A STUDY OF PREVENTION AND RETENTION STRATEGIES FOR

SUCCESSFUL URBAN SECONDARY HIGH SCHOOL HISPANIC STUDENTS

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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May 2013

Major Subject: Educational Administration

ABSTRACT

Hispanic high school students have a dropout rate that ranges from 35 percent to 55 percent depending on what type of report you may be referencing. Add rates for all high school students. Hispanic youth endure the challenges of language barriers, single parent households, working to help their family, or fighting off gang involvement in their communities to graduate from high school.

The purpose of this case study is to address the urban Hispanic dropout problem through an examination of strategies perceived as successful by Hispanic graduates. In order to narrow the scope, the researcher focused on the strategies suggested by the National Dropout Prevention Center. The researcher posed two questions: 1.) To what extent did students perceive that these fifteen identified strategies influenced their decision to remain in school and graduate? and 2.) What other positive influences beyond the identified strategies were credited by at-risk students and staff as contributing factors to their graduation? The study examined eight former Hispanic high school students who successfully completed high school and four of their teachers. The strategies that this study group perceived as most effective are discussed and policy implications are described.

The findings stated students did not find a single path that lead to graduation, although the three highest ranked strategies were community collaboration, alternative schooling, and active learning. The conclusions one can make is that family involvement

and school partnerships are very important to the outcome of Hispanic high school

students' graduation success.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

encouragement in this last turn of the race. Your input has been invaluable and I am

beyond grateful.

To the research participants, I thank each of you for your participation and may

you, too, continue with your individual quests for success.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education, 32.5 million

Hispanics accounted for 12 percent of the total population in the United States in the

year 2000 (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). According to a U.S. Census report, the Hispanic

population grew 55 percent in the previous ten-year period, dwarfing the 12 percent

growth rate for non-Hispanics (U.S. Census, 2006). From 2000 to 2006, Hispanics

accounted for one-half of the nation's growth—a trend that is expected to continue

through 2050, with Hispanics accounting for 51 percent of the total population growth in

the United States (U.S. Census, 2006).

This national trend is also clearly noted in Texas. Former state demographers

Murdock, White, Hoque, Pecotte, You, and Balkan (2003) studied population growth in

Texas from 1980 to 1990, charting a growth rate of 45.2 percent for Hispanics as

compared to just 10.1 percent for whites. While the white growth rate then declined in

the next ten years to 7.3 percent, the Hispanic growth rate increased to 53.7 percent in

the same time period (Murdock, et al., 2003). As would be expected, the high

proportion of Hispanics in the state population is reflected in the public education

system. According to enrollment tracking data from the Texas Education Agency

(TEA), Hispanic students represented 40 percent of the total state enrollment for the

1999-2000 school year (TEA, 2000). Five years later, TEA data showed Hispanic

students comprising 45 percent of total school enrollment in Texas (TEA, 2006). The

growth of the Hispanic population will only continue into the near future, as Hispanics comprise an even greater proportion of enrollment in younger grade levels; in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade, Hispanics comprised 53.4 percent of enrollment for the 2004-2005 school year (TEA, 2005).

With such a dramatic rise in the Hispanic population across Texas, the education of these students becomes critical. As Texas continues to be a majority minority state, there are high stakes in providing a sound education to the children of this population. To continue making economic progress, Texas must ensure the needs of all students—especially students of this newly booming population—are effectively being met. A case study of Hispanic students who have successfully graduated from high school can contribute to a better understanding of which strategies are most effective in preventing students of this population from dropping out. The findings will in turn allow educators to reconsider the utilization of resources to maintain maximum student retention and create conditions better enabling students to achieve their greater academic goals.

Statement of the Problem

A recent study for the TEA found most dropout prevention programs still had difficulty in graduating students who entered their programs (TEA, 2008). This issue is particularly salient in the Hispanic population, which becomes evident when the dropout rate is measured in selected urban cities where Hispanics comprise a majority of the population, such as Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas. As noted in Table 1, Hispanic students clearly exhibited the highest rate of dropout in the 2008-2009 school year.

TABLE 1. Texas Education Agency Dropout Data, 2010

Ethnic Background	Number	Percentage
African American	8,876	22.90%
White	6,767	17.50%
Hispanic	22,493	58.10%

For the study used by the Texas Education Agency, the research uses the following formula:

$$The\ Graduation\ Rate\ Formula = \frac{Diploma\ recipients\ from\ the\ selected\ cohort}{All\ students\ belonging\ to\ the\ selected\ cohort}$$

Attrition and dropout rates often use different means of measuring the number of students who are no longer in school, which can result in widely varying data. For example, in a study through the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, Losen, Orfield, and Balzanz in 2005 found that Texas Hispanic students had a graduation rate of 64.9 percent, with Hispanic males representing the lowest national average graduation rate at just 53 percent (Losen, et.all, 2006). However, for the same time period, the TEA reported a Hispanic graduation rate of 77.4 percent—nearly fifteen percentage points higher (Losen et al., 2006). Another study conducted by Swanson (2010) reported the national average at 55.5 percent just six years later.

To avoid conflicting data, the best manner to accurately reflect graduation rates is called the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), a measure based on students' progress from each grade nine to twelve. This process is used by the federal legislation No Child

Left Behind to help measure high school graduates. It was established and developed at the Urban Institute and only counts students who earn a standard high school diploma (Swanson, 2001). Swanson (2006) used CPI in his study of Texas urban schools. The difference in statistics generated from using CPI in place of traditional methods of calculating graduation rates can be seen clearly in Table 2, which shows data for five of the largest urban districts in Texas:

TABLE 2. Hispanic Graduates in Texas Urban Schools (Swanson, 2006)

Cities	*Graduating Percentage (according to the Texas Education Agency)*				
	All Students	*All Students using CPI*	*Anglo Students using CPI*	*African-American Students using CPI*	*Hispanic Students using CPI*
Dallas	81.3	46.3	54.5	48.6	43.6
Houston	71.3	48.9	69.0	48.7	43.3
Fort Worth	76.5	48.9	59.4	45.5	45.7
San Antonio	79.2	51.9	46.3	46.5	53.0
Austin	78.8	55.1	77.3	44.7	42.8

When using the CPI method, it becomes clear just how dire the situation is in many high schools across Texas. Compared to other ethnic groups, the successful graduation of Hispanic students has become a particular challenge for many of Texas' urban schools.

This startlingly low graduation rate in Texas is even more alarming at the charter school where the students in this study attended. According to the TEA (2006), this school's graduation rate for the 2008-2009 year sat at 26.1 percent. As shown in Figure 1, by 2008 the school's dropout rate exceeded its graduation rate (TEA, 2008).

Graduation and Dropout Data for Alternative Urban High School

	1	2	3	4
Graduation %	30.0%	39.6%	39.8%	26.1%
Dropout %	23.2%	23.2%	34.9%	36.6%
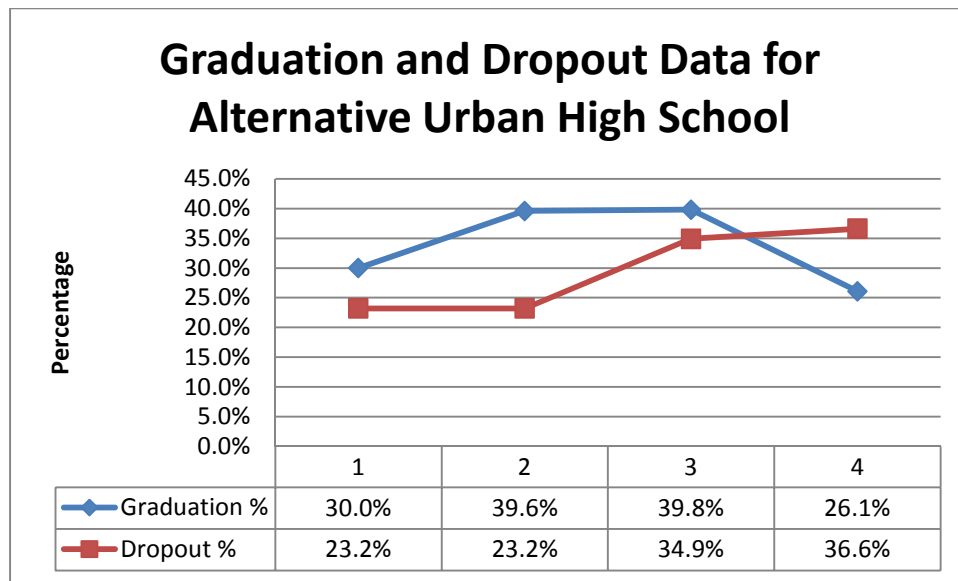
FIGURE 1. Graduation rate for students in alternative high school

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to explore former charter school student attitudes regarding the effectiveness of dropout reduction strategies. This study primarily employed a qualitative research methodology to explore former students' perceptions of the relative impact of factors considered to be influential in reducing dropout among Hispanic high school students in an alternative urban school. The findings of this study may yield a more nuanced understanding of why students drop out, especially from urban at-risk charter high schools.

This study examined the relationship between the fifteen alternative strategies defined by the National Center for Dropout Prevention (Smink & Reimer, 2005) and the students' perceptions on how these aspects impacted their graduation from an alternative high school in a large urban city in Texas. The study examined how closely the fifteen

strategies were applied in order to assist these alternative high school students in completing their high school diploma requirements. The data were collected through the process of reviewing the students' academic records and by personal interviews. Additionally, teachers and administrators who served these students were surveyed as to their perceptions on the fifteen strategies, and more specifically, how the strategies impacted the individual students in the study.

The fifteen strategies identified by the National Center for Dropout Prevention and definitions as found on their website are as follows:

1. "Systemic Renewal -- Systemic renewal refers to a continuing process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners.

2. School-Community Collaboration -- When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring and supportive environment where youth can thrive.

3. Safe Learning Environment -- A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences at all grade levels that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.

4. Family Engagement -- Research consistently shows that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school.

5. Early Childhood Education -- Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience through the primary grades.

6. Early Literacy Development -- Early interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects.

7. Mentoring/Tutoring -- Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a protégé that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academics and is effective when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies.

8. Service Learning -- Service learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.

9. Alternative Schooling -- Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.

10. After-school Opportunities -- Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs that reduce information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because these programs fill the afternoon "gap time" with constructive and engaging activities.

11. Professional Development -- Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques, and learn about innovative strategies.

12. Active Learning -- Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators demonstrate different ways to learn.

13. Educational Technology -- Technology offers some of the best opportunities for delivering instruction to engage students in authentic learning, address multiple intelligences, and adapt to student learning styles.

14. Individualized Instruction -- Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching method and motivational strategies to take individual differences into consideration.

15. Career and Technology Education -- A quality career and technology education program and a related guidance program are essential for all

students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific skills

to prepare them to measure up to the larger demands of today's workplace"

(Smink & Reimer, 2005).

To reiterate, this study examines to what extent these fifteen strategies contributed to the success of Hispanic urban charter school graduates and to determine which, if any, of these strategies were perceived by these students as important to their education.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer two research questions:

1. To what extent did students perceive that these fifteen identified factors influenced their decision to remain in school and graduate?

2. What other positive influences beyond the identified factors were mentioned by at-risk students and staff as contributing factors to their graduation?

Research Assumptions

Students are expected to perceive their high school will assist them in graduating within four years of enrollment, regardless of the school within which they are enrolled. Geographic chance should not play a role in determining their odds of graduating within the four years. Ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds should also not play a part in whether a student graduates from high school. It is assumed schools meet minimum state standards, know how to deal with high school student behavior and offer programs to help keep students in school such as cheerleading, football, band, choir, or any other extra-curricular activity. Additionally, it is assumed all teachers interact well with

students, are proficient in their subject matter, and have the necessary skills to reach students successfully.

Rationale for the Research Design

This research was designed as a descriptive case study of Hispanic at-risk high school students who successfully managed to graduate. Merriam states a descriptive study is undertaken when description and explanation are sought (1988). Yin further states the case study as a research method is an all-encompassing "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). According to Yin "a single-case study is an appropriate design under several circumstances; more specifically, a single-case study is useful when the case represents:

- A critical case in testing a well-formulated theory;

- An extreme or unique case;

- A typical case that is assumed to be informative about the experiences of the average person or institution;

- A revelatory case, in which an investigator has the opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation; or

- A longitudinal case, in which an investigator studies the same case at two or more points in time" (2003, p. 39).

This particular case study follows the third rationale, as the strategies employed are assumed to be effective in urban at-risk charter high schools. The main approach for the research was to collect descriptive data through open-ended surveys and then to

follow up with semi-structured interviews. The case study design worked well with this study because it allowed the investigator to describe and explain the factors contributing to successful high school graduation. Such qualitative case studies are prevalent throughout the field of education (Merriam, 1998).

Participants of the Study

The student participants consisted of Hispanic graduates who were former students of an urban charter school in the city of Houston. In total, Hispanics comprised about 94 percent of the school's enrollment, and all of the participants came from a predominately lower socioeconomic background, qualifying for either free or reduced cost lunch. Each of these participants selected this charter school based on need and attended the school as a last alternative to achieve a high school education. Additionally, all of the students were a minimum of one grade level behind in their reading and math capabilities.

The staff participants consisted of teachers and administrators who were employed at the same urban charter school during the same period the students were in attendance. All were experienced teachers, who were well versed in effective strategies and methods in working at-risk high school students.

Significance of the Study

The dropout problem among Hispanic high school students has perplexed administrators for the last two and a half decades. Llagas and Snyder (2003) note two nationally important points regarding the Hispanic student population: first, that "much of the recent rise in minority enrollment in elementary and secondary schools may be

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attributed to the growth in the number of Hispanic students, and second, that Hispanic students have higher high school dropout rates and lower high school completion rates than White or Black students" (p. ix). In fact, in 2008, about one-third of Hispanic 20- to 29-year-olds had dropped out of high school (Fry, 2010, p.16).

This study may provide administrators, as well as educators in general, keys to selecting strategies to address the issues of how to better help high school students and prevent them from dropping out of school. Additionally, this study builds upon the original study conducted by the National Center for Dropout Prevention by identifying successful practices to prevent students from dropping out of school.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions for at-risk students are given by the Texas Education Code (2007), Chapter 29.081, which states:

For purposes of this section, a "student at risk of dropping out of school" includes each student who is under 21 years of age and who:

(1)   was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;

(2)   if the student is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12, did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;

(3)   did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;

(4)   if the student is in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or grade 1, 2, or 3, did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;

(5)   is pregnant or is a parent;

(6)   has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with Section 37.006 during the preceding or current school year;

(7)   has been expelled in accordance with Section 37.007 during the preceding or current school year;

(8)   is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;

(9)   was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;

(10)   is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by Section 29.052;

(11)   is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;

(12) is homeless, as defined by 42 U.S.C. Section 11302, and its subsequent

amendments; or

(13) resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in

a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility,

substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital,

halfway house, or foster group home. (Texas Education Code, 2007).

The following are definitions of terms utilized in this study as they pertain to the

state of Texas:

- Dropout -- A dropout is a student who is enrolled in Texas public school in

grades 7-12, does not return to Texas public school the following fall, is not

expelled, and does not graduate, receive a GED, continue high school outside

the Texas public school system or begin college, or die (Texas Education

Agency, 2006).

- Graduate -- One who has received an academic degree or diploma.

- Hispanic -- "Of or relating to the people or culture of Spain, or relating to a

person of Latin American descent living in the United States" (Merriam-

Webster, 2003, p.589).

- Limited English Proficiency -- Students who do not speak English as their

primary language.

- Socioeconomic status (SES) -- "relating to or involving a combination of

social and cultural factors" (Merriam-Webster, 2003, p.1184).

- Minority -- "A part of a population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment" (Merriam-Webster, 2003, p.791).

- Qualitative research -- A study which is intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit. It can also be described as an end-product. The qualitative method investigates the why and how of decision making, not just what, where, when (Merriam, 1998).

- Case study -- "Investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined" (Yin, 2003, p.16).

- Strategy -- A plan, method, or series of maneuvers for obtaining a specific goal or result (TEA, 2010).

- Charter School -- A Texas public school operated by a charter holder under an open-enrollment charter granted by the State Board of Education (SBOE) pursuant to TEC §12.101 (TEA).

- Alternative School -- In this study, an alternative school is defined as a school of choice, an *alternative* to the public school to which a student is zoned.

Conclusion

In this introductory chapter the researcher has described the rationale for conducting the study, provided needed definitions, and outlined the structure and methodology for the following research. Before examining the data collected from

student and teacher participants, it is helpful to more fully explain the dropout problem. In the next chapter, the researcher survey factors contributing to students' decisions to leave school before graduation, reviews the literature describing effects produced by high dropout rates, and describes strategies researchers suggest to prevent dropouts and improve retention. Finally, the fifteen strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center are described in detail before examining student and faculty perceptions of their effectiveness in later chapters.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter, the problem of high school dropouts will be examined first on a national scale and specifically in Texas. The chapter will cover factors possibly influencing students to drop out, and then turn to the disproportionately high dropout rate among Hispanic students in Texas. Scholars' research on interventions/ best practices for reducing the dropout rate will be examined, followed by an explanation of the fifteen strategies identified by the National Center for Dropout Prevention. This chapter specifically focuses on considering how closely these 15 strategies were authenticated and or validated by research as means to assist alternative school graduates in completing their high school diploma requirements.

Factors Contributing to High School Dropout

High school graduation is something most teenagers strive to achieve. While many teenagers are studying for algebra II, chemistry, English III, and other courses, other students are falling behind and dropping out of school at a daily pace. Though it is difficult to definitively identify who will drop out of high school, factors have been identified that consistently explain students dropping out of school. Indeed a 2002 U.S. General Accountability Office report pointed to research which shows that, "multiple factors are associated with dropping out and that dropping out of school is a long-term process of disengagement that occurs over time and begins in the earliest grades" (U.S. GAO, 2002, p.3).

A student's social and familial background has a great influence on whether the student stays in school or not. Students who have not been successful in staying in one school, who are minority students, who are poor, and overage, are at greater risk of dropping out of school according to Jerald (Jerald, 2006). Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) further reveal the ability of demographic data to identify students likely to drop out of high school. Working with school districts in Boston, Indianapolis, and Philadelphia, these researchers found that "grades, test scores, behavior marks, attendance records, special education status, English language learner status, and demographic data could potentially identify future dropouts. Taking these factors into consideration, their study reveals a disproportionately low graduation rate among low-income and minority youth" (Neild, et at, 2007, p. 29). A study by Bridgeland et. al (2006) reveals a similar trend, that most of the dropout students in the United States have attended public schools, come from single-parent homes, and are of low-income backgrounds.

There are several factors leading to dropouts. In the Alliance for Excellent Education, Linda Pinkus states that students who have low expectations, highly mobile families, parents with low levels of education, and low language and literacy levels, will also be affected and there is a high likelihood of their dropping out of school (Pinkus, 2008). Teenagers who take on adult responsibilities either by working or becoming parents also have a higher risk of dropping out of school. Students who come from single parent households also experience situations which place them at-risk due to having parents who provide limited support for learning or have parents who do not keep

up with their friends' parents. In a study of Urban CEO superintendents' alternative strategies, Hoyle and Collier (2006) report only 50 percent of single parent urban students graduate. Dr. Sue McLanahan notes that "father absence increases the school failure risk among Hispanics by 75 percent" (1999, p. 3).   The lack of community and family support has a clear impact on students, as two thirds of dropouts in "The Silent Epidemic" article said they would have worked harder if more were demanded of them (Bridgeland, et al, 2006, p.5).

In addition to demographic, community, and family factors, poorly functioning schools contribute to students dropping out. If students' instructional needs are not met, if they find school uninteresting, or if they attend an unsafe school, they are more likely to leave before graduation. A study funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found 35 percent of the students who dropped out of school did so because they were failing; three in ten stated they could not keep up with the work and 43 percent stated they had missed too many school days to catch up (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The article further points to the role school factors can play, finding in their study 47 percent of students dropped out due to classes not being interested, 69 percent due to not being motivated, and 32% failed a class before dropping out of school. A study in the city of Miami noted 36% of 9th graders were suspended at least once, and 26% of students suspended accumulated more than 10 days in suspension (Arcia, 2006). Given the variety of factors at the school level, a recent study indicated the public high schools were mostly dropout factories (Benton, 2001).

Though the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has made a great attempt to inject accountability and correct some of the problems in identifying dropouts, high school students continue to face many obstacles in trying to meet the law's new standards such as ensuring all students pass the reading and math grade level exams. Schools may burden students with extra courses that might increase their test scores, but are not required for graduation. Some remedial classes do not even reward students with a credit toward graduation. Siskin (2004) notes in one low-performing school high school "selected students were assigned to one period for math, one of remedial math, and another one of test-prep math" (2004, p. 174).

Russell W. Rumberger (2011, p. 146) discusses two models proposed by Jeremy Finn, a psychologist who calls the first model the "Frustration-self-esteem" model. In this model, the student experiences early school failure, which ultimately leads the student to drop out of school. In the second model, "Participation-identification" model, the student withdrawals from the lack of participation in school. Ultimately, this also leads to the student dropping out of school.

These factors clearly do not represent an exhaustive list. Schargel, et al., notes the following factors in influencing students to drop out of school and are listed below divided into categories based on previous school experience, personal and psychological issues, students with family responsibilities, and issues of family background and cohesion. If a student has been absent over 20 days, been retained in at least one grade level, or experienced then the student is placed in an at-risk category meaning the student has the potential of dropping out of school. Students are placed in a higher level

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of at-risk if they have additional psychological factors such as low self-esteem, poor peer support, experienced early sexual activity or other emotional issues. Family responsibilities also add additional weight to the at-risk status if the student has had a child or is working to support his/her family. Students are greater at-risk if family background and cohesion issues such as single-parent home, history of poor parent-child relationships, the family receives public assistance, English is not the primary language of the home, parents are unemployed, if a sibling dropped out of school, or if their parents never finished high school (Schargel, Thacker, & Bell, 2007).

Factors Contributing to High School Dropouts in Texas Schools

Though all students may encounter factors in the course of their education, Texas Hispanics children face various obstacles, which may place them acutely at risk of dropping out of school. First, Hispanic students, along with African American students, have a significant higher overrepresentation in disciplinary issues compared to the overall student population. According to a report by the Texas Appleseed (2007), more than a third of Texas public school students dropped out of school in 2005-2006 school year. The report notes forty school districts had an overrepresentation of Hispanic students in discretionary District Alternative Education Program referrals, 224 districts disproportionately suspended them from school, and 92 districts over-represented them in discretionary referrals to in-school suspension (ISS) for one or more years from 2001 through 2006. The Texas public schools have a disproportionate representation when you look at the historical data of referrals at a school and see a history of being referred to the office can lead to a future in the juvenile justice system. This correlation is shown

in 2008, where 48 percent of the referrals to the Texas juvenile probation system were Hispanic (Texas Juvenile Probation Commission [TJPC], 2010). Of these referrals, 73 percent were male Hispanics (TJPC, 2010).

Hispanics in Texas also have a higher rate of teenage pregnancy than the national average. In a report about National and State trends, Kost et al., notes that 131 of 1000 teens become pregnant between the ages of 15 and 19 (2010). Both disciplinary action and early pregnancy have been identified as highly at-risk factors, and they disproportionately affect Hispanic students in Texas.

Similarly, urban students face a particular set of problems in Texas; for example, urban schools are most affected by the TEA's fall "snapshot" date, which serves as the denominator for National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (TEA, 2006). Taking place every October 31st, the Texas Education Agency notes the actual students in attendance at any given high school and counts these students toward that school's accountability status. It is not uncommon for high schools to send students to alternative programs in September and October in order to improve their reports. While this effort may not be intentional, it often results in more students dropping out of school.

Furthermore, the latest rules by the TEA also make it difficult for at-risk students to be welcomed by school administration, as the state is becoming more stringent on the sanctions against schools failing to graduate students on a timely basis. These rules target students through a completion rate status, which is determined by monitoring a student once he/she has entered the ninth grade for the first time. Since Texas' accountability plan places much of the burden on the schools to monitor and ensure that

all students graduate, allowing a highly at-risk student to enroll imposes a great burden on the school administration. This becomes a systemic problem, as highly at-risk students tend to bounce around from school to school. Additionally, urban schools are usually where one finds students encountering many other issues, which further exacerbates the problem.

Seen as a whole, it becomes clear Hispanic students attending urban schools in Texas are particularly at-risk of dropping out. In order to reverse the dropout trend for this at-risk population, effective prevention strategies must be identified.

Consequences of Dropping Out

Regardless of which of these numerous factors contributes most strongly, a high school student's decision to drop out impacts not only their family and local community, but also the nation at large. Because many high school dropouts lack minimum technical skills and basic education, they tend to rely on public assistance much more than high school graduates. "Dropouts receive greater amounts of government assistance yet only contribute only half as much in taxes as high school graduates" (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger & Smink, 2008, p.4). Hoyle and Collier found dropouts cost the United States an estimated $260 billion annually (2006). Dropouts also impose a burden on all levels of governments as they make up a disproportionate share of the nation's prison and death row inmates (U.S. General Accountability Office, 2002). Beyond the greater likelihood of incarceration, students who drop out of school represent 14.4% of juveniles incarcerated (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). When these implications are viewed on

the aggregate level, it is clear that a rising high school dropout rate has become a national concern.

Texas Consequences of Dropping Out

This nationwide dropout problem and its societal implications are also visible in Texas, where it is particularly challenging for Hispanic students. This too reflects a national trend; a recent study by Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson (2004) showed the graduation rate of high school students in the United States at 69 percent, with Hispanics falling behind at a dismal 53 percent. In a separate study, Greene (2001) reports a similar figure, with up to 54 percent of Hispanic students failing to complete high school.

In 1986, the Intercultural Development Research Association performed a statewide study of high school dropouts in Texas. Using a high school attrition formula to estimate the number and percent of students who left Texas public schools prior to graduation, this study concluded 86,276 of all enrolled students had not graduated. Embedded in this first comprehensive major study was a loss of state income estimated at $17 billion, lost tax revenues, a need for increased job training, more families unemployment, more on welfare, and the added expenses for criminal justice expenses for students dropping out of school (IDRA, 1986). Hoyle and Collier (2005) noted that of the ten largest urban districts in Texas, high school graduation rates range from just 28 to 87 percent.

With the growing presence of Hispanics throughout the state, the graduation of Hispanic students in particular has become a real concern, especially as key Hispanic

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advocacy groups have sharpened their focus on education. In a report by the Texas

Education Agency (2001), the attrition rate, or the rate of all ninth graders who were not

enrolled or graduated in twelfth grade four years later, was 36.7 percent for the year

2000-2001. In the same report (TEA, 2001), Hispanic students had a longitudinal

graduation rate of 73.6 percent. The same report showed Hispanic students had a

dropout rate of 1.4 percent, the highest of any student population (TEA, 2001). Looking

at a similar report for 2009, the TEA shows 73.5 percent of Hispanic students graduating

(TEA, 2009). Though the attrition rate for all students went down to 28.6 percent, the

percentage of Hispanic students among all students dropping out of school rose from

56.6 percent to 58.1 percent (TEA, 2009).

The *Dallas Morning News* has reported that scarcely half of all high school

students in the Dallas and Fort Worth Independent School Districts graduate and the

percentage of Hispanics who graduate is less than 40 percent (Benton, 2001). Various

studies continue to place the dropout rate of Hispanics in Texas between 30 to 50

percent.

Strategies to Address High School Dropouts

Though high school students have been leaving high schools for the past three or

four decades, it was not seen as a severe problem until around 1987. Over the past

decade, a variety of programs and strategies have been used to address the dropout

problem. Barr and Parrett (2001) suggest in order for programs to be effective, three

things need to be included: "1.) A positive school climate, 2.) A customized curriculum

and instructional program, and, 3.) A promotion of personal, social, and emotional

growth" (p. 172). Several strategies are outlined by Lunenburg which may assist in

dropout prevention, which include "modifying the instructional environment,

strengthening school membership, developing school board policies, and improving

mentoring" (Lunenburg, 2000, p.42). In Adelman and Taylor's article, *Dropout*

Prevention: Do Districts Pursue Best Practice Recommendations?, the authors note

schools need to meet the challenge of addressing barriers to learning and teaching

(Adelman and Taylor, 2011). They further note schools with the most dropouts need to

address all issues within a comprehensive and unified system. Edmondson and White

(1998) developed tutorial and counseling programs; Sanders (2001) emphasizes the

importance of collaboration between parents, teachers, school counselors, and

community members. There have been other suggested options from creating alternative

high schools (Karl and Karl, 2000) to focusing on creating career academies (Kemple

and Snipes, 2000).

Fifteen Strategies from the National Dropout Prevention Center

Led by Dr. Jim Smink, the National Dropout Prevention Center developed fifteen

strategies to reach potential high school dropouts. These strategies have been studied by

the National Dropout Prevention center. When asked how the National Dropout

Prevention Center designed these strategies, Smink explained the following to me by

telephone:

I led the research team that analyzed more than 400 model dropout prevention

programs identified and listed in the NDPC model program database found on

our Website. The first analysis was completed in the early 90's and we used the

references in professional development sessions with just handout materials. Initially we found more than 50 successful strategies but eventually boiled them down to a more manageable list of 15. The most recent reviews of the model programs were completed in 2000 and 2004 and resulted in two publications— the most recent was Helping Students Graduate available from our publications section on our website. We continually do casual reviews of the model programs and the current list of 15 effective strategies remains intact. In fact, many state agencies have used the list of effective strategies as part of a planning framework for LEAs to use to prepare a comprehensive dropout prevention program at the district and school levels (Smink, 2011).

According to Smink and Reimer (2005), the following fifteen strategies may be effective in helping students to complete high school successfully.

Systemic Renewal

The National Dropout Prevention Center noted one of the strategies for improving the dropout rate is systemic renewal. This strategy calls for a continuous process of evaluating goals and objectives related to school policies, practices, and organizational structures as they impact a diverse group of learners. Smink cites the 2002 report of the U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO), which points to studies showing that dropping out is a long-term process of disengagement that begins in the earliest grades (2002). Schools have traditionally attempted to work in new strategies by just layering program after program onto existing structures.

Systemic renewal calls for evaluating goals and objectives as they relate to school policies. If one takes school truancy as a point of reference, we note school truancy affects every school, but in particular affects high schools. Truancy not only affects the student, but also impacts the income generated by the school. When a student fails to attend, then the school does not generate revenue for the student. Systematic renewal is required to impact the attendance problem.   Schools need to place more emphasis on the interpersonal relations between the students and the teachers and must also improve the quality of the courses they according to Epstein & Sheldon (2002).

Based on a study by Wagstaff, Combs, & Jarvis (2000), students interviewed reported not feel being treated fairly by the employees of the school or by other students. Further problems identified were in the curriculum and instruction leading to weakening of student motivation and the isolation of many students.

One example of an organization using systemic renewal is The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The foundation worked to help improve three low-performing middle schools in Jefferson County Public Schools, in Kentucky. Beginning in 1989, the foundation spent millions over a decade helping these schools evaluate and systematically transform their academic programs.

School-community Collaboration

Collaboration can be defined as "coordination, integrated services, school-linked and school-based services, any focus on non-educational or supportive services, public-private partnerships with businesses and community groups, and parental or family involvement" (Smink & Schargel, 2004, p.54). When all groups in a community provide

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collective support to their schools, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring environment where youth can thrive and achieve. When schools and communities collaborate in a professional learning community both sides may thrive.   Schools gain valuable resources and professional expertise while communities gain an educated workforce relevant to the local market. Reforms have failed because the focus has been on academics instead of connecting with the community to address the broader needs of all stakeholders, both schools and businesses.

With the initiation of No Child Left Behind, all schools are accountable to more rigorous national standards in the evaluation of their programs. Tying schools in with community collaboration partners can help schools transform their programs to meet these new standards. School districts which fail to achieve the standards of NCLB are required report their results through public meetings and to seek community involvement in establishing an acceptable program. It is better to partner with community agencies voluntarily before receiving NCLB sanctions.

Sanders (2001) described ten major categories of community partners after examining data from 400 schools linked with a variety of community partners. These are

> a) business/ corporations, b) universities and educational institutions, c) government and military agencies, d) health care organizations, e) faith organizations, f) national service and volunteer organizations, g) senior citizen organizations, h) cultural and recreational institutions, i) other community-based organizations, j) individuals in the community. (p. 1355).

Schools work better when they collaborate with community agencies. When all stake-holders collaborate to support a school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring environment enabling youth to thrive and achieve. School collaboration also reflects on the community and business groups. These groups can then join in on supporting schools especially if the potential for dropouts leads to truancy rates in the community. In further discussing costs for dropouts, Smink and Reimer quote Garry (1996) in the NDPC's article "Truancy is costly. It costs businesses, which must pay to train uneducated workers. It costs taxpayers, who must pay higher taxes for law enforcement and welfare costs for dropouts who end up on welfare rolls or underemployed" (as cited in Smink and Reimer, 2005, p.8). Here a collaborative, school-community effort works in the best interest of both the community and the schools.

Getting community groups involved to assist schools with issues is another way in which collaboration works. Smink & Reimer (2005) note a program known as "Community Advocates." This program helps schools monitor truancy. Advocates make telephone calls or visits to the home of every child in the school who has a specific number of absences to prevent a pattern of truancy from developing.

Safe Learning Environment

A comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe learning environment provides daily experiences, at all grade levels, to enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students. Teaching needs to take place where students

can learn and teachers can teach in a warm and welcoming environment. The environment needs to be free of intimidation, violence and fear.

The No Child Left Behind act permits students to leave schools identified as persistently dangerous. Under the No Child Left Behind act, schools are required to enhance efforts to protect children by initially identifying a "persistently dangerous school" and by providing families with an alternative when students are in danger of being trapped in an unsafe and threatening environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Schools need to continue their efforts in trying to become safer environments. Students are constantly facing violence through various efforts such as bullying, harassment, or fighting in schools. Efforts to implement safe schools have taken several forms. Creating a safe learning environment is usually defined as a comprehensive violence prevention plan, which includes conflict resolution and must deal with potential violence as well as crisis management.

Family Engagement

Research consistently finds family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is one of the most accurate predictors of a student's success in school. Especially important is the involvement of minority parents in the education of their children. An example of this would be parents who attend report card nights, participate in having student and teacher conferences, or support their children's school sponsored activities.

Family engagement should start in the early years. Historically, schools have emphasized parent involvement in order to help students learn to read early, get better grades, improve attendance, increase motivation, and have better self-esteem. Redd, Brooks, and McGarvey (2002) found the involvement of parents in the education of students has a direct correlation with the attainment of the students' academics. Similarly, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) found 71 percent of the individuals they surveyed felt communication between the school and the parents was a key to increasing parental involvement. Less than half of the respondents in the study said their parents were contacted when they were absent or when they dropped out.

Regardless of the attempts to involve parents in the schools, Mitra notes, "schools serving large populations of low-income minority families have low rates of partnering with parents" (2006, p. 456). For example, a comparison of parental involvement between low poverty and high poverty schools showed 72 percent of low poverty schools reported "most or all" parents attended the school open house, while only 28 percent of high poverty schools reported such high parent attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Similarly, the percentage of teachers who report parent involvement to be excellent or good in their schools is 79 percent in suburban schools, 64 percent in rural schools, and only 36 percent in inner-city schools (Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher, 1998).

Research clearly demonstrates parental involvement with students from urban, inner-city schools is both important and lacking. "For example, results from the NCES study found that students whose parents were not actively involved in the student's

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school, whose parents infrequently talked to them about school-related matters, or whose parents held low expectations for their child's future educational attainment were more likely to drop out" (GAO, 2002, p.15).

One of the most accurate predictors of a student's success in school is family engagement. This process has a direct and positive effect on a child's achievement. It is very clear families involved in their child's education will have a lasting effect. Epstein & Sheldon (2002) notes the involvement of parents in parent teacher associations memberships, discussions within the parents and children, or parents participating at the school are all linked to good student attendance or lower levels of truancy within their children.

Early Childhood Education and Early Literacy Development

Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The best manner in which one can curtail a dropout problem is insisting on having the best possible instruction beginning at preschool through the primary grades. An example of this would be involvement in a Head Start program, pre-kindergarten program or any type of early intervention program prior to the enrollment of kindergarten. In 1999, while less than the 47 percent of white and 60 percent of black 3-year-olds who were enrolled in center-based preprimary education, 26 percent of Hispanic 3-year-olds were enrolled at the same age (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). In 2002, the U.S. General Accountability Office report noted students from low-income, single-parent, and less-educated families often entered

school less prepared than children from more affluent, higher educated families and subsequently drop out at a much higher rate than other students do.

Early intervention starts with helping low socio-economic students to increase their skills in reading and writing which will be the foundation for effective learning in all subjects. This strategy could include home-based programs in which parents get instruction on how to help their children develop reading skills. Another area of early childhood education would lead to educational success is simple exposure to everyday objects. All children need exposure to letters, numbers and processes of learning. While most parents have several books or educational toys for their children, they rarely read or take time to explain and talk to their children. Parents need instruction on how to better work with their children and to develop literacy skills.

Providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development especially through birth-to-five interventions. One of the most successful ways in demonstrating how to reduce the number of children who drop out of school is to provide the best possible early school experiences. One of the most successful school programs is the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (Baker, et al., 1999). This program is a home-based that has early childhood education activities based upon parents being the key to their children's success in school. This program is designed to enrich the lives of three through five year olds, especially disadvantaged preschool children over a two-year period. Another manner in which early childhood education plays a strong influence is on immigrant children. Magnuson et al. (2006)

found preschool education had a larger, more positive effect on the English language proficiency of children of immigrant mothers than it did for other children.

Another form of early intervention is the early literacy development. This is done to help low achieving students improve their reading and writing skills necessary to establish a strong foundation in learning. A California program titled Opportunity Knocks focused on improving school attendance and dropout rates among teens in selected homes. Another successful program was the Guadalupe program which has been in existence for 37 years and which serves children in poverty areas. From birth to age three, home visitors met with parents for an hour to teach parenting skills. The goals for the home visitors are to select stimulating activities to help children achieve full development.

Mentoring and Tutoring

Mentoring is a one-on-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a protégé, which is largely based on trust. Tutoring, also one-on-one, focuses on academics and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies. An example of this type of program would be a mentorship program where students are able to receive one-on-one tutoring to enhance their academic skills.

Mentoring has become a very popular strategy to increase academic performance for high school students, especially at-risk students. Mentors have been drawn from various volunteer and professional organizations, businesses, non-profit groups, and universities. Students from minority neighborhoods particularly benefit from mentors,

ideally drawn from their own community, because they provide students with successful role models show students that there is a viable path to success. Many times, these students come from dysfunctional homes and lack a strong parental figure. Additionally, many of these students seldom consider graduating from high school, much less going to college.

Dubois and Silverthorn (2005) found mentoring programs produced best results where they:

- Trained and supported mentors on an ongoing basis;

- Provided structured activities for mentor and protégé;

- Encouraged parent support and involvement; and

- Recruited mentors with a helping background.

"Students report that having a person at school who is checking up on them, gives the sense that someone cares and motivates them to come to school" (Gonzales, Richards, & Seeley, 2002, p. 12). Mentoring and tutoring is one of the most successful types of interventions a youngster can receive. Mentoring is the process which is developed between a mentor and a protégé by a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship that is based on trust. Tutoring may also serve as an effective lever toward identifying specific needs for improving reading, writing, or math competencies. One of the longest and most successful programs is the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program established by the Intercultural Development Research Association program in San Antonio, Texas. This program is a cross-age tutoring program designed to increase the self-esteem of the participants by placing them in positions of responsibility as tutors.

Service Learning

Service learning, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center, "connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning; it promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility" (NDPC, 2005). It can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels, requiring students to perform service activities prior to graduation.

Service learning takes place in a classroom with exposure to careers in the real world. It places the student in the community agency between 15 hours to 40 hours of service per semester. Various forms of service learning currently take place in many schools such as organizing in clubs or classes before or after school to work on community needs. Schools usually identify off-campus needs and use these activities to further enhance their understanding of their course contents. These courses also provide the students with a deeper understanding of civil responsibility.

The service-learning process doesn't end when the service activity is completed. According to the National Youth Leadership Council [NYLC] (2009), "projects may be finished, but service-learning is a transformational process where young people, practitioners, and communities continue to grow as they discover the root causes underlying the needs" (NYLC, 2009). This cycle includes the process of allowing young individuals to identify, plan and carry out service activities allowing for learning and growth opportunities. The NYLC notes that there is an importance placed on practitioners to recognize the learning potential. This furthermore allows students to reflect in each process so real learning takes place (NYLC, 2009). "Schools that employ

the elements of service learning (as opposed to community service) will provide experiences that are in greater alignment to NCLB" (Dymond, Renzaglia, and Chun, 2008, p. 37).

Connecting meaningful community service experiences with academic learning reflects the core business of service learning. One example of service learning occurred within a high school in Philadelphia. "The community partner assisted the teacher in helping students to develop a short community survey asking middle school students and community members to identify the top five problems facing their neighborhood and community" (RMC, 2009, p.8). This teaching method promoted civic responsibility, career development, and personal and social growth.

Alternative Schools

In this study, the researcher, noting the various types of alternative schools, decided on using two models (NDPC, 2005). One is a short-term program designed to help students improve their behavior or academic skills and then to return them to their home school. This type of school is usually more suitable for elementary or middle school students. As they return to their school, they usually get assistance from a transition specialist in order to readjust and maintain the improvements. The second type is a long-term program, which is more appropriate for high school students. Students are usually taught employment-related skills and are still able to graduate with a high school diploma. Though these programs do take the students away from their peers, they are very effective in reaching the students.

It is not unusual to find students in high minority neighborhoods getting into trouble in school early. Many students get sent to the office in fourth or fifth grade, continue getting into trouble in sixth and have been suspended from school by the time they are in seventh grade. Teachers rarely want to see the student who they have sent out of class, which may begin the downward spiral of discipline problems. At the same time, the student is not the only one spending more time with the principal than with the teachers; the parents of the student who is in trouble are also spending more and more time with the principal. Frustration starts to set in, and the principal may suggest an alternative school. In some cases, the students are not provided this option but rather are sent to an alternative school directly.

Voluntary alternative schooling is an option for many students who are at the point of dropping out of school or have dropped out of school. In Florida, Blanche Fly High School and Broward Community College, instituted a model program called the Ninth Grade Learning Community Academy. This program focuses on the transition between middle and high school but continues to work with students throughout their high school years. Seniors have the opportunity to enroll in dual credit courses. When the programs pay careful attention to the individual's social and academic needs, they can lead to the student obtaining a high school diploma. Alternative school programs can play a key role in transforming a potential dropout into a productive citizen (Morley, 2002).

After-school Programs

Research shows that according to DeAngelis, "low school achievement and risky behavior occurs most often between 3- and 6-p.m., leading policymakers to focus on the best ways youth should fill after school hours" (DeAngelis, 2001, p.60). Getting students involved in after school activities which focus on athletics or the arts can serve as a meaningful hedge against gang involvement, drugs, or other risky behaviors and help to produce happier, healthier, more productive adults. After school activities may prevent boredom, worry, and idleness and instead provide opportunities for caring relationships with adults and academic enrichment. "Around 20 to 25 percent of low and moderate income urban children aged 6 to 14 now spend three to five afternoons a week—and sometimes all day during the summer—in after-school programs, and participation rates appear to be growing" (Halpern, 2002, p. 179).

Many schools provide after-school and summer-enhancement programs helping students retain what they have learned throughout the day or year. Additionally, in addition to academics, these programs inspire interest in a variety of areas such as the arts, physical education, music, and theater. Findings by Jordan and Nettles (1999) suggest students who were involved in academic-related activities after school had a higher preponderance of doing well in academics during the school day. Students who are also engaged in school and have a practice for arriving to school on time, bringing in necessary materials and supplies, and completing homework assignments show a greater propensity to do well in future success (Jordan & Nettles, 1999).

A recently released policy report entitled *What Do Adolescents Need for Healthy Development?* (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000) recommends the following programs:

- Monitor adolescents by caring adults;

- Provide positive school experiences, such as a safe school;

- Provide an environment that helps young people develop positive relationships with peers;

- Provide enriching and creative activities;

- Give youngsters an opportunity to develop leadership skills;

- Provide all of these opportunities over the long term.

There are two afterschool programs, which have focused on improving graduation rates along with academic achievement. Programs focusing on providing enrichment activities instead of offering academic assistance were found to correlate with improved student school-work. Two of the studies were commissioned by Los Angeles' Better Educated Students of Tomorrow (LA's BEST) and The After-School Corporation (TASC) in New York (Afterschool Alliance, 2006).

After-school programs provide an opportunity for students to fill the afternoon gap times with constructive and engaging activities. These programs provide students with an opportunity to either play some type of sports or use the time to work on academics. The programs give students a chance to make new friends. All of these will lead to students feeling successful and have less a likelihood of skipping school.

Staff Development

Youth who are at-risk of failing academically need to feel supported and be able to have strategies to develop skills, techniques, and innovative strategies. Staff development is vital to the success of any program, but especially one that deals with highly at-risk students. Teachers need to be equipped with the most current research along with classroom management skills to be able to effectively deal with discipline problems. Such training is usually administered within school district sponsored workshops focusing on issues germane to at-risk students.

Teachers also need to get refresher courses on the latest skills in the content areas. Newly licensed teachers may not have the background and experience necessary to deal with at-risk students. It would be vital for the campus principal to provide staff development in working with at-risk students or even go further if there is a cultural difference to provide staff development in this area.

Most teachers do not become experts right out of college, so it is in the district's best interest to provide staff development for the identified areas of need plus to strengthen other skills necessary for the benefits of all students. Workshops in the area of reading, math, science, special education, discipline, and classroom management are needed every year.

The development of skills for teachers working with high-risk students of academic failure needs to be strongly supported. These teachers need an avenue in which they can continue their skill development and learn new techniques about innovative strategies. A recent article for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010)

notes that, "a teacher's effectiveness has more impact on student learning than any other factor under the control of school systems, including class size, school size, and the quality of after-school programs. . ." (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010, p. 1). Students who are dealing with high risk issues in attempting to complete their high school diplomas need teachers who are highly trained and have the development necessary to keep up with the latest innovative strategies in helping at-risk students.

Active Learning

Active learning surrounds teaching and learning strategies which engage and involve students in learning. This strategy allows students find new ways to create and to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when shown a different ways to learn. Students must be actively involved in reading, writing, and discussing ways to solve problems. Students must also be involved in higher-order thinking processes such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Therefore, active learning strategies persuades students to do things and thinking about what they are doing.

At-risk students need creative way in which to learn. Many students often claim that learning is boring or that the instruction is under-motivating. Studies continue to show students prefer active learning to traditional lectures. Active learning uses the strategy which allows the mastery of content in developing students' skills in thinking and writing. This process is much more advantageous than lectures.

Traditional lectures can be modified to accommodate active learning. According to Ruhl et al., teachers who allow students to solidify or strengthen their notes by pausing three times for two minutes each during a lecture can provide significant

learning for students (Ruhl, Hughes, & Schloss, 1987). Discussion in the classroom is a good form of active learning. Visual-based instruction is also helpful for other interactive techniques. Another way to involve students is through writing activities across the curriculum. Teachers may engage students in a variety of active learning activities through the use of cooperative learning, peer teaching, debates and/or drama.

There are a number of reasons why teachers fail to include active learning in their daily lessons. Some see specific obstacles such as limited class time, large classes, lack of material and equipment, preparation time, limited resources, or risk of criticism for teaching in an unorthodox manner. There is also the possibility students will not participate, learn sufficient content, or use higher-order thinking skills. Though some teachers feel they will lose control of the classes, each of these obstacles or barriers can be overcome through careful and thoughtful planning (Bonwell, 1991).

Active learning is a process that engages students where teaching and learning strategies are embraced. Through this process, students find ways in which they become lifelong learners by utilizing new and creative ways to solve problems and achieve success. Students in at-risk situations need teachers who are engaged in active learning since there has long been a trend between high truancy rates and low academic achievement. Hassel notes, "children who start out behind are likely to stay behind, even with good teachers who produce a year of progress each year" (Hassel, 2011, p.2). Further in the study he notes that without excellent teachers the students who are behind will continue behind and that no gap will be closed.

Technology

The use of technology offers schools an opportunity to engage students in authentic learning. It furthermore, provides the schools with the options of addressing multiple intelligences and adapting to the various learning styles. Students normally involve themselves in technology courses throughout high school. The use of technology is supported by an investment in infrastructure, hardware, software, support services and professional development. Technology is not an inexpensive part of the curriculum as "schools spent over $6 billion" during the year 2000 (Ringstaff & Kelley, 2002, p. 1). Though many school districts have invested significantly in technology, many of these districts have not had an adequate plan.

Reeves (1998) addresses two basic functions for computers in education. One is for students to learn from computers and the other is for students to learn with computers. When a student uses a computer for learning, then the computer serves as a tutor for the student. The goal of technology is to increase each student's basic skills. When a student learns with computers, the use of technology as a tool is applied to a variety of goals in the student's learning capacity. In this manner, students' use of more advanced technology is applied as they develop higher order thinking or research skills.

Schools have used computers as tutors through various programs such as computer-based or computer-assisted instruction. They have also extended the technology to integrated learning and intelligent learning systems. Classroom teachers can use these programs to provide direct assistance or tutoring in areas such as mathematics, English, social studies, or science.

In using technology as a tool, teachers and students control the curriculum and instruction. Technology allows all students to spend less time in doing calculations and spend more time solving complex problems. Nonetheless, either of these methods is one to consider when using computers in the classroom.

Educational technology may serve as one lever at reducing the educational disparities formed by race and income. Educational technology can also accommodate differences in learning situations especially for *at-risk* students. One of the most successful programs has been Academic Alternatives—a program offering students who are three or more credits behind to accelerate their learning. Through this program, students can move up six credits per academic year and catch up to their normal grade.

Individualized Instructional Program

Each student has a set of unique interests. Students also come into the schools with past learning experiences. Schools can provide students with an individualized program allowing students the flexibility to learn through teaching methods and motivational strategies geared toward difference and individuality. An example of this type of program might come through an English-as-a-Second-Language program, special education, or other regular course work.

To create an effective individualized instructional program, several key members of the school must be involved, and the student's unique needs must be addressed. The individual's knowledge and experience will be utilized in helping design an educational program helping the student progress through the curriculum. Whether the individualized education program is developed through special education or regular

education, it is also very important to involve the parent of the student. In many situations, a parent can bring in valuable documentation explaining pre-existing or other unknown conditions.

Viviana Alexandrowicz, associate professor at University of San Diego, states academic success is likely only when students reach an adequate threshold of competency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Alexandrowicz, 1996). Individualized instruction is vital to at-risk students with gaps in their previous learning. Studies have shown schools with smaller class environments yield higher attendance and a lower dropout rate. Many students who are identified under the special education criteria are usually the students who wind up in at-risk situations. At-risk students are students who are not experiencing success in school and are potential dropouts. These students benefit from individualized instruction where attention will be provided to them. Additionally, these types of students are usually males, students of color, labeled as low academic achievers exhibiting low self-esteem. Furthermore, these students usually come from low socioeconomic families where their parents may have not completed a high school education. Therefore, providing these students with smaller classes and individualized instruction can help them graduate from high school. (Konstantopoulos, 2008).

Career and Technology Program

A high quality career and technology program is essential for all students. These programs also include a school-to-work type program assisting students in completing their high school diploma. Career and Technology Education programs help prepare

students for further education. As the role of technology has increased, especially in classrooms, technology can always assist students who continue with their education into a college or university. This learning tool can eventually lead to a secure job in a technology-intensive world. Texas backs a plan strongly supporting local control of Texas public schools by recommending strategies guiding district implementation and improvement of career and technology education programs.

The state plan for technology acknowledges a rigorous academic foundation needed to secure a strong successful future in school and in life. It further states all students are entitled to equal educational opportunities. The career and technology programs enable all the students to apply academic principles and technical skills in their future career successes (TEA, 2010).

One example of this adoption is a school district in Texas: Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD. It partnered with the South Texas College to create the College, Career, and Technology Academy. This served as a dropout recovery program placing into action policies Texas created over the past five years. The students noted the importance of this program by stating the following:

- Students are engaged in a meaningful postsecondary experience that culminates immediately in marketable national certification for high-demand work and entry to a career ladder.

- Students begin to identify themselves as not only postsecondary learners but also as fulfilling societal needs in the world of work outside of school—often through required internships.

- Student learning becomes real as they apply academic knowledge and technical skills to their work.

- Students learn from their inclusion in actual communities of practice that advancement is possible. The importance of this cannot be underestimated for young adults growing up in the socioeconomically challenged community of Hidalgo and other Texas towns in the Rio Grande Valley with tough economies. (Jobs for the Future, 2009, p. 7).

The National High School completion rate is at 74 percent but among Hispanic students, the completion rate is much lower at 55 percent (Gray, 2002). Many of these students prefer school-to-work type of programs that recognize and enhance specific vocational skills. Helping prepare them for the workplace in many situations is the best for students who have already experienced great difficulty with their education. For students who have experienced great difficulty in academic courses, the best strategy may be a vocational program that prepares them for the workplace. Career and technology education courses may effectively reduce the dropout rate but are seldom consumed by Latino students.

Conclusions

Reaching an at-risk student in the public school system is no easy task, and it seems Hispanic students in Texas are facing a particularly dire situation. Though the dropout rate among Hispanics ultimately affects both their futures and the social and economic future of the state of Texas, many of these students continue to drop out of school. Given the growing Hispanic population in Texas, the increased likelihood that

minority students will drop out, and the unique set of challenges urban students face, it is important that dropout prevention strategies reach these at-risk students. This case study will examine the fifteen recommended strategies provided by the National Center for Dropout Prevention and closely examine them in the specific context of urban at-risk high school Hispanic students. It will furthermore look at the suggestions which the respondents provided as strategies for improving Hispanic students path toward graduation.

While considerable research supporting interventions and programs such as those championed by the National Dropout Prevention Center for at-risk students exists in the literature, there have not been case studies examining the effectiveness of these programs on urban, Hispanic high school students. This study's participants related the NDPC's fifteen strategies to their personal high school experiences and then identified those they felt helped them succeed. The study also explored whether the participants felt other strategies not identified by the NDPC were effective. This is the mission of this case study.

The charter school movement has been in existence in Texas for less than fifteen years. Charter schools have had the option of being classified as alternative schools for at-risk students. The school whose students and staff are the subject of this study chose this option. While leading this school the researcher witnessed many students seemingly on the verge of academic failure reconnect with school and graduate. Many of these students continued their education by enrolling in college. Unfortunately, others did not take advantage of the opportunity this school provided. In studying student success

stories it is the researcher's intention to illustrate the strategies that successful students

themselves perceived as effective.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section includes an overview of the research design including: information needed, sources of data, proposed research sample, plans and methods for data collection, and how data was analyzed. It provides a methodological guideline to the whole study. Qualitative research methodology techniques are surveyed and described to establish their relevance to this case study. The qualitative methodology model adopted for this study, the definition of case design, method of selecting of participants, and the validity and definition of terms are all explained.

The purpose of this case study was to examine how a selected group of Hispanic high school graduates from an urban high school perceived the fifteen strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center and their effects on high school retention. The eight students selected for the study were attending college at the time of the study or had graduated from college. The case study research model was chosen as the most appropriate manner in addressing the following research questions:

1. To what extent did students perceive the impact of the fifteen identified factors in their decision to remain in school and graduate?

2. What other positive influences beyond the fifteen identified factors were mentioned by at-risk students and staff that contributed to their graduation?

Rational and Assumptions for Qualitative Design

Qualitative research is used in case studies where a researcher wants to probe in-depth and acquire more information from his subjects. Merriam defined a case study as,

"an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Dooley asserts that, "Case study research is viewed by many to be qualitative; however, and this is very important, it can be quantitative. Tools used in this type of data collection are usually surveys, interviews, document analysis, and observation…." (2002, p. 340). Glesne (1999) states that in qualitative research the focus is to look for indicators of success or improvement through the experiences and stories of the participant. Case study research is distinct since it brings an understanding to complex issues. Case studies can further add stability to what is already known through other research (Yin, 2003). In reviewing or analyzing limited number of events, cases study research allows for a relationship to be built and explained. Case study research methods have been used for many years across a variety of disciplines by researchers. Social scientists have used qualitative research method to examine contemporary real-life situations in many studies. This study, while it utilizes the tools for quanitative research described by Dooley and provides quanitative data, it is primarily an example of qualitative research.

According to Robert K. Yin, "A case study is described as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Yin (2003) further states the case study as a research strategy encompassing the logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis.

"Critics of the case study method believe that the study of a small number of cases can offer no grounds for establishing reliability or generality of findings" (Soy, 1997, p.1). While there are others who feel the intense exposure to case study biases the findings, others dismiss case study research as useful only as an exploratory tool. Yet case studies continue to be used for research methods with great success. In carefully planning and crafting studies of real-life situations, issues and problems, case studies are very accurate for this type of use.

According to Peck and Secker (1999), there are three important points when conducting a case study:

1. The purpose of research is not to establish objective facts but to explore how subjects make sense of topics of interest,

2. The theories are researchers own interpretation of the subjects understandings, and

3. To assess qualitative research, one must provide detailed description of data and make process of analysis transparent.

This researcher reviewed and investigated models by Robert Stake (1995) and Robert Yin, who have written extensively about case studies and suggestions about how to organize data. The research model employed in this case study is most influenced by Robert Yin. The format comes from their suggested techniques for organizing and conducting research successfully. Yin's case study research proposes using six steps:

- Determine and define the research questions

- Select the cases and determine data gathering and analysis techniques

- Prepare to collect the data

- Collect data in the field

- Evaluate and analyze the data

- Prepare the report (2003).

Type of Design

There are various manners in which to compose a case study. One is by handling each case as a separate chapter; another is to treat the case study as a story. During the preparation process, researchers critically examine the document, looking for ways the study is incomplete. The case study method and design worked well with this study due to its ability to answer the research questions. Yin (2003, p. 39) states single-case study is an appropriate design under several circumstances, and five rationales are provided:

1. One rationale is for a single case when it represents the critical case in testing a well-formulated theory.

2. A second rationale is for a single case when the case represents an extreme case or a unique case.

3. A third rationale is the representative or typical case. The lessons learned from these cases are assumed to be informative about the experiences of the average person or institution.

4. A fourth rationale is the revelatory case. This situation exists when an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation.

5. A fifth rationale is the longitudinal case of studying the same single case at two or more different points in time.

This case study follows the third rationale, which is a typical case.

Another case study researcher, Merriam (1988), further states "a descriptive study is one which is undertaken when description and explanation are sought" (Merriam, 1988, p.27). He goes on to state that a case study can also include data gathered by a survey instrument. In this case study data was collected through surveys of all participants.

In responding to the research questions, this case study used a survey and personal interviews. Both of these strategies were used in responding to this study's research questions. The participants initially responded to a survey which listed the 15 strategies from the National Center for Dropout Prevention. After the surveys were returned, the researcher then met personally with each participant and solicited further responses.

The Participants

The participants were all former students of the selected urban high school. All the participants selected the alternative school as a school of last choice. The participants were selected from a number of former high school students who had graduated and enrolled in college. All the participants were economically disadvantaged youth, several of whom came from a single parent household. Several of the participants were immigrants whose parents had migrated to the United States in search of a better job.

Robert

Robert came as one of three siblings who enrolled at the charter school. Robert was the youngest of the three siblings and enrolled as a freshman. Robert's two oldest brothers seemed to always be getting into trouble at the charter school. Robert's mother and father were also provided a job at the school. Robert's mother left after a short time and Robert's father worked for about four years at the school. Both parents were very supportive of the school and would attend all parent and administrator or parent and teacher conferences as necessary. Although his older brother graduated from the school, he graduated after dropping out of the school and re-entering. His second oldest brother dropped out of school as did his younger brother who started school when Robert was a junior. Robert seemed to never get into trouble and was always the most focused. Robert did have a younger sister who did start school at the charter school and continued. Robert was very involved in his studies and always had the support of all his teachers. Robert made the honor society and was part of the school chess team. Robert was hired as an instructional tutor while he was attending college and would work during the summer months. Robert completed his bachelor's degree and is currently teaching at the charter school.

Yermina

Yermina transferred to the charter school after being "kicked out" of her previous school. Yermina did have several confrontations with the teachers when she first started. One of the confrontations led to Yermina being arrested. Yermina also made the honor society and was a leader in the campus. During Yermina's senior year, she was elected

to an office of the student council and held a senior class office position. Yermina started to work for the charter holder's accounting office part-time and then lead to full time while Yermina continued with the bachelor's degree program. When Yermina completed the bachelor's degree, she decided to stay as a full time employee.

Maryann

Maryann transferred to the charter school also after being "kicked out" of her school. She had a small baby when she first enrolled at the charter school. One of the benefits of the charter school was that it provided free day care to any girl who had a baby between the ages of seven weeks and three years of age. After three years of age, the youngster could enroll in the full time pre-kindergarten program also at the school. Maryann did not have any type of discipline problems. Maryann also had two younger brothers who did enroll at the school who had also been "kicked out" of their school. The two younger brothers were eventually told to leave the school due to discipline issues. Maryann continued attending the charter school program and graduated. Maryann also worked on a part-time basis tutoring while she was attending her bachelor's program. After working part-time, she moved into the charter holder's accounting office and worked part-time. When Maryann graduated from college, Maryann was offered a full time job teaching for the charter school, which she accepted. Maryann is still working for the charter school.

Ernesto

Ernesto transferred to the charter school from his previous school because he was also "kicked out" of the previous school. Ernesto was a pretty quiet student who worked

hard to make his grades. Ernesto was never in trouble and seldom had any type of issues with discipline. Ernesto was not involved in any discipline issues although Ernesto had been involved in a physical confrontation with an individual at his previous school. This is what caused Ernesto to be expelled from his previous high school.

Fermin

Fermin started school as a first time freshman, which was unusual at the charter school, since it catered to potential or former dropouts. Most of the students transferred after they had "gotten in trouble" at their previous school. Fermin started attending a summer program that was run by the charter holder. The charter school's holder was a non-profit community based organization which had a summer program. Fermin started to attend the summer program as Fermin lived in some apartments next to the school. Fermin started to get tutored by teachers at the charter school before Fermin was a student at the school. When Fermin finally completed the 8th grade level, Fermin enrolled in the charter school as a first time freshman.

Lucy

Lucy transferred into our school also after being "kicked out" of her previous school. Lucy came from a single parent household and was severely economically disadvantaged. Lucy worked very hard to try to help the home situation. Lucy was always very focused on her studies and became a member of the academic team. The academic team would compete against other regular schools often finding the charter school to be the only charter school attending a competition and all other schools were

public schools. Lucy even became a member of the national honor society and received a scholarship to the University of Texas.

Homer

Homer was also a first time freshman when the student enrolled in the charter school. Homer came from a large family with Homer's father owning his own company. Homer was a good student who was part of the academic team, chess club, and graduated in the top ten percent. Homer also accomplished his graduation in three years and was the recipient of a scholarship to the University of Texas. He wound up graduating from the University of Texas.

Maria

Maria transferred to the charter school also economically disadvantaged. Maria came from a single parent household where she did not have a father. Maria's mother struggled to find a job to support Maria and a younger sister. Maria was a good student who struggled with her English and certainly her writing skills. She still was able to become part of the academic team and became the first president of the National Honor Society. When Maria graduated she was a top ten student who graduated salutatorian. Maria received a University of Texas scholarship and graduated in 2008. While Maria is a college graduate, she is not a legal citizen of the United States and thus remains unemployed. This situation has also placed an additional burden on her future studies. Maria last applied to Brown University for her master's degree.

Researcher

The researcher has been in education for 25 years. His experience started as a second grade teacher in a low socio-economic neighborhood in an urban area. The researcher climbed the ladder to teacher specialist, assistant principal, principal, and finally superintendent of a public school. The researcher then went on from public school to becoming a superintendent of a charter school in an urban area. As the leader of this charter school, the researcher implemented many of the strategies discussed in this case study. Despite this it was evident that many students were no more successful at this "second chance" at graduating high school than they were at their first chance. This was the inspiration for this study: the researcher wanted to discover which strategies were effective with the most successful students. In other words, why did some students succeed when so many of their peers did not?

In recognition of his success in dealing with high school dropouts, the researcher was appointed to serve as a member of the National Board for Education Sciences by President George W. Bush. The researcher was also appointed to a state position by Governor Rick Perry as a commissioner to the Texas Juvenile System. It was this appointment, along with his superintendency at the urban charter school, which made the researcher acutely aware of the difficulties Hispanic students face in completing their high school diplomas. The researcher was also elected as a college trustee. Through this experience, the researcher noted that even when Hispanics successfully graduated high school relatively few enrolled in colleges or universities. These experiences engender a profound concern for the educational attainment of Hispanic students, leading the

researcher to delve more deeply into why some Hispanic students complete their education regardless of the obstacles they face.

Student Demographics

The school is located in a large urban city and has been in existence since 1973. It started as a private alternative school to combat the Hispanic "pushout" problem taking place within the inner city schools. The school started in a garage with very few students coming from some of the schools located in the east end of this large urban city. The school demographics are shown in Figures 2 and 3, as well as listed below:

- Enrollment is mostly Hispanic with a population of over 90 percent

- Economically disadvantaged population has been over 60 percent

- Mobility rate has been over 50 percent which is considered very high for a high school

- At-risk population has been over 70 percent
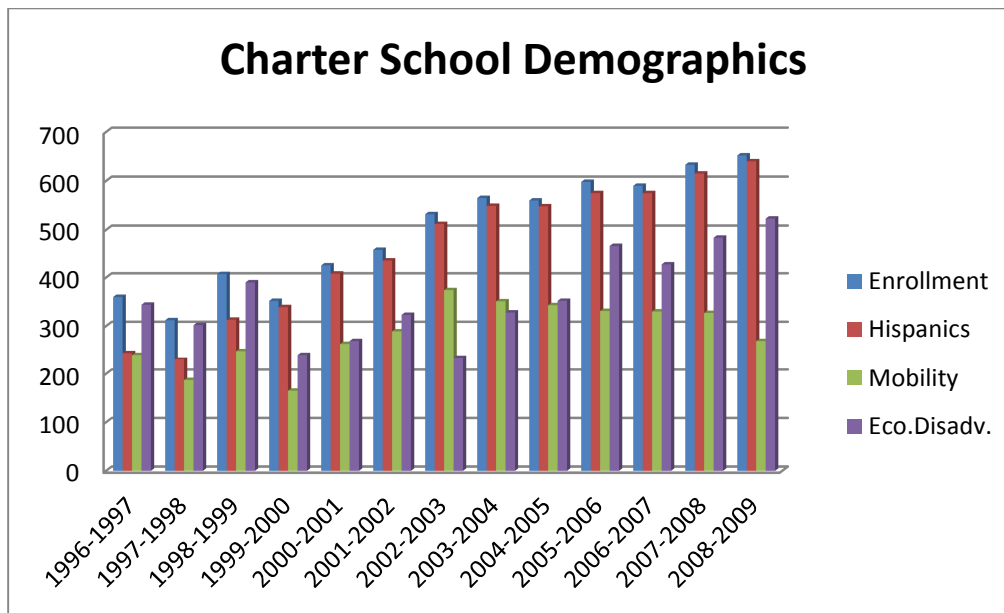
FIGURE 2. Charter school demographics, Texas Education Agency 2010
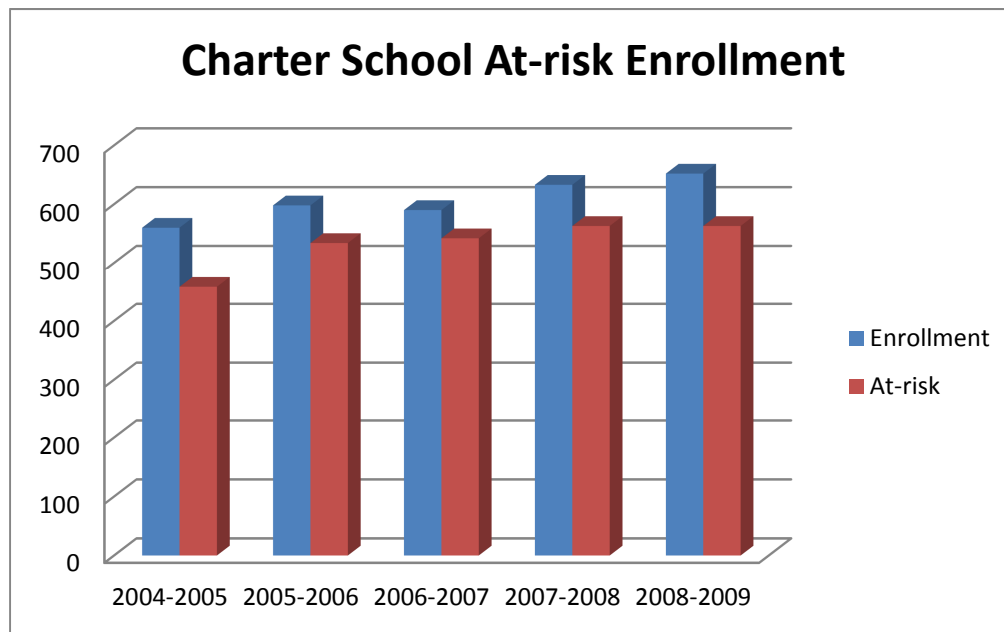
FIGURE 3. At-risk enrollment

Procedures for Case Study

In this study, the participants completed a survey of questions created from the fifteen dropout prevention strategies. After completing the survey, the participants were interviewed about their survey responses. The responses were analyzed in Chapter IV of this study. Finally, teachers were asked to complete a survey created from the fifteen dropout prevention strategies. Through qualitative research design, the relationships and resulting interactions of former students will be compiled, analyzed, and compared. The case study was written in narrative form and provided insight and understanding into the perceptions of students and staff at the school examined in this study.

Qualitative methods are an excellent choice for this research because they allow the researcher to look into the views of research participants while focusing on the natural setting or context in which participants express their views (Creswell, 2005). Patton (1990) notes qualitative methods allow the evaluator to study selected issues, cases, or events in depth and detail. Patton further notes data collection is not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis. This allows for a level of depth and detail that quantitative strategies will not provide (Patton, 1990).

Study Panel

The student study group consisted of graduates who were successful former students of an urban charter school in a large city. This panel met the criteria of success by graduating high school and enrolling in college. All but one eventually completed a bachelor's degree, although at the time of the study all had yet to complete their studies. The survey was sent to twelve students, eight of whom completed and returned it. The

researcher used these eight students for his study. These students all came from similar backgrounds and selected the school based on need. Each of these students chose to attend the charter school as a last alternative for achieving their high school education. Each student qualified for free and reduced-cost lunch during the time that they were in high school. Additionally, all of the students were a minimum of one grade level behind in their reading and math capabilities at the time of their enrollment. Some of the students came from single parent backgrounds while others had both parents at home. To protect their identity, each participant received a pseudonym which was used throughout the study.

The teachers at the charter school consisted of two groups. One small core group had taught at the school for several years, including one veteran teacher with nineteen years of service at the school by the completion of the study. These teachers were highly supportive of the agency's mission and experienced in educating at-risk students. Most had personally participated in developing the charter school's mission and formulating the school's goals. The second and far larger group consisted of teachers with less than three years of experience at the school, many with only one year. Most of these were uncertified and new to the teaching profession. Some were talented, dedicated teachers, but all in this group lacked experience.

The staff study group was selected because each was an experienced teacher employed at the school during the period of enrollment of the surveyed students. Each is a member of the first group of teachers described above. The researcher selected a

group of eight teachers, of which only four returned the survey. The researcher used these four teachers in the study.

Approaches for Data Collection

The researcher collected data through an open-ended survey and interviews. The idea for qualitative research is to select key participants who will help best answer the research questions. A total of 12 students were invited to participate in the study of which a total of eight students did complete the survey. The participants are all former at-risk, Hispanic students who attended the charter school in an urban district.

Open-ended Survey

The researcher used an open-ended survey to collect data in a very time-effective and applicable manner for former high school students. This process focused on the questions and saved time.

Interview

Interviews occurred once the open-ended survey was completed. The purpose of the interview was to clarify answers to the questions on the survey and to solicit more in-depth responses. The students were selected from a group of former charter school graduates. The school is based in the low-income area in Houston and is seen as a last chance school. The interviews took place at appropriate locations the participants selected.

Interviewee Selection

Each interviewee was a successful high school graduate of an urban inner city alternative charter school. They were selected from a list comprised by the researcher of

former graduates who had or were attending college, some of whom had obtained college degrees.

Data Reporting

Data was reported through the use of well-ordered matrices. The advantage of this format is that it permits researcher to "cross" two lists of data in an easily readable table (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It also permits the data to be presented by the strength or intensity of a selected variable. The data was further placed in a meta-matrix in order to highlight the contrasts in the data.

Limitations

The eight survey students attended the school over a six-year period and were not concurrently enrolled.

School History

The school was situated in the Houston's east side and had been in existence since 1973. The school originated as an after school program for students at-risk of dropping out of school. It then started to contract with the large urban district to take students who were at-risk of dropping out of school and provide them a second chance to complete their high school education. The school started with about 20 students housed in a garage in 1973. In 1996, the school made a transition from a private entity into a public school when it was granted one of Texas' original twenty open enrollment charters under the authority of the Texas Education Agency.

Enrolling approximately 250 students during that first year as a public school, it now serves over 650 students. The school receives state funding based on enrollment

and attendance and federal funding through the Title Programs. According to the 2008-2009 Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report, 98 percent of the students attending this charter school are Hispanic and 80 percent are considered low-income.

The staff, according to the same AEIS report, had 37 teachers during the 2002-2009 school year. Of these, 5.4 percent were Asian, 21.6 were African-American, 24.3 percent were white, and 48.6 percent were Hispanic. First year teachers comprised 13.5 percent of the staff, 51.4 percent had taught between one and five years, and 35.1 percent taught more than six years. It is clear that 64.9 percent of the staff had taught six or fewer years.

Conclusions

This chapter focused on the methodology used in the qualitative design for the case study. The process used involved surveys and interviews with eight participants who were formerly high school students at an at-risk charter school in an urban area. The following chapter includes the descriptive analysis of the data along with person interviews.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The idea for this case study began in 2000 when the researcher first started to
work directly with highly at-risk urban Hispanic high school students. Although the
dropout rate among these students was quite high at the time of study, some did graduate
and continue on to college. This study aimed to determine what factors or strategies
allowed some students to succeed while many of their peers with identical backgrounds
failed to complete their education by addressing the following questions:

1. To what extent did students perceive that the fifteen strategies identified by
   the National Dropout Prevention Center influenced their decision to remain
   in school and graduate?

2. What other positive influences beyond the identified strategies were
   mentioned by the participating students and staff as contributing to their
   graduation?

This study examined the fifteen strategies identified by the National Dropout
Prevention Center and compared them to the self-reported experiences of Hispanic
charter high school students. In this way, the study aimed to measure which of the
recommended strategies were most effective in preventing dropouts in a Hispanic
student population. In addition, the study sought to identify other positive influences, as
described by teachers and administrators, which may have contributed to these students'
successful completion of high school. This chapter will describe and analyze both

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student and teacher responses to the questionnaire to measure how well the recommended strategies aligned with these participants' perceptions.

Participants in the Study

To identify a pool of potential participants for the study, the researcher reviewed the academic records of graduates from the selected school and compiled a list of students who had graduated and were attending college at the time of the study. Questionnaires were sent to twelve selected graduates who met the study's criteria. Eight of the twelve former students responded to the questionnaire. Each of these eight students came from low-income families and participated in the free lunch program at the charter school; four came from single-family homes. The participants were chosen because they had successfully graduated from high school and were either currently enrolled in college or had already completed a bachelor's degree. In addition to the eight former students, four teachers from the charter school participated in this study.

The charter school in question is operated by a non-profit organization founded in 1973. The organization primarily targets Hispanic students who have dropped out of high school in the East End community of Houston, Texas. After approximately fifteen years, the organization broadened its scope by adding a health and human services division to focus on drug intervention and adult education programs, including pre-GED, GED, English as a Second Language, and Civics classes.

This particular study addressed the problem of a rising high school dropout rate among Hispanic students in Texas schools by researching an alternative school which specifically targeted and welcomed students who had previously failed at other schools.

Four years of data clearly indicate that this school mirrored statewide trends.   In this alternative high school, as in the state of Texas, the number of dropouts continued to rise while the percentage of students completing high school continued to drop. Given such a negative trend, this study is significant because it may help identify strategies that charter schools with Hispanic high school students could use to improve the rate of successful graduation by examining what worked with students able to succeed in an environment where their peers could not. Figure 4 shows the graduation versus dropout data for the at-risk charter school.
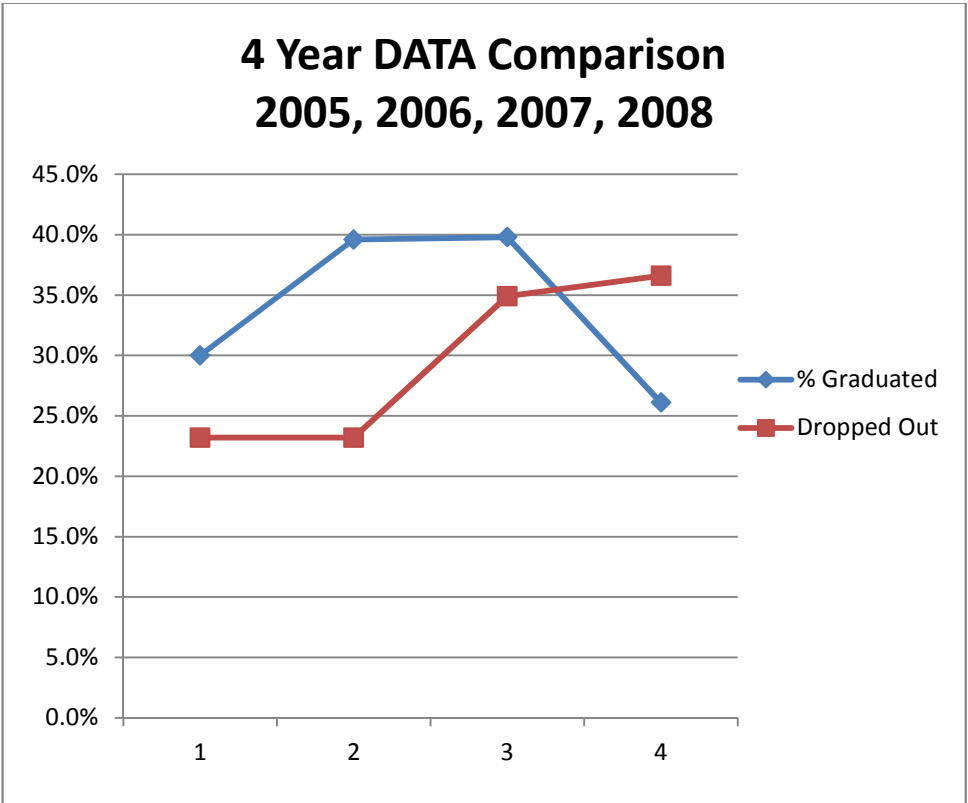
FIGURE 4. Four year high school data comparison

Type of Descriptive Study

According to Miles (1994, p. 101), there are several types of descriptive displays. One is partially ordered in which a project is primarily in an exploratory, opening up stage. The second is a context chart in which the intent is to uncover and describe what is happening in a local setting. In this explanation, one may utilize the checklist matrix. The third form is the time-oriented display, typically used for event listing, event-state network, and other time-oriented matrices. The fourth type is a role-ordered matrix, a display which examines the interaction of people in their roles. The fifth and final version is the conceptually oriented display, which is less exploratory in nature and involves a fairly clearly defined set of key variables. The researcher used several of these matrices to present the data.

The primary motivation behind this descriptive study was to understand which variables affected a students' choice or ability to continue their high school education and to graduate successfully. The study was designed to discover what exactly the students who graduated and enrolled in college did differently than those who dropped out.

The questionnaire sent to study participants was based on the National Dropout Prevention Center's fifteen strategies designed to keep students in school and help them graduate. The survey asked students to what extent they had used or experienced these fifteen strategies during their time at the charter school. Based on their personal experiences, the students answered each of the questions with a score of 1 through 4 via a Likert Scale.

The Likert Scale is defined as follows:

1 = not experienced

2 = somewhat experienced

3 = frequently experienced

4 = greatly experienced

TABLE 3. Student Responses

PARTICIPANTS	Q1 Systemic Renewal	Q2 Community Collaboration	Q3 Safe Learning Environments	Q4 Family Engagement	Q5 Early Childhood Education	Q6 Early Literacy Development	Q7 Mentoring/ Tutoring/	Q8 Service Learning	Q9 Alternative Schooling	Q10 After School Opportunities	Q11 Professional Development	Q12 Active Learning	Q13 Educational Technology	Q14 Individualized Instruction	Q15 Career and Technology Education	AVERAGES
1-M	2	3	1	1	4	1	2	1	4	1	1	2	2	1	1	1.8
2-H	4	4	4	4	1	1	2	4	4	4	2	4	4	1	1	3.0
3-L	2	4	2	4	4	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	1	1	3.1
4-F	3	3	1	4	1	1	2	3	3	4	3	3	2	1	1	2.3
5-R	2	4	1	4	1	1	2	3	3	4	3	3	2	1	1	2.3
6-E	3	3	3	1	3	2	2	3	2	3	1	3	1	2	3	2.3
7-Y	2	3	1	1	4	1	2	1	4	1	1	2	2	1	1	1.8
8-M	2	4	1	2	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	2	2	1	1	1.6
Average on questions	2.5	3.5	1.8	2.6	2.4	1.3	2.1	2.5	2.9	2.8	2.1	2.9	2.3	1.1	1.3	

These answers carried weighted scores, with 4 being most favorable and 1 being least favorable to the question. From these weighted scores, the average answer score for each question was then calculated. Most of the averages fell between 1.6 and 3.1, with a standard deviation from .31 to 1.51. Table 3 shows a detailed matrix of each student's response to each question on the survey.

Data Reporting

Data were reported through the use of well-ordered matrices. The advantage of this format is it permits the researcher to "cross" two lists of data in an easily readable table (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It also permits the data to be presented by the strength or intensity of a selected variable. The data were further placed in a meta-matrix in order to highlight the contrasts in the data.

Themed Grouping

In an effort to better explain the results, the student answers have been divided into three categories based on average scores. The first category shows the highest scores and includes five questions, with results in the range of 2.6 to 3.5; the second category shows the middle scores and includes six questions, with results in the range of 2.1 to 2.5; and the third category shows the lowest scores and includes four questions, with results in the range of 1.1 to 1.8.

Table 4 shows the average answer score for each question of the survey, ranked from highest to lowest, and the following section will analyze each of these fifteen questions individually, grouped according to the three sets.

TABLE 4. Overall Participants' Scores – Highest to Lowest

Outcomes By Score - Highest to Lowest	Score
School-Community - Collaboration	3.5
Alternative Schooling	2.9
Active Learning	2.9
After-School Opportunities	2.8
Family Engagement	2.6
Systemic Renewal	2.5
Service Learning	2.5
Early Childhood Education	2.4
Educational Technology	2.3
Mentoring/Tutoring	2.1
Professional Development	2.1
Safe Learning Environment	1.8
Early Literacy Development	1.3
Career and Technology Education	1.3
Individualized Instruction	1.1

Category 1: Highest Average Scores

The first category includes the highest average scores, ranging from 2.6 to 3.5. This group includes five questions: Community Collaborative Support, Alternative Schooling, Active Learning, After-School Opportunities, and Family Engagement.

Community collaborative support

Communities can enhance the interest of schools by providing collective support and sustaining the infrastructure so that students can continue to grow and achieve. Partnerships allow organizations or educators in large cities to bring in resources needed to reach their goals, form relationships with community businesses, or to share information about the organization (Kezar, 2010).

This question asked students if they experienced a supportive environment where they thrived and achieved academically. For example, did their school-community collaborate with other groups or agencies to establish an educational community? Some of the student responses follow:

> Homer: "I experienced that Mr. Money (former CEO) helped us a lot in the various programs. He looked for money."

> Maria: "One of the main reasons for my going to the school was to get services for pregnancy. Dari McCount, the school nurse, was there for all the pregnant girls and I succeeded due to Dari McCount."

> Ernesto: "Yes, because throughout the whole process we saw the environment was to have the involvement of the community."

The following table, Table 5, notes the student responses for community collaboration.

TABLE 5. Community Collaboration

Students	*Q 2 – School and Community Collaboration*
2-H	4
3-L	4
5-R	4
8-M	4

Alternative schooling

Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options to remain in school until graduation by offering programs which focus their attention on individual

social needs. Traditional programs only focus on academic requirements, but alternative

programs can go beyond the academics and reach into the social needs of the students.

This question asked the participants if any had experienced any form of alternative

school environment. Because all of the participants chose to attend the charter school in

lieu of their neighborhood high school, they all had experienced alternative schooling.

Though McNulty and Roseboro (2009) find that students in alternative schooling are

generally labeled as delinquents and tend toward conflict with teachers and

administrators, the high average score to this question in the study reveals that the

participants in this study did not find themselves at odds with their teachers. Rather, the

responses describe how students were able to establish positive relationships with their

teachers.

> Homer: "Yes, Mr. Wow provided some of these strategies. It changed my life."

> Ernesto: "Yes with Mr. Wow, Jim Chaps and Mr. Hymm. All their lesson plans.
> You would never see students falling asleep."

> Robert: "At the charter school, the teacher would show you how to do it that
> there was a different process about putting it together."

Table 6 notes the student responses for alternative education.

TABLE 6. Alternative Education

Students	Q 9 – Alternative Schools
1-M	4
2-H	4
3-L	4
7-Y	4
8-M	4

Active learning

Active learning endorses the teaching methods through engaging and involving students in the learning process. When educators effectively use and model different ways to learn, students discover new and creative ways to solve problems. For example, Ruhl discusses a situation where teachers used a teaching method of pausing three times for two minutes each during a lecture. This study concluded students were able to learn more with teachers talking less or in a nontraditional manner. (Ruhl, Hughes, & Schloss, 1987).

The participants were asked if they had experienced any creative teaching strategies and involvement, which engaged them in active learning activities. An example of this method would involve teachers guiding students in creative ways to solve problems. As shown in the responses below, the students in this study indicated several of their teachers had provided active instruction.

> Fermin: "I remember specifically Mr. Hymm and how he taught. He was very active. He had his classroom filled with a lot of learning activities."

> Ernesto: "Yes, with Mr. Wow, Jim Chaps and Mr. Hymm. All their lesson plans. You would never see students sleeping. All of them engaged their students."

> Maryann: "Mr. Wow was a very active. We did rockets. Measuring something. Labs. Fish. Life experiences. Ms. Moon always had us do reflections, translations. Ms. Plumb would have us look at animal farms."

The following table (Table 7) notes the student responses for active learning.

TABLE 7. Active Learning

Students	Q 12 – Active Learning
4-F	3
5-R	3
6-E	3
1-M	2
7-Y	2
8-M	2

After-school opportunities

Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs helping students retain learning throughout the day or year and inspire interest in a variety of areas. Such experiences are especially important for students at risk of school failure because they fill the afternoons with constructive and engaging activities. According to Halpern (2002), 20 to 25 percent of low and moderate income urban children between the ages of 6 to 14 spend three to five hours a week in after school programs. Brown and Beckett (2007) state that alternative schools are usually seen as having teachers who want to leave or as dumping grounds for at-risk students.

The participants were asked if they had participated in any type of after school program throughout their school years. This question scored highly for several participants, since some of the students did participate in the after-school program offered by the charter school. Table 8 notes the student responses for after-school programs. Two of the student responses are noted below:

Robert: "I participated in an elementary after-school program. It was through the

parks and recreation program. In middle school, we had an after-school

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program at the Guadalupe Plaza. We had several activities we chose

from. You would go according to the choices and the program lasted

until 5:00 p.m."

Fermin: "Yes, I did. I participated in after school programs and helped Mr.

Wow. I was in junior national honor society (sic). I was also in Club

Cultura and the Leadership Club."

TABLE 8. After-School Programs

Students	Q 10 – After-school Programs
2-H	4
3-L	4
4-F	4
5-R	4

Family engagement

The research in chapter 2 consistently finds one of the most accurate predictors

of a student's success in school is based on family engagement. Family engagement

seemed to have a direct, positive effect on children's achievement. The participants

were asked if they experienced family or guardian involvement in their education, such

as parental attendance at student-teacher conferences or school-sponsored activities.

In this study, all participants reported some type of family engagement, with the

exception of two. One of the participants stated that the school's requirement that

parents and students pick up the report cards during "Report Card Night" was very

successful; even though the teachers did not speak Spanish, the participant translated for

the parent. Another participant noted his family always had dinner together even though

their apartment was very cramped. Table 9 notes the student responses for family

engagement. These responses and those below, reveal how important parent

involvement was to the participants.

> Fermin: "I wanted to put my mother in this. My dad helped around but he was
>
> not really involved. My mother would come to report card night or
>
> meetings with teachers. She was really involved in what I was doing
>
> academically."
>
> Maryann: "Yes. My mother was very involved with open house or record card
>
> night. I used to live pretty far but she would make sure that I was always
>
> taking care of all the tardies. She was very involved."
>
> Robert: "Yes, very true. I give a lot of credit to my mother. She was always
>
> interested in what we did during the day. She would always come to
>
> school and to report card night. She was always motivating me to go to
>
> college. She always encouraged me. We always had dinner as a family.
>
> We were cramped up but it meant a lot."

TABLE 9. Family Engagement

Students	Q 4 – Family Engagement
2-H	4
3-L	4
4-F	4
5-R	4

Category 2: Middle Average Scores

The second category includes the middle average scores, ranging from 2.1 to 2.5. This group includes six questions: Systemic Renewal, Service Learning, Early Childhood Education, Educational Technology, Mentoring/Tutoring, and Professional Development.

Systemic renewal

Systemic renewal is the process for continuing to evaluate goals and objectives relating to school policies, practices, and organizational structures. These are seen in relation to how they impact the diverse group of learners. According to Epstein and Sheldon (2002), systemic renewal can have a corrective effect on serious attendance problems. They note that there has to be a change in the way schools are structured. They further state that the relationships students have with teachers also need to change. Another example of systemic renewal would be an after-school tutorial program which targets specific at-risk students and has clear, measurable objectives.

For this question, students were asked if, in their experience, their charter school had clear goals and objectives to help them succeed. Though this question seemed more difficult for the participants to understand, example responses are shown below, and table 10 notes all student responses for systemic renewal.

> Homer: "When I got there, I was just thinking that the school was just getting us to get to graduate, but when I started to see the programs, like Early College, it getting students to graduate in three years, etc., I was convinced it was a great school."

Fermin: "I noticed that one of the main goals or clear goals was that they had to

get students to succeed."

TABLE 10. Systemic Renewal

TABLE 10. Systemic Renewal	
Students	*Q 1 – Systematic Renewal*
2-H	4
4-F	3
6-E	3
7-Y	2

Service learning

The service learning strategy associates purposeful community service activities

with the learning taking place for academics. This method endorses several key factors

such as personal and social growth, civic responsibility, and career development. It can

serve as a dynamic agent for effective school reform. An example of this would be

involvement in a service oriented club that would require the student to perform service

activities prior to graduation. Table 11 notes the student responses for service learning,

with corresponding quotes below.

Fermin: "It helped me grow; we helped out in the community."

Robert: "Yes. This was done at YES. We did Earth Day and we would come to

school and pick up trash from the community."

Ernesto: "We did receive a lot of service learning."

Maryann: "There was nothing that required us to do service learning. Club

Cultura took kids and fed others."

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TABLE 11. Service Learning

Students	Q 8 – Service Learning
4-F	3
5-R	3
6-E	3
1-M	1
7-Y	1
8-M	1

Early childhood education

Early intervention to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establishes the important foundation for effective learning in the students' futures. Early childhood education may have a particularly strong effect on native Spanish-speaking students, as Magnuson finds preschool has a greater positive effect (22 percent increase) on the English language proficiency of children of immigrant mothers than it does for other children (Johnson De Feyter, 2009).

The participants were asked if they had experienced any literacy development programs prior to enrolling in public school. An example of this would be home-based programs where parents receive instruction on how to help their children develop reading skills. Many of the participants of this study indicated they had attended pre-kindergarten or even a summer school program. Table 12 notes the student responses for early childhood education.

Yermina: "I went to pre-kindergarten school and then to a summer program they held at Milby High School. We would learn about preparing us for the future."

Maryann: "I went to kindergarten. I remember that my mother changed my birth

certificate so I could be eligible."

Lucy: "Yes, I went to preschool."

TABLE 12. Early Childhood Education

TABLE 12. Early Childhood Education	
Students	Q 5 – Early Childhood Education
1-M	4
3-L	4
7-Y	4

Educational technology

Technology offers schools the best opportunities for addressing the various types of learning styles. It further allows school the convenience to approach multiple intelligences in their curriculum through technology. Reimer and Smink report technology offers opportunities for delivering instruction engaging students not successful in traditional learning contexts (Reimer and Smink, 2005).

The participants were asked if they had experienced any type of educational technology in courses throughout their educational experience. While technology is a highly suggested strategy, the participants unfortunately did not receive much in their curriculum. Table 13 notes the student responses for technology, and example responses are as follows:

Fermin: "The only technology we had was in BCIS. We did work with Mr. Psych

and did get to speak to him about Microsoft word, Power Point, etc."

Yermina: "Not really. The only technology was with Boomer (instructor)."

Maryann: "We had Boomer (contracted instructor), but he did not want to be a

teacher."

TABLE 13. Technology

Students	Q 13 – Technology
1-M	2
4-F	2
5-R	2
7-Y	2
8-M	2

Mentoring/Tutoring

Mentoring is a one-on-one, caring, supportive relationship between mentor and mentee that is based on trust. Tutoring, also a one-on-one activity, focuses on academics and is an effective strategy to address specific needs such as reading, writing, or math competencies. Students need positive role models or mentors that derive from the community organizations, churches, social agencies, or youth groups. "Highly advantaged individuals often have redundant social supports and opportunities that fill any gaps that might occur if the family fails in some way" notes Powell (1997, p. 11).

Given the large number of area schools promoting mentoring programs, it was presumed most students would have reported extensive use during their middle school years. However, as revealed in the example responses, this was not the case.

Maria: "My little sister did have a mentor, but I did not have one."

Homer: "It was not until I got to college that I had a mentor. While I was in high

school, I did not have one. Mentors do work as the mentor which I was

assigned in college helped me to develop study skills, time management,

and helped me put a schedule in place."

Robert: "It was very informal. My older brothers sort of acted as mentors but I

was never assigned a mentor through the school."

Yermina: "I did not actually have a mentor program."

The following table (Table 14) notes the student responses for mentoring/tutoring.

TABLE 14. Mentoring/Tutoring

Students	Q 7 – Mentoring/Tutoring
1-M	2
2-H	2
4-F	2
5-R	2
6-E	2
7-Y	2

Professional development

"Teachers who work with youth at high risk of academic failure need to feel

supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques,

and innovative strategies" (Reimer and Smink, 2005, p.26). Hirsh and Hord (2009)

discuss the need for schools to adopt a vision which encompasses the values upon which

the school is founded. They go on to add schools need to allow teachers to meet for staff

development. Especially in high at-risk minority schools, staff development is essential to assist teachers in knowing the population of students they serve.

In this study, the participants were asked if they had observed their school providing teachers with such support. To answer positively, students would need to have to have knowledge that their teachers attended workshops relating to at-risk students. However, as shown in the following responses, students did not perceive a strong staff development program at their charter school.

> Maria: "No. I did not feel that the teachers dealt with the different types of
>
> student environments."
>
> Ernesto: "The teachers did not understand where we, the students, were coming
>
> from as we had a lot of things going on at home."
>
> Yermina: "The Health and Human Services side of the organization did have
>
> workshops but the school did not."

Table 15 notes the student responses for staff development.

TABLE 15. Staff Development

Students	Q 11 – Professional Staff Development
1-M	1
6-E	1
7-Y	1
8-M	1

Category 3: Lowest Average Scores

The third category includes the lowest average scores, ranging from 1.1 to 1.8. This group includes four questions: Safe Learning Environment, Early Literacy Development, Career and Technology Education, and Individualized Instruction.

Safe learning environment

A safe learning environment is necessary for education because it provides daily experiences at all grade levels enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students. Therefore, a comprehensive violence prevention plan, including conflict resolution, is normally required in schools. Although the No Child Left Behind act allows students to leave persistently dangerous schools, students who are already attending an alternative school must be ensured a safe learning environment as well. The participants were asked if their school provided measures to make them feel safe. An example of providing a safe learning environment would be a school that had a comprehensive violence prevention plan, including information for students about school violence and what to do in situations that may become violent.

Table 16 notes that such was not the case in the participants' experiences, as further evidenced by their responses below.

Maryann: "I do not recall there being any type of program to reduce violence."

Fermin: "(the school) had cops and security running around but that was not enough. I got to witness a fight in the bathroom while I was washing my hands. I witnessed no security around. I didn't feel safe like going to the bathroom."

Robert: "At times, I did not feel safe at the school. There were drugs at the

school. Random searches were provided but fights were always

happening."

TABLE 16. Safe Learning Environment

Students	Q 3 – Safe Learning
1-M	1
4-F	1
5-R	1
7-Y	1
8-M	1

Early literacy development

Birth-to-five interventions are very important to the development of a child. The

interactions young children experience allow for the building of language, reading, and

writing. It further enhances the brain development of a child which will ultimately assist

in his classroom experiences in the primary grades. Specifically, early literacy targets to

help low achieving students improve their reading and writing skills can establish a

strong foundation in learning. Noted is a California program titled Opportunity Knocks

focused on improving school attendance and dropout rates among teens in selected

homes. Then another successful program was the Guadalupe Program, which has been

in existence for 37 years and serves children in poverty areas.

For this question, the participants were asked if they ever experienced an early

childhood educational program such as pre-kindergarten, Head Start or a private

preschool. However, the participants in this study did not participate in any type of early

literacy program, as can be seen in their responses below and in Table 17.

> Homer: "I did not like anything early in my school years. I did not receive any
>
> > type of program."
>
> Ernesto: "We never got to that point of getting any type of help."
>
> Yermina: "I did not have any type of program."
>
> Maria: "I did not recall anything."

TABLE 17. Early Literacy Development

Students	*Q 6 – Early Literacy Development*
1-M	1
2-H	1
4-F	1
5-R	1
7-Y	1
8-M	1

Career and technology education

"A quality career and technology program and a related guidance program are

essential for all students. School-to-work programs recognize that youth need specific

skills to prepare them to measure up to the increased demands of today's workplace"

(Reiner and Smink, 2005, p.34). Career and technology programs can be successful

even for high school dropouts, as evidenced by the College, Career, and Technology

Academy (CCTA), a college-connected dropout recovery school formed by Pharr-San

Juan-Alamo and South Texas College.

The participants were asked if they had experienced any type of career and technology program which may have included a school-to-work program. These participants did not receive any type of strong career and technology program as noted in their comments below and Table 18.

Homer: "I did not experience this school to work curriculum."

Fermin: "There was not a school-to-work program."

Yermina: "We did not experience any career and technology program."

Maryann: "We did not have any type of program."

TABLE 18. Career and Technology Program

Students	Q 15 – Career and Technology Program
1-M	1
2-H	1
3-L	1
4-F	1
5-R	1
7-Y	1
8-M	1

Individualized instruction

Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences. The participants were asked if they had noted any individualized instructional programs which specifically helped them graduate with a high school diploma. An example of this

would be being involved in individualized instruction either through special education, English-as-a-Second Language program or regular course work.

In chapter 2, Alexandrowicz states that it is only when they reach an adequate threshold level of competency in speaking, listening, reading and writing will they have greater opportunities to succeed academically at their grade level in English (1996). The participant responses are as follows in Table 19.

Fermin: "Not really."

Robert: "No."

Lucy: "None."

Maria: "I did not see it only under Ms. Plumb."

TABLE 19. Individualized Education Plan

Students	*Q 14 – Individualized Instructional Plan*
1-M	1
2-H	1
3-L	1
4-F	1
5-R	1
7-Y	1
8-M	1

Individual Student Responses

Of the participant's individual responses, the participants were of varying ages. Some of the participants enrolled in the school when it was seen more as a dropout prevention or drop out re-entry program. Thus, we see a very different disparity in the averages.

Follow Up Questions

The first follow up question the researcher asked was in regards to the

participant's parents' education. One hundred percent of the students answered their

parents had dropped out of school. With these types of statistics, the odds were stacked

against these students completing their high school diploma and the chances of them

continuing on to college were slimmer still.

Seventy-five percent of the students had attended two or more high schools.

Only 25 percent of the students had attended one high school. Fifty percent of the

students who attended two or more high schools did because of discipline issues. Fifty

percent of the students attributed the success of a high school diploma to their teachers at

the charter school and to the small classes of the charter school. Twenty-five percent of

the participants noted that their parents played a vital role in their education. Regardless

of their parents' education level, the parents were still a motivating factor in supporting

their son or daughter through high school.

Teachers' Responses

The teachers were asked the same questions as the students. The teachers

responded in a different manner than the students. The teachers' responses are noted in

Table 20 below.

TABLE 20.   Teachers' Responses

Answers	1	2	3	4
Systemic Renewal	0	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)
School-Community Collaboration	0	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)
Safe Learning Environment	50% (2)	0	25% (1)	25% (1)

TABLE 20. Teachers' Responses Continued.

Answers	1	2	3	4
Family Engagement	0	75% (3)	0	25% (1)
Early Childhood Education	50% (2)	0	25% (1)	25% (1)
Early Literacy Development	25% (1)	25% (1)	25% (1)	25% (1)
Mentoring/Tutoring	0	50% (1)	25% (1)	25% (1)
Service Learning	0	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)
After-School Programs	0	0	25% (1)	75% (3)
Alternative Education	0	0	50% (2)	50% (2)
Staff Development	25% (1)	0	25% (1)	50% (2)
Active Learning	0	25% (1)	50% (2)	25% (1)
Technology	0	0	75% (3)	25% (1)
Individualized Education Plan	0	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)
Career and Technology Programs	25% (1)	0	50% (2)	25% (1)

Explanation of Answers

Lowest Responses

Most of the teachers' answers scored in either the 3 or 4 responses meaning that

they witnessed most of the characteristics. The answers which were on the lower end

were Safe Learning Environment, Early Childhood Education, Family Engagement, and

Mentoring/ Tutoring.

The first characteristic to address is Safe Learning Environment. The school was

an alternative charter high school which enrolled many students who had had previous

school discipline issues. Consequently, when the students first enrolled in the school,

many students brought their previous discipline issues to the new school. The school did

have more than the normal fights and most of the fights were where the student had had

previous run-ins with the person he was fighting. So, it is clear why the teachers scored

this low on their answers. The teachers often had to go into the hallways and stop student fights.

 Early Childhood Education also earned a very low score by the teachers. The teachers rarely had any type of conversations with the students regarding previous school experiences. Most of the information the teachers could access was middle school or other high school grades. So, teachers were generally unaware of any impact made on their students by Early Childhood Education programs.

Family Engagement also had one of the lowest scores by the teachers. From the teachers' perspective, highly at-risk high school students rarely had family involved in their education. Teachers felt that their students' parents' involvement in school activities was superficial, limited to attending report card night. They did not see parents as responsive to the concerns of teachers in discipline or academic issues. The teachers' perceptions differed dramatically from those of the eight students who responded to the survey. Perhaps this is because teachers answered the question with all of their students in mind and the parents of successful students where in fact much more involved than those of the overall student body.

Mentoring/Tutoring was an area where the school did not participate in any type of mentoring programs. On one occasion, the school did participate with the Hispanic Government Officials Organization, who would meet with the students during their lunch period and provide mentoring. But this only happened one year and then it stopped. Tutoring also was not provided as a structured program after-school or on Saturdays. Consequently, this area was not scored highly by surveyed teachers.

Highest Responses

Since only four teachers responded to the survey, the highest response answers are those on the questions averaging a three to four for the response. Additionally, these questions also had two or three teachers scoring them with a three or a four.

The one question to which three teachers responded with a four was the question relating to after-school programs. This score seemed to be based on the fact that the agency administered an after-school program, which also ran into the summer months.

There were six other questions to which two individuals scored with a four and these were Systemic Renewal, School-Community Collaboration, Service Learning, Alternative Education, Staff Development, and Individualized Education Plan. The teachers noted these were strategies adopted by the school.

The teachers scored Systemic Renewal highly because they were aware of the school's goals and objectives through participation in campus planning. Teachers participated in annual goal setting through the Site Based Management Committee and creation of the Campus Improvement Plan, so it is easy to see how they supported this question. School-Community Collaboration was highly rated because of the visible community support for the school. The Chief Executive Officer actively promoted the various programs throughout the community. The agency had a yearly Gala, introducing the various programs to community supporters. Service Learning was another strategy teachers felt was successfully utilized by the school. The teachers were frequently involved in service activities with their students. The two teachers who scored this

strategy with a four were both very active in serving the community by sponsoring student service oriented clubs.

Survey teachers also indicated the school adoption of the Alternative Education strategy as a factor. In fact, the charter school was an alternative program and evaluated as such by the Texas Education Agency. Teachers reported this program permitted attention to the unique academic and behavioral needs of their students in creative ways difficult to implement in a traditional program.

Teachers had direct input into the type of staff development, so it is easy to see why they felt this was an important factor. The final area that two staff members scored with a four was the Individualized Education Plan. It is the researcher's perception the teacher respondents confused the terminology of this strategy with Special Education IEP's as non-special populations at this school did not have Individual Education Plans. The teachers were proficient at working individually with all students to meet individual needs, so it is likely that this is why they considered this an important strategy.

Comparing the Results

The following section compares student and teacher responses for each strategy. The students responses are noted in blue and the staff responses are noted in red. The student data are also noted by S_1 and the staff data is noted by S_2 on each graph. Figures 5 through 19 show the comparisons for each particular area from the National Center for Dropout Prevention.

The figures below denote the positive responses of students and staff for each strategy. The numbers reflect the percentage of students and staff who scored each strategy 1 through 4, with 4 being the most positive response.

Systemic Renewal

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	0%	62% (5)	25% (2)	13% (1)
Staff-S[2]	0%	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)

FIGURE 5. Systemic renewal comparison

Findings: This strategy is clearly more apparent to teachers than students. It is clear that the teachers knew more about school goals, policies and organizational structure whereas the students did not know as much about this process.

Community Collaborative Support

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	0%	0%	50% (4)	50% (4)
Staff-S[2]	0%	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)

FIGURE 6. School-community collaboration comparison

Findings: There is a clear indication that students are aware of the school-community collaboration involved in the school. The staff is also clearly aware of all the school-community collaborations and this chart clearly notes this finding.

Safe Learning Environment

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	63% (4)	12% (1)	12% (1)	13% (2)
Staff-S[2]	50% (2)	0%	25% (1)	25% (1)

FIGURE 7. Safe learning comparison

Findings: The evidence points to neither the staff nor the students finding that the
school demonstrated a sound violence prevention plan. The school needed to provide
more information to the students and staff regarding school violence and what to do in
situations to prevent violence.

Family Engagement

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	37% (2)	13% (1)	0%	50% (5)
Staff-S[2]	0%	75% (3)	0%	25% (1)

FIGURE 8. Family engagement comparison

Findings: Findings suggest the teachers did not feel the students had active
parental participation in their children's education. While the majority of the students
felt they did not have parental participation, 44 percent did feel that their parents did
participate. Most of the research notes that minority students from economically
disadvantaged backgrounds normally do not have parent participation in their education.

Early Childhood Education

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	50% (5)	0%	13% (1)	37% (2)
Staff-S[2]	25% (1)	0%	50% (2)	25% (1)

FIGURE 9. Early childhood education comparison

Findings: These findings reveal students did not experience participation in an early childhood development program. The staff's knowledge of the students' participation in an early childhood development program was somewhat limited.

Early Literacy Development

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	75% (6)	25% (2)	0%	0%
Staff-S[2]	25% (1)	25% (1)	25% (1)	25% (1)

FIGURE 10. Early literacy development comparison

Findings: These findings show that over half of the students did not experience any type of early literacy development. The staff also had limited information on the findings. Research strongly indicates that low-income, minority students benefit from structured early literacy development programs.

Mentoring/Tutoring

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	12% (1)	76% (6)	0%	12% (1)
Staff-S[2]	0%	50% (2)	25% (1)	25% (1)

FIGURE 11. Mentoring/tutoring comparison

Findings: These results seem to suggest both the students and the staff noted the importance of a mentoring and tutoring program. Yet, still in both sectors almost half of the respondents felt the students did not participate in a tutoring or mentoring program.

Service Learning

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	37% (3)	0%	37% (3)	26% (2)
Staff-S[2]	0%	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)

FIGURE 12. Service learning comparison

Findings: The evidence points to the staff believing opportunities were provided
for service learning. The student responses did not show the same results. Close to 50
percent of the students felt that they did not have any type of service learning
opportunity.

Alternative Schools

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	0%	13% (1)	24% (2)	63% (5)
Staff-S[2]	0%	0%	50% (2)	50% (2)

FIGURE 13. Alternative schools comparison

Findings: The findings were both strong on the students and the staff with both
showing over 50 percent of either a three or four scores. This probably is due to the fact
that the charter school was considered an alternative school and for many of the students
who enrolled at the charter school it was a last option.

After-school Programs

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	37% (2)	0%	13% (1)	50% (5)
Staff-S[2]	25% (1)	0%	50% (2)	25% (1)

FIGURE 14. After-school program comparison

Findings: The score on the staff is rather high for the after-school program. The charter school where these students attended did offer a strong after-school program where several students from this study participated. The students' scores were found either on the "did not participate" side or the "participation" side. Again, several of the students in this study did participate in the after-school program provided by the charter school.

Staff Development

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	50% (5)	0%	37% (2)	13% (1)
Staff-S[2]	25% (1)	0%	25% (1)	50% (2)

FIGURE 15. Staff development comparison

Findings: These scores almost mirror each other. The students' response showing 50 percent on a low score shows that the students really do not pay much attention to the staff development offered to their teachers. The staff did show over 50 percent showing a favorable response.

Active Learning

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	50% (5)	0%	37% (2)	13% (1)
Staff-S[2]	25% (1)	0%	25% (1)	50% (2)

FIGURE 16. Active learning comparison

Findings: These findings did demonstrate that teachers engaged students with positive active learning strategies. Student responses also support the conclusion that

teachers used these strategies in their lessons.

Technology

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	12% (1)	64% (5)	12% (1)	12% (1)
Staff-S[2]	0%	0%	75% (3)	25% (1)

FIGURE 17. Technology comparison

Findings: The students obviously did not experience the use of technology in

their classes. Teachers clearly expressed a differing opinion, feeling that they were

using technology in their instruction. The explanation for these conflicting views lies in

each group's disparate definition of technology and its use in the classroom. As an

example, teachers accepted older equipment such as an overhead projector or tape

recorders as technology, whereas, the participants narrowly defined technology. For

them, technology was computers, video cameras, and video conferencing. Even more

significantly, when technology was used, teachers utilized it as an instructional tool.

Students did not define this as using technology in their learning. Students were rarely

personally engaged with technology as a learning tool, resulting in the low rating for this

strategy.

Individualized Instructional Program

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	87% (7)	13% (1)	0%	0%
Staff-S[2]	0%	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)

FIGURE 18. Individualized education instruction comparison

Findings: Students did not experience individualized instruction in their learning. Teachers did feel that they used individualized instruction in the delivery of their instruction.

Career and Technology

	1	2	3	4
Students-S[1]	87% (7)	0%	13% (1)	0%
Staff-S[2]	25% (1)	0%	50% (2)	25% (1)

FIGURE 19. Career and technology comparison

Findings: It is quite clear the students did not see or experience any elective career and technology courses in their high school experience. The school did have a potentially valuable partnership with Enron Corporation, Compaq Computers, and DNS Corp. to create a school-to-work technology program. This program was available for all students to take as electives; unfortunately, participant responses indicate this program was not effectively communicated to all students. The teachers, more aware of the program, did feel students had the opportunity to experience career and technology courses.

Conclusions

The idea of identifying specific strategies that will help students complete their high school graduation program was the goal of this study. Currently schools are faced with enormous tasks especially in dealing with at-risk youths who are many times unmotivated, do not have parental support, and involved in gangs. Yet, even with all of

these issues facing today's youth, there are still students who look beyond these issues and not only obtain a high school diploma but continue on with a college degree.

We can conclude that there is no specific dropout strategy any one student was successful in pursing in their education but that it was several and these were all used without any specific map or intention. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings in more detail along with suggested strategies that one can employ in reaching out to at-risk Hispanic high school students.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the case study's findings in terms of both student and staff answers, and then examines them comparatively. It describes how these findings are discussed in the literature and suggests areas for further research. Based on the results of this study, the researcher also gives specific policy suggestions to address the nationwide problem of high school dropouts.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth qualitative study of Hispanic high school students' attitudes toward recommended prevention and retention strategies. This case study examined the relationship between fifteen strategies recommended by the National Center for Dropout Prevention and their actual impact on at-risk Hispanic students who graduated from an alternative high school in a large urban city. Which of these strategies did the students and their teachers perceive as being most successful in helping them obtain a high school diploma? To this end, the study explored two research questions:

1. Which of the 15 identified factors were a positive influence in assisting the at risk students to remain in school and graduate?

2. What other positive influences were mentioned by at-risk students and staff that contributed to their graduation?

The following will discuss the findings of both research questions, broken down into student and teacher groups. Additionally, the discussion will compare and contrast students' perceptions with the literature review in chapter II.

Question 1

The first research question examined which of the National Dropout Prevention Center's fifteen identified factors positively influenced students to remain in school and graduate.

Student results

Student responses demonstrate that there is no single path leading to graduation. Youth experience many obstacles and encounter many choices throughout their school years. The smoothest path for one student may not successfully navigate the obstacles faced by a different student. This chapter focuses on which dropout and retention strategies are authenticated by representatives of the students they are intended to help. The case study identified strategies perceived by students as effective in increasing retention rates. Student responses favored three of the fifteen strategies suggested by the National Dropout Prevention Center as important in their decision to remain in school.

Of the fifteen strategies for helping prevent students from dropping out put forth by the National Dropout Prevention Center, the following three are comparisons to the studies examined in the Chapter II review.

Community collaborative support

The strategy most commonly selected by surveyed students as having a positive influence on their decision to remain in school is Community Collaborative Support.

Community collaborations have long been utilized by public schools. At the turn of the 20th century, John Dewey's *The School and Society* discussed the concept of community schools (Dewey, 1915). More recently, in 1972 six Central New York high school administrators partnered with Syracuse University to start one of the earliest dual credit programs (Syracuse University website, 2012). In recent years, schools have expanded dual credit partnerships as research shows how universities and public schools can work more effectively together, especially "in reaching low-income numbers enrolled in colleges" (Kezar, 2011, p.207).

Federal and state governments have supported the creation of community partnerships through grants to establish 21st Century Community Learning Centers. 21st Century Community Learning Center programs provide academic enrichment in core areas such as math and literacy, during non-school hours, to students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools (Butler, 2010). Changes in family structure have caused schools to look for means to provide additional support to students from low socio-economic backgrounds. One of these ways is through afterschool programs like 21st Century Community Learning Centers that offer not only academic enrichment but also serve as "safe havens" (Sanders, 2006). Safe havens provide cultural opportunities such as art and dance that create connections with students' communities. The researcher partnered with the Harris County Department of Education, which sought the 21st Century Learning Center grant from the Texas Education Agency. This Center served over six hundred students on the campus of the participants surveyed for this research project.

As previously explained in chapter II, Sanders (2001) described several ways in which schools can partner with community organizations. Successful school partnerships can take various forms depending on what problem or goal they seek to address. Student-centered partnerships provide incentives such as awards or scholarships. For example, a partnership with an insurance company awarded two graduates per year of the charter school in this study with college scholarships. Business centered partnerships offer different type of resources including monetary, equipment, or work based training for high school students. The researcher's agency formed a partnership with the Enron Corporation to award internships to students taking a computer maintenance and repair course. Another partnership through Compaq Computers bestowed new computers for the agency's computer lab used by students. A third donation came from DNS Corp who donated server equipment along with an instructor to provide the service training for our students.

 One of the National Dropout Prevention strategies is Family Involvement. Schools can use community collaborations to encourage parents to visit the campuses and involve them in their child's education. Successful schools reach out to Hispanic families by becoming well-versed in the needs of the families in the community (Clark and Dorris, 2006). The researcher involved parents at his own school by partnering with community agencies to offer services ranging from counseling to sessions led by attorneys on immigration law.

Charter schools should conduct comprehensive needs analyses and set clear and precise goals before reaching out to community partners. This will permit more

purposeful collaborations. For example, if the needs analysis indicates a lack of student

motivation is present, then a partnership can assist by providing student awards and

incentives or scholarships. In the researcher's charter school, students were drawn from

schools in the Houston Independent School District. The Houston I.S.D. benefited from

over 2,300 community partners in 1994 according to an article by Sanders & Harvey

(2002). Among the things these partnerships provided were mentors, school equipment,

and awards for improved attendance.

If a school's needs analysis warranted family involvement activities such as

counseling services to parents or family nights, then a family type of collaboration is

effective. Sanders & Harvey (2002) defines family-centered activities as those that

involve the entire family, including parents and students' siblings, in activities such as

parenting workshops, GED and other adult education classes. These activities allow

parents and their children to embrace the school as part of their community. The

researcher's charter school was part of an all-inclusive approach to working with

families. The agency provided GED, citizenship, and ESL classes to parents. The school

offered workshops in computer literacy, immigration, and drug and gang intervention to

student's families. The research and student responses suggest that a comprehensive,

multi-faceted approach methodology is an effective dropout prevention strategy.

According to a report by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools,

charter schools nationwide experience an average funding deficit of $2,247 per student

(Broy, 2011). This deficit has detrimental effects on the charter schools' ability to serve

students. Edward Bodine, et al., points out quality indicators in charter schools lag

behind those in regular public schools (Bodine, 2008). These indicators include teacher credential levels, lower mean salary, and lower levels of special education and Title I funding. So with less money, charter schools need to be pro-active and develop strong relationships with community agencies. It is important charter school leaders plan ahead and try to make the most of the money they receive for each child by supplementing that money with resources derived from community agencies. Research shows that for every dollar a school system spends on such partnerships, it sees a return of four dollars in the value of the services the district receives (Bulter, 2010).

Validation of the literature review

As noted in chapter II, Sanders described ten major categories of community partnerships. These are partnerships with: "businesses and corporations, universities and other educational institutions, government and military agencies, health care organizations, faith-based organizations, national service and volunteer organizations, senior citizen organizations, cultural and recreation institutions, other community based organizations, and individuals in the community" (2001, p. 1347). At the urban charter school the participants attended, the school and its parent organization partnered with nine of these types of organizations to benefit students, excluding only faith-based organizations. Some collaborations aided students directly through mentorships, internships, gang intervention programs, advanced coursework, and tutoring. Other collaborations helped students indirectly by providing resources for equipment and staff development, recreational opportunities, and parent training.

Some of these are discussed above, such as the partnership with Enron that provided equipment and internships and another with Compaq to equip an entire computer lab. Many more examples exist. The YMCA provided the school with a gym until the school could afford to build one of its own. Many private citizens served as mentors to individual students. Exxon volunteers cleaned and maintained land for a playground on campus. Barrios Unidos provided gang intervention and counseling to students living in one of the areas of Houston most afflicted by gangs. The partnership most noted by student participants in the survey was the collaboration with Houston Community College (HCC). This alliance created an Early College Program in which students from the charter school attended college courses, both on the high school and on the HCC campus. Student comments indicate this program directly impacted their decision to remain in school and, in some cases, to enroll in higher education after graduation by increasing their confidence they could, in fact, graduate and even compete academically on a college campus. This is especially important in a population of Hispanic low income at-risk high school students who do not come from a family or economic background in which college is an expectation. It is also critical in a population that has not previously experienced much academic success. The contention of the researchers' surveyed in chapter II that Community Collaborative Support is an important factor in improving retention rates is borne out by the experience of the charter school in this study and its students.

Alternative schooling

Participants also rated alternative schooling as one of the most important factors that kept them in school. All the participants felt grateful for having attended and graduated from an alternative high school, indicating they appreciated the fact their classes were smaller than those of traditional high schools. These participants' comments contradict the literature, as McNulty and Roseboro (2009) find that students in alternative schools are typically labeled as delinquent and have conflicts with teachers. Conversely, the participants held their teachers at the alternative charter school in high regard and credited those teachers with helping them graduate.

Participants stated that smaller classes positively impacted their education. The participants did attend classes significantly smaller than those of their peers enrolled in the surrounding urban district. In the year studied, students in core classes attending Houston Independent School District experienced average class sizes ranging from 26.1 to 28.7 compared to classes of 18.2 to 18.9 at their charter school (TEA AEIS Report 2003-04). Although a Tennessee project concluded that class size did matter in early grades, there is no evidence in the literature that smaller classes in high school really help the student academically (Mosteller, 1995). But, nonetheless, the participants in the study concluded smaller classes did help them and this belief may be a factor that influenced them to remain in school.

Alternative schools focus on students maladjusted to the regular high school program. In the state of New York, Eve Tuck notes in her article, superintendents and principals shared a strategy of shifting students on the verge of dropping out to

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alternative schools offering GED programs (Tuck, 2012, p. 7). The reason for shifting them to alternative schools is that state dropout data does not capture students who transfer to alternative schools.

Rumberger states in his book, *Dropping Out-Why Students Drop out of High School and What Can Be Done about It*, that there are more than 6,000 alternative schools (2011). This number only includes schools affiliated with regular high schools. The Houston Independent School District contracted with Community Education Partners (CEP) to provide an alternative school environment to students who exhibited behavior problems. Unfortunately, "by placing all of a district's disciplinary problems under one roof, CEP facilities created dangerous environments that resembled soft prisons" (Frontline, 2012, p.2). While students were not incarcerated, they were searched prior to stepping on to campus and classroom design prevented students from congregating. CEP created an atmosphere that did not address the needs of at-risk students and additionally, used punitive techniques instead of implementing positive strategies in dealing with behavior issues. A former CEP student interviewed on Frontline, stated, "I wouldn't have went (back) to CEP. I probably would've just dropped out" (Frontline, 2012, p. 2). This may account for the difference in student attitudes toward alternative schools as reflected in the literature versus the attitude in this study.

Charter schools which target non-traditional students have not been calculated into this number; however, they offer a successful alternative to traditional schools. In 1995, the Texas legislature authorized charter schools to exist as local education

agencies not affiliated with a district. Today, there are 215 public charter school districts in the state of which they represent 425 charter school campuses educating 135,000 students in Texas schools (TCSA, 2012). This number or 3 percent of students in charter schools represents only a small fraction of the total student population of 4.9 million in Texas schools.

Validation of literature review

The literature review in chapter II describes two types of alternative schools differentiated by the length of time and reason why students are enrolled in them. The short term alternative school is designed for schools to send students who have disciplinary problems for a predetermined period of time. In chapter II, Barr and Parrett (2001) suggest that effective programs are characterized by three components: a positive school climate; a customized curriculum and instructional program; and a promotion of personal, social, and emotional growth (Barr & Parrett, 2001). Creating alternative programs can bring much success to a school. Kemple et al notes the success the program titled, "Talent Development High School Model" had on increasing students credits (Kemple et al, 2005). The expectation is that students will learn more acceptable behaviors and return to their home school to complete their education. The emphasis is on teaching discipline rather than academics. Research indicates students do not like this type of school and some surveys indicate some students will chose to dropout rather than attend a short-term alternative school.

The second type of alternative school described is one intended for long-term enrollment. This type includes many charter schools, such as the school attended by

participants in this study. These alternative schools are better described as schools of choice. Students may choose an alternate path to graduation. They give students a new long-term academic home in which alternate and innovative teaching methodologies are used to implement the standard required state curriculum, sometimes supplemented by additional learning opportunities not required by the state and often implemented using nontraditional disciplinary methods.

As the discussion above reveals, student participants saw alternative schooling as an important factor in their decision to remain in school. Many took advantage of programs not usually seen in traditional public schools. As one surveyed student said, "I was on probation and a potential dropout and Barrios (Unidos) helped me."

Active learning

Survey participants also selected active learning as an important reason why they remained in school. Active learning engages students with hands-on activities that they find pertinent to the world outside of school. Active learning employs higher order thinking skills and challenges students to solve relevant problems in creative ways to reinforce learning while engaging multiple intelligences and learning styles. In research for the Texas Education Agency, students defined good teachers as those who, "provide clear explanations, encourage active and meaningful learning, make class interesting, establish personal relationships, use small-group activities, and offer individual help" (Shapley, et al, 2004, p. 3). Thus, students themselves recognize the effectiveness of teachers who engage in active learning.

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Many of the alternative charter high school teachers were experienced teachers who profited from diverse professional development opportunities. As noted in some of the participants' comments, teaching was a passion for each of the teachers; the students particularly gave high regards their science and English teachers. The more seasoned teachers in this study applied active learning strategies. Oakes, in his article "Challenges and Strategies-Working with At-Risk Students", notes the importance of becoming familiar with students' needs and adapting teaching methodology to their learning styles (2010). The charter school administrator in this study gave the teaching staff an array of research-based tools from which to choose by offering professional development that focused on student engagement and rigor. A rigor committee composed of campus teacher leaders ensured faculty buy-in and input into the program.

Teachers at this charter school learned and used the techniques of active learning. One veteran science teacher, for example, conducted a science project on the topic of force. Traditional methods might have stopped with lecture, worksheets, and assessment. This teacher encouraged students to design and construct rockets which students then flew under the supervision of their teacher. Another teacher supplemented a unit on Shakespeare by having students research and create masks similar to those worn by actors of the era. Students in other classes built suspension bridges, performed dances indigent to various cultures, or even engaged in actual protests about community issues they had researched.

Validation of literature review

Ruhl (1987) in chapter II of this study states that active learning provides students with the best opportunity to succeed. This is but one of many examples of research which clearly supports the importance of teaching using active learning strategies. This is particularly true of Hispanic at-risk students, many of whom have experienced difficulty succeeding in traditional academic programs and have turned to a charter school as a last resort alternative to dropping out of school. Student survey participants agree. Students particularly mentioned the hands on activities of the science and geometry teachers. They also admired the English and social studies teachers, whose classrooms were described as "very active, he (the social studies teacher) had his classroom filled with learning activities." Another participant claimed, "You would never see students sleeping (in class)."

Additionally, Chapter II notes that according to Hassel (2011), "with excellent teachers, we can not only close our gaps—we could move toward being a whole nation of high-achieving children" (p. 2). The author also calls upon schools to maximize the instructional time of excellent teachers by exempting those teachers from non-instructional duties. The participants in the study noted repeatedly they appreciated the teachers they had who focused on providing them outstanding lessons in the areas of the discipline assigned. While the students are unaware of what constitutes active learning, the surveyed students' teachers' preferences clearly indicate teachers who practiced active learning more effectively reached more students.

Teacher results

Participating teachers perceived several strategies as having some effectiveness in preventing dropouts: Afterschool Opportunities, Alternative Schooling, Community Collaborative Support, Individualized Learning, Service Learning, Systemic Renewal, Educational Technology, and Professional Development. However, the two strategies most frequently described as effective were after-school opportunities and alternative schooling.

Perhaps due to their experience teaching at an alternative school, the teachers saw alternative schooling as the most important factor helping at-risk students achieve success. The teachers were committed to the school's alternative mission and saw the need for such a school. The benefits alternative schools bring to students are discussed above. From the teachers' perspectives, alternative schools are attractive because they provide more scope for innovation and the smaller student body permits teachers to know and respond to their students' individual needs.

Afterschool opportunities also point toward success with at-risk students. Halpern notes that participation rates are growing with after school programs (2002). There are two kinds of after-school programs, those that focus on enrichment activities and those whose focus is on academic activities. An example of an enrichment program would be 21st Century Community Learning Centers. An academic program example would be one which emphasizes tutoring and homework help. The Afterschool Advocate (2006) newsletter cites research demonstrating that both types of programs benefit students academically.

After school activities at the participating charter school were focused on enrichment and counseling activities. The school hosted a 21st Century Community Learning Center which was attended by many students of the charter school. Two other programs, Barrios Unidos and Communities in Schools, counseled students after school to combat drug and gang issues. The school also offered students an academic afterschool program. In this program, students recovered lost credits by retaking courses they had not previously passed or in which they had failed to receive credit due to poor attendance. This program was particularly valued by students who were in danger of dropping out due to age limits.

Question 2

The second question asked what additional positive influences were regarded by at-risk students and their teachers as contributing to retention. Teachers who touch students' lives have a lot to do with the success of the students. This is reflected in the comments of 75 percent of the student participants. In the section addressing question one, the influence of teachers who practice Active Learning instructional techniques has already been discussed. However, the most impactful teachers were those whose influence extended beyond the classroom and beyond the instructional day. These teachers tutored after school without asking for supplemental pay, acted as informal mentors, and sponsored extracurricular activities. Students recognized these highly effective teachers addressed not only the academic deficiencies they faced, but also many of the social barriers common to at-risk students.

The best example of this was one of the school's science teachers. Student participants repeatedly commented on this teacher's influence over them. This teacher reached out to students as a teacher and, as the sponsor of the chess club, National Honor Society, and science club.

Another important component in retention strategies clearly emerged from the student surveys as non-academic support services. Schools effective in successfully educating at-risk students are those with a very comprehensive approach reaching beyond students' instructional needs to address specific problems they face. Surveyed students valued gang intervention, drug rehabilitation, and day care programs. This means many non-educator school or agency personnel directly influenced students' abilities to complete their education. A primary example of a vital non-educator was the school nurse. The nurse was responsible for homebound services to pregnant girls and started a full-day care center for students with babies. Under the leadership of this nurse, the daycare program grew into an early childhood and pre-kindergarten program. Pregnancy and motherhood remained barriers, but at this school, there were programs which provided an opportunity for teen parents to remain in school.

The school was located in an area where gangs were active. The school's parent organization operated community gang intervention and drug rehabilitation programs also available to students. Twenty-five percent of students who participated in the survey also participated in one or both of these programs. The organization's ability to offer these services is one example of an advantage alternative schools have over traditional public schools.

Parents also were mentioned frequently as being partly responsible for the success of their children. Family involvement is one of the most important factors in making a child complete his education; indeed, one of the strongest factors in student success is how active a parent is in their child's education (Bridgeland, et.al, 2008). The participants noted that they had parents who attended the schools and met with the teachers, picked up their report cards, and asked questions. This finding fits into much of the literature, as according to Deborah Leuchovius from the Pacer Center, parents who are involved with their child's education from middle to high school see their children advance to post-secondary education (Leuchovius, 2006).

Implications

Though the results indicate that there is no one path to graduation and that each student will face different obstacles and factors throughout their education, several implications may be drawn from this case study.

Students

Students and their parents should make wise choices on the type of school the student attends. If their home school does not provide the services that best fit their individual needs, then they must choose an alternative school that will work for them. Although individuals vary, this survey concludes that at-risk students are more likely to be successful in schools that incorporate the fifteen strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center.

Teachers

Active learning is an area where schools may be able to assist at-risk students by encouraging teachers to tune their teaching styles to students' learning styles. Continuing professional development for teachers should focused not only on research proven instructional strategies, but also on the particular needs of at-risk students. Setting up workshops for teachers is very important in the work of reaching at-risk students. Most schools rarely spend any time in helping teachers deal with this population of students.

Administrators

School administrators should note the importance participants placed on after-school opportunities in their decisions to remain in school. Schools, especially charter schools with at-risk students, need to offer after-school opportunities for high school students. The participants, the majority with single parent homes, indicated that the availability of after-school programs impacted whether they remained in school or not.

Parents

Schools must make parent involvement a high priority. Students need to first experience support from their parents. School must hold events that make parents feel welcome and active participants in the learning community. School administrators and teachers need to note parents need to be very involved in their child's education, especially in the higher level grades. Elementary schools are typically excellent at involving parents, but once the child reaches the middle and high school levels, the family involvement often drops off. Mandating parents to pick up a child's report card

is a great way to open communication with parents, but schools must do more to involve parents. Technology such as online grade books and class webpages offers parents an avenue to stay informed and, hopefully, involved in their child's education. Workshops, seminars, and volunteer opportunities are also used by successful schools.

The participants noted their parents played a significant part in their education, even if it meant just showing up to pick up their report card. With the changes in curriculum requirements and the rigor in classrooms, parents need to ensure all students have some type of homework area at home. This is obviously very important to all students who wish to complete their high school diploma.

Policy

Alternative schools also are a place where students who are disengaged from their learning environment can reconnect with their education. But, similar to the students they serve, alternative charter schools face challenges that make it difficult for them to operate on a level playing field. Alternative schools need support from the Texas Education Agency as far as accountability is concerned (TEA, 2006). The Texas Education Agency can help support the alternative charter schools by acknowledging the type of student in an alternative school. This student usually comes to the alternative school after having discipline and attendance issues. With great voids in the student's education, the Texas Education Agency still requires the student to perform at the grade level the student is enrolled in at school.

At the national level, the No Child Left Behind act rules do not necessarily fit well with the mission of alternative schools. Schools are penalized when it comes to

counting a student as a graduate. The rules required schools to ensure that a student graduates within four years. This is hard for at-risk schools to accomplish, especially when a student appears at their doorsteps grades behind. Thus, an alternative charter school may well accomplish the primary goal of providing a path for an at-risk student to graduate but still be penalized.

Community

The major implication the results show that schools, especially charter schools, need to continue to collaborate with the community for support. Charter schools targeting low income, high at-risk students, need much financial as well as staff support. Charter schools in Texas currently receive less money per student from the Texas Education Agency. In light of the current fiscal and legislative environment, this implies that charter schools must aggressively seek supplemental sources of funding if they are to improve retention rates. Community-based partnerships promise to provide one answer to this dilemma.

Conclusions

The important findings and implications all point toward family involvement and school partnerships. This study discovered why Hispanic participants in a low-income area obtained their high school diploma while many other students, just like them, were dropping out of school. The study looked at the National Dropout Prevention Center's 15 successful strategies and compared them to the participants in the study.

The study concluded the participants felt that family involvement was very important to their successes. In Hispanic families, especially recent immigrant families

such as many of the participants, there is a tendency to have close family ties. Unfortunately, this often does not translate to school, particularly when the parents themselves were unsuccessful in school. As this study shows, when there is family involvement, it becomes an important positive factor in retention. The results of the survey indicated that there is no clear "best path" to graduation for students, as there was no significant indication on either of the questions.

The choice to drop out of high school can have many negative effects not only on the student who drops out, but also on their family, community, and nation at large. While the high dropout rate is definitely a national concern, it is a problem that particularly impacts Hispanic students. Orfield (2004) notes, "Hispanics' graduation sits at a dismal 53 percent in comparison with the 69 percent of all students in the United States" (p.2). Given the growing Hispanic population in Texas, it is essential schools implement effective strategies to encourage at-risk students to successfully graduate from high school. As the Texas Education Code, Title 2, Subtitle A, Chapter 4, Sec. 4.001 states, "the mission of the public education system of this state is to ensure that all Texas children have access to a quality education that enables them to achieve their potential and fully participate now and in the future in the social, economic, and educational opportunities of our state and nation." More specifically, such enhanced dropout prevention plans fit squarely into the goals of the state's education plan in Objective 3, Title 2, Subtitle A, Chapter 4.

A solid and adequate education should be available to all the children regardless of income or race. Our nation must, at a minimum, continue to strive to educate all

children with a high school diploma. As Levin (2005) describes in his summary of a symposium held at Columbia University, "the inadequate and inequitable opportunities offered to poor and minority youth today are perhaps the greatest challenge facing America's schools" (p. 6). Youth will surely experience many obstacles and be confronted with many choices throughout their educational years, but schools must be adamant about their efforts in ensuring that all high school students—regardless of color or background—graduate. By closely examining eight at-risk Hispanic students who graduated from an alternative urban charter high school, this study shed light on retention and dropout prevention strategies.

The successful experiences of these students can provide insight into the nationwide problem of dropping out, giving a planning model for developing effective strategies for urban secondary high school Hispanic students in the future. Using the results of this study and the others that have examined this issue, proper and conscientious planning may occur that will bring the state of Texas, and the nation at large, one step closer to fulfilling the mission of providing quality education to all children.

Researchers addressing the dropout epidemic suggest creating alternative schools with innovative curriculums implemented by teachers using an active teaching methodology and incorporating programs that address the social and emotional barriers faced by at-risk students. Schools may best achieve this through collaborations with parents, the business community, and other social organizations. The experiences and

perceptions of the Hispanic at-risk students surveyed in this study and those of their

teachers fully validate this model.

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