymous as possible) by not asking for names and attaching no identifying characteristics to notes.

Much of the data collection and recording procedures detailed by Creswell (2009) were utilized:

- Observations by the researcher, with a record of these observations maintained through field notes,

- Interviews through face-to-face one-on-one interaction, telephone interviews, focus group interviews, and email interviews, documented through notes, audiotaping and transcription by the researcher,

- A prepared questionnaire, designed to foster unstructured, open-ended conversation, to establish continuity among interviews,

- Examination of documents, including state archived data, local records, newspaper stories, and minutes of meetings,

- Examination of audio-visual materials, including phototgraphs, videotapes, computer programs, and other artifacts, and

- A research log tracking date, time, and place of each interview, observation, or examination of data. (pp. 179-180)

The three primary research questions considered through the site visits were:

- What role does administrative staff play in contributing to the graduation rate success of the selected Indiana high schools?

- What roles do teachers and other staff play in contributing to the graduation rate success of the selected Indiana high schools?

- What other factors contribute to the graduation rate success of the selected Indiana high schools?

It should be noted here that data analysis cannot be entirely separated from data collection, as Creswell asserts: "Qualitative data analysis is conducted concurrently with gathering data, making interpretations, and writing reports" (Creswell, 2009, p. 184). Data analysis, particularly in the case study phase, "is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytical questions, and writing memos throughout the study" (p. 184). Concepts "are developed and refined in the process of research" (Gibbs, 2007, p. xi). Gibbs further purports "analysis can, and should, start in the field" (p. 3). Gibbs suggests

qualitative research is flexible, and analysis of early data is a way to raise new research issues and questions.

Establishing Validity and Reliability

"All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner" (Merriam, 2009, p. 209). For internal validity, the question is how research findings match reality. An assumption in qualitative research is that reality is "holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in quantitative research" (Merriam, 2009, p. 213). Maxwell (2005) stated:

> Validity is a goal rather than a product: it is never something that can be proven or taken for granted. Validity is also relative: it has to be assessed in relationship to the purposes and circumstances of the research, rather than being a context-independent property of methods or conclusions. (p. 105)

Techniques used by this researcher to increase the internal validity, or credibility of the study, as suggested by Creswell (2009), included:

- Triangulation: Information obtained through interviews was compared to observations made by the researcher and further referenced against available documented data.

- Member checking, or respondent validation (also Merriam, 2009): Preliminary analysis by the researcher was reviewed with four of the interviewed participants to see if the researcher's interpretations aligned with the participants' interpretations.

- Descriptions that make the results more realistic and adding to the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2009).

Reliability indicates the researcher's approach has been consistent across the study (Creswell, 2009). Merriam (2009) added to this definition, suggesting "the most important question for qualitative research is whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (p. 221), and a study can be considered dependable when the findings are consistent with the data.

Both Creswell (2009) and Merriam (2009) discuss generalizability, or external validity, of a qualitative study. The extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be generalized or transferred to another situation – or replicated in a new setting – is an object of debate among researchers. The intent of qualitative study is not to generalize findings to individuals, sites or places beyond those under study (Creswell, 2009; Gibbs, 2007). It is the expressed intent of this researcher, however, to uncover findings that can be studied and transferred, with appropriate adaptations, to other high schools. Rich, thick descriptions are perhaps the primary method of facilitating a greater range of application and transferability of the findings (Merriam, 2009).

Conclusion

Through this study the researcher sought to uncover the essential critical factors – i.e., the 'heart' – of how an Indiana high school can overcome the most challenging demographic factors and establish and maintain a graduation rate that exceeds state averages. The sensitivity and integrity of the researcher is uniquely vital in a qualitative case study, and the past preparation and experiences of the researcher guided both the collection and interpretation of data. In the final analysis, Chapters 4 and 5 uncover findings and relate conclusions that can be studied by other school corporations and utilized, as appropriate and adaptable, to their own situations to reduce student dropout rates.

CHAPTER 4

Presentation of Results and Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to discover three Indiana high schools that have overcome

challenging demographic factors identified as having a strong contributing relationship to low

graduation rates and maintained a successful graduation rate above the Indiana state average. By

examining data and conducting case studies of these three high schools the researcher sought to

uncover how those high schools have been successful in reducing dropouts despite factors that

would seem to predict a low graduation rate.

Identification of Demographic Factors with Correlations to Graduation Rates

The first task in the study was to address research question 1 (Phase 1, part a): "What

demographic factors have the strongest contributing relationship to low graduation rates in

Indiana and what Indiana high schools have the largest concentrations of students who exhibit

those factors?" To make this determination, the researcher utilized databases from the IDOE.

Until late in the summer of 2010 (this issue is addressed under Limitations), the IDOE

maintained extensive databases on numerous public school corporation statistics and

demographic characteristics. Those databases contain a detailed analysis of correlations between

and among demographic factors and student achievement data, with corresponding Pearson

Product-Moment Correlations (IDOE, 2009b).

Within this same database, the IDOE also designates *Top Ten* corporations for each demographic, student achievement, and other statistical piece of information maintained in its databases. These *Top Ten* lists actually show the ranking of both the top 10 and the bottom 10 corporations for each selected factor. *Top Ten* designation for a positive factor would indicate that the corporation has a large percentage of students that possess that positive characteristic. *Top Ten* designation for a negative factor would indicate, similarly, that corporation has a large percentage of students that possess that negative characteristic.

The researcher first identified demographic factors with the strongest positive correlation to graduation rates in Indiana (as identified by Pearson *r*) (IDOE, 2009b). Six demographic factors were identified with correlations of 0.3 or stronger to graduation rates.

Table 1

Positive Demographic Correlations

Correlation	Positive Demographic Factors
0.6638	Percent of students passing ISTEP (both English and Math)
0.6080	Stability index (remaining in same school corporation)
0.5154	Student attendance rate
0.4508	SAT scores
0.4173	Percent of seniors taking SAT
0.3553	Per capita income of school corporation

Next the researcher identified demographic factors with the strongest negative correlation to graduation rates in Indiana (as identified by Pearson *r*) (IDOE, 2009b). Eight demographic factors were identified with correlations of - 0.3 or stronger to graduation rates.

Table 2

Negative Demographic Correlations

Correlation	Negative Demographic Factors
-0.7466	Percent of students on free lunch
-0.6556	Percent of students with single parent families
-0.6169	Percent of children in district with at risk mothers
-0.5620	Percent of families in district below poverty level
-0.5369	Suspension/expulsion rate for corporation
-0.4413	Percent of minority students in district
-0.3733	Percent of adults in district with less than a high school education
-0.3115	Enrollment

The researcher next examined the *Top Ten* corporations listed for each of the eight demographic factors listed above that had a negative correlation to graduation rates. It was determined before attempting to rank all corporations in the state on the basis of these demographic factors (a rather laborious process because of the way the data was maintained) the researcher would examine Indiana high school graduation rates and later merge the resulting databases.

Graduation Rate Analysis

The graduation rates of all Indiana high schools for 2006-2009 were retrieved from IDOE databases: (IDOE, 2010b) for 2009 rates and (IDOE, 2009c) for 2006-2008 rates. All high schools were ranked each year on the basis of those rates. A total of 182 high schools were found to have maintained graduation rates above the state average in each of those four years. With 368 high schools listed for 2009, the total of 182 reflects that nearly half of all high schools in Indiana have maintained graduation rates above the state average in each of the past four years.

Merging of Data to Select High Schools for Case Study

The final process in Phase 1 was to merge these two collections of data and address the second research question: "Are there Indiana high schools identified in part a of Phase 1 that exhibit graduation rates above the Indiana state average?" The researcher used the newly created database of 182 Indiana high schools with above state average graduation rates for each of the past four years and examined the demographic factor with the highest negative correlation to graduation rates (percent of students on free lunch). This resulted in identification of which of those 182 high schools also had student numbers above the state average in that negative demographic factor. A similar examination was made of each of the next three demographic factors with a negative correlation to graduation rates and merged into the graduation rate database. Using only the top four negative demographic factors in the combined analysis of demographic factors with graduation rates resulted in identification of only two high schools in the entire state that met the desired parameters: above the state average in numbers of students who exhibit each of the four strongest negative demographic factors and also above the state average in graduation rate each of the past four years.

Because only two high schools met the parameters established by the researcher for identifying three high schools for case studies, the researcher expanded his search to include high schools that met seven of the eight parameters. High schools which had above average graduation rates for each of the past four years and were above the state average in three of the four negative demographic factors were added to the final group of high schools under consideration for a case study. Similarly, high schools that were above the state average in all four negative demographic factors and above the state average in graduation in three of the past four years were also included. Five more high schools were added by utilizing these expanded parameters.

To assist in making a final determination of which three high schools to study, the researcher noted which schools were in the upper 10% and upper 25% in state ranking of the negative demographic factors. Table 3 details data on the final seven high schools considered for case study.

Table 3

High School Selection Data Summary

	Graduation Rates				2008 Demographic Data			
	81.5 Avg ----- 2009	77.8 Avg ----- 2008	76.4 Avg ----- 2007	76.1 Avg ----- 2006	Students on Free Lunch %	Students with Single Parent %	Students with At-Risk Mom %	Students with Families Below Pov %
HS	Rate	Rate	Rate	Rate	31.9 avg	27.8 avg	3.6 avg	6.7 avg
1	85.4	83.7	76.4	77.2	41.5 [2]	29.9 [2]	7.9 [1]	17.3 [1]
2	87.7	87.6	86.5	80.1	39.8 [2]	31.5 [2]	4.4 [2]	12.1 [2]
3	84.5	80.5	76.8	76.0	47.4 [1]	37.5 [1]	4.5 [2]	14.5 [1]
4	91.1	90.3	82.3	77.1	47.2 [1]	33.3 [1]	2.6	13.1 [2]
5	96.6	86.3	90.6	85.4	34.0	35.7 [1]	0.5	7.1
6	85.4	78.2	76.9	76.6	36.2 [2]	27.7	7.3 [1]	7.1
7	92.6	79.2	82.6	80.5	39.4 [2]	39.5 [1]	3.2	8.8

1 = Upper 10% of all schools in Indiana; 2 = Upper 25% of all schools in Indiana

The first three high schools listed were selected for case study: high schools one and two by meeting all parameters established by the researcher, and high school three by failing to meet only one of the criteria, 2006 graduation rate, by 0.1%. The superintendents of the three corporations were contacted to obtain permission for the high schools to be included in the study (see Appendix A). Securing written permission from the corporations of the three identified high schools, however, began a series of events that eventually led the researcher to include, with permission from his committee, only one high school for inclusion as a case study. This matter also is discussed as a limitation of this study. The series of events, in summary:

- Corporation 1: Although verbal permission was granted from corporation one to permit its high school to be included in the study, the superintendent of the school corporation did not return the signed permission form after repeated requests and reminders to do so. It was decided to move to corporation four as an alternate.

- Corporation 2: The superintendent of corporation two granted written permission for the high school to be included, but the high school principal was unable to secure an adequate number of participants to make the case study meaningful and valid. After several attempts to randomly request participation from staff, every staff member was invited to participate. Only one accepted the invitation. Similarly, 50 invitations were sent to the parents of students randomly selected for possible participation (see Appendix B). Only two permission forms were returned.

- Corporation 3: Accepted for case study. It should be noted this high school provided a rich source of data, as it ranked not only above state averages in the four negative demographic factors, but in the top 10% of the state in three of the factors and in the top 25% in the fourth factor.

- Corporation 4: Corporation four was invited to participate, with a result similar to corporation 2. No staff indicated a willingness to participate in the study, and only two parents returned permission forms for their children to participate.

- Corporation 5: The researcher included corporation 5 as second alternate. The superintendent of corporation five respectfully indicated he was unable to grant permission for his high school to participate due to previous board action prohibiting research studies.

Due to time constraints and the extended time needed to effect the invitations, it was

decided to include only one high school, from corporation 3, in the case study. It should be

noted that implementation of the case study in this high school was accomplished only with its

own measure of difficulty. Invitations to 100 parents (Appendix B) were needed to secure the

return of an adequate number of written permission forms for students to participate. Nine forms

were returned, and those nine students were included in a focus group interview.

Implementation of the Case Study

Onsite visits to the selected high school and the resultant case study constituted Phase 2

of this study and addressed the final three research questions:

- What role does administrative staff play in contributing to the graduation rate success
  of the selected Indiana high school?

- What roles do teachers and other staff play in contributing to the graduation rate
  success of the selected Indiana high school?

- What other factors contribute to the graduation rate success of the selected Indiana
  high school?

The case study was accomplished through four onsite and one offsite visits.   All adults

interviewed were given a consent to participate form, had it explained to them, and signed it

before participating (see Appendix D). For students, although their parents had already granted

permission for them to participate, an assent to participate form was distributed, explained, and

signed (see Appendix E) before they were interviewed. During the first visit a focus group of 11

randomly selected teachers was interviewed. During the second visit four administrators were

interviewed as a focus group. A guidance counselor and the high school principal were

interviewed individually on a third visit, and nine students were interviewed as a focus group on

the fourth visit. The fourth visit was also used as a follow up with the principal and other staff; school records were also examined. Notes were taken during each interview session, and all focus group interviews were audio recorded. During each visit the researcher spent time walking through the high school noting school artifacts as well as gathering personal impressions of the atmosphere of the school. A focus group of five parents and community members was interviewed off site (see Appendix C).

The researcher exercised extreme care in each interview session to ensure responses were spontaneous and original. When interviewing one person or a group no reference was made to comments by previous groups. The mention of a specific program by a group was initiated by that group and not the result of the researcher asking the group to comment on a program cited by a previous group. The researcher's role was largely confined to asking the prepared questions (Appendices F, G, and H) and encouraging the participants to expand their responses. The researcher refrained from adding comments or opinions to responses by participants.

Every Child is Important

The pervasive message from each interview session was that every child in the high school is important. Interestingly, the phrase "individual student(s)" was repeated in every interview session in a variety of contexts. When asked for closing comments, an administrator noted, "Every single kid is important. We have to make sure there are no cracks for them to fall through." School staff, including administrative staff, guidance staff, and teachers, stressed the importance of "seizing every opportunity every day to help every child," as stated by an administrator. A student also noted, "People in this school try to make everyone feel important," and community members expressed they feel a genuine sense of caring from a majority of the staff members they encounter at the school. Teachers, parents and community members noted

there was an effort to "work with a kid rather than just kick him out," as expressed by a parent. Students noted administrators are "personable" and "accessible" and "try to get to know students as people."

A teacher commented, "Every day is different," and explained some students come to school with different issues every day and staff must carefully monitor students as individuals and continually adjust instruction and even personal approaches to students. Teacher comments included, "Life is tough – we need to do whatever we can to help." Teachers also expressed the prevalence of a "problem-solving mentality" among the majority of the staff. One teacher noted, "Every day has a purpose."

The principal noted he stresses the importance of "a minute a day." He expressed an expectation for individual staff members to identify an at-risk student and just spend "a minute a day" checking on that child. He noted this practice has led to increased communication with students who normally do not regularly interact with staff members. He also stated there have been referrals for academic, medical, and personal help as a result of these simple interactions initiated by staff members. There has also been a decline in reports of bullying and in overall discipline referrals, which he believes is a direct consequence of students feeling there is someone on staff who cares about him/her.

One student commented, "People here will help you if you want help." Students also expressed appreciation for community outreach programs which do "little things to show a kid I'm worth it."

Importance of a High School Diploma

Staff, students, and parents all mentioned the critical importance of every student graduating from high school with a diploma. "Are you kidding? You have to have a diploma if you want to have a chance to be successful," commented one student. Teachers saw a high school diploma as a minimum requirement for any type of career. Parents and community members used words like, "critical," "vital," and "essential" to describe the importance of getting a diploma. "Kids don't have a chance in today's economy without at least a high school diploma," commented a community member. A parent stated, "It is necessary to learn skills like critical thinking, working with others, etc. to get a decent job. Not much can be done without a diploma these days." Student comments focused on competition for jobs in today's economy when asked about the importance of a high school diploma. Administrators noted they stress to students the importance of a diploma from a simple perspective of being in a more competitive position for even entry level jobs. Administrators also stress to students considering dropping out they may be competing against people that have a college degree, so the chances to secure a good job without even a high school diploma are not good. Guidance staff mentioned the challenge of helping students realize the importance of staying in school "before it's too late."

Teachers noted many students do not enter high school with the motivation to graduate with a diploma, but most "grow up" and "eventually" realize the importance of staying in school. A teacher commented he had recently heard a senior student comment, "I wish I hadn't blown off my freshman year." Teachers, guidance staff, and administrators all expressed the opinion that freshmen and sophomores "lack vision" and become more motivated as they advance to junior and senior levels.

All groups interviewed expressed the opinion that the community is generally supportive and encouraging of students completing high school. All groups mentioned, however, there is a segment of the community that does not seem to understand or at least emphasize the importance of receiving a diploma. Staff and community members noted there is a feeling of apathy among some adults because of job reductions and eliminations in the community. "It's hard to tell your kid to stay in school because he needs a diploma when he sees his dad with a diploma lose his job after 20 years," noted one parent. The principal noted there is also a significant portion of the community that relies on the government for assistance. As those citizens struggle on a daily basis to meet basic needs, a focus on higher aspirations – including a high school diploma for their children – is not a priority. Parents and community members also commented there is a large segment of the community that has to focus on "keeping their heads above water."

Although all groups stressed the importance of graduation when asked about the high school's graduation rate, most groups were generally unaware of specific details. Administrators expressed the strongest awareness, noting, "We know we have a pretty good [graduation] rate compared to other schools our size." Even administrators, however, with the exception of the principal, were not aware of the school's comparison to state averages, particularly over the past several years. When asked about her knowledge of the high school's graduation rate, one teacher commented, "I have no idea. It must be positive, though, or you wouldn't be here!" A student commented, "We've always figured it was bad, but it seems to be getting better. We're hearing good things from administrators and teachers about more students graduating." A parent stated she had no idea the high school's graduation rate was above state averages and presumed it was much lower. Although students, parents, and community members all expressed no specific knowledge of the school's graduation rate, each of those groups expressed an opinion

that "school staff is concerned about it and doing everything they can to get it up." (a parent

comment)

Why Do Students Drop Out?

A myriad of reasons students drop out were shared, with every group sharing a consensus

focused on home environment and external factors. A teacher cited a "cycle of failure and

frustration" experienced by parents and passed on to children. Administration and guidance both

discussed the difficulties in "breaking the cycle" of parents and other relatives who lack a high

school diploma and passing this low expectation on to their children. One teacher noted she

currently has a third generation single mother in class, and neither her mother nor her

grandmother graduated from high school. That teacher also commented she sees many students

who "have a skewed concept of what normal is supposed to be." Students also noted they know

classmates who have dropped out of school because no one in their family has ever graduated

from high school.

Students commented that outside pressures like jobs and having a child force some

students to place greater importance on those real life issues than on high school attendance. A

student commented, "I know several families that depend on their kids to have jobs." A parent

corroborated that statement: "It's sad, but there are many kids who have to work to support their

families." An administrator stated, "Survival takes precedence over graduation." Teachers noted

they see many students who are tired at school. They know these students have outside jobs,

sometimes necessary to help families pay for rent and food. Guidance staff also explained they

see many students who struggle balancing outside jobs with schoolwork. Child care

responsibilities are also evident in many students seen by guidance, and parents also cited

teenage pregnancies as a cause of dropping out. One student cited "alcohol problems" as another reason a few students she knows dropped out.

A lack of discipline and not having an environment conducive to good study in the home was cited by administration as a cause of students not being "ready for the demands of high school" and eventually dropping out. "Students who are unable to focus and study at home find it difficult to focus and study in school." Administrators also noted students with good attendance "never" drop out, and parental involvement is critical to good attendance. "The conversation at the dinner table has changed," according to one administrator. Citing the economy, she commented parents either stress, "You have to have an education," or assume an opposite attitude, "It doesn't make a difference anymore." Administrators stressed that education is getting discussed at home, and the school's challenge is to help make that conversation a positive one. Parents also cited lack of motivation and encouragement from home, as well as a lack of parental involvement, as strong factors in students' decisions to drop out. Guidance personnel noted most students in danger of dropping out have very little involvement of their parents.

Students noted many of their classmates were not ready for high school as freshmen. Classes were more difficult and required better study habits than they were used to. Although many students "wake up," many do not and eventually drop out, according to students, administrators, and teachers. The guidance department focuses on freshman students with a stated goal of making ninth grade successful for every student. Absenteeism and discipline problems increase the likelihood of dropping out and are carefully monitored by administrative and guidance staff.

Although academic failure was cited by all groups, students and parents stressed this factor more than school staff. "Students fail a couple classes, get behind, and can never catch up – so they drop out," stated a student. Testing pressure, such as Indiana's statewide assessment test, was cited by a parent as a negative factor. School staff commented students "simply refusing to do the work" leads to academic failure. An administrator commented he sees many students drop out and return several times in response to failing too many classes.

Programs to Reduce Dropouts

Programs to keep students in school ranged from individual counseling to specialized curriculum to alternative schools. From administrative and guidance staff: "Our high school continues to evolve to meet the needs of all kids." "Our diverse population requires diverse offerings." "Kids can find success here." "We have good balance and a full spectrum of classes; our best kids can compete with anybody." A student also commented, "You can succeed here." A parent noted, "If you're an involved parent you can find help for any kid to get the education he needs." Administrative, guidance, and teaching staff all stressed the importance of creating a positive school climate.

One of the first programs to reduce dropouts cited by all groups was the alternative school program. The alternative program actually has numerous components:

- An alternative school designed primarily for students who have experienced discipline problems. Students who have encountered legal problems with law enforcement may be assigned to this school by community authorities.

- A second alternative school operated by an outside provider. It focuses on students who have already dropped out and tries to prepare them for a return to regular high

school. This school is completely independent of the school system and includes a

religious influence.

- Online "virtual school" offerings designed to help students recover credits from

  classes they have failed. The online classes are supervised by staff and are conducted

  during the regular school day.

- An online virtual GED program for students who are unable to continue in the regular

  school setting but still desire a high school diploma. Students in this program have

  generally failed numerous classes and are older than traditional students.

- Targeted math and English courses for students who have failed a course that requires

  passing of a state-mandated End of Course Assessment (ECA) test. These classes are

  designed to focus on what is needed to pass the state ECA.

- Special learning programs during the school day that focus on study skills and basic

  learning strategies. Students can receive a course credit for this class.

A vocational career center was also cited by every group as a vital program to keep

students in school. The center offers numerous and varied courses to help students prepare for

careers after high school, including college prep classes. Sequential courses can lead to

certification in some technical areas, facilitating students' entry into postsecondary education or

the job market. This perception of the career center as a pathway to better employment after

high school was expressed by the parent focus group. All groups interviewed expressed strong

support and appreciation for the opportunities students find through the career center. One

student noted the career center is valuable for all types of students from potential dropouts who

need training for jobs to college-bound students who want more technical skills. Students

commented, "The career center opens your eyes," and also "opens opportunities" for many

students. A parent also noted the many opportunities available through the career center, including internships where students get to work in the community "and see what the real world is like."

Tutoring programs have a variety of identities. There are programs after school, manned by staff, in math and English, two evenings per week. Students praised teachers who run the tutoring programs because they are "willing to help anyone at any level." Parents also noted "there are many teachers who are willing to help outside of school." Students from advanced classes as well as students on the verge of dropping out attend tutoring sessions. Some local churches offer tutoring programs, and the local YMCA has a tutoring program which includes middle school students. The career center also offers after school tutoring for students enrolled there. A community organization provides daily after school services to students, including academic tutoring and counseling for social and emotional issues. Middle school students may also attend this program, which also provides food for the students. The school corporation provides daily transportation to this program. Included with some of the community tutoring programs are presentations by role model adults, particularly minority males, to share success and "how to overcome" stories. Students can be referred by guidance to a special tutoring program designed to help with basic study skills as well as specific curricular areas.

There are sections in most school curricular areas designed to help students realize success at a level appropriate to their abilities. In addition to special education offerings, regular education students may be placed in classes that focus on state standards needed to pass state assessment tests. Teachers noted general education teachers are very supportive of special education students and work closely with special education staff to provide appropriate modified curriculum. Parents also noted a special elective class available to freshmen. In the class,

freshmen are taught the value of becoming involved in a community and must complete a volunteer project as a course requirement.

The important role of clubs, athletics, fine arts, and other extracurricular activities was expressed by all groups. Students noted rules about smoking and drinking, plus the random drug testing policy, are positive factors in sports programs that have long term benefits for students. Parents also commented on the positive benefits of the random drug testing program. A student commented, "Kids in activities usually value education." Another student added, "When you're in an activity you're too busy to get in trouble!" Parents noted many students "get their grades up so they can play sports." Parents also mentioned a program of providing books for newborn babies implemented by high school girls. A parent noted the program not only gets high school girls involved in the community, but also sends an early message to young parents about the importance of education.

Although students are not utilized in many planned mentoring programs, they provide help and encouragement to fellow students in a variety of ways. "Our students at the top are very caring and lead by example, most without even knowing they are doing so. These top students are not 'nerds' but are truly leaders," commented a teacher. Special education students are accepted by general education students and are able to blend in. There are programs for freshmen and for special education students that pair them with another student for support and encouragement. Another teacher noted that although there is no formal peer mentoring program, "We see a lot of kids put pressure on each other to do well."

Lack of involvement by parents was cited by all groups as a contributing factor to students dropping out. Expanded use of email has helped involve more parents in their children's schoolwork. "Parents who are too intimidated to personally come in appreciate being

able to check grades and homework assignments anonymously online," stated a teacher. Parents

have also been included as members of the academic teams. These parents take a leading role in

working with borderline at-risk students on academic teams and encourage the students to view

college as a necessity.

Although extensive professional development programs are lacking, several programs are

in place to help staff better understand the cultural complexities of students who attend their high

school. One required program for new teachers includes a school bus trip to major

neighborhoods in the school district so teachers see where kids live. Inspirational and

informational speakers have also been utilized as professional development tools. Computer labs

are utilized for staff development programs.

The high school also combines efforts of staff with outside community groups to address

basic physical needs of students. Clothing outreaches, particularly in winter months, are quietly

maintained. Guidance personnel refer students and families to appropriate community agencies

for help with food, shelter, finances, and other basic needs. A school social worker has a class

for teen parents and refers them to community resources. Students and parents noted child care

is provided during the school day so teenage moms can return to school.

Administrators praised teachers for their caring attitude about students as well as each

other. In addition to programs to help students, an anonymous program through which teachers

"look out" for colleagues exists in the high school. If teachers are to address the many needs of

students, they must themselves "be strong, be ready each day, and know they are cared about."

Identification of At-Risk Students and Use of Data

As students make the transition from middle school to high school, a focused effort is

made to identify students in danger of not completing high school. Middle school counselors

help eighth graders prepare for high school and assist high school guidance in placing students in appropriate classes. High School guidance counselors look up both the academic and behavioral history of incoming students. Freshmen identified as at-risk are placed in smaller classes, a program specific to the freshman class. Students who have never passed ISTEP+ are identified for special reading help. The high school's goal, as stated by a guidance counselor, is to "make students successful in ninth grade." Administrators also noted, "Kids aren't prepared for the 'plan' of high school. They are used to just moving from one grade to the next. We explain high school opportunities, and include, if possible, a conversation with parents." Administrators stress an attitude of "everyone is a counselor" in addressing the many needs of students.

Discipline referrals are also passed on to guidance to identify causes of disciplinary problems. This interaction of disciplinary consequences with guidance provides good behavioral support and reinforcement for students and tracking for school staff. Several administrative staff, including an attendance officer, an assistant principal, and other staff, meet once per week to address attendance issues, another area seen as critical by administration.

The principal provided the most input on the need to use data more extensively. He noted the small subgroup details of data are important in identifying areas for improvement. Administrators and teachers noted the staff has a problem-solving attitude. One administrator remarked the staff's reaction to negative data is: "Well, what are we going to do to solve this?" Several staff members commented on the need to make decisions based on data. The principal commented data should be used as a launching pad to set goals for school improvement. An administrator also commented, "We need to understand the tools we have," and use data to the fullest extent possible. Administrators, guidance staff, and teachers all acknowledged the need to

use data more extensively. Disaggregation of data to classroom and individual student levels is needed to improve instruction.

Consideration of Validity and Reliability

The findings in the case study high school provide a realistic match to the data which demonstrates the high school has achieved success in reducing dropouts in the face of challenging demographic factors. The data provided by the Indiana Department of Education indicate this high school has large numbers of students in the most challenging demographic areas (see Table 3 data on HS 3 in this document, p. 51). The dropout factors identified by administrators, staff, parents, and students are consistent with the IDOE data.   As the researcher toured the building and conducted walk-throughs dedicated to obtaining general impressions of the school climate, further support of the awareness of dropout challenges was gained. Although not detailed through formal analysis, triangulation, and consequent validity, of the information gained through the interviews, the IDOE data, and the general observations of the researcher was achieved.

The researcher also spoke with the principal on two additional occasions, and another administrator, a teacher, and a student a second time to ensure preliminary impressions and analysis made by the researcher were consistent with the participants' interpretations. This review of information enhances the credibility and validity of the study through member checking.

The descriptions of findings have been detailed to make the results realistic. The researcher's approach to all interviewed groups was the same, establishing reliability within the study. With numerous interviewed groups citing similar causes of dropouts as well as successful

prevention programs, the realism of the findings is further enhanced, and both validity and reliability is supported.

Summary

Databases maintained by the IDOE were researched to identify demographic factors that have a strong correlation – both positive and negative – to high school graduation rates in Indiana. The four demographic factors with the strongest negative correlation to graduation rates were:

- Percent of students on free lunch

- Percent of students with single parent families

- Percent of children in district with at risk mothers

- Percent of families in district below poverty level

Indiana high school graduation rate history for the years of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 was reviewed to identify high schools that had achieved a graduation rate above the state average in each of those four years. Nearly half the high schools in the state of Indiana – 182 of 368 – were found to have graduation rates above the state average in each of those four years.

Those two pieces of data were merged to identify high schools that exhibited above the state average in numbers of students exhibiting each of the four negative demographic factors and had also maintained a graduation rate above the state average in each of the four years cited. Only two high schools met those parameters. Five additional high schools were identified that exhibited seven of the eight established parameters. Those steps constituted Phase 1 of the study and addressed the first two research questions.

Through analysis of the data collected in Phase 1, a single high school was identified for case study. Although the original intent was to identify three high schools for case study, the

limited number of schools that met the criteria and difficulties encountered in receiving

permission from corporations to be included in the study resulted in only one high school being

selected for study. The case study constituted Phase 2 of the study and addressed the remaining

three research questions.

During the case study, prepared interview questions were presented to individuals in one-

on-one interview sessions and to small focus groups. The principal, other administrators,

guidance personnel, teachers, students, parents, and community members were interviewed

through four onsite and one offsite interview sessions. Several general walks through the

building were also completed. During the walk-throughs the researcher noted banners and sign

of encouragement and positive messages. Several hallways contained photos of both current

students and graduates who had achieved success in academics or athletics. Trophy cases

displayed memorabilia from athletics, fine arts, and other extracurricular activities. The

researcher also examined at risk data maintained by the administration and guidance department,

including standardized testing scores, discipline referrals, failing grades, and files of other

confidential and anecdotal information that was not shared with the researcher.

Staff members in the high school were found to be genuinely committed to meeting the

needs of each student and helping him/her graduate from high school with a diploma. The

principal stated, "Our goal is 100% graduation." An attitude of helping every child every day

permeated the atmosphere of the high school and was evident during walk-throughs of the

building as well as during interview sessions.

Teachers noted the staff consists of "mature thinkers" who possess a "problem-solving

mentality." An administrator commented, "We know our limitations. We tackle them, not hide

them." Staff members also anonymously monitor needs of colleagues to ensure personal

readiness to meet the challenges presented by students. All groups interviewed expressed knowledge of and appreciation for the efforts of administrators, guidance, teachers, students, parents, and outside community organizations to address the dropout problem and help every student graduate with a high school diploma. A student commented, "Teachers are changing how they teach. You can tell they want everyone to be successful."

Primary factors identified in the case study high school as contributing to students dropping out included:

- Lack of both support and discipline in the home, creating an environment that is not conducive to learning

- Cycle/history of family members, including parents, dropping out of school

- Lack of adequate and appropriate preparation for high school

- Academic failure

- Students maintaining jobs

- Teen pregnancy

Numerous programs to encourage students to remain in school and to address specific and individual problems as they occur were found. Primary dropout prevention programs and strategies indentified were:

- An alternative school maintained by the school corporation

- A second alternative school maintained by an independent provider

- A vocational/career center

- Online virtual classes

- An online GED program

- Specialized classes in math and English

- A specialized class in learning skills

- A freshman elective class that requires student involvement in the community, including a volunteer project as a course requirement

- Evening tutoring programs provided by high school staff

- Tutoring programs provided by outside agencies

- A wide variety of extracurricular programs, including athletics, fine arts, and special interest clubs

- Child care for pregnant teenagers

- Counseling services and other programs, including the principal's "a minute a day" program, designed to watch for and address signs of potential dropout behavior

- Involvement of outside agencies to address academics, social, emotional, and basic personal need issues, particularly a daily program, run by community members, to which students are transported by the corporation

It should be noted the challenge of maintaining a successful graduation rate at this high school is heightened when it is noted the school not only ranked above the state average in all four of the negative demographic factors, but in the upper 10% of all schools in the state in three of the factors and in the upper 25% in the fourth factor.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion, Limitations, Implications, and Conclusions

Included in the title of this study is the anticipatory line "…Overcoming Challenging Demographic Factors." Early in this research it was highly evident attaining that implied goal is daunting at best. Phase 1 of this study identified 182 Indiana high schools, nearly half of the entire state's total of 368, that had achieved a graduation rate above the Indiana state average in each of the four years studied (2006 – 2009). Although a commendable accomplishment for those schools, how many of them also ranked high in negative – or challenging, as the title states – demographic factors and were able to, as presented, "overcome" them? An analysis of only four of the top eight demographic factors that have a negative correlation to Indiana graduation rates revealed only two high schools were able, as the title proposed, to overcome challenging demographic factors and reduce high school dropouts. Although not reported as part of this study, further analysis by the researcher revealed that not one high school was above the state average in all eight of the negative/challenging demographic factors and also achieved a graduation rate above the state average in each of the four designated years. A quick conclusion would be that it is nearly impossible to overcome those challenging demographic factors. It is important to consider, however, that those challenging factors were not predetermined as documented as solitary predictors of a low graduation rate, but rather were identified as characteristics of student populations after graduation statistics were known. The Indiana

Department of Education (IDOE) designation of demographic factors and their correlation to

graduation rates was not done as part of a study of either demographic factors or graduation

rates. The factors and their correlation to graduation rates were determined after data was

collected. They certainly merit study because of this correlation, however, and expansion of this

study to more extensively examine individual factors and to include greater analysis of

prediction will be cited later in this chapter as a recommendation for further research. The

complex interaction of challenging demographic factors, and a high school's ability to identify

and address those challenging demographic factors, is central to this study.

Case Study Alignment with Literature Review of Causes of Dropping Out

As each interview group in the high school selected for case study was asked the

question, "What causes students in this high school to drop out?" two primary themes emerged:

(1) impact of home and other influences outside the school and (2) lack of preparation for the

rigors of high school. Although academic failure may have been the 'official' reason cited for a

student dropping out, other factors were perceived as causal to academic problems. That

perception is consistent with literature reviewed in Chapter 2 of this study.

Teachers and administrators identified a cycle of failure passed on from the home as a

strong factor in student decisions to drop out. Parents and students themselves also noted a lack

of encouragement from home as a reason students lose interest in school and drop out. An

administrator discussed how family survival in today's economy can often take precedence over

staying in school. All groups also noted the negative impact from the pressure and time

commitment of students having outside jobs. In the Civic Enterprises study for the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation, students cited family and other real life events as reasons they

dropped out (as cited in Bridgeland et al. 2006). In the 2009 Civic Enterprises study (Bridgeland

et al., 2009), dropping out was examined from educators' perspective. Not enough support at home was listed by educators as the top reason for students dropping out. Shannon and Bylsma (2006) noted students working 15 or 20 hours a week were at an increased risk of dropping out.

The National Governor's Association study (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009) cited life events as one of four primary reasons for students dropping out. Those life events included pregnancy, getting a job, or caring for an ill family member. A 2002 federal report identified two primary factors associated with dropping out: family characteristics and school experiences (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002). The family experiences included socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and single-parent families. Those family experiences were cited by groups in the case study and also mirror many of the negative demographic factors identified by the IDOE.

Student, family, and community factors were cited by Shannon and Bylsma (2006) in their study for the state of Washington. Factors they listed that coincided with those identified by participants from the case study high school include:

- family with an income below poverty level

- student is a member of a minority

- student has poor academic achievement

- student has poor attendance

- student has repeated one of more grades

- student has relatives or friends who have dropped out

- student is pregnant (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006)

These factors directly coincide with three of the eight negative demographic factors identified by the IDOE: families with an income below poverty level (IDOE factor #4); student

is a member of a minority (IDOE factor #6); and student has relatives or family members who have dropped out (IDOE factor #7) (Indiana Department of Education, 2009b).

Inability to make a successful transition from middle school to high school is a primary at risk factor identified by the case study high school. A guidance counselor noted a primary focus of the high school is to "make students successful in ninth grade." Middle school counselors are utilized to assist in making appropriate plans for eighth graders. Incoming freshmen identified as at risk are placed in smaller classes and sometimes specialized classes to maximize opportunities for success. Attendance and discipline are carefully monitored among freshmen and concerns are identified and addressed early. Absenteeism was identified as a strong early warning sign in the first Civic Enterprise study (Bridgeland et al., 2006) and as a warning sign with 85% accuracy in the second Civic Enterprise study (Bridgeland et al., 2009). Balfanz and Legters (2006) noted 40% of ninth grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates had repeated ninth grade, and a 2009 Fact Sheet from the Alliance for Excellent Education indicated "difficult transitions to high school" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a, p. 3) as a prominent barrier to graduation.

Addressing the Dropout Problem

In addition to identifying reasons for dropping out that coincide with other documented research, the case study high school has also implemented numerous preventative programs to address the issue. The pervasive attitude of the case study high school is that each child is an individual who deserves to succeed. "We have to make sure there are no cracks for them to fall through." It is important to seize "every opportunity every day to help every child." "Life is tough – we need to do whatever we can to help." "Every day has a purpose." "Our high school continues to evolve to meet the needs of all kids." Student-centered quotes were abundant in the

interview sessions conducted at the case study high school. The school's focus on each child as an individual is congruent with the underlying premises of federal No Child Left Behind legislation, "that all children can learn and have a right to be taught" (Borkowski & Sneed, 2006).

The approach to addressing the dropout problem embraced by the case study high school centered on recognizing difficulties encountered by individual students and taking steps to address those difficulties. Although numerous programs to address at risk issues are in place, utilization of those programs is predicated upon identification of individual student needs. Although the chance of a student "falling through the cracks" might be increased by this type approach, the staff of the high school demonstrated a focused, committed, and cohesive awareness of individual student needs. The Center for Social and Emotional Education stresses the need for "systemic intervention to create a safe, caring, and responsive school climate as it provides the platform upon which we teach and learn" (Cohen, 2006, p. 212). It is highly evident the case study high school embraces this philosophy.

Lack of engagement is cited by research as a primary cause of students dropping out, and the individualized approach by the case study high school staff seeks to address this concern. "Research shows that a lack of student engagement is predictive of dropping out, even after controlling for academic achievement and student background" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a, p. 3). The principal's "minute a day" program, wherein he asks staff to spend just one minute a day with an at risk student, facilitates an increased sense of engagement among students. Encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities such as clubs, fine arts, and athletics also increases student attachment to the school. "Work in psychology tells us that the sense of community, this experience of belonging, is an important factor in understanding

student behavior and performance" (Osterman, 2000, p. 325). A freshman class in the case study high school that requires students to volunteer in the community enhances student engagement in both the school and the community. Research by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) described the benefits of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement by students in terms of increased academic achievement and a reduction in dropouts. "Students who experienced a greater sense of acceptance by peers and teachers were more likely to be interested in and enjoy school and their classes" (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 331).

Once students successfully navigate their freshman year, the high school offers numerous programs to guide students into areas of interest and help them, if necessary, to recover credits lost by failing a course. Two alternative schools, an online "virtual school" for credit recovery, and an online virtual GED program help students who have encountered academic problems. A vocational career center is also key to keeping students in school as they are able to find hands on programs that are interesting and beneficial to them. Princiotta and Reyna (2009) found many students who fail courses lack resources to help them get back on track, leading to dropping out. Students responding to a national poll cited by Bridgeland in his 2006 study indicated the main reason they dropped out of school was because classes were not interesting (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Programs in place in the case study high school were found to address these concerns.

Schargel and Smink (2001) developed a list of 15 effective strategies for the National Dropout Prevention Center. These strategies include many of the efforts implemented by the case study high school: alternative learning, after-school opportunities, active learning, use of educational technology, individualized instruction, school-community collaboration, and career/technical education (Schargel & Smink, 2001). The National Dropout Prevention Center

list of critical factors for preventing students from dropping out includes alternative learning

environments and hands-on learning (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

Limitations of the Study

Although the data gathered were highly informative and the case study resulted in

valuable and important insight into ways a high school can prevent dropouts, the study is

bounded by several limitations that should be noted. The inclusion of only one high school in

the case study restricts the amount of data and spectrum of programs that might have been

uncovered if three high schools, as originally intended, were studied. Difficulties in securing

appropriate permission from the corporation chief administrator, in acquiring sufficient voluntary

participation from staff, and in receiving permission from parents/guardians for their child to

participate were all barriers that resulted in the final inclusion of only one high school.

The date of U.S. census data that was used by the IDOE for determination of

demographic correlations is a limitation. Although the data were listed by the IDOE as 2008

data, many areas were compiled from 2000 census data. Although more recent census data is

available, the researcher was limited to the dates of data used by the IDOE for their correlations.

Although dramatic changes in those statistics would not be expected, there would certainly be at

least minor changes due to population fluctuation.

The databases of the IDOE used by this researcher to examine demographic factors are

no longer maintained by the Department. In fact, during the summer of 2010 those databases

disappeared from the IDOE webpage without warning. Although the researcher had completed

most of his research involving those databases, further information was still needed. Fortunately,

the researcher was able to locate an IDOE staff member who guided him to the archived files

that contained those databases. Upon later inquiry about why those files were removed and no

longer maintained, the researcher was told staff reductions at the IDOE made it impossible to compile that data and compute the correlations. Additionally, the current administrative leadership of the IDOE was utilizing other formats for data and did not share the researcher's opinion of the value of that data. Future expansions of this study or other studies similar to this will not have the availability of the detailed demographic and student performance data that was vitally important to this research.

Implications and Future Research

The primary value in this study is the sharing of numerous programs implemented by the case study school which have successfully resulted in a reduction of dropouts. In addition to those programs, a genuine student-focused attitude permeated the atmosphere at the high school. It was highly evident during the case study that the high school is committed to meeting affective needs of students as well as academic needs. In fact, the high school embraces the ability to address personal, social, emotional, family, and other non-school needs as integral to addressing academic needs. That emphasis on the total child is congruent with the position of Cohen: "The goals of education need to be reframed to prioritize not only academic learning, but also social, emotional, and ethical competencies" (Cohen, 2006, p. 201). "Consequently, when evidence-based social, emotional, and ethical education is integrated into traditional teaching and learning, educators can hone the essential academic and social skills, understanding, and dispositions that support effective participation in democracy" (Cohen, 2006, p. 202). The promulgation of that attitude is also a primary value of this study.

In addition to addressing affective needs of students, the case study high school demonstrated a commitment to identifying and meeting the needs of individual students, whatever those needs might be. The permeating theme of meeting every child's needs every day

was reinforced not only by signage in the school, but by programs that target individual students as well as small groups of students. Classes for pregnant girls and day care for the children of students; a wide range of classes at the career/vocational center for the most advanced students as well as students on the verge of dropping out; online courses; smaller and targeted classes within the school day; after school tutoring programs; referrals of students and families to outside resources for help; all are examples of programs designed for specific student needs.

In addressing the final three research questions related to the roles of administration, teachers, other staff, and other factors in contributing to the graduation rate success of the case study high school, those roles and other factors were found to be highly intertwined. Although the current superintendent was not specifically cited in any interview sessions, it should be noted he is in his first year at that corporation. The principal is in only his second year, also limiting specific references. Teachers, students, and parents, however, cited support from the superintendent and high school principal over the past several years as key to initiating and maintaining many of the programs found to be successful in reducing dropouts. The current principal was cited for his "minute a day" program and other efforts to create a positive, caring, and productive atmosphere in the high school. Teacher-initiated programs require the support of administration and guidance, cooperation among themselves and other staff, and many times support and coordination with community organizations. The important roles of clubs, sports, and activities cited by all interviewed groups certainly require coordination and cooperation among all stakeholders. Rather than implementing a few broad programs with contrived titles, the case study high school was found to rely on a constant and continuous focus on all students within the school to identify early warning signs of dropout behavior. As those at risk behaviors are identified, the school guides students into services, classes, and/or programs that would most

benefit that individual child. The support and cooperation among all groups – the superintendent and central office staff, the high school principal and building level administrators, guidance personnel, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and a myriad of community organizations – was highly evident, even when not specifically cited.

Future research similar to that of this study could expand and enhance the findings herein. Future research could include:

- Study of specific links between identified demographic factors and how they are addressed in a high school to reduce dropouts. Isolation of demographic factors could lead to identification of specific programs that are successful in addressing that factor.

- By isolating demographic factors, a predictive variable could also be added to the study, including consequent effect of preventative programs.

- A more complex expansion of the first recommendation above could include analysis of the relative strength of each demographic factor and how it interacts with other demographic factors.

- An examination of commercially marketed dropout prevention programs to assess their effectiveness and compare that effectiveness to results in schools like the one in this case study that utilize a more generalized, case by case approach.

- The case study high school sought to address affective as well as academic needs of students. Research could be conducted on social, emotional, and ethical competencies in schools and resultant impact on and interaction with academic competencies.

- Further study of the impact of No Child Left Behind initiatives on academic achievement of total schools and subgroups within schools is needed. The interaction

of NCLB with affective educational needs, as suggested above, particularly related to the overall development of students to be responsible citizens in our democratic society, is also needed.

- Further study of the concepts of engagement, belongingness, and acceptance, and the consequent effects on student attitudes, achievement, and the quality of student learning, is needed.

Summary Conclusions

Several demographic factors can be identified that have a negative correlation to graduation rates in Indiana. Those Indiana factors closely align with national research studies examining factors that contribute to students dropping out. In Indiana those identified negative – or challenging – demographic factors are not easily addressed. Of 182 high schools that achieved graduation rates above the state average in each of four consecutive years (2006 – 2009), only two were also identified as having student numbers above the state average in the top four identified negative demographic factors.

The high school selected for case study has demonstrated success in reducing dropouts by maintaining a focus on individual students, including the affective needs of those students. A "can do" – and even a "must do" – attitude permeates the atmosphere of that school. A sense of genuine caring is shared by staff, transmitted to students, and highly evident to even casual observers like this researcher. The roles of the principal and other administrators, guidance personnel, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and community resources are highly intertwined and reveal a focus and a commitment to meeting the needs of each child. Support, coordination, and cooperation between and among adults, program leaders, activity sponsors, and community support organizations and programs are highly evident. All interviewed groups

commented that students can be successful in this high school and expressed appreciation for the

prevalent atmosphere of help and success. The concentrated efforts of staff to meet student

needs was perhaps best expressed by a student, "No one has ever done that before," when

referring to the help she found. Rather than a few isolated programs geared to mass replication,

the case study high school relies on numerous individualized and constantly evolving programs,

fostered both within the school and from community resources, to help students remain in school

and graduate with a diploma.

Much remains to be done in addressing dropout problems across the nation. The case

study high school has taken significant strides in keeping students in school, and their examples

of success are worthy of emulation. Their dedicated focus on seizing every opportunity every

day to help every child rings loudly in the quote by President Obama that introduced this study,

"Don't even think about dropping out of school. Don't even think about it" (Obama, 2009b, p.

9).

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APPENDIX A: SUPERINTENDENT APPROVAL

Indiana State University

October, 2010

Dear Superintendent/Board of School Trustees,

I am Robert Schultz, a doctoral student of Dr. Terry McDaniel from the Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations Department at Indiana State University. I am conducting a research project on how Indiana high schools keep students in school and achieve a high graduation rate. I am seeking permission to include _____ High School in my study.

I am currently assistant superintendent at Tipton Community Schools. Actually, I retired as superintendent at Tipton a year ago so I could pursue this degree, and have returned to Tipton on a temporary basis for business functions. I have also been a high school band director and principal, and share your interest in helping students receive a high school diploma.

To identify high schools for my study, I first examined several demographic factors which have a strong correlation to students dropping out, such as numbers of students on free lunch, from single parent homes, with at risk mothers, and from families below poverty levels. I then identified high schools that had numbers of students that exceeded state averages in those demographic categories -- and also had a graduation rate above the Indiana state average. _____High School was one of a very few Indiana high schools that met that criteria.

I want to find programs and procedures _____High School is using to reduce dropouts. It is my hope other high schools will be able to use this information to reduce dropouts in their own schools. I will study the high school by asking the principal to identify small numbers of administrators (1-2), guidance personnel (1-2), teachers (6-8), students (8-10), parents (6-8), and community members (included with parents), whom I will divide into small discussion groups. I have enclosed a copy of the interview forms and questions I will use. Consent to participate forms will be distributed to all participants before they are interviewed. In the case of minor students (17 years old and younger), I will send a parental permission form home and then also have each student sign an assent to participate form. No names will be

asked, and all responses will be kept confidential. Quotes will be identified in a generic manner, such as "a student said..." I will use an audio tape (no video) to record the interviews for my own reference and will also take notes. I will be the only person who has access to notes or tapes, and they will be kept in a locked cabinet assessable only to me and destroyed three years after my study is complete. The name of the high school will also be kept confidential.

If you have any questions or desire further information feel free to contact:

Mr. Robert Schultz	Dr. Terry McDaniel
Principal Investigator	Faculty Project Sponsor
Tipton Community Schools	ELAF Department
221 N. Main Street	University Hall, 317C
Tipton, IN 46072	Indiana State University
765-675-2147, ext. 312	Terre Haute, IN 47809
cell: 317-432-7778	812-237-3862
rwschultz4@comcast.net	Terry.McDaniel@indstate.edu
or rschultz@tcsc.k12.in.us	

Please complete the two signature pages of this letter (they are identical) and return one to me via fax at 765-675-3857. If you feel your school board should also grant permission for this study, I would be pleased to attend a board meeting and explain my proposal if you feel that would be appropriate. Keep this letter and one of the signed signature pages for your records.

If you have any questions about the rights of participants as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or email the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.
Thank you.

Respectfully,

Robert W. Schultz

Date of IRB Approval: Oct. 15, 2010
IRB Number: 1960065-1
Project Expiration Date: Sept. 25, 2011

Please indicate whether or not you grant permission for Robert Schultz to conduct this study at _____ High School. Sign both copies and keep one for your records.

_____ I grant permission for _____High School to be used in Robert Schultz's study on high school graduation rates and dropouts.

_____ I do not grant permission for _____High School to be used in Robert Schultz's study on high school graduation rates and dropouts.

_____   _____
   Signature of Superintendent   Printed name of Superintendent

_____   _____
          Corporation   High School

_____
        Date

APPENDIX B: PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL

Indiana State University

October, 2010

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am Robert Schultz, a doctoral student of Dr. Terry McDaniel from the Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations Department at Indiana State University. I am requesting permission for your child to participate in a research study to be used for my doctoral dissertation. I am conducting a research project on how Indiana high schools keep students in school and achieve a high graduation rate. I want to find programs and procedures your child's high school is using to reduce dropouts. It is my hope other high schools will be able to use this information to reduce dropouts in their own schools.

Your child will be invited to participate in a small discussion group. I will be asking the students in this group to tell me about programs in their school that encourage students to stay in school. I will ask them how administrators, teachers, parents, other students, and anyone else help students graduate. (I have enclosed a copy of the interview form and questions I will use.) Your child will not be asked to give his or her name, thereby keeping all information I collect confidential. Your child will also be asked to keep all conversations made in the small group confidential. I will tape the discussion (audio only, no video) to help me get accurate information. I will be the only person who listens to those tapes and will destroy them three years after this study is completed. I will also take written notes, which will also be destroyed. When using information from these discussions, I will use generic terms such as "a student said" to maintain confidentiality. Most information will be reported as group responses. A small potential risk with this study is that someone who reads it after it is finished might be able to determine what high school I am talking about, even though I will not use the high school's name. That is why it is important to keep everything that is said in the interviews confidential. Even if someone later can figure out what high school I am talking about, the students will not be at risk because no names or anything else that could be used to identify individual students will be used in the final report. Because this study also is being done to find out good things about your high school, the risks are minimal.

Even if you give permission for your child to participate, your child is free to decline to participate or may end participation at any time. If you grant permission for your child to participate in this study, his/her name will be added to a pool from which students will be randomly selected for actual participation.

If you have any questions or desire further information feel free to contact:

Mr. Robert Schultz	Dr. Terry McDaniel
Principal Investigator	Faculty Project Sponsor
Tipton Community Schools	ELAF Department
221 N. Main Street	University Hall, 317C
Tipton, IN 46072	Indiana State University
765-675-2147, ext. 312	Terre Haute, IN 47809
rwschultz4@comcast.net	812-237-3862
	Terry.McDaniel@indstate.edu

Please complete the two signature pages of this letter (they are identical) and return one to me in the enclosed envelope. Keep this letter and one of the signed signature pages for your records.

If you have any questions about your rights (or your child's rights) as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809; by phone at (812) 237-8217; or by email at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Robert W. Schultz

Please indicate whether or not you wish to allow your child to participate in this project by checking one of the statements below, signing your name and returning one copy of this page to me in the enclosed envelope. Sign both copies and keep one for your records.

_____ I grant permission for my child to participate in Robert Schultz's study on high school graduation rates and dropouts.

_____ I do not grant permission for my child to participate in Robert Schultz's study on high school graduation rates and dropouts.

_____   _____
Signature of Parent/Guardian   Printed Parent/Guardian Name

_____   _____
Printed Name of Child   Date

APPENDIX C: PARENT/COMMUNITY MEMBER INVITATION

Indiana State University

October, 2010

Dear Parent or Community Member,

My name is Robert Schultz, and I am a doctoral student of Dr. Terry McDaniel from the Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations Department at Indiana State University. (I am also the assistant superintendent at Tipton Community Schools in Tipton, IN.) I am conducting a research project on how Indiana high schools keep students in school and achieve a high graduation rate. I want to find programs and procedures high schools are using to reduce dropouts. It is my hope other high schools will be able to use this information to reduce dropouts in their own schools.

You have been invited to participate. I selected three high schools in Indiana for my study. You were identified by the administration of the high school in your district as either a parent or community member who might be able to share valuable information on good things happening in your area high school -- specifically, how that high school is reducing dropouts. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and contact me about any questions you might have before deciding if you are willing to participate.

PROCEDURES
If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to take part in a small group discussion about your high school. In this discussion you will be asked questions designed to get you to describe good things that are going on in your school. You will be asked about the importance of staying in high school and getting a diploma, what things you think cause students to drop out, and what your school is doing to prevent dropouts. The group discussion will be tape recorded (voices only, no video), and I will take notes. The discussion should take no more than 45 minutes.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Any information shared during this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential. I will not ask for names during interviews, and only titles such as teacher,

administrator, student, etc. will be used in my final report. (Like, "a teacher said…") Tape recordings of interview sessions will not be listened to by anyone other than me. All notes and tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, seen only by me, and will be destroyed after three years. By agreeing to participate in this study, you are also agreeing to keep all information that is heard during your interview confidential, including comments made by other people. That is especially important in a small group interview so that not only your own comments but also the comments of everyone in the group remain confidential.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS
If you have any questions or desire further information feel free to contact:

Mr. Robert Schultz	Dr. Terry McDaniel
Principal Investigator	Faculty Project Sponsor
Tipton Community Schools	ELAF Department
221 N. Main Street	University Hall, 317C
Tipton, IN 46072	Indiana State University
765-675-2147, ext. 312	Terre Haute, IN 47809
rwschultz4@comcast.net	812-237-3862
	Terry.McDaniel@indstate.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809; by phone at (812) 237-8217; or by email at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about rights as a research participant with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

If you agree to participate, please return the enclosed form in the envelope I have provided. I will contact you in the near future to give you the time and location of the interview session. You can then decide whether or not it is convenient for you to participate. Thank you for considering joining this exciting research. I hope to speak with you soon!

Respectfully,

Robert W. Schultz

Please return this form at your earliest convenience in the enclosed envelope.

_____   I agree to participate in the research study being conducted by Robert W. Schultz on high school graduation rates and dropouts.

Signature _____

Date _____

Printed Name _____

Please indicate how you would like to be contacted about the time and place of the interview session. Your phone number or email address will be discarded after I use it to contact you.

Contact Phone Number _____

And/or Email _____

Thank you!

APPENDIX D: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM

Graduation Success: Identifying and Overcoming Challenging Demographic Factors

To Reduce High School Dropouts

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Robert Schultz, a doctoral student from the Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations Department at Indiana State University. Dr. Terry McDaniel is the faculty sponsor for this project. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding if you are willing to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to find Indiana high schools that have overcome challenges and have a successful graduation rate above the Indiana state average. Although there are many programs across the country to keep students in school, students continue to leave high school without diplomas at alarming rates. Numerous studies have identified critical factors -- like numbers of students on free lunch, from single parent homes, with at risk mothers, or from families below poverty levels -- that are found in schools with low graduation rates. If these kinds of things are used to predict low graduation rates, are there steps high schools can take to overcome these factors and keep more students in school --- and are there high schools that have been able to do this?

PROCEDURES
If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to take part in a small group discussion about your high school. In this discussion you will be asked questions designed to get you to describe good things that are going on in your school. You will be asked about the importance of staying in high school and getting a diploma, what things you think cause students to drop out, and what your school is doing to prevent dropouts. The group discussion will be tape recorded (voices only, no video), and I will take notes. The discussion should take no more than 45 minutes. I might return at a future date to ask a couple follow up questions or to review my conclusions with you to see if they are accurate.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
There are no expected risks or discomforts to you other than sitting in a small discussion group for approximately 45 minutes. If you do become uncomfortable in any way, you may stop your participation and leave the group. Every effort will be made to keep your name and even the name of the high school confidential. There is a slight risk that someone who reads this study

after it is completed could figure out the name of the high school from the information that is given. That makes it extremely important for both you and I (and everyone else in the group) to keep everything you say and hear confidential.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY
It is not likely you will receive any direct benefits from participating in this study other than your opportunity to talk about an important topic. An important purpose of this study is to talk about successful programs and other things that are taking place in Indiana high schools to reduce dropouts and share this information with other schools so they can use parts that could help their own high school.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Any information shared during this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential. I will not ask for names during interviews, and only titles such as teacher, administrator, student, etc. will be used in my final report. (Like, "a teacher said…") Tape recordings of interview sessions will not be listened to by anyone other thanme. All notes and tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, seen only by me, and will be destroyed after three years. By agreeing to participate in this study, you are also agreeing to keep all information that is heard during your interview confidential, including comments made by other people. That is especially important in a small group interview so that not only your own comments but also the comments of everyone in the group remain confidential.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
You can choose whether or not you wish to participate in this study. If you volunteer to participate, you may stop and leave at any time. You may also choose to not answer any questions. If you leave, no comments made by you will be used in the final report. Your comments will be erased from the tapes and blackened out on my notes.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS
If you have any questions or concerns about the research feel free to contact:

Mr. Robert Schultz	Dr. Terry McDaniel
Principal Investigator	Faculty Project Sponsor
Tipton Community Schools	ELAF Department
221 North Main Street	University Hall, 317C
Tipton, IN 46072	Indiana State University
765-675-2147, etc. 312	Terre Haute, IN 47809
rwschultz4@comcast.net	812-237-3862
	Terry.McDaniel@indstate.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS
If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809; by phone at 812-237-8217; or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights

as a research participant with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University as well as members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

APPENDIX E: ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM

Graduation Success: Identifying and Overcoming Challenging Demographic Factors

To Reduce High School Dropouts

1. My name is Robert Schultz and I am a student at Indiana State University.

2. My professor, Dr. Terry McDaniel, and I are asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn how high schools like yours have achieved a high graduation rate.

3. If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to participate in a small discussion group. I will ask you questions about your high school to help me find out how your school has kept students from dropping out. I may come back in a few weeks to ask some follow up questions.

4. I do not believe you will be hurt or upset in any way by participating in this study. If you become uncomfortable during the interviews you may stop and leave the group.

5. This study will probably not help you, but information I gather may help other high schools reduce their dropout rates.

6. Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. Your parent gave permission for you to take part in this study, but you can still decide to not participate.

7. If you don't want to be in this study you don't have to participate. Your participation is voluntary and nothing will happen (and no one will be upset) if you don't participate or if you change your mind later and want to stop.

8. Although anything said by you in the small group interview may be used by me in this study, I will not ask any names and I will not keep track of who makes comments. I will tape record (audio only – no video) the interview and also take notes, but I will be the only one who listens to or sees those tapes and notes. They will be destroyed 3 years after this study is complete. By agreeing to participate in this study you are also agreeing to keep all information that is shared in the interviews confidential. That is particularly important in a small group interview so that your comments and all comments by everyone else in the group are kept confidential.

9. You can ask any questions you have about the study, and may call me at 765-675-2147, extension 312 if you think of a question later.

10. Signing your name at the bottom means you agree to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form after you sign it.

_____   _____   _____
Signature   Printed Name   Date

APPENDIX F: STAFF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Robert W. Schultz Dissertation Research on High School Graduation

Staff Interview Questions

1. Talk to me about the importance of students staying in high school and receiving a diploma. How important is it? Why is it important?

2. Do the students of this high school generally want to stay in high school and graduate? Elaborate

3. What's good about this high school?

4. Tell me what you know about this high school's graduation rate. Is it good or bad?

5. What causes students in this high school to drop out?

6. Describe specific people (by position - not by name) in this high school you would say encourage students to stay in school. How do these people help?....   Administration? Guidance Personnel?   Teachers?   Other students?   Parents and other relatives?

7. How do you identify at risk students and how early do you do that? (by 9th grade?) How do you keep them in school?

8. Describe any special programs or incentives to help motivate students to graduate.

9. Describe any instructional strategies that help motivate students to stay in school.

10. Describe any professional development programs for staff focused on keeping students in school.

11. What does the community think of this high school and what are the community's expectations?

12. Any other comments?

APPENDIX G: STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Robert W. Schultz Dissertation Research on High School Graduation

Student Interview Questions

1. Talk to me about the importance of students staying in high school and receiving a diploma. How important is it? Why is it important?

2. What causes students in this high school to drop out?

3. What's good about this high school?

4. Tell me what you know about this high school's graduation rate. Is it good or bad?

5. Are there any special programs or other things that make students want to stay in school and graduate?

6. I would like information on people in this high school and how they help students stay in school. How do these people help?   Administration?   Guidance Personnel?   Teachers? Other students?   Parents and other relatives?

7. What people or groups in the community help?

8. Any other comments?

APPENDIX H: PARENT/COMMUNITY MEMBER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Robert W. Schultz Dissertation Research on High School Graduation

Parents/Community Member Interview Questions

1. Talk to me about the importance of students staying in high school and receiving a diploma. How important is it? Why is it important?

2. What's good about this high school?

3. Tell me what you know about this high school's graduation rate. Is it good or bad?

4. What causes students in this high school to drop out?

5. Describe any programs in this high school that encourage students to stay in school and graduate.

6. Describe specific people (by position - not by name) in this high school you would say encourage students to stay in school. How do these people help?.... Administration? Guidance Personnel? Teachers? Other students? Parents and other relatives?

7. Describe any programs in the community focused on keeping students in school.

8. What does the community think of this high school and what are the community's expectations?

9. Any other comments?