

AN EXAMINATION OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AND SUPPORT STAFF
REGARDING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE STRATEGIES
EMPLOYED TO INCREASE THE GRADUATION RATE OF
ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION STUDENTS
IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

A Doctoral Research Project

Presented to

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ABSTRACT

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Victor Gathers

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The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of administrators and support staff with regards to the effectiveness of services used to impact the rate of graduation of alternative high school education students in a large urban school district.

Students who are classified as at-risk are in danger of educational failure. Educational failure is the non-receipt of a high school diploma after four years of entering high school with the respective ninth grade cohort.

The Alternative Education student population is growing. In this study, the school district of New York City, from 2012-2015, evidenced an at-risk population of 20% - 25% of potential graduates.

Alternative education students are characterized with academic deficits, few course credits, court involvement, alcohol or substance abuse, disruptive behavior, multiple suspensions, homelessness, immigrant status, language learners.

Alternative education students often come from single parent homes, are predominantly male students, and are subjected to school mobility (2 to 3 school changes). These factors cause the students to be subjected to the phenomenon of dropping out, (school disengagement), which is preceded by indices of poor attendance, lateness and truancy.

This research identified efforts to facilitate learning and graduation as, small school model, early intervention, individualized instruction, counseling, and internships. One-third of the participants indicated that more effective measures are needed. The services of mentoring and family engagement were offered as additional measures for implementation.

The findings of this research indicate that the primary characteristic of alternative education students is to be over-age and under credited. Based upon the findings of this study, specific university training of administrators and staff is required. In addition the inhibiting conditions of homelessness, poverty, court intervention and immigration status will require a mandate to continue developing services which effectively increase the rate of graduation for students at-risk of educational failure.

Key Words

Educational Failure

Cohort

Mobility

At-Risk

Disengagement

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview / Background

In 1983, Alternative High School Services in New York City were created to counteract the heightening high school drop-out rate from traditional high schools. (New York City Department of Education, 2016a) This study examined the alternative education program within the City School District of New York Department of Education (NYCDOE), between 2012-2015. Specific research was conducted in District 79 which provided the respective alternative education services through a variety of schools and programs.

This study investigated the success of actions and strategies implemented to assist Alternative High School students in attaining high school equivalency graduation. Carver and Lewis (2010) in a report for the National Center for Education Statistics indicated the Alternative High School student enrollment of 645,500 in the United States with 10,300 Alternative Education Programs.

Alternative Education is an effort to prevent students' separation and failure, from the education system. Students are generally referred or transferred into Alternative Education for a variety of reasons; such as, disruptive behavior, poor academic and language skills, inconsistent attendance, in school and out of school truancy, and multiple suspensions. The New York City Department of Education Office of Multiple Pathways (2006), identified the many characteristics of Alternative Education students as, being over-age and under credited (Cahill, Lynch, & Hamilton, 2006). This means that these students are not on track to graduate with their cohorts.

Students who attend Alternative High School have not earned sufficient accreditation to graduate on time with their class, have previously dropped-out, or have multiple suspensions,

engage in at risk behavior, demonstrate academic and social skill deficits, and are older than their peers. For students deemed failures or at-risk of failure, two basic subsets of alternative schools have emerged: One for students experiencing academic difficulty and at-risk of dropping out, and the other for students described as dangerous or disruptive (Vandehaar, Petrosko, and Munoz, 1995).

The research also gathered evidence from Transfer Schools and Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC). Transfer Schools and YABC provides alternative education services to high school students who cannot continue in traditional high school setting. These programs are designed to prepare students to acquire a high school diploma. The enrollment criteria for YABC and Transfer Schools require students to have a minimum of 15-17 high school credits. The enrollment criteria into a District 79 Program do not require a minimum number of high school credits. (New York City Department of Education, 2016a)

Statement of the Problem:

Kena, Gillette, Robinson, Wang, Rathbun, Zhang, & Flicker (2015) reported the national high school graduation rate at an all-time high of 81% in 2011-2012.

The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, comprised of 34 countries), reported on the 2012 Programme,

the United States is ranked 17th in the developed world for education; that, the United States ranked 27th out of 34 countries in math, and 20th in science (OECD, PISA-United States, p. 1). Further, the OECD reports that the United States ranks 21st in the world for the rate of high school graduation (retrieved from [aneki.com/oecd_high school rates](http://aneki.com/oecd_high_school_rates), p. 12).

In reference to the NYCDOE,

The high school graduation results for alternative education students are assigned to the students' home school. The home school is the high school which transferred the student for alternative education services (Retrieved from <http://www.schools.nyc.gov>). In the NYCDOE, alternative education (district 79, transfer schools, YABC) is offered city-wide. Data representing the alternative education graduation rate are embedded within the respective high schools (New York City Department of Education, 2016a).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceptions of the Alternative Education leaders regarding the actions used to increase the graduation rate of under-credited and over-age Alternative Education students in a large urban school district.

This research study was conducted through the interviews of school leaders, counselors and social workers to elicit their perceptions of the strategies/actions used to affect graduation rates of under-credited/overage Alternative High School students.

Research Questions:

The questions guiding this research study are as follows:

- 1) What are the characteristics for enrollment into Alternative High School Education Programs?
- 2) What strategic services have been implemented to address the needs of Alternative High School Education students, while promoting graduation?
- 3) To what degree are system leaders supporting Alternative High School Education Programs and Services?
- 4) How effective are the programs and services to address the needs of Alternative High School Education students from the perspective of the system leaders?

Significance of Study:

The research is a study of the perceptions of school leaders, who are responsible for designing, implementing, operating and supervising services to students at-risk of educational failure. From 2012-2015, in the district under review, at-risk students represented 20%-25% of the potential student graduating population (New York City Department of Education, 2016a). This cohort of students failed to meet graduation requirements, along with their 9th grade cohort, which places the students at-risk for educational failure. These students are primarily over-age, and under credited. The Alternative Education student population is primarily male, exhibit disabilities, are of immigrant status, and non-white. Alternative Education students require additional activities and services to motivate school engagement, and facilitate the attainment of a high school completion credential. The educational success of these students is essential to the individual, family, community, state, and national economic health.

The size of the alternative education student population signals the significance of the study, which looks at implementation of strategic services to promote graduation rates, the role of system leaders, and the effectiveness of services to address the conditions of the alternative education student, which can affect the economic health of the society. As Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) stated, “the costs of failing to graduate from high school are not limited to dropouts themselves, but also spill over to society” (p.87).

This study intends to guide school leaders to understand the need to develop and implement services which improve the graduation rate of at-risk Alternative High School students.

Definition of Terms:

The following terminology is associated to the attributes of the study.

Alternative High School - high school graduation preparation for students not enrolled in traditional high school.

Alternative education program - preparation for a high school equivalent credential

An overage, under-credited student is at least two years off-track relative to expected age and credit accumulation toward earning a diploma. Nearly all high school dropouts in New York City have a history of being over-age, and under-credited (Department Education - Office of Multiple Pathways, 2006).

Drop-Out - Student who leaves school prior to graduation without an official discharge.

Official Discharge - To document the date that the student is officially discharged (disenrolled) from receiving public education services.

New York State Equivalency Diploma - Certification that the course of studies is equivalent to a high school diploma when successfully passing the General Education Development Exam (now called the Test Assessing Secondary Completion - TASC).

Delimitations of the Study:

The delimitations are those characteristics that limit the scope and define the boundaries of your study. The delimitations are in the control of the researcher (Simon, M.K.-2011- excerpt). This study is focused on a large urban school district, which provides alternative education services to at-risk students. The study is limited to the City School District of New York, which provides alternative education services through District 79, Transfer schools, and the Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC).

This district was chosen because of its accessibility, and the lack of data regarding the perceptions of the effectiveness of services to increase the graduation rate of alternative education students.

Limitations:

Creswell (2015) stated,

Limitations - are the potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher. These weaknesses are enumerated one by one and often relate to inadequate measures of variables, loss or lack of participants, small sample sizes, errors in measurement, and other factors typically related to data collection and analysis. These limitations are useful to other potential researchers who may choose to conduct a similar or replication study. Advancing these limitations provides a useful bridge for recommending future studies. Limitations also help readers judge to what extent the findings can or cannot be generalized to other people or situations (p. 197).

The limitations to this study are as follows -

- a) Only two support staff were able to participate, due to end of semester student needs and events. This means that the school leaders' responses dominated the data;
- b) The quantity and quality of resources at community satellite sites and at the hubs can affect the perceptions of the participants;
- c) The literature did not reveal any longitudinal studies on the success of at-risk students, which could guide the discussion in the development of program services;
- d) Each U.S. state educational department has its own description of an alternative education program, the lack of a uniform definition does not provide developmental

stability for integrity for at-risk services on a national level.

Organization of Study

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter one identifies the purpose of the study, gave a national and local perspective, states the problem, and the study's significance. Chapter one displayed the research questions to be answered, and the associated research terminology. Chapter one also identified the areas under the researcher's control (delimitations), and the influences which place restrictions (limitations) on the research methods. Chapter two is a review of the literature about alternative education. These references, relevant to the research, provide resources surrounding the topic. Chapter three is the description of the methodology used in this qualitative study. Chapter four presents the findings which resulted from the themes emerging from the participant interviews. Chapter five represents the conclusions and recommendations from the findings.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

INTRODUCTION:

Chapter two explores research literature associated with alternative education, its history, description, enrollment criteria, factors leading to placement, elements for successful alternative programs, and societal implications of students at-risk of educational failure. A review of the literature will address the gaps associated with effective programs for Alternative Education students at-risk of educational failure.

The findings of Quinn & Poirer (2007) stated,

Although there was a dearth of rigorous empirical evidence supporting the relevance of particular program effectiveness, various characteristics are frequently cited in the literature on alternative education ... They include:

* Small class size, and small study body, * Personalized school environment in which students feel included in the decision making, * Flexibility, * Effective classroom management, * Choice, * High expectation / belief in the students, * Special teacher training, * Parent involvement, * Collaboration. (p. 16)

Historical Perspectives on Alternative Education

Efforts to provide alternative education to students at-risk of educational failure have been under way for at least 40 years (Duardo, 2009). Kleiner, Porch, and Farris (2002) affirmed, that, “although alternative forms of education took root in the United States in the early 19th century their widespread adoption and proliferation did not occur until the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 1).

As the education system developed during the twentieth century, the necessity to provide for students at-risk of school failure became more pronounced. Lange & Sletten (2002) stated,

Advocates argue that alternatives to the traditional school model are imperative to meeting the needs of all students. Some educators and policy makers have contended that, if an alternate educational option is provided for students at-risk of school failure, they will be able to succeed (p. 1).

In an effort to develop an alternative education model to traditional methods, Lange & Sletten (2002) stated that - “alternatives as we know them in the modern sense, find their roots in the civil rights movement” (p. 2).

The impetus for the alternative education effort was recognition of the need to provide an education process for economically disadvantaged students. As Lange & Sletten (2002) affirmed, “The mainstream public education system of the 1950’s and the 1960’s was criticized for being racist and exclusively designed for the success of the few” (p. 3).

In 1965 President Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in order to provide students from every background access to quality public education. This was eleven years prior to the founding of the U.S. Department of Education in 1976. This act was intended to close the education gap between middle and low income students. As such, the ESEA can be viewed as a weapon in the “War On Poverty” to reduce the at-risk student population (Crawford, 2001, p. 1).

Young (1990) identified alternative education efforts both inside and outside the Public School System. Alternative education outside of the Public School System is generally referred to as “Freedom Schools.” (Lange & Sletten (2002). By outside, this means, a process which is administered through a private entity, such as a religious, or community organization. Lange &

Sletten (2002) affirmed that the, “Freedom schools were intended to provide high quality education to minorities in response to the substandard education they were afforded in the public school system (p. 2).

Hale (2014) described the Freedom School “as raising questions about the very nature of American Democracy, in particular how to provide a quality education to all of its citizens” (p. 5). The author cited civil rights activist, Bob Moses, who stated that, “quality education did not necessarily mean seating a black student next to a white student. It meant, making sure every school adopted a rigorous curriculum, hired excellent teachers, and provided an opportunity for economic mobility” (As cited in Hale, 2014, p. 2).

Another example, outside of the public school system, of the alternative education process was the Free School Movement. A description provided by Lange & Sletten (2002) indicated that, “these schools were founded on the notion that mainstream public education was inhibiting and alienating to many students and that schools should be structured to allow students to freely explore their natural interest and curiosity” (p. 3). The alternative education programs of the United States Public School System were developed and characterized by parent, student, and teacher choice, autonomous learning and pace; noncompetitive evaluation and a child-centered approach (p. 4). These components help to nurture student reengagement. The aforementioned elements are an effort to have teacher, parent and student collaboration, which are essential elements of alternative education. The Free School and Freedom School Movement were practices which primarily existed from the mid 1960’s to the early 1970’s.

Heckman and Lafontaine (2010) contended that, “high school graduation is a barometer of the health of the American society and the skill level of its’ future workforce” (p. 2).

Freudenberg and Ruglis (2007) stated, “In recent decades, educational attainment in the United

States has improved significantly” (p. 2). However, the traditional school system is still experiencing student school separation. Belfranz, Herzog, and MacIver (2007) contended, “given that high school dropouts have been a concern for more than 40 years, that many more minority students and student living in poverty, dropout, and that dropping out has consistently been linked to student disengagement, it is surprising that the field of early indicators is underdeveloped” (p. 225).

McDonald (2003) declared,

the earliest alternative programs seem to have focused on offering alternative learning opportunities to students who did not function well in the mainstream environment. These functioned under the philosophy that, Alternative Education is a perspective, not a procedure or program. It is based on the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur. However, alternative programs were soon recognized as appropriate placement for disruptive students (p. 3).

Alternative Education programs have assumed many paradigms, as Raywid (1994) offered,

despite these ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start, they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization programs and environments (p. 1).

Leadership is charged with the responsibility to plan and operate an effective alternative education process, as such, in the 2006 report - *Alternative Education Programs and Student Characteristics* Foley and Pang stated;

The predominate management approach governing alternative programs appears to be site-based management. An overwhelming majority of Alternative Education programs operate in off-campus facilities. The principals rated the adequacy of the physical facilities of the programs as slightly above average (p. 13).

Cushman (1998) wrote, “that a non-negotiable in school design for student achievement is, that the student must be well-known...., the possible means to this end: small school size (p. 5).

As indicated earlier by Quinn & Poirer (2007), there is no comprehensive and acceptable research based evaluation of the effectiveness of alternative education services.

Lange & Sletten (2002) explained,

the academic outcomes for students attending alternative programs are mixed and the research documenting those outcomes is varied in scope and method. In order to fully examine the effect of alternative schools on student achievement and retention in alternative schools, more large-scale standardized assessments may be necessary.

The initial question for any large-scale review of the effectiveness of alternative schools and programs is to define effectiveness. The literature lists several characteristic of “effective” alternative schools: yet, there is little empirical evidence that the characteristics consistently transfer to desired outcomes for students (p. 22).

Definition and Description of Alternative Education:

Carver and Lewis (2010), stated that the federal (U.S.) description of alternative education is as follows:

Alternative schools and programs are designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools. The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at-risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school) (p. 1).

The following are examples of various state education department descriptions of alternative education services.

The California Education Department defines alternative schools and programs as “a provider of a means to achieve grade-level standards and meet student needs.” (California Education Department, 2016). To deal with unruly or turbulent students, the Texas Education System created disciplinary alternative education programs for “students who committed offenses that are punishable by the Texas juvenile system” (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

In Pennsylvania the alternative education program is described as “providing temporary placement to disruptive students in grades 6 to 12” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016).

The aforementioned state education authorities are not focused on the comprehensive development of students, in order to promote career and college readiness. However, in New York State alternative education is defined “as providing options for students who are at risk of dropping out of school to remain engaged in an alternative learning environment that focuses on

their particular skills, abilities and learning styles” (New York State Education Department, 2016).

Alternative education programs in New York State have for decades provided additional pathway for students to complete their secondary education and transition to a post-secondary or career option (New York State Education Department, 2016).

Since 1982, District 79 has provided alternative education and programs to students in New York City. The stated vision of District 79 is that, “100% of students will be college and career ready in order to succeed in the world” (retrieved from <http://www.schools.nyc.gov>).

In the absence of a single definition for alternative education, for purposes of discussion, the description of an alternative school and an alternative program will be the definition used by the NYCDOE. Alternative schools provide services to students which lead to a high school diploma. Alternative programs provide services which lead to a high school equivalent credential.

Alternative Education Enrollment

According to Carver, and Lewis (2010) students are transferred and enrolled in Alternative Education programs for the following reasons, and at the following rates:

physical attacks or fights (61 percent); the possession, distribution, or use of alcohol or drugs (excluding tobacco) (57 percent), disruptive verbal behavior (57 percent); continual academic failure (57 percent); chronic truancy (53 percent); the possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm (51 percent); and the possession or use of a firearm (42 percent) (p. 4).

Porowski, O’Connor, & Luo (2014), indicated,

Targeting alternative education to specific groups of youth can drive the curriculum or approach. For example, different alternative programs may be designed for pregnant or parenting teens, suspended or expelled students, recovered dropouts, delinquent teens, students with disabilities, students with high-risk health behaviors, and students seeking vocational and technical education (p. 2).

The largest group of students enrolled in the NYCDOE Alternative Education Program are students with disabilities (Cahill & Lynch, 2006). Lehr (2004) affirmed, Understanding the role of alternative schools is providing educational opportunities for youth with disabilities have become increasingly important over the past few years. Significant numbers of youth with disabilities are not completing school and the extent to which alternative education may offer an option that engages students, provides a more successful school experience, and improves the likelihood of graduation has been unexamined (p. 1).

Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, & Atkins (2007) noted, “Noticeably overlooked, however, has been the growing practice of placing students with disabilities - often those students with the most significant behavioral challenges - in alternative schools or programs” (p. 1).

Janine Zweig (2003) declared, “Typical populations of students in alternative schools are: dropouts, students with disabilities...” (p. 12). Zweig (2003) further stated, “Recognizing the special needs of the student population in alternative schools for at-risk and vulnerable youth, many schools become service providers or facilitate services provided outside the school setting” (p. 14). These schools include, but are not limited to, mental health screening, assessment of speech, hearing, vision, and cognitive skills.

As noted earlier, Alternative Education serves students who are at-risk of educational failure. Student enrollment into the alternative process is initiated by state regulations, which target student placement.

Porowski, O'Connor, & Luo (2014), described the eligibility for alternative education student placement as follows:

Alternative education programs most commonly target students with behavioral problems (35 states) including students who disrupt the classroom and students who commit severe disciplinary infractions and must be removed from regular education. Eighteen states target students with academic problems, including students with poor grades or low standardized test scores and students who are behind in school credits. Eighteen states target students classified as “at risk,” a category that can encompass pregnancy, homelessness, dropout status, disciplinary problems, academic failure, absenteeism or truancy, drug or alcohol abuse, and physical or sexual abuse. Thirteen states specify general target populations and are directed at students who are unable to benefit from a regular school environment. Other states target students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school or who have dropped out (11 states) and students with truancy or attendance problems (states) ..., other target populations identified..., include students who are pregnant or parenting (six states), students caught engaging in substance use (six states), students whose parents are in legal or other trouble (for example, in jail or under investigation by child protective services; three states), and English language learner students (two states) (p. 4).

. The alternative education school effort is fueled by the drop-out phenomenon, which is increasing. Horne (2007) stated: “The National Governors Association concurred with researcher estimates ... we know that about a third of our students are not graduating from high school” (p. 4). Cahill, et al (2006), reported,

In New York City, 138,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 21 are over-age and under credited; 70,000 of them are in school, while 68,000 have already dropped out ...

New York City’s estimated 70,000 in school over-age and under credited youth represent a population of students that is smaller than only five other U.S. high school districts (p. 2).

The stated purpose of NYCDOE-District79 is to, “help students under 21 years of age, who have experienced an interruption to their studies” (New York City Department of Education, 2016a). Dropping out is one of the most significant interruptions to a student’s education. The issue of dropping out is present in the following narrative and Table which represents the national drop-out rate (2012), and the NYCDOE drop-out rate (2014), included, in the narrative, are the NYCDOE graduation rates (2014).

Stark and Noel (2015) reported there is a national dropout rate of 6.6%, of which white students represent 4.3%, Hispanic students represent 12.7%, black students represent 7.5%, and 14.4% of all dropouts are classified with a disability. The largest dropout rate of 66.6% was seen in students ages 20-24. Further, on a national regional basis, the lowest dropout rate of 5.6% occurred in the Midwest; the South and West regions experienced the highest dropout rates of 6.9% and 7.0% respectively. The Northeast dropout rate was reported at 6.7%. Nationally, the dropout rate fell 2.1% from 2007-2012, during the same period, the female rate fell 2.2%, and the male dropout rate fell 2.5%. The Hispanic dropout rate in 2012 of 12.7 is .9 percentage

points higher than the combined rates of white (4.3%), and black (7.5%) high school students. In examining the city school district of New York, the recent high school drop-out statistics for 2014 indicated similar results (New York City Department of Education, 2016b). The dropout rate for black students was 9.6%, for Latino students 12.7%, for white students 6.1%. The lowest rate of dropping out was 5.8% for Asian students. Overall the NYCDOE dropout rate was 9.7%. This means that almost one out of ten high school students separated from the traditional H.S. process.

In the City of New York, this represents approximately 7300 students. Students with disabilities showed a dropout rate of 15.6%. Schools in predominantly Latino communities of Bushwick, Hunts Point, and the Lower East Side, reported the highest dropout rates of 18%, 18.3%, and 17%, respectively.

A. ETHNICITY / DISABILITY - NATIONALLY

WHITE	BLACK	LATINO	DISABLED	NATIONAL
4.3	7.5	12.7	14.4	6.6

B. REGIONS

MID-WEST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTHEAST
5.6	6.9	7.0	6.7

NYC DOE - 2014

C. ETHNICITY / DISABILITY

WHITE	BLACK	LATINO	ASIAN	DISABLED	TOTAL
6.1	9.6	12.7	5.8	15.6	9.7

D. NYC COMMUNITIES WITH HIGHEST DROP-OUT RATES (2014)

BUSHWICK	HUNTS POINT	LOWER EAST SIDE
18	18.3	17

Figure 1.

REPORTED U.S. DROP-OUT RATES - 2014

The overall NYCDOE 2014 graduation rate was 64.2%; Asian graduates reported 79.5%, White graduates reported 66.7%, Black graduates reported 58.8%, and Latino graduates reported 56.5%. To improve these statistics and foster student achievement alternative education programs are implementing “small school” strategies. These strategies, use small class size, individualized instruction, coupled with a flexible schedule, in a caring and supportive environment.

The figure below illustrates the 2012-2015, June and August 4th Year NYCDOE Dropout and Graduation Percentage. The at-risk eligible students are determined by adding the dropout and graduation percentage, and subtracting from 100.0%.

YEAR (Total)	DROPOUT (Total)	GRADUATION	AT-RISK (Total)
JUNE COHORT			
2012-2013 (79,719)	11.5% (9131)	60.4%	28.1% (22,400)
2013-2014 (78,721)	10.6% (8370)	61.3%	28.1 (22,120)
2014-2015 (75,524)	9.7% (7311)	64.2%	27.1% (20,467)

AUGUST COHORT			
2012-2013 (79,719)	11.4% (9,096)	64.7%	23.9% (19,053)
2013-2014 (78,721)	10.6% (8,363)	66%	23.4% (18,814)
2014-2015 (75,524)	9.7% (7,509)	68.4%	21.9% (16,539)

Figure 2

Dropout and Graduation Percentages 2012-2015 (New York City Department of Education, 2016b)

Figure 2 identifies the NYCDOE at-risks student population from 2012 - 2015 for the 4th year June and August cohorts to average approximately 25%. This quantity of potential students at-risk of failure seems to indicate that programs and services to forestall separation, and encourage student educational persistence.

Approximately 17 years ago Dr. Mary A. Raywid (1997) observed,

in small schools, otherwise marginal or at-risk students are much more likely to become involved, to make an effort, and to achieve. As a result such schools manage to reduce the well-established negative effects of race and poverty on school success (p.2).

Raywid (1997) indicated that the school setting allows for greater student and instructor interaction, which enhances student learning.

Bailey (2004) agreed and declared, “The Youth Opportunity Center is an alternative education program which employs the small school model to service the at-risk population), maintained a small school environment where students felt safe and they excelled, because they believed that the staff cared about their well-being” (p. 180). Sprague and Tobin (1999) indicated

that, “there is no doubt that smaller classes are better for students with social, emotional, or behavioral problem” (p. 9).

Factors Associated with Dropping Out of School

The criterion for enrollment in Alternative Education programs, has been presented earlier in this chapter. There are important reasons to signal Alternative Education placement. Stark and Noel (2015) indicated that poverty, diminished reading skills, criminal justice involvement, residing in a single parent household, lack of high school attainment (dropping-out) and being a male, are factors which signal Alternative Education placement.

Kena, Robinson, Wang, Rathbun, Zhang, Wilkerson-Flicker, Barmer and Velez (2015) explained, “that living in poverty during early childhood is associated with lower than average academic performance ... is also associated with lower than average rates of school completion.” The researchers further affirmed, “Families headed by single parents, particularly single mothers, are associated with a higher incidence of poverty.” (p. 11)

Balfranz, Herzog & Maclver (2007) declared,

The few studies that have been able to identify high yield predictors of dropping out, have done so, using small populations of students from a single high school, or modest - sized town. These studies, though, have consistently found, course grades, attendance, and misbehavior measures in the middle grades to be high yield predictors (p. 226).

Stark and Noel (2015) found that: “disparities in educational and other outcomes persist in the aggregate for male youth compared to their female peers in general for boys’ and young men of color in particular ... additionally males ages 18-24 had notably higher rates of imprisonment ... than females” (p. 10-13).

Student mobility is a factor in student achievement, completion, and the dropout rate. Student mobility is defined as the event of a student changing or moving from one school setting into another school. Rumberger & Larson (1998) indicated that,

Students who made even one non-promotional school change between the eighth and twelfth grades were twice as likely not to complete high school as students who did not change schools, the findings suggest that student mobility is both a symptom of disengagement and an important risk factor for high school dropout (p. 1).

Social class and family economic strength are indicators of stability versus mobility. Rumberger & Larson (1998) professed, “student mobility was higher among Latino, Black, Native American, and poor children than among, White, Asian, and middle and high income children” (p. 2). Students who are evidencing behavioral challenges within the school environment are also selected for “mobility” by school officials. Rumberger & Larson (1998) further noted, “two recent case studies of urban high schools documented how school changes occurred when school officials actively tried to get rid of “troublemakers” by forcing them to leave or illegally telling them they had to leave” (p.2).

Belfrantz, Herzog, & MacIver (2007) stated, “the large numbers of students who fall off the graduation path early in the middle grades, clearly require substantial and sustained supports to become engaged in schooling and successfully pass their courses” (p.30).

Alternative Education Programs: Elements For Success

Further, Fitzsimmons-Lovett (2001) affirmed, “Characteristics of effective Education programs are called the three C’s of effective programming or *Climate, Competency, Community*” (p. 39-40). Fitzsimmons-Lovett (2001) characterized school climate as the conditions which directly affects the physical, emotional, and academic needs of the students.

Competency is explained as those measures designed to enhance both staff and student skills.

The community are those elements inside and outside the school which support and drive student momentum toward success (p. 39-40).

Conversely an ineffective alternative education program can be described as having minimal or no parent engagement, negligible community involvement, harsh, punitive regulations, a poorly trained staff, in a warehouse setting for defiant unruly students (Fitzsimmons-Lovett, 2001, p. 43).

Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007) stated that effective alternative education programs contained:

- (A) Life skills development, welcoming classroom environment, case management, academic support (climate);
- (B) Academic Support, self-paced curriculum, remediation, computer skill development, career development/job training, after school assistance and tutoring (competency);
- (C) Family engagement, mentoring, service learning, teen parent support, court advocacy/transition (community) (pp 61-62).

MacIver, A.M. and MacIver, J.D., (2009) stated, "The strongest student indicators of dropping out of school are: attendance, behavior, and course failure, or the ABC's, offer a starting point for developing a more effective drop-out prevention strategy" (p. 1).

To illustrate efforts of success at drop-out prevention, Hammond, et al (2007), identified some examples of providing exemplary service to at-risk students (p. 55).

"Career Academy" employs career and technical education training to secure employment. "Families and Schools Together," building responsive relationships. "Success For All" is a literacy program aimed at promoting academic achievement, and "Promoting

Alternative thinking Strategies” is a methodology to promote peaceful resolutions of student interactions. The aforementioned programs contain the essential elements to reduce the dropout rate and impact the graduation rate of at-risk alternative education students.

Societal Implications of At-Risk Students

In 2000-2001 the U.S. Department of Education, conducted its first study of Alternative Education programs which revealed an alternative high school student enrollment of 631,000 (Kleiner, Porch, and Farris, 2002).

In 2007-2008 the National Center of Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education reported an Alternative High School enrollment of 645,000 (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

Kena, et al. (2015) reported in school year 2012-13 some 3.2 million school students graduated public school with a regular diploma.

According to McFarland, Stark, and Cui, - “between October 2012 and October 2013 approximately 508,000 15-24 year olds left school without obtaining a high school credential” (p. 7). This represents a drop-out rate of 4.7 percent.

In 2013 median earnings for full-time young adults without a high school diploma, or its equivalence is less than one-half of persons with an undergraduate degree (Kena, et al-2015, p. 42). There are economic ramifications for not successfully completing a high school education.

Tyler & Lofstrom (2009) stated,

The costs of failing to graduate from high school are not limited to dropouts themselves, but also spill over to society. These social costs include lower tax revenues, greater public spending on public assistance and health care, and higher crime rates (p. 87).

In 2015 there was a cohort of 75,524 potential high school graduates in the City School District of New York (New York City Department of Education, 2016b). The dropout rate for 2015 was 9.7%, which represented 7309 students, combined with 16,539 enrolled Alternative Education students represent 24,048 students at-risk of educational failure.

NYC School District Efforts to Address At-Risk Students

The NYCDOE provides alternative education programs for at-risk students through District 79. Identified as the Alternative School District, 79 provides services for approximately 10,407 students (retrieved from <http://www.schools.nyc.gov>) in over 170 sites, within the five boroughs of New York City, as well as, Westchester County. District 79 admits and services students who are court involved, substance abusers, medically prescribed outpatients, English language learners, special needs, transferred from traditional high school due to a lack of credits, evidencing at-risk behavior, truants, homeless, pregnant or parenting and experiencing immigration issues. The stated mission of District 79 is - “District 79 will empower students through “rigorous instruction and quality support services. A community of education leaders District 79 will serve as a model for innovative and replicable strategies to engage students” (New York City Department of Education, 2016a).

To achieve this mission, District 79 provides a variety of services, such as traditional and electronic instruction, on-going assessment, special education protocols, English language development, counseling, social work, post-secondary planning, internships, career and technical training, and childcare (New York City Department of Education, 2016a). To further assist the at-risk student population, the NYCDOE offers several other program efforts.

The Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC) is another path to high school attainment provided by the NYCDOE. The YABC are evening academic programs designed for high

school students who are behind in credits, or considering dropping out, because of adult responsibilities in the daytime (New York City Department of Education, 2016a). The YABC is open to students 17.5-21 years of age with a minimum of 17 high school credits, who are currently enrolled in their fifth years of high school. YABC students receive counseling services, internship placement, and individualized academic support, towards the attainment of a high school diploma, which requires successfully passing five New York State Regents Exams.

YABC Classes/Services are typically offered from 3:30 PM - 8:30 PM, Monday to Friday and conduct Remediation on Saturday from 9:30 AM - 1:30 PM (New York City Department of Education, 2016a).

During 2015-2016, the NYCDOE operated 23 YABC for students at-risk of educational failure. The number of centers for the YABC and their locations are: Bronx has eight, Brooklyn has nine, Manhattan has two, Queens has three, and Staten Island has one. These facilities are supervised and administered by on-site assistant principals, who report to the lead building principal. The YABC enrollment average per site approximately 150 students ((New York City Department of Education, 2016a).

Another effort to address the at-risk high school student in the NYCDOE is called “Transfer Schools”. Transfer schools are small academically rigorous, full time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out, or who have fallen behind in credits (retrieved from <http://www.schools.nyc.gov>). The guiding principle for these Transfer Schools is that they employ the “tenants” of small school reform which is to provide a school structure that motivates and reengages students to achieve, coupled with generous support services (retrieved from <http://www.schools.nyc.gov>). The student population of a transfer school is between the ages of 15-21, and students must have completed a year of high school. These

students receive college preparation and counseling services, along with paid internships for those students in the Learn To Work Program. The Learn to Work Program gives students the soft skills of timeliness, politeness, cooperativeness, and eagerness, which are required to blend seamlessly into the work environment.

Transfer students attend school Monday to Friday during regular school hours, and can access Regents preparation as well as tutoring. The average student enrollment for a Transfer School is between 175-190 students, and the school is supervised by an on-site principal.

There are 50 Transfer Schools, which are located as follows: Manhattan has 17, the Bronx has 10, Brooklyn has 17, Queens has 5, and Staten Island has 1. ((New York City Department of Education, 2016a).

The array of services offered to at-risk students is identified in Table 1.

Table 1.

NYC DOE SERVICES FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

PROGRAMS	SERVICES	ELIGIBILITY	SCHEDULE
District 79 City Wide 170 Plus sites of which 50% are in non-DOE buildings	High School Equivalency Preparation, Career Technical Education Courses, Internships, Infant-Care, Middle and High School Diploma Attainment for students who are court involved, substance abusers, special needs, immigrants.	17.5-21 years of age	Monday - Friday Morning, Afternoon and PM sessions (No Fridays)
Transfer Schools 50 City-Wide	Small high school environment, prepares for high school diploma, jobs, and college readiness, internships and counseling.	15-21 years of age completed one year of high school	Monday - Friday 8:00 AM - 3:00 PM
YABC 23 Schools City-Wide	Evening High School Diploma Preparation, Employment and College Preparation	17.5 - 21 Years of Age. Minimum of 17 High School Credits	Monday - Friday 3:00 PM - 8:00 PM

and in Fifth year
of High School

Source: (New York City Department of Education, 2016a)

These different efforts are offered as alternate paths to complete high school credentialing, while inhibiting episodes of truancy and dropping out.

If students are not experiencing success in either a Transfer School or YABC then the student has the option to enroll into District 79 alternative schools and programs to continue pursuit of a high school completion credential (New York City Department of Education, 2016a).

According to NYCDOE regulations compulsory education is not afforded to persons above the age of 23. To address this situation, students are referred to an Adult Education Program. These programs are designed for persons 24 years of age and older (New York City Department of Education, 2016b). The Adult Education Programs are offered for free, during the day, evening, and Saturday. The courses can include: English as a Second Language, Computer Skills, Health and Career Technical Education, High School Equivalency, and Higher Education Preparation. The NYCDOE has an Adult and Continuing Education Department; however, the majority of these courses are offered at community sites by social service programs, including the NYC Public Library (New York City Department of Education, 2016b).

SUMMARY:

Chapter 2 was a review of the literature pertaining to alternative education. Alternative education provides services to students who are at-risk of educational failure. This condition is the result of not having sufficient credits to graduate in a timely manner with the student's ninth grade cohort.

The literature indicates that the alternative education process is at least 50 years old. The elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was an attempt to reduce the educational disparity demonstrated by low-income students. During the same time Free Schools and Freedom Schools surfaced to provide an alternative education progress.

There is no uniform description or definition of Alternative Education. Enrollment into Alternative Education can be triggered by disruptive behavior, absenteeism, truancy, drug and alcohol use incarceration, weapon possession, and academic failure. These attributes most likely lead to students to be over-age, and under-credited, which impacts their rate of graduation.

Students with disabilities, both as English language learners, and with special needs, are placed in Alternative Education programs. Blacks and Latinos have the highest rate of dropping out.

Raywid (1997), and Quinn & Poirer (2006) advocated for the small school model as a method to reduce alternative education students from dropping out. Porowski, et al identified poverty, poor academic skills, criminal justice involvement, living in single parent home, and, school mobility are predictors of alternative education placement.

Successful Alternative Education programs are characterized by school environment, student and staff competency, and community support. The costs to society of failing to attain a high school credential are, individual income lost, and reciprocal increased costs of public services to society.

The NYCDOE has three pathways for Alternative Education students to remain educationally engaged and attain a high school credential. After the age of 23, students can continue to pursue their high school credential through the NYCDOE Adult education programs.

Finally, the rationalization for this study, lies in the fact that to date, there is no research

at this point to examine the perceptions of the NYC alternative education leadership regarding the efficacy of services to increase the graduation rate of students at-risk of educational failure.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction:

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of school administrators and support staff, regarding the effectiveness of the strategies used to impact in a positive way the graduation rate of Alternative High School students, who were enrolled in a large urban school district from 2012-2015. The research sought to identify the perceptions of success or failure associated with the strategic services used to affect the graduation rate of alternative high school education students. High school students in alternative education programs have been classified as students “at-risk of educational failure”.

Research Questions:

The questions guiding this research study are as follows:

- 1) What are the characteristics for enrollment into Alternative High School Education Programs?
- 2) What strategic services have been implemented to address the needs of Alternative High School Education students, while promoting graduation?
- 3) To what degree are system leaders supporting Alternative High School Education Programs and Services?
- 4) How effective are the programs and services to address the needs of Alternative High School Education students from the perspective of the system leaders?

Population and Sample:

The population includes superintendents, deputy superintendents, principals, assistant

principals, counselors, social workers assigned to the alternative high schools, and programs of a large urban school district from 2012-2015. These are experienced staff who are representative of the NYCDOE leadership for Alternative Education schools and programs. The researcher used a purposeful sampling method to engage participants who have direct knowledge of working with alternative education students who are at risk of failure. It was designed to acquire a broad perspective of the effectiveness of the strategies implemented to service alternative high school education students.

The rationale for selecting these participants is that they are the persons who design and employ the alternative high school education programs, which enroll, instruct, support, assess, evaluate, discharge and graduate students at-risk of education failure.

Research Design:

This research used a qualitative grounded theory approach to explore Alternative Education services to at risk students..

Alemu (2016) asserted “grounded theory is applied when the intent is to generate general explanation (theory) by interviewing a single group of individuals, all of whom had experienced an action, a process, or interaction”(p. 39).

McMillan (1996) stated that:

Qualitative studies should have informative and knowledgeable subjects. Since the purposes of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon in depth, it is important to select subjects that will provide the richer information. The researcher should indicate the criteria used to select subjects, the reasons why these particular individuals were selected, and the strategies used for selecting subjects during the study (p.99).

The researcher wanted to examine the perceptions of the Alternative Education leadership and support personnel with respect to the number, classification, and rate of graduation for Alternative Education high school students enrolled in a large urban school district. In support of this method, Creswell (2014) stated,

“Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (p. 4).

The data drawn from this phenomenological approach will be codified, and interpreted to produce the study’s findings, and generate the corresponding conclusions and recommendations.

Instrumentation:

As part of this qualitative study, the researcher developed the interview questions designed to elicit emergent themes from the participants.

The questions were developed to generate responses which would evidence the participants’ perceptions. The questions dealt with the issues surrounding the efficacy of services, and their effect on the graduation rate of alternative education students enrolled in NYCDOE from 2012-2015.

Vogt, Garner, and Haeffele (2012) confirmed that “interviews are more aimed at understanding. Interviewers usually select interviewees through purposive or judgment sampling targeting individuals with specific knowledge, experience, or characteristics. This means that the interviewee in a study often have much in common” (p. 33).

The interview questions were developed to examine the following research areas: Alternative Education predictors, strategic services to address student needs, support from system leaders, and the effectiveness of services on improving the rate of graduation of at-risk students. As the researcher developed the interview questions, it was important to maintain the alignment to the research questions, which are the fundamental guideposts of this research study. Alemu (2016) stated, “research questions/hypotheses provide specific focus about what is to be inquired. They provide the road map to base the entire research work on...” (p. 9). Questions were also derived from the National Center of Educational Statistics, 2007-2008 report *Alternative Schools and Programs for Public School Students At-risk of Educational Failure* (Carver & Lewis, 2010). (See Appendix D Interview Questions)

Prior to use, as a measure to increase the validity of the interview questions, there were three practice sessions with three assistant principals, who are knowledgeable of District 79 services. These persons served as the panel of experts. The panel of experts reviewed the questions for clarity and comprehensiveness.

Data Collection:

The recruitment process began after receiving IRB approval from both the NYCDOE and Sage College. The researcher met with the Superintendent of District 79, explained the purpose of the study, and asked for permission to collect data from the system leaders and support personnel in District 79. Having gained permission, the researcher spoke to approximately 30 potential participants at a professional development event. From this group, nine persons volunteered to participate. Subsequently, six more individuals were contacted by telephone or e-mail and were asked to participate, to which they voluntarily agreed.

The collection of data for this study was in accord with the Creswell (2015) process. To initiate the data collection process, the researcher obtained IRB approval from the NYCDOE, and The Sage Colleges to conduct the research. The sample group for the study was identified. In order to gain access to the group, the researcher met with, and gained permission from the District Superintendent.

Three fifths of the participants voluntarily agreed to participate, as the result of recruitment efforts at a professional development session. The remaining two-fifths of the group were voluntarily recruited from YABC and Transfer school staff as the result of contact by telephone or e-mail.

Prior to the interview each perspective participant was given an introductory letter to read which explained the problem of practice, the reason for their selection, the confidentiality safeguards, and encouraged the opportunity to question the nature or study scope, as well as the usefulness of the research. An agreed upon appointment to be interviewed was individually established for each participant. During the audio-taped interviews all participants gave responses which were not influenced or prompted by the researcher.

All participants were asked the same questions, during the expected 45-50 minute interview session. To insure clarity, subjects were offered to review their transcribed responses. All data collected was anonymous, and the use of pseudonyms was employed. The emergent themes of the data was categorized, color coded, and interpreted.

Merriam (2009) stated, "At the outset of the qualitative study, the investigator knows what the problem is and has selected a purposeful sample to collect data in order to address the problem" (P. 171). To advance the data collection process, the researcher employed Creswell's (2015), five steps to qualitative data collection, which are stated as, "Identify your participants,

and sites, gain access, determine the types of data to collect, develop collection forms, administer the process in an ethical manner” (p. 203). These steps were the road map used in the study’s data collection process.

The participants in this study are system and school leaders, along with support staff. They were selected because of their importance in determining the structure, direction, services rendered, and outcomes of the alternative education schools and programs. YABC and Transfer school participants were contacted individually, by phone, or, e-mail. For those persons in agreement, a scheduled time outside of their work schedule was arranged in order to conduct the interview.

All participants signed the Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix B) which outlined that their participation in the study was voluntary. In order to protect their confidentiality, the researcher provided each participant with a pseudonym.. Participants only answered questions that they felt comfortable with, and the researcher did not prompt, coax, or influence any responses, nor were responders discouraged, or, encouraged to reduce or amplify the quality or the quantity of their responses.

The type of data to be collected were responses to questions regarding their perceptions of at-risk students, rates of attendance, retention, dropout, graduation, admission criteria, system leadership, student needs, and services.

Data Analysis:

Subsequent to transcription of the data, the essential points of each responder’s answers were put on a chart, which contained all of the interview questions. This was the initial process of categorizing and coding of emergent themes.

In order to interpret the emergent themes from the raw data of the sample group, consolidation and reduction of the data was required. Merriam (2009), explained, “A qualitative design is emergent” (p. 169). The categories allowed for comparison of the frequency of similar responses to affect the analysis, through coding. The responses were colored coded for their frequency of agreement or disagreement. Red for “high”, Blue for “moderate”, Green for “low”, or infrequent. Merriam (2009), clarified:

Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data. The designations can be single words, letters, numbers, phrases, colors, or combinations of these” (p. 173).

The response categories for data compilation were designated as: rates, conditions, referral criteria, services, leadership, and needs. The final interpretation of the data was a result of similar emerging themes which provided answers to the study’s research questions and led to the research findings. The goal of this process was to analyze the sample group’s data to clarify their perceptions of the efficacy of services to at-risk students in the NYCDOE from 2012-2015. In her explanation of the goal of data analysis, Merriam (2009) stated, “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said...it is the process of making meaning” (p. 175-176).

Researcher Bias:

The researcher has been a practitioner in the field of Alternative High School education schools and programs since 1995. During the interview process the researcher did not coax, hint, gesture, commend, defend, or say any remarks which were in approval or disapproval of

any responses given by the interviewees. Before the interview process, to further limit bias, the use of an expert panel was employed to review and clarify questions. In addition, member checking was employed as a method for participants to review their responses. The data extracted from this process informed the findings for this research.

The interview protocol was the same for all participants. Each interviewee read an introductory letter which explained the interview purpose, process, their role, and personal confidentiality protection. The participants signed a consent form, and were given a copy. Each participant read an interview script prior to the audio-taped interview. Subsequently, at the close of the interview session, each participant received a thank you for their participation.

Reliability:

Reliability is referred to as when a researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). Each member was audio-taped, and asked the same 16 questions. All participation was voluntary and untimed. The researcher did not prompt, coax, encourage, or discourage participant responses. All interviews were conducted at the time and place most convenient to the participant.

The research questions yielded similar participant responses, which demonstrate the consistency of the research design to reliably facilitate the study's findings. Although all participants in the study were consistently exposed to the same protocols, reliability through replication is in question, because of the human element. Merriam (2009) wrote,

replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results, but this does not discredit the results of any particular study, there can be numerous interpretations of the same

data. The most important question of qualitative research is whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 221).

Validity:

Validity is when a researcher uses certain procedures to check for accuracy of research findings (Creswell, 2014, p. 201).

The research questions were answered by the relevant interview questions which were used to elicit targeted responses. The use of panel experts served to increase the value of the questions.

The worthiness of the findings in this study is validated by the uncensored responses of the experienced participants. Also, the interview protocols were designed to elicit authentic responses to the research questions in order to arrive at credible conclusions to address the assumptions of the research. All results are realized due to the emerging themes of the study which were categorized, evaluated, and codified by the researcher. Hence the findings were the summation of responses, which predicated my conclusions and induced the study’s recommendations. To ensure credibility all participants were asked to check their transcribed responses for accuracy. This is called member checking. Merriam (2009), contended:

A second common strategy for ensuring the internal validity or credibility is member checks. Also called respondent validation, the idea here is that you solicit feedback on your emerging findings from some of the people that you interviewed. This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases (p. 217).

Summary:

The research process for this effort was conducted as a qualitative phenomenological study. The purpose is to examine the perceptions of Alternative Education administrators, and support staff regarding the effectiveness of services impacting the graduation rate of at-risk students. The procedures included the development of interview questions and protocol. The sample participants were identified from the same school district and voluntarily responded to the same questions, without prompting or a time limit. The researcher interviewed, categorized, evaluated, and codified the responses of 15 participants. The emerging themes are the foundation for the subsequent findings, conclusions, and recommendations in Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the perceptions of school administrators and support staff regarding the effectiveness of the strategies employed to impact the graduation rate of Alternative High School Education students in a large urban school district.

Chapter 4 represents the research findings which are a result of the emergent data from the interview process. The titles of the participants are described, along with their years of experience in Alternative Education, and the date of their interview. The findings will be identified, along with the corresponding research and interview questions, as well as the responses of the participants. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

The NYCDOE is comprised of thirty two community school districts and four city-wide school districts, District 88 (Suspension), District 84 (Charter), District 75 (Special Education, and District 79 (Alternative Education Schools and Programs). Also, there are 94 Renewal schools, which represent the turnaround schools. It is estimated that 1.1 million students attend NYCDOE schools. Of that number, due to rolling registers approximately 22,000-28,000 students are provided with alternative high school education program and services. Rolling registers are realized when students disengage (truant or drop-out), and return to school in the same school year (New York City Department of Education, 2016b).

These services are offered to the at-risk student population through the Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC), Transfer High Schools, and District 79 Schools and Programs (New York City Department of Education, 2016b).

Participants

The participants of this study included principals (2), assistant principal (9), counselor (1), social worker (1), and system leaders (2).

The years of experience and date of the interview are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2.

Participant Positions, Years of Experience, and Date of Interviews

Participants	Years of Experience	Date of Interview
Principal-AG	6	7/12/16
Principal-CP	9	6/27/16
Assistant Principal-IG	1	6/28/16
Assistant Principal-CS	3	6/02/16
Assistant Principal-TB	16	6/06/16
Assistant Principal-LE	9	7/12/16
Assistant Principal-LC	6	7/20/16
Assistant Principal-JR	1	6/27/16
Assistant Principal-JD	19	6/7/16
Assistant Principa l-JB	21	6/22/16
Assistant Principal-CM	10	7/11/16
Counselor-LS	6	6/1/16
Social Worker-RV	4.5	6/27/16
System Leader-SG	28	7/19/16
System Leader-RR	23	10/20/16

Research Question 1. What are the criteria for enrollment in Alternative High School Education Programs?

The interview questions used to elicit participant responses were:

- What are the primary reasons for student enrollment in the Alternative Education Program at your school or district from 2012 - 2015?
- What are the two primary reasons for student separation at your school or district between 2012 - 2015?

Findings:

According to the data received from the participants, the primary reasons for enrollment into an Alternative Education school or program are that students are over-age and under-credited. Students face homelessness, incur multiple suspensions, or engage in alcohol, or substance abuse. Alternative Education students primarily separate from the educational process, due to the need for employment, and a need for social-emotional support, which include immigrant students.

Student Enrollment:

Typically students are transferred from traditional high schools, or are enrolled as new students to the system (immigrants) into the alternative education program. Together, with the over-age and under-credited status, the students also have other social issues.

Fitzsimmons-Lovett (2001), reported, “since the inception of the alternative schools, enrollees have been disproportionately students from low income groups, students with disabilities, and students from diverse ethnic and cultural groups” (p. 42).

Participants in this study reported social issues of immigration ,English language barrier, homelessness, parenting responsibilities, and ,low income (poverty).

The responses from 11 participants revealed that more than fifty percent of students have court related issues, which require time away from school in order to satisfy legal and court appointments. Eleven of fifteen respondents estimated an average student homelessness rate of 15% for the alternative education students enrolled in their schools or programs.

Principal A.G. expressed that, “sixty percent enroll because they’re immigrant populations and they’re coming to the country in their schools or programs overage already, and another 33% come in based on prior disengagement from another public school.”

System Leader R.R. stated that, “Unfortunately there seems to be an increase in the number of students who are enrolling with a classification of homelessness, and or become homeless while attending class.”

Respondent L.E. indicated that, “Three students out of 15 received services from Covenant House. In fact, we were instrumental in securing beds at this site.”

Covenant House is an agency that is administered by the New York Roman Catholic Archdiocese, and provides emergency shelter to homeless individuals and families within the five boroughs of New York City.

Social Worker R.V., with 4.5 years of experience in alternative education indicated that, “We had students become homeless, while they were here.” Assistant Principal J.D., acknowledged, “that students come with a history of suspensions,” Assistant Principal L.E., with 9 years of experience in alternative education, expressed that, “we would call them disengaged students, who were at multiple community high schools, experiencing multiple suspensions.”

System Leader S.G., revealed that, “one particular alternative program, educates 350 outpatient drug and alcohol students daily.” The program referenced by the System Leader is called “Restart”. Services are provided for inpatient and outpatient students with substance or abuse issues. The classes are located in hospitals, or treatment centers.

Alternative education students experience separation from school for a myriad of circumstances. This study found that alternative education students separate from school primarily due to the need for employment, and unmet social-emotional needs.

As an example two respondents stated the following:

Assistant Principal I.G. stated, “I would say they do not get the service or support they need” and Assistant Principal T.B. added, “I would say external issues like having children or having to work in the evening.”

Special Education and English Language Learner Students:

The interview questions used to elicit sample members responses were:

- From 2012 - 2015 did the Special Education students receive their mandated services?
- From 2012 - 2015 did the English Language Learner students receive their mandated services?

Findings:

Alternative education programs service Special Education (SPED) and English Language Learner (ELL) students.

Seventy-five percent of the participants agreed that the Special Education and English language learner students received their mandated services. The remainder of the participants did not comment. School Counselor L.S. stated that, “Yes from their home school”; Social Worker R.V. said that, “I know everybody did. When we started everybody with the mandated counseling piece were either in groups or seeing me individually.” Special Education

and English Language Learner students are transferred from regular high school, and they enter Alternative Education programs with a prescribed action plan to meet their needs.

Research Question 2. What strategic services are implemented to address the needs of Alternative High School Education Students, while promoting graduation?

The interview questions used to elicit sample member responses were:

From your perspective, what are the strategic services which promote the graduation rate of the alternative education students from 2012-2015 at your school or district?

From your perspective, what strategic services do not promote the graduation rate of the Alternative Education students from 2012-2015 at your school or district?

Findings:

Based on the data in this study, the services implemented to address the needs of alternative education students, while promoting graduation are, internships, individualized instruction, small class size, counseling, and early intervention.

Internships provide an opportunity to earn a salary and gain world of work skills. System Leader R.R. indicated, “the need for small class size and internships in Alternative Education.” Individualized instruction allows the student to comprehend and learn at his own pace.

System Leader R.R. also indicated that, “the graduation rate for our students is directly affected by attendance. The service which promotes or encourages attendance is student internships. The other is counseling and guidance where we can serve as a bridge to assist students with their social emotional issues.”

Assistant Principal, L.E. stated, “that individualized instruction is an important component to help the student.” Counseling gives the student an adult he or she can rely on for

guidance, direction, and information. To address the social-emotional needs, assistant principal C.M. advocated for the importance of social work and guidance counseling support services.

Assistant Principal I.G., also expressed the need for support services, and exclaimed, "...we had the college and career coaches, and they work with the students in terms of what are their options. Are they going to go on the college track, or the career track?"

Early intervention is the act of providing support (as needed) upon entering the program, with a flexible schedule, clear path of activities and assignments to achieve a high school credential. Assistant Principal J.B. responded, "that early intervention is critical to sustain the student in achieving the goal of completion."

As members of the NYCDOE, Alternative Education family, the YABC and the Transfer schools incorporate similar activities. Both approaches offer employment training, counseling, career and college preparation services, along with individualized instruction.

Assistant Principal C.S. (Transfer School) stated that:

We rely a lot on youth development supports. We have a community-based organization called Good Shepherds. One of their responsibilities is to connect every student with an adult as an advocate-counselor. They meet and do activities with them. They advocate on their behalf, as well as we have a fulltime guidance counselor. The role of the guidance counselor is to support the academic, social, emotional needs and work very closely with Good Shepherds to do college and career readiness stuff. We have four community service projects that we do every year where we have PS-5, which is an elementary school. We have 50 second graders come and our students provide a service to those students.

We have Family Day coming up this Saturday. We engage our families. From 3:00

to 7:00, for example, we have food and we've spent an inordinate amount of money getting novelties, inflatables because what we see with the families is they do matter.

We will honor students on Saturday for academic achievement. We will highlight eight students who took advanced placement in U.S. history. They took the exam and we expect some great scores. We also have advanced placement in English, but I say all of that to say that every kid is different. Having the advocate-counselor who builds that rapport with the kid helps the rest of the school to be able to support the child

Assistant Principal T.B. (YABC), advocated for the use of the small class model, tutoring, and Saturday instruction to facilitate student growth and success.

As Principal, A.G. declared, "Institute individualized placement programming versus cohort scheduling or block scheduling." Student individualized placement programming refers to prescribing an instructional program which best addresses the academic and social-emotional needs of the student. A regular student academic program with its block or cohort of core courses, does not serve the individual academic needs of an alternative education student, who may need a double period of skill building. Principal C.P. stated, the following as a graduation hindrance,

I mean, I guess I would say the community-based organization that we were working with had some different objectives for the students than we did, so that always created systematic roadblocks where the alignment of goals weren't exactly the same for a school compared to another organization. So that would be definitely a big factor.

Assistant Principals, J.D., and I.G., agreed in summary that "lack of resources, whole class instruction, harsh disciplinary practices, and generic student programming are examples of services which do not promote the graduation rate."

Which Programs and Services Address Student Needs?

Findings:

Based on the data in this study, alternative education programs need to be realigned to address a variety of student needs. Assistant Principal T.B. stated that activities such as, “regents preparation, independent study, and accelerated credit acquisition meet student needs, because students gain test taking confidence, improve comprehension skills, and remain engaged in the educational process.” Assistant Principal L.E. advocated for the “implementation of the schools without walls curriculum”, which is a method of learning which permits the students to produce portfolios of completed assignments that are connected to a theme which demonstrate student competence. This is an effort to impact the motivation and self-esteem of the learner, because he/she is self-producing a product. System Leader S.G. stated that in order to address student needs we must, “improve coordination between school and community partners.” This is in recognition of the need to align in-school activities with community resources which facilitate the needed student support services, such as employment, medical and dental care.

Research Question 3. To what degree are system leaders supporting Alternative

High School Education Programs and Services?

The interview questions used to elicit participant responses were:

- As system leaders, to what extent are the superintendent, deputy superintendent, principal, and assistant principal support of the alternative education services at your school or district?
- As system leaders, what could be done differently to increase graduation rates among

at-risk alternative high school education students?

Findings:

The system leadership is supportive of the Alternative Education services. Leadership allows for innovation, and strategic planning and is focused on student services. Leadership should expand after school services, and apply a different standard of accountability to Transfer schools. There is a need to increase the number of field supervisors, as well as increase early intervention efforts.

The interview data revealed that a majority of the participants were satisfied with the level of support received from the system leadership.

With regards to systems leadership, School Counselor L.S. indicated, “that there was support to a great extent from system leaders.” Principal, C.P. stated, “system leaders provided tremendous support and allowed staff to think and act strategically.” Assistant Principal J.D. indicated that, “the system leaders were highly supportive and innovative.” Sample member J.R. declared that, “the system leaders absolutely encouraged service to students as a priority.” Assistant Principal C.S. reported that, “the systems leaders work primarily with the Principals and apply a no-hands approach to site operations. Assistant Principal C.M. indicated that, “the system leaders demonstrated moderate support.”

Assistant Principal, L.C. with six years of experience in alternative education indicated, “the leadership is supportive even when the agency controls the facility.” What this remark signifies that many agencies which house alternative programs, and as a partner, control the physical plant operation.

What Can System Leaders Do Differently to Increase the Graduation Rate?

Eleven of the thirteen on-site supervisors, who are responsible for the day to day staff,

students, and services, along with the support personnel had a variety of opinions and suggestions to offer, with respect to site supervision, school evaluative processes, site infrastructure, and the use of web-based instruction.

Assistant Principal L.E. replied that the district needed to, “increase the frequency of supervisors per site, currently a field supervisor has a minimum of 5-6 sites, which reduces the frequency of the supervision.” School Counselor L.S. indicated that the system leaders should, “arrange for after school programs and tutoring.” Assistant Principal C.S. argued the necessity to, “destigmatize Transfer schools, and the accountability for Transfer schools should be different than regular high school.

Assistant Principal T.B. stated that, “there needs to be a broadening of the graduation appeals criteria.” The current high school appeals process for graduation does not take into consideration the unique circumstances of the at-risk student population” (homelessness, pregnancy, disabilities, and mobility). Social Worker R.V. argued, “for an awareness of the issues and differences at each site.” Sites which house at-risk students can vary in resources, ease of travel access, instructional , counseling and administrative support, facility infrastructure and student demographics.

Assistant Principal C.M. indicated that system leaders must “have candid conversations with staff, who are in the trenches.” The level and quality of system leadership collaboration can vary between supervisors. Assistant Principal L.C. advocated, “for the use of remote instructional student access.” Students tend to rely on their electronic devices for information. The suggestion is to use it to support and supplement learning, by transmitting assignment to their devices.

Assistant Principal J.B. wanted system leaders to, “permit site administrators to make decisions.”

System Leader S.G. pointed out that, “there needs to be earlier intervention to prevent alternative education enrollment decrease; at the point of referral, and before class admission, it is suggested to have a thorough student orientation, where student issues, needs, and goals are identified along with program expectations and services.”

Assistant Principal J.R. noted that system leaders,

Find a way to get them [students] to increase their attendance. I think one of the things that I’ve noticed is that, since we’re an alternative school, they’re not graduating, per se. So students feel that, “Oh, well, if I don’t show up it’s no big deal, because it’s not like I’m not going to graduate,” you know what I mean? But they’re completing a program which is just as important to us, because it shows that they’ve acquired the necessary skills in that particular occupational field of study. So I think we need to find a way to get them to attend more and get more buy-in, you know what I mean? And then sometimes, like we have the shared instruction students who have a two-hour gap between classes, and they’ll leave the building and won’t come back. So we have to find a better way of enticing them to stay. One of the things we’ve talked about was getting food for them. Since we don’t have a cafeteria, a lot of students leave to go get food and don’t come back. Maybe we can provide a better selection for them, then maybe it’ll entice them to stay.

Research Question 4. How effective are the programs and services to address needs of Alternative High School Education Students?

The interview questions used to elicit sample members responses were:

- To what extent are programs and services in your school or district effectively addressing the needs of the Alternative Education students in your school or district?
- What programs or strategic services could you promote, that would more effectively help to increase the graduation rate of at-risk students in Alternative Education high schools?

Findings

Nearly fifty percent (7 out of 15) of the participants believed that promoting mentoring and parent/family engagement as services would more effectively help to increase the graduation rate of Alternative Education students.

The following responses from participants are indicative of the need to improve services to address student needs. School Counselor L.S. stated, “that students receive better service at the Hub, than at the satellites.” Alternative education conducts enrollment services at centers called “Hubs”. There is one Hub located in each of the five New York City boroughs.

Typically, the Hub contains support staff, instructional teams, and technology specialists, which are rotated to the field sites on an as needs basis. (Retrieved from <https://www.schools.nyc.gov>)

Assistant Principal C.S. indicated that, “improvement in services is a work in progress.” There is a recognition and continuing effort to enhance student services.

Principal A.G. pointed out that there is “a need for student social-emotional supports.” The student conditions of academic deficits, school disengagement, and low self-esteem warrant support, in order to achieve student success.

Assistant Principal C.M. indicated that, “student’s needs are not being met.” These statements refer to a lack of early intervention, and the use of comprehensive resources, flexible student programming, remediation/tutoring, mentoring and parent engagement activities at the field site.

Assistant Principal L.C. stated that, “we are doing about 60% of what we can do.” System Leader R.R. expressed that,

We need to increase the internship activities. I think we need to better engage families in their child’s development. We need to look into extra-curricular activities, offer tutoring, increase the use of technology with instruction, with all that said, I think we need to do more.

The following data represents participant’s responses regarding the promotion of more effective services to increase the graduation rate of alternative education students.

Assistant Principal, J.B. indicated that, “one of the things that I find effective is mentoring. Many of these youngsters have no role model to guide them.” Unfortunately, at-risk students have the tendency to come from homes or environments, where adult supervision is limited, or infrequent. These students require a reliable individual to facilitate their navigation toward high school credentialing and career and college readiness.”

Principal C.P. offered that:

The social component is huge. I think letting kids know that they’re not by themselves. I found that a lot of my work, but in conjunction with the

teams that I was supervising and working with, the difference for me was when kids felt that they weren't by themselves and just being - there was no belief that they could be successful. So I think a perception that students had - and still have who are at risk - is that I'm not smart enough, I can't do it, I can't go to college, I can't do a lot of things that may be some of their own role models didn't do.

School Counselor L.S. espoused: "that we need to incorporate a mentorship program with students, where we can link them with maybe potential partners from industry."

Parent/family engagement was also identified as an effective service to facilitate the graduation rate of at-risk students. The acceptance of the parent or family members into the educational process of the alternative education student is of tremendous benefit.

In addition, Assistant Principal J.B. called for the, "need to include parents, we don't have a parent association to engage parents and guardians, there is no real connection with parents."

The need for parental engagement was expressed further by Social Worker R.V., who declared that, "once a month there should be an open house for family members to come in. There should be some level of knowledge for whoever the caretaker is, or person housing these kids."

In addition, Assistant Principal J.R. outlined that,

We're looking at a few things. Number one is a lot of these kids have financial issues, and we're working - although we had a lot of students get paid internships, it's still not enough. And I think that helping them to get a job, an internship in their field will also help better prepare them, but at the same time, will help

them with those financial issues. Because some of our kids don't have money, they don't have Metrocards, they're in a bad place. I think that one of the systems that we've been really working on is developing more business relationships with - relationships with our industry, partners and local businesses to help these students out, but at the same time, prepare them for a career in their particular fields.

The previous statement, by Principal J.R., is an example of an effort to simulate the parent and family role and attempt to provide for basic human needs of survival.

Summary of Findings

The following are the summary data findings of this qualitative study of the perceptions of the NYCDOE administrators and support staff regarding the effectiveness of services to increase the rate of graduation for at-risk alternative education students

The data in this study showed that leaders and staff in alternative education programs perceived that students are characterized with homelessness, high rates of school suspension, and are prone to alcohol and substance abuse, which lead to the phenomenon of dropping out. Alternative Education students separate from the educational process due to the need for employment and counseling supports. In addition, the Alternative Education students with special needs or English language deficiencies are required to receive their mandated services.

To address the needs of Alternative Education students, strategic services are employed such as, small school model, individualized instruction, internships, early intervention, and counseling. System leaders are critical in the development, direction and management of the services and programs for Alternative Education students. The degree of perceived support from

system leaders was in the majority. The research also revealed that leadership should address the areas of field supervision, school evaluation, and the expansion of services.

The data revealed that participants were split in their perceptions regarding their satisfaction with the services to address the needs of alternative education students. The services of mentoring and parent/family engagement were identified as methods to promote graduation rates. Finally, the participants believed that internships, tutoring and social-emotional supports were essential elements to improve alternative education programs.

Chapter five provides a summary of the findings, along with conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of school leaders, and support personnel with respect to the effectiveness of the strategies used to impact the rate of graduation for alternative high school education students. The participants of the study were: system leaders, principals, assistant principals, social workers, and counselors who deliver alternative education services to at-risk students in the City School District of New York. The method employed to elicit data from the participants were audio-taped interviews. The programs which conduct the Alternative Education efforts are the, Young Adult Borough Centers (YABC), Transfer Schools, and District #79.

This chapter has three subsections including, the summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The summary of findings section will describe the study's findings based on the data obtained from the participants, as a result of answering the interview questions. The conclusions are based on the research findings, and the relationship to other research on the topic. The recommendations section will suggest procedures which encourage the use of practices which can affect policy and future studies.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the predictors for enrollment into Alternative High School education programs?

Seventy-five percent of the participants indicated that the predictors for enrollment into Alternative Education are a separation or disengagement from the regular education system. Due

to a lack of course credits, and, or multiple suspensions, students become over-age and under-credited.

From the data, participants indicated that students evidenced homelessness, alcohol and substance abuse and are court involved. In addition, these participants indicated that alternative education students have a need for employment and counseling support. A majority (75%) of the participants indicated that Special Education and English Language Learner students received their mandated services. The special education students have a prescribed set of educational protocols, such as ratio of students to staff, extended time, and differentiated instruction, which were indicated on the student's Individual Educational Plan.

Question 2: What strategic services are implemented to address the needs of Alternative high school education students, while promoting graduation?

Sixty percent of the participants indicated that the implementation of strategic services such as small school model, early intervention, individualized instruction, internships, and counseling, promote the graduation rate of alternative education students. Together these services provide a holistic approach to encourage and motivate alternative education students to re-engage with the educational process, while giving the student an alternate learning experience.

The English Language Learner students are required to receive regular assessments in English as well as instruction.

Question 3: To what degree are system leaders supporting alternative high school education programs and services?

The participants perceived that the system leadership demonstrated support for the alternative high school education programs and services. System leaders allow the opportunities of creativity, and new ideas in the planning and execution of the alternative education services. Participants also perceived that leadership should address the area of service expansion to develop and implement additional activities such as tutoring, mentoring,, and life skill training Schools and programs should have differentiated evaluation, meaning the use of different measures to evaluate different alternative education schools. System leaders should address the frequency of field supervision, in order to improve the quality of supervision and service in the “field”, either reduce the number of sites per supervisor, or increase the number of field supervisors.

Question 4: How effective are the programs and services to address the needs of alternative high school education students?

Four out of fifteen participants did not perceive that the programs and services in their schools were effectively addressing the needs of the at-risk students in order to facilitate graduation rates. Seven out of fifteen participants perceived that services of mentoring and parent/family engagement are critical to more effectively facilitate the graduation rate of at-risk students.

CONCLUSIONS

Research Question 1. What are the predictors for enrollment into alternative education programs?

A conclusion based upon the findings indicates that the primary predictor for enrollment into alternative education is being over-age, and under-credited, which places the student at-risk for school failure. This data indicates that the sustainability of alternative education students requires program services and strategies which can restore student effort. Participant data identified the following as characteristics for enrollment into alternative education; a lack of sufficient credits, deficient academic skills, poor attendance, prolonged truancy, disruptive behavior, multiple suspensions, classification as English Language Learners, or students with disabilities, some enter as immigrants, disengage and dropout. According to the data collected from the participants in this study, students at-risk of educational failure characteristically enter alternative education with prevailing issues of homelessness, criminal justice involvement, substance abuse, lack of success in traditional schools, parenting responsibilities, with a predominate non-white male demographic, as well as being over age and under-credited. These pronounced factors are the burdens that both the student and alternative education system encounter, and address on the path to high school credentialing and career and college readiness.

Research Question 2. What strategic services are implemented to address the needs of alternative high school students?

A conclusion based upon the findings indicate that the implementation of strategic services such as small classes, early intervention, individualized instruction, internships, and counseling will address student needs while promoting graduation.

Based upon the data collected in this study, students are eligible for internships and receive early intervention counseling services. Support and academic services are aimed at building skills to reduce skill deficits while establishing student participation, and addressing the students' individual needs in order to avoid educational failure. Assignments and activities provide a clear path to a high school credential. Student scheduling is flexible and offered in the morning, afternoon, evening and Saturdays. The alternative education student does not have a successful history with the traditional educational structure, which characterizes these students as at-risk for educational failure.

Fitzsimmons-Lovett (2001) characterizes effective elements of successful alternative education programs which implement a positive school climate, demonstrate student and staff competency, and use community resources (p.43-44). With these characteristics and strategic services in evidence, it becomes the mandate of alternative education to institute services which support and nurture student high school attainment.

This research data evidenced that sixty percent of the participants indicated, when strategic services are implemented, such as the small school model, individualized instruction, early intervention, internships, and counseling, these services promote student graduation.

Research Question 3. To what degree are system leaders supporting alternative high school education programs?

A conclusion based upon the findings indicates that leaders in alternative education programs believe that the role of system leaders make a difference with student growth and graduation. Students must be engaged in the process in order to grow academically. Leaders encourage creativity, innovation, and professional development to enhance student growth and

impact the rate of graduation. System leadership has been critical in fostering community agency relationships in the acquisition of space, resources, materials, and student recruitment. The data revealed that further support from system leaders is warranted in promoting the use of remote student instruction and implementing after-school tutoring.

The current school review and evaluation instrument is the same for high schools, whether a regular, transfer, YABC, or District 79 high school. The participants believe that these evaluation instruments should be differentiated to address the specific needs of alternative programs. There are an insufficient number of alternative education field supervisors. Efforts of early intervention need increased implementation. A majority of the participants expressed satisfaction with the degree of supervisory system leader support

Research Question 4. How effective are the programs and services to address the needs of the alternative high school education students?

A conclusion based upon the findings indicates that the participants believed that at-risk students have a host of educational and personal barriers which can lead to social and emotional impediments, which, if not addressed, will continue to obstruct the students' progress. Mentors can serve as a resource and guide to facilitate the students' path to completion. Another conclusion based upon the beliefs of the participants was that parent/family engagement allows the parent or guardian to be a strong collaborator with the school in the preparation of the students' (their child) success to career and college preparation and high school credentialing.

The extent to which the participants perceived the effectiveness of services to increase the rate of graduation for at-risk students was in the minority (4 out of 15). A majority of

participants perceived that they could promote the services of mentoring and parent/family engagement as services to more effectively facilitate the graduation rate of at-risk students in the school or district.

McDonald (2002) noted:

Thus we find that successful alternative educational programs feature small classrooms that create a community atmosphere of courtesy and respect. They are staffed by highly trained teachers who maintain clearly defined behavioral and academic expectations and a constructivist focus on student needs, interests, and abilities, adapting their curriculum to their clientele. This constellation of features seems ideally suited to the unique challenges represented by children who are “at-risk” because of academic failure, disengagement from the school culture, and deviant behaviors. (p. 5).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Practice

The findings and conclusions of this study regarding effective strategies to impact the graduation rate of students enrolled in NYCDOE Alternative Education programs should include:

- After school activities, such as clubs (newsletter, chess, photo), mentoring - to advise with respect to personal issues, employment, future endeavors (college, military, or trade school).
- The parent/family engagement should involve adult education inclusion in educational and cultural plans, and intergenerational activities.

- Use of the small school model, which features small class size, in a caring environment.
- Develop early intervention strategies to identify potential at-risk students to mitigate the possibility of enrollment in alternative education programs..
- Incorporate career technical education courses to enable students to learn a skilled trade for employment opportunities.
- Incorporate the personal social skills (Life skill) training, which are necessary to navigate within society.
- Maintain mandated services to the special needs students and English language learners.
- Incorporate internships.to build world of work skills
- Establish flexible student schedules and offer web-based (remote) instructional programming.
- Increase the number of supervisors and services to the field sites.
- This research has revealed that although the alternative education population is sizeable, there is no specific supervisory training for the at-risk student population. In-service alternative education supervisor/administrator certificate training should be established with an emphasis on multi-site supervision, student retention strategies, and community resource development.
- Finally, services should be conducted in a caring, supportive environment, minus harsh disciplinary practices.

Recommendations for future study

Further study, in the form of longitudinal study, is warranted due to the size of the alternative education student population, as well as the economic, and societal status of successful alternative education students. This study should follow a cohort of at risk students while they are engaged in alternative education programs and to document what pathways they take either once they graduate or leave these programs. This would provide the field of education with a better understanding of the long term of effects of alternative education programming on at-risk students.

Summary

Today, the incidence of immigration and homelessness contribute to the steady population of at-risk students. Pappas (2006) expressed, “there was a 25 percent increase in the number of temporary housed youth attending schools run by the city’s public education department from school year 2010-2011 through 2013-2014, when the number totaled roughly 83,000” (p. 1).

Horne (2007) indicated, “by 2010 ... 80% of all the new jobs created will require some post-secondary education. The combination of high school drop outs and low literate immigrants will create a challenge for companies seeking human capital to meet anticipated demand” (p. 5).

Increasingly, students classified as “special needs” are enrolled into alternative education. Unruh, et al (2007), stated, “noticeably overlooked has been the growing practice of placing students with disabilities ... in alternative schools or programs” (p. 2).

Social conditions of poverty, criminal justice involvement, alcohol, substance abuse, parenting responsibilities and the requirements of the regular high school process are factors which will continue to increase the at-risk student population. These multiplicity of factors

require specific training for administrators and supervisors to develop and deliver appropriate services to the at-risk student population. The literature indicates that alternative education leaders lack appropriate training. Price (2009) stated, “there is little research, however on exactly what leaders of alternative education programs need in terms of preparation and training to be successful” (p. 2).

As a moral imperative to increase the graduation rate of at-risk students, the researcher recommends the implementation of effective services to address at-risk student needs and specific leadership training.

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Appendix A

Cover Letter

February, 2016

My name is Victor Gathers and I am a doctoral candidate in the Sage Colleges Educational Leadership Program. I am conducting research based upon a problem of practice whereby a team of doctoral students will investigate school improvement/reform in relation to system leadership. My specific area of research under the umbrella of this problem of practice will be an examination of the perceptions of school administrators and support staff regarding the effectiveness of the strategies employed to impact the graduation rate of Alternative High School Education students, at risk of educational failure, enrolled in a large urban school district.

As a result of your experience as an administrator, counselor, or social worker working with the Alternative High School structure within New York City, you offer a unique perspective regarding efficacy of these programs and their impact upon at-risk students. As such, I would like to invite you to be a participant in this research. Methods of inquiry will include interviews as well as collecting demographic information regarding your schools.

This research will be conducted confidentially. Pseudonyms will be developed for both the participants, as well as the schools, when reporting the results. The interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at a mutually convenient time. Once the interviews have been transcribed, they will be returned to the participants for verification and accuracy. The audio tapes will be maintained until the research has been concluded and then destroyed.

Sharing your knowledge of the Alternative High School system and its efficacy for students at risk will provide a valuable contribution to the field of educational leadership that could serve as a model for school improvement and/or reform efforts. Please review the attached informed consent document. If you have any questions regarding the nature or scope of this study as well as your participation, please feel free to contact me at: victorgathers@yahoo.com.

I am looking forward to meeting and interviewing you to gain a better understanding of your perspectives in this area of school improvement and reform.

Thank you,

Victor Gathers

Appendix B

Letter of Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TO: _____

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled: “An Analysis of the graduation rate, and the strategies offered to at-risk Alternative High School Education Students in a large Urban School District.”

This research is being conducted by the Student Researcher, Victor Gathers, who is under the supervision of my doctoral chair, Jerome D. Steele, Ed.D, the Principal Researcher.

The purpose of this research is to determine the perceptions of school administrators, counselors and social workers with regard to the strategies implemented to impact student success and the rate of Alternative High School graduation. Methods of inquiry will include interviews of superintendent, principals, school counselors and social workers. Demographic data will also be collected and analyzed.

Your participation will assist in the identification of strategic services which best promote the graduation rate of at-risk Alternative High School Education students. The research will help to improve rates of attendance and graduation, while reducing student school separation and disengagement.

As a Research Participant, there is minimal risk to you. Participation is voluntary. Please, understand that you may at any time during the survey administration, revoke your consent, and withdraw from the study without any penalty. This study will be conducted confidentially. Participants will be interviewed and audio taped for accuracy of transcription. Participants may elect to not answer any questions and may terminate the interview at any time. The names of the participants will be maintained confidentially. Pseudonyms will be developed for all participants and these will be used when reporting the findings of this research. Only the researcher will have access to the identity of the participants. All interviews will be transcribed and maintained on a password protected computer. Once the transcribed interviews have been verified for accuracy by the participants, the audio tapes will be maintained on the password protected computer until the research has been concluded and then destroyed.

The interview protocol for this research study will be face to face and should be no more than 45 - 60 minutes. If for some reason the participant is uncomfortable with this format, the research is open to conducting telephone interviews as well as having the participant answer the questions in written format either by mail or email.

If you would prefer that I contact you by telephone for this interview, please indicate with your initials here _____.

Also, please provide a telephone number to contact you. _____

I give permission to the researcher to audio tape my interview for the sole purpose of transcription. Put your initials here to indicate your permission. _____

You have been given an opportunity to read and keep a copy of this agreement, and ask questions concerning the study. Any such questions have been answered to your full and complete satisfaction.

I, _____, having full capacity, do hereby volunteer to participate in this research study.

Signed: _____ Date: _____
Research Participant

This research has received the approval of the Sage Colleges Institutional Review Board, which functions to insure the protection of the rights of human participants. If you, as a participant, have any complaints about this study, please contact:

Dr. Lori V. Quigley, Dean
Esteves School of Education
The Sage Colleges
65 1st Street
Troy, New York 12180
518-244-2326
l.quigley@sage.edu

Appendix C

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

SCRIPT FOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Read to Interviewees)

Good Day! Thank you for your volunteer participation in this interview process. The purpose of these questions is to elicit the participant's perceptions, with respect to the efficacy of the strategic services which are offered and their impact in promoting the graduation rate of Alternative Education High School students at risk of educational failure.

You are selected because of your experience in the Alternative High School Education programs. Your responses will facilitate the research which will support the development and delivery of effective strategic services which promote Alternative High School Education success through an increased graduation rate for at-risk students.

Thank You.

Researcher - Victor Gathers

Appendix D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of school administrators and support staff regarding the efficacy of strategies employed to impact the graduation rate of Alternative Education High School students.

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your school or district rate of graduation from 2012-2015?
2. What is your school or district rate of attendance from 2012-2015?
3. From 2012-2015, what was the rate of truancy at your school or district?
4. From 2012-2015, what was the drop-out rate at your school or district?
5. From 2012-2015, what was the rate of suspension in your school or district?
6. From 2012-2015, what was the rate of college admission for the Alternative Education students in your school or district?
7. From 2012-2015, what were the rates of employment placement for the Alternative Education students in your school or district?
8. From 2012-2015, estimate the percentage of students who are enrolled in your school or district as a result of - court involvement _____, homelessness _____, weapons possession _____, disruptive behavior _____, drug or alcohol use _____, at-risk of educational failure _____.

Research Question 1.

What are the factors for student enrollment into Alternative High School Education Programs?

1. What are the two primary reasons for student enrollment in the Alternative Education program at your school or district from 2012-2015?
2. What are the two primary reasons for student separation at your school or district between 2012 and 2015?

Research Question 2.

What strategic services are implemented to address the needs of Alternative High School Education students, while promoting graduation?

1. From 2012-2015, did the SPED students receive their mandated services?
2. From 2012-2015, did ELL students receive their mandated services?
3. From your perspective, what are the strategic services which promote the graduation rate of the Alternative Education students from 2012-2015 at your school or district?
4. From your perspective, what strategic services do not promote the graduation rate of the Alternative Education students from 2012 through 2015 at your school or district?

Research Question 3.

To what degree are system leaders supporting Alternative High school Education Programs and services?

1. As system leaders, to what extent are the Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, Principal, and Assistant Principal supportive of the Alternative Education services at your school or district?

2. As system leaders, what could be done differently to increase graduation rates among at risk Alternative High School students?

Research Question 4.

How effective are the programs and services to address the needs of Alternative High School Education Students?

1. To what extent are programs and services in your school or district effectively addressing the needs of the Alternative Education students in your school or district?
2. What programs or strategic services could you promote that would more effectively help to increase the graduation rate of at risk students in Alternative High Schools?

Appendix E
Sage IRB Approval

April 2, 2016

Victor Gathers
Doctoral Student, The Sage Colleges

IRB PROPOSAL #344-2015-2016
Reviewer: Francesca Durand, Chair

Dear Victor:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your expedited application and has approved your project entitled "*An analysis of Graduation Rates and the Strategies Offered to At-risk Alternative High School Education Students in a Large Urban School District.*" Good luck with your research.

Please refer to your IRB Proposal number whenever corresponding with us whether by mail or in person.

When you have completed collecting your data you will need to submit to the IRB Committee a final report indicating any problems you may have encountered regarding the treatment of human subjects, if the project goes longer than one year.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Francesca Durand, PhD
Chair, IRB

FD/nan

Cc. Dr. Jerome Steele

Appendix F

NYC DOE IRB Approval



**Department of
Education**

Carmen Fariña, Chancellor

Research and Policy Support Group April 20, 2016

52 Chambers Street
Room 310
New York, NY 10007

Mr. Victor Gathers
319 Sumpter Street
Brooklyn, NY 11233

Dear Mr. Gathers:

I am happy to inform you that the New York City Department of Education Institutional Review Board (NYCDOE IRB) has approved your research proposal, "Examination of the perceptions of school administrators and support staff regarding the effectiveness of the strategies employed to impact the graduation rate of Alternative High School Education students in a large urban school district." The NYCDOE IRB has assigned your study the file number of 1310. Please make certain that all correspondence regarding this project references this number. The IRB has determined that the study poses minimal risk to participants. The approval is for a period of one year:

Approval Date: April 20, 2016
Expiration Date: April 19, 2017

Responsibilities of Principal Investigators: Please find below a list of responsibilities of Principal Investigators who have DOE IRB approval to conduct research in New York City public schools.

- Approval by this office does not guarantee access to any particular school, individual or data. You are responsible for making appropriate contacts and getting the required permissions and consents before initiating the study.
- When requesting permission to conduct research, submit a letter to the school principal summarizing your research design and methodology along with this IRB Approval letter. Each principal agreeing to participate must sign the enclosed Approval to Conduct Research in Schools/Districts form. *A completed and signed form for every school included in your research must be emailed to IRB@schools.nyc.gov.* Principals may also ask you to show them the receipt issued by the NYC Department of Education at the time of your fingerprinting.
- You are responsible for ensuring that all researchers on your team conducting research in NYC public schools are fingerprinted by the NYC Department of Education. Please note: This rule applies to all research in schools conducted with students and/or staff. See the attached fingerprinting materials. For additional information [click here](#). Fingerprinting staff will ask you for your identification and social security number and for your DOE IRB approval letter. You must be fingerprinted during the school year in which the letter is issued. Researchers who join the study team after the inception of the research must also be fingerprinted. Please provide a list of their names and social security numbers to the NYC Department of Education Research and Policy Support Group for tracking their eligibility and security clearance. The cost of fingerprinting is \$130. *A copy of the fingerprinting receipt must be emailed to IRB@schools.nyc.gov.*

- You are responsible for ensuring that the research is conducted in accordance with your research proposal as approved by the DOE IRB and for the actions of all co-investigators and research staff involved with the research.
- You are responsible for informing all participants (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents, and students) that their participation is strictly voluntary and that there are no consequences for non-participation or withdrawal at any time during the study.
- Researchers must: use the consent forms approved by the DOE IRB; provide all research subjects with copies of their signed forms; maintain signed forms in a secure place for a period of at least three years after study completion; and destroy the forms in accordance with the data disposal plan approved by the IRB.

Mandatory Reporting to the IRB: The principal investigator must report to the Research and Policy Support Group, within five business days, any serious problem, adverse effect, or outcome that occurs with frequency or degree of severity greater than that anticipated. In addition, the principal investigator must report any event or series of events that prompt the temporary or permanent suspension of a research project involving human subjects or any deviations from the approved protocol.

Amendments/Modifications: All amendments/modification of protocols involving human subjects must have prior IRB approval, except those involving the prevention of immediate harm to a subject, which must be reported within 24 hours to the NYC Department of Education IRB.

Continuation of your research: It is your responsibility to insure that an application for continuing review approval is submitted six weeks before the expiration date noted above. If you do not receive approval before the expiration date, all study activities must stop until you receive a new approval letter.

Research findings: We require a copy of the report of findings from the research. Interim reports may also be requested for multi-year studies. Your report should not include identification of the superintendency, district, any school, student, or staff member. Please send an electronic copy of the final report to: irb@schools.nyc.gov.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Mary Mattis at 212.374.3913.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Mary C. Mattis, PhD
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc: Barbara Dworkowitz