Fall 10-2017

A Study of the Effectiveness of Alternative Schools through an Examination of Graduation Rates, School Climate, Student Motivation, and Academic Rigor

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Mark Harris Piper

October, 2017

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

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Dr. Sherry DeVore, Dissertation Chair	Oct. 12, 2017 Date
Dr. Danny Humble, Committee Member	Oct 12 2017 Date
Dr. Nate Moore, Committee Member	Oct. 12, 2017 Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Full Legal Name: Mark Harris Piper

Signature:  Date: Oct. 12, 2017

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Sherry DeVore, Dr. Danny Humble, and Dr. Nate Moore for their guidance through this study. I also want to thank the school districts represented in this study, especially the teachers and principals who participated. Appreciation is also due to the board of education, faculty, and staff of the Hartville R-II School District for their encouragement through this process. I also want to thank my family for their love, understanding, and patience. My wife, Dana, and my children, Shade, Dune, and Ryce, have supported me throughout this journey. Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for giving me the will and patience to achieve as well as the faith to believe.

Abstract

This study was guided by Deci and Ryan's (2015) self-determination theory, which focuses on meeting three specific psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. The literature review for this study included topics relating to alternative education such as educational reform, school improvement, school climate, student discipline, intervention strategies, at-risk students, and the achievement gap. This study involved determining the effectiveness of alternative schools through a mixed-methods examination of graduation rates, school climate, student motivation, and academic rigor in high schools from the southwest Missouri region. Graduation rate data were compared from school districts without alternative schools and those with alternative schools utilizing a *t*-test. The mean of the graduation rates of districts with alternative schools was significantly higher than districts without alternative schools. Quantitative data collection continued via a survey designed to measure the degree to which high school principals report an improved school climate upon implementation of an alternative school. These data demonstrated an improved school climate within the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative school. Qualitative data collection consisted of interviewing subject-area high school teachers and alternative school teachers from randomly selected school districts in southwest Missouri. These interviews were designed and conducted by the researcher to gather teacher perceptions of the degree of student motivation and academic rigor evident among alternative school students within their respective school districts. These data demonstrated increased student motivation with mixed results pertaining to academic rigor in alternative schools.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Alternative schools offer options to students who struggle in mainstream education due to failing grades, behavioral or mental concerns, and factors that put them at-risk of dropping out (Caroleo, 2014). D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) determined:

> Today's adolescent learners are more diverse than ever in terms of their backgrounds, interests, learning styles, and motivations. Thus school officials must address these differences by thinking outside of the box and creating alternative education settings that acknowledge the fact that not everyone can learn in the traditional classroom setting. (p. 211)

Alternative education is based on research demonstrating there are various ways to become educated, numerous educational environments, and a range of educational structures (Irvine Unified School District, 2014). Alternative education programs began appearing in the United States in the 1950s to serve students who were not successful in traditional school settings (Caroleo, 2014). Educators in the alternative education field recognize everyone can be educated, and it is in society's best interest to ensure students graduate from high school (Irvine Unified School District, 2014).

Opportunities provided through alternative schooling are beneficial in accommodating the educational needs of youth in today's world, because educators in traditional school systems, and particularly in traditional high schools, find it increasingly difficult to serve the needs of at-risk students (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2014). The definition of alternative education is broad and covers a wide range of schools and programs for all sorts of students (Lieszkovszky, 2012). This study was designed around the definition of alternative education provided by Hinds

(2013): “A public school or separate class group designed to best serve students’ educational needs and interests and assist students in achieving the academic standards of the school district and the state” (p. 23). Students are placed in alternative schools for academic or behavioral reasons (Caroleo, 2014). This study was focused on alternative school efforts to increase graduation rates by reducing the risk of students dropping out (Hinds, 2013).

Background of the Study

Alternative education programs began appearing in the United States in the 1950s and served a growing number of students already failing and at high risk of dropping out of school (Caroleo, 2014). Stanley (2008) found, “Alternative education experienced a period of intense growth in the 1970s” (p. 4). These early alternative education programs often operated as a major component of a school district’s comprehensive dropout prevention program (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2014). The increase of alternative education programs continued in the 1990s, providing services to students most at risk of dropping out in the traditional school setting (Caroleo, 2014). Programs which offer an alternative to the traditional classroom continue to be a viable option for students at risk of dropping out of school (Schargel & Smink, 2013).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), the number of alternative schools was reportedly 1,151 in 1990-1991 compared to 6,197 in 2010-2011, signifying a 538% increase in the number of alternative schools for that time period. Following this increase in alternative school programs, the U.S. Department of Education (2015) reported the graduation rate in the United States hit an all-time high of 81% for the 2012-2013 school year, signifying a 2% increase over 2010-2011 graduation rates. Graduation

rates for Missouri were above national averages during this same timeframe, rising from 81% in 2010-2011 to 86% in 2012-2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Considering the nation's climbing graduation rates, Graham (2013) stated, "Improved graduation rates have been buoyed from educators across the country that have spent years fighting to keep at-risk students in the classroom through the implementation of alternative schools" (p. 1). The success of alternative schools is attributed to clearly stated missions and discipline codes, favorable student-to-teacher ratios, small class sizes, caring faculty with high expectations for students, individualized expectations, flexible scheduling, and total commitment to student success (Johns, 2014).

Poor academic performance is a powerful predictor of students who eventually become at risk of dropping out of school (Caroleo, 2014). However, research has shown 80% of present-day alternative schools are punitive in nature, meaning students are placed into alternative schools largely due to behaviors rather than academic issues (Lieszkovszky, 2012). The removal of these students from a traditional school setting and the subsequent placement in an alternative school setting improves the traditional school environment for students and staff (Schargel & Smink, 2013). Disruptive student behavior can have a negative effect on entire classrooms when teachers must spend valuable instructional time on behavioral management (Thompson, 2015). According to Schargel and Smink (2013), decreases in harmful behaviors were identified in traditional schools after placing students in alternative schools, creating a safer learning environment. However, Caroleo (2014) acknowledged segregating and excluding alternative school students from the mainstream population alienates disadvantaged students.

Theoretical Framework

Alternative education emerged in North America to provide assistance for students at risk of failing school by creating more innovative approaches to learning (Caroleo, 2014). However, according to Glassett (2013), students who arrive at alternative schools are often disengaged from the educational system. The traditional school environment is becoming less effective for disengaged students who can find success in alternative education programs (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). These students are "disengaged from their high school, underachievers, unmotivated, and/or socially isolated, disengaged, or otherwise unhappy in the traditional high school environment" (Guerin, 1999, para. 3). Therefore, an understanding of student motivation is central to the analysis of student success in an alternative school setting (Glassett, 2013). This study was guided by Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan's (2015) self-determination theory as the theoretical framework.

Self-determination theory has been applied to a variety of realms, with education seemingly the most common field of study; it is a theory of motivation concerned with supporting one's natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways (Deci & Ryan, 2015). Self-determination theory focuses on interest in learning, valuing of education, and confidence in abilities with a belief school culture is a strong contributor to student motivation, development, and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Deci and Ryan (2015) proposed:

> People are centrally concerned with motivation—how to move themselves or others to act…. People are often moved by external factors…. Yet just as frequently, people are motivated from within…. These intrinsic motivations are

> not necessarily externally rewarded or supported…. The interplay between the extrinsic forces acting on persons and the intrinsic motives and needs inherent in human nature is the territory of Self-Determination Theory. (Theory section, para. 1)

According to Deci and Ryan (2015), self-determination theory focuses on meeting three specific psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Meeting these needs is said to foster intrinsic motivation, conceptual understanding, and creativity (Dincer, Yesilyurt, & Takkac, 2012). When these three psychological needs are met, student motivation, engagement, and achievement increase (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

Deci and Ryan (2014) discussed the first of the psychological needs, autonomy, as the making of choices or decisions. People have, within themselves, the desire to organize experiences and behaviors to participate in activities consistent with their likes and dislikes (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Choices are the most integral ingredient to autonomy; in essence a need for autonomy is equivalent to the need to have choice in initiation, participation, and continuation of a given activity (Deci & Ryan, 2015). A student maintains autonomy by having a choice in completing a task or a choice in how to take on the task (Center on Education Policy, 2012). This autonomy plays an important role in student engagement, since alternative school programs operate with a relatively high degree of autonomy (Glassett, 2013).

Relatedness arises out of the establishment of respect, association, and bonds with others (Deci & Ryan, 2015). The psychological need relatedness is commonly identified as the desire to feel connected with others, including the desire to love and care and to be loved and cared for (Deci & Ryan, 2014). One of the most important aspects of

determining the success of an alternative school environment is the quality of students' relationships with other students and with the school's staff (Schaps, 2003). According to John Dewey (1938), the effectiveness of a school is measured by the degree to which the individuals within the school are able to form a group. Alternative schools characteristically have smaller class sizes than traditional classrooms, thus providing a sense of community to students and staff (Caroleo, 2014).

Competence is attained when a student is able to complete a specific task to the best of his or her ability, and therefore, successfully meet a specific goal (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Deci and Ryan (2015) explained competence as a person's innate longing to feel effective in relating with the world around him or her. Having a satisfactory level of competence allows an individual to meet challenges and extend skills (Deci & Ryan, 2015). On the other hand, being stymied with limited competence levels results in frustration, helplessness, and lack of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2014). These negative feelings often cause students to become disinterested and disengaged with education, leading them toward failure or dropout (Caroleo, 2014). As stated earlier, students often arrive at alternative schools disengaged (Glassett, 2013). The challenge and goal for alternative school programs is to re-engage these students, ensuring academic success (Caroleo, 2014).

One important characteristic of a successful alternative school program is self-esteem building, and there is a link between alternative school programs and increased self-esteem (Guerin, 1999). Students who attend alternative school programs benefit from attaining skills and success, which lead to an increased and more positive self-perception (Caroleo, 2014). Higher self-esteem and self-worth and fewer signs of

depressive symptoms are directly associated with the support and self-realization of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Researchers generally agree competence, autonomy, and relatedness are three of the main contributors to student motivation (Center on Education Policy, 2012). Conditions fostering these three psychological needs are the basis of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

The economic and social impacts of dropping out of high school include long-lasting disadvantages and consequences such as lower wages, higher unemployment, and a lower degree of job and life satisfaction (Mahuteau, 2013). Individuals who drop out of high school in the United States earn a lower income than those individuals who graduate high school, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2014a). Median annual earnings for workers ages 25-34 without a high school diploma were $6,100 less than the incomes of individuals with a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). In addition, employment rates among dropouts are 12.1% lower than among graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2014a). Alternative schools were designed to ensure at-risk students receive the attention, guidance, and support required to enable them to receive a diploma (Graham, 2013).

The ultimate goal of education in Missouri is to ensure children are prepared to be successful in life (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014). The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016a) described this preparation as college and career readiness:

> Missouri students will graduate college and career ready. That means that a high school graduate has the necessary English and mathematics knowledge and

> skills—including, but not limited to, reading, writing, communications, teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving—either to qualify for and succeed in credit-bearing two- or four-year college courses—or to enter training programs for his/her chosen career with a livable salary above the poverty line, opportunities for career advancement, and in a growing or sustainable industry. (para. 2)

With this goal in mind, a student would need to achieve some degree of success in school before being successful upon graduation (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Glassett (2013) suggested students in alternative programs are given an easier route to graduation, decreasing the probability of success in college and career. Heaggans (2006) asserted alternative schools create an achievement gap between graduates from alternative schools and graduates from mainstream schools. Concerns also persist that the education received in alternative programs is not comparable to and is seen as inferior in quality to the education received in traditional schools (Caroleo, 2014). Despite concerns about the academic integrity of alternative schools, proponents argue alternative education programs provide students with a basic education while also building strong relationships between students and staff and making education relevant and challenging to students (Schargel & Smink, 2013). The notion of inferior education received within alternative schools demonstrates a need for research into the academic rigor of alternative schools (Caroleo, 2014).

When asked their reasons for dropping out of school, students do not report dropping out due to schoolwork being too rigorous (Schargel & Smink, 2013). In findings gathered from high school dropouts, Stanley (2008) reported, "67 percent said

they would have worked harder had it been expected of them, and 70 percent said they were capable of graduating had they tried" (p. 3). Based on research, it is apparent student motivation is a key component in a student's educational experience, but motivation is often overlooked in the world of accountability, standards, and high-stakes testing (Center on Education Policy, 2012). Students who successfully complete an alternative education program are reported to display increases in motivation, self-esteem, and academic persistence (Caroleo, 2014).

In the classroom context, Brophy (2013) defined student motivation as the degree to which students invest attention and effort to various pursuits. Student motivation is closely related to the student's willingness to engage in learning activities and the student's reasons for doing so (Brophy, 2013). A researcher cannot overlook the importance of student motivation, because "even the best teacher can't force a student to learn if the student is completely unmotivated" (Thompson, 2015, para. 4).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact and effectiveness of alternative schools at the high school level. The first part of this study involved determining which public school districts in southwest Missouri do or do not have alternative schools. Then, data were gathered to determine if there is a substantial difference in graduation rates for districts implementing an alternative school compared to districts without an alternative school. Perspectives from school personnel regarding the impact of alternative school implementation on the traditional school climate were elicited. Data were collected to explore the motivational impact of alternative schools on

student attendance. Finally, educator views on the academic rigor students receive within an alternative school were considered.

Research questions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What statistical difference exists between the graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts that do not have alternative school programs?

$H1_0$: There is no difference between the graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts that do not have alternative school programs.

2. To what extent do high school principals report an improved learning environment in the traditional school with the implementation of an alternative school?

3. What are the perceptions of high school teachers and alternative school teachers regarding student motivation within alternative school settings?

4. What are the perceptions of high school teachers and alternative school teachers with regard to the academic rigor of their district's alternative high school?

Definition of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined:

Alternative education. Alternative education is broadly defined as educational activities that serve students who are at risk of school failure (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014). Alternative education includes academic instruction, counseling, social/life skills, job readiness, and behavioral services (Porowski et al., 2014).

At-risk students. At-risk students are students considered to be susceptible to educational failure and likely to drop out of school due to multiple at-risk indicators such as failure to meet educational standards, lack of credits earned, pregnancy/parenting, multiple disciplinary incidents, or poor attendance (Hinds, 2013).

Dropout rate. For the purpose of this study, dropout rate was defined according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016b): "For grades 9-12 the number of dropouts divided by the total of September enrollment, plus transfers in, minus transfers out, minus dropouts, added to September enrollment, then divided by two" (para. 8).

Graduation rate. For the purpose of this study, graduation rate refers to the adjusted cohort graduation rate as defined by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016b):

> The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is the number of students who graduate in four (4) years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class rounded to the tenth. From the beginning of 9th grade, students who are entering that grade for the first time form a cohort that is subsequently "adjusted" by adding any students who transfer into the cohort later during the 9th grade and the next three (3) years and subtracting any students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die during that same period. (para. 6)

The four-year adjusted graduation rate is also a statistic measured nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Limitations and Assumptions

All scientific research contains limitations essential in the research and beyond the control of the researcher (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). One obvious limitation beyond the control of the researcher was the degree of bias present among participants. Creswell (2012) discussed bias as always being present and pointed out a researcher must examine the degree of bias in the study. Another limitation was the success rate in collecting surveys from selected school district personnel.

An assumption, as defined by Fraenkel et al. (2012), is "any important assertion presumed to be true but not actually verified" (p. 638). An obvious assumption for this study was that the responses of participants were offered honestly and without bias.

Sample demographics. The first step in this research involved making every effort to collect a sufficient amount of data. In a research study, a low number of participants creates problems in drawing the appropriate statistical conclusions (Creswell, 2012). The population of this study was a limitation, as it was limited to school districts in Missouri. Limitations exist due to participants' willingness to participate in this study.

Instrument. The survey and interview questions used for this study were a limitation, as they were created and written from the perspective of the researcher (Creswell, 2012).

Summary

School districts are held accountable for student graduation rates, and there is a great deal of research on the importance of graduating high school (Tanner-Smith, 2013). Individuals who do not graduate high school are faced with numerous detrimental consequences, including low wages, unemployment, incarceration, and poverty (Tanner-

Smith, 2013). A high school diploma truly matters to individuals, communities, and society, because graduates are more likely to be employed and make a higher taxable income (America's Promise Alliance, 2014).

In an effort to ensure students persist to graduation, alternative education has been hailed as a possible solution by offering viable pathways to earn a high school diploma (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2014). Alternative school critics question the academic rigor of alternative schools and fear they are inferior to mainstream schools with a focus on behavioral change rather than on academics (Caroleo, 2014). Alternative schools are applauded by proponents for not only motivating students to want to receive a high school diploma, but for enabling them to achieve it (Graham, 2013).

In Chapter Two, a variety of initiatives, theories, philosophies, and strategies are explored to provide an understanding of the alternative school's role within the accountability-driven society of public education. A variety of literature targeting topics such as school reform, equity-based reform, school choice, standards-based reform, school improvement, school climate, student discipline, school safety, intervention strategies, at-risk students, and the achievement gap are explored.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

For the past 50 to 60 years, public education in America has been subject to constant reform (Jennings, 2012). Alternative education programs have continued to grow during this time period (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). The literature review begins with an examination of school reform followed by equity-based reform, school choice, standards-based reform, and school improvement. The literature review continues with a look at school climate, student discipline, and school safety. The review concludes with research on intervention strategies, at-risk students, and the achievement gap.

School Reform

Horace Mann, a man most consider to be a father figure of the development of the American educational movement, called for a transformation of education in the early 1800s ("Horace Mann," 2015). Horace Mann's views on education are often summarized in six major principles ("Horace Mann," 2015). Mann's principles include the following: (a) citizens cannot maintain both ignorance and freedom; (b) education should be paid for, controlled, and maintained by the public; (c) education should be provided in schools that embrace children from varying backgrounds; (d) education must be nonsectarian, meaning education should not be linked to a particular group, whether religious or political; (e) education should be based on the democratic ideals of a free society; and (f) education must be provided by well-trained, professional teachers ("Horace Mann," 2015).

Over time, schools have taken on an extraordinary number of responsibilities beyond academics, which is a burden not carried by any other institution in America (Reese, 2007). According to Reese (2007):

> Schools are expected to feed the hungry, discipline the wayward, identify and encourage the talented, treat everyone alike yet not forget that everyone is an individual, raise not only test scores but also feelings of self-worth, ensure winning sports teams without demeaning academics, improve not only standards but also graduation rates, provide for differing learning styles and capacities while administering common tests, and counter the crass materialism of the larger society while they provide the young with the skills and sensibilities to thrive in it as a future workers. (p. 217)

These lofty and often contradictory expectations placed upon public education ensure a seemingly constant state of reform due to creation of an atmosphere of criticism and perpetual unhappiness (Reese, 2007). Reese (2007) questioned why teachers are entrusted with so much when they are so often accused of not being capable of teaching the basics.

Over the past 50 to 60 years, the United States has been dominated by three major school reform movements: equity-based reform, school choice, and standards-based reform (Jennings, 2012). Alternative schools have grown in number during these three movements, to the point that in 2007-2008 there were 646,500 students enrolled in public school districts and attending alternative schools (Carver et al., 2010). Despite the growth of alternative education programs, there are not enough of these programs to meet the needs of students who require them (Caroleo, 2014).

Equity-Based Reform

In the 1960s and 1970s, education was marked by the federal government stepping into schools to ensure equality of opportunity (Jennings, 2012). There were a

variety of policies and programs aimed at improving educational equity for minority students, students with disabilities, low-income students, children with limited English proficiency, and females (Jennings, 2012). The equity-based reform movement was marked by three major pieces of legislation still evident today (Jennings, 2012). The three laws include the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 (Jennings, 2012).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was intended to confirm and endorse what Congress believed to be the principle of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court decision that ordered the desegregation of public schools throughout the United States. One obstacle to immediate nationwide abolition of school segregation came from interpretations of the court's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which did not require an immediate end to educational segregation. Instead, the decision called for states to proceed toward integration with "all deliberate speed" (Zirkel & Cantor, 2004, p. 3). Although the Supreme Court understood *Brown v. Board of Education* to prohibit racial discrimination, others interpreted this decision as a gradual adjustment period toward integration in public schools (Zirkel & Cantor, 2004).

The four main sections of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were Title II, Title IV, Title VI, and Title VII (Graglia, 2013). Title II prohibited racial discrimination in restaurants, hotels, and other public accommodations (Graglia, 2013). Title IV addressed public grade-school education (Graglia, 2013). Title VI prohibited discrimination by any institutions that receive federal funding, and lastly, Title VII prohibited discrimination in employment decisions (Graglia, 2013). Title II was met with the least resistance, because

it was ultimately not in the best interest of businesses to turn away black customers (Graglia, 2013). Civil rights experts soon came to see the other three Titles as hurdles rather than triumphs (Graglia, 2013).

The ultimate goal of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was to eliminate separate school systems for white and black students in the United States (Jennings, 2012). Unfortunately, racial separation did not come to an end with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, because racially segregated neighborhoods generated racially segregated schools (Graglia, 2013). Although Graglia (2013) pointed out racial segregation in schools was supposed to have come to an end with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, critics have asserted alternative schools represent another form of segregation. The U.S. Department of Justice found Georgia was illegally segregating students in an alternative education setting (Gross, 2015). In addition, Gross (2015) asserted black students made up less than 10% of a district's student body but they accounted for 48% of the population of the alternative school within the district. Furthermore, Zirkel and Cantor (2004) concluded activist groups and educational researchers blame federal accountability laws for providing districts with incentives to place minority students into alternative schools.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) provides legal authority for the U.S. government's financial support of public education, including the ability to set funding limits and establish legal requirements for state and local education agencies, universities, Native American tribes, and other entities receiving federal assistance (Crawford, 2011). The ESEA provides separate services for students at risk of educational problems, and all appropriations for programs are voted on and approved yearly by Congress (Crawford, 2011). Title I was introduced through the ESEA and

provides funding for students from low-income families (Jennings, 2012). Students from low-income families often attend alternative schools due to their propensity to drop out of school (Stanley, 2008). The primary purpose of the ESEA was to help schools better serve the needs of educationally deprived children (Crawford, 2011).

In 1975, Congress originally passed what was named the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which gave children with disabilities the right to a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Karger, 2004). The 1975 statute was reauthorized several times and was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Karger, 2004). The IDEA was enacted to incorporate strong procedural rights for students with disabilities (Jennings, 2012). In most instances, alternative schools may serve, but are not openly designed for, students with disabilities (Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2014). However, in Pennsylvania, Schaeffer (2013) demonstrated a disproportionate percentage of referrals to the alternative school from the population of students with disabilities. Ensuring all students with disabilities have access to special education and related services designed to meet their distinctive needs was the fundamental purpose of the IDEA (Karger, 2004). Prior to the IDEA, the educational needs of a large number of children were not being met (Karger, 2004).

School Choice Movement

The school choice movement was described by Jennings (2012) as the second major school reform movement of the past 50 years. The idea of choice was based largely on the belief parents should be able to choose where their students attend school, but at public expense (Jennings, 2012). There was a belief among school choice

supporters that promoting competition among educational institutions would benefit students by eliminating ineffective schools (Jennings, 2012).

Consistent with equity-based reform, there were some who simply desired the ability to choose a school compatible with religious beliefs, while others wanted to be assured low-income parents receive the same choices as higher-income families (Jennings, 2012). For instance, prior to the school choice movement, alternative schools in urban areas were primarily to support failing students, while suburban areas provided alternative programs to make learning more innovative (Caroleo, 2014). School choice proponents believed low-income parents should have the right to pick better, more innovative schools for their children just as parents could in the suburbs (Jennings, 2012).

The school choice movement was put into motion as Ronald Reagan campaigned for president in 1980 on a platform which included an attempt to abolish the U.S. Department of Education ("Ronald Reagan on Education," 2014). Reagan's administration argued the premise the U.S. educational system was a failure, and parents could best determine how to educate their children ("Ronald Reagan on Education," 2014). The motion was further propelled in 1983 when the U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report entitled *A Nation at Risk,* which indicated the state of education was dreadful and created a perception America's public schools were failing to meet the educational needs of students (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This perception encouraged school choice and can be attributed to the growth of alternative education programs (Caroleo, 2014).

Standards-Based Reform

The third educational reform movement in the United States over the past 50 years was standards-based reform (Jennings, 2012). Traces of this movement were first seen in the late 1980s when the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics wrote a set of national standards (Jennings, 2012). According to Lezotte (2007):

> To remain competitive in world markets business leaders need workers better prepared to confront the best and brightest workers in the world. These leaders have advocated that educational standards be raised and as a result they are now higher than ever before in our history. Many are still claiming that they are not yet high enough to remain competitive. (p. 1)

George H. Bush sought school improvement by announcing educational goals to set higher expectations for schools, teachers, parents, and students ("George Bush Sr. on Education," 2014). His administration followed suit by proposing the adoption of national academic standards and tests in all subjects ("George Bush Sr. on Education," 2014). This effort was not successful; however, it was a sign of the standards-based movements yet to come (Jennings, 2012).

Bill Clinton succeeded Bush Sr. as President of the United States and served from 1993-2001; President Clinton continued to advocate for the use of standards and tests to reform education ("Bill Clinton on Education," 2014). The major difference in Clinton's approach was his desire for states to develop their own standards and tests to measure student proficiency ("Bill Clinton on Education," 2014). Clinton's legislation was enacted, and states began the process of implementing standards (Jennings, 2012). Supporting standards and accountability, the authors of "Bill Clinton on Education"

(2014) stated, “All successful schools have followed the same proven formula; higher standards, more accountability, and extra help so children who need it can get it to reach those standards” (p. 4). The support received in alternative schools led to the number of students in alternative schools increasing during the Clinton era; in Minnesota alone, the number of students in alternative schools increased from 13,800 in 1990-1991 to 152,000 in 2000-2001 (Lehr, 2003).

This standards-based approach continued into the beginning of the George W. Bush presidential term when he ramped up intensity by enacting the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002 (“George W. Bush on Education,” 2014). In 2004, during his Republican Convention Acceptance Speech, President Bush said:

> We are transforming our schools by raising standards and focusing on results. We are insisting on accountability, empowering parents and teachers, and making sure that local people are in charge of their schools. By testing every child, we are identifying those who need help and providing a record level of funding. Challenging the soft bigotry of low expectations is the spirit of our education reform, and the commitment of our country. We will leave no child behind. (“George W. Bush on Education,” 2014, p. 7)

With NCLB in full swing, the standards-based movement made a turn from standards as a guide for instruction to testing and accountability as the norm (Jennings, 2012). Accountability measures have led to a record number of students graduating high school in recent years (Graham, 2013). According to Graham (2013), there is now a fight to keep at-risk students in school through interventions such as the continued implementation of alternative schools.

School Improvement

Public educators have witnessed rising standards and an increase in disadvantaged students while resources have remained constant or decreased, thus creating pressure on educators in their efforts to improve schools (Lezotte, 2007). The Correlates of Effective Schools were established as a basic framework for school improvement (Lezotte, 2007). Lezotte (2007) established the Correlates, which have been refined and expanded to the following:

1. Instructional Leadership. In an effective school, the principal acts as an instructional leader and effectively and persistently communicates the mission of the school to all stakeholders.
2. Clear and Focused Mission. The effective school maintains a clearly articulated mission of the school. The staff shares an understanding of and a commitment to the school's goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability. The staff in the effective school accepts responsibility for student learning.
3. Safe and Orderly Environment. In an effective school there is an orderly, purposeful, business-like atmosphere, which is free from the threat of physical harm. The school climate is not oppressive, is conducive to learning, and exhibits a high degree of student engagement.
4. High Expectations. In an effective school, there is a climate of high expectations in which the staff believes and demonstrates that all students can obtain mastery of the school's essential curriculum. Staff also believe in their ability to help all students obtain that mastery.

5. Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress. The effective school measures pupil progress over the essential objectives frequently. The results of those assessments are used to improve the individual student behavior, performance, as well as curriculum revision and improvement.
6. Positive Home-School Relations. In the effective school, parents understand and support the basic mission of the school and are given opportunities to be part of the collaborative team and are seen by the school as partners in the educational process.
7. Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task. In an effective school, teachers allocate a significant amount of classroom time to instruction in the essential curricular areas. Quite simply, kids tend to learn mostly the things that they spend time on. (pp. 8-10)

Since the onset of the effective schools movement, additional outcomes such as problem-solving, higher-order thinking, creativity, and communication have been added (Lezotte, 2007).

The effective schools movement proclaimed a solution to the problems facing at-risk students by transforming underperforming educational institutions through the leadership of effective educational professionals who embrace a sincere desire to meet the needs of disadvantaged students (Lezotte, 2007). The Alternative Learning Programs (ALPS) in North Carolina developed seven standards of accountability aligned with the proposed national alternative education standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015). The seven standards developed by the ALPS are closely related to the seven Correlates of Effective Schools and are as follows: Clear Mission, Leadership,

Culture and Climate, Professional Development, Parent/Community Involvement, Curriculum and Instruction, and Monitoring and Assessment (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015). Of the seven correlates, the single-most important factor impacting students and staff is school climate (Zakrzewski, 2013).

School Climate

According to Zakrzewski (2013), a positive school climate is instrumental in assisting schools when combating bullying, teacher burnout, disengaged students, vandalism, litter, cultural differences, and socioeconomic differences. Positive school climate contributes to decreases in absenteeism, suspensions, and substance abuse among students (Zakrzewski, 2013). Zakrzewski (2013) also found positive school climate contributes to increases in students' academic achievement, motivation to learn, and psychological well-being. The National School Climate Council defined positive school climate with the following criteria: (a) Norms, values, and expectation support social, emotional, and physical safety; (b) people are engaged and respected; (c) students, families, and educators work together to develop and live a shared school vision; (d) educators model and nurture attitudes and emphasize the benefits gained from learning; and each person contributes to the operation of the school and the care of the physical environment (Zakrzewski, 2013).

According to McGrath and Van Bergen (2017), disruptive student behavior has a negative effect on student-teacher relationships which in turn negatively impacts school climate and academic achievement. This is largely due to the belief positive school climate starts with the formation of trusting relationships (Zakrzewski, 2013). According to Ford (2013), disruptive students negatively affect school climate because they make it

difficult for other students to learn and difficult for teachers to teach. Therefore, alternative school implementation may contribute to a positive school climate by removing disruptive students from traditional classrooms (Ford, 2013). Disruptive student behavior is a clear problem in schools and has a direct negative effect on the quality of education provided and on the school climate and culture (Douglas, Moyes, & Douglas, 2016). Because disruptive behavior is detrimental to school climate and student learning, the reduction of problem behaviors, through student discipline or placement, increases academic achievement (Ford, 2013).

Student Discipline

Student discipline addresses problematic behaviors that impede or disrupt the educational goals of the school (Manning & Bucher, 2013). Discipline does not only entail punishment but also includes a combination of prevention and remediation (Manning & Bucher, 2013). The primary goal for student discipline is to bring student behavior in line with the school rules, mission, and goals to maximize the effectiveness of instruction (Adams, 2015). According to Adams (2015), effective discipline practices provide a safe environment for learning.

There must be a balance between discipline and instruction; a school should not become an overly punitive environment because ultimately schools should be about relationships (Adams, 2015). Safety, student learning, and overall school climate are cited as issues related to the importance of effective disciplinary practices within school systems (Ford, 2013). Problem behavior requiring discipline covers a wide range of behaviors including classroom disruption, truancy, disrespect, insubordination, violence,

alcohol and drugs, bullying, weapons violations, other illegal activities, and a variety of minor violations (Ford, 2013).

The need for school discipline is not a new concern in public education; disciplinary issues have been documented by educators since the inception of formal education within the United States (Rousmaniere & Smith, 2013). Philosophies of student discipline have evolved throughout the history of public education. The primary discipline used in early education through the 19th century was corporal punishment (Gershoff, Purtell, & Holas, 2015). Gershoff et al. (2015) found the use of corporal punishment as a discipline form has decreased, but is still legal and used in many states.

Other consequences widely utilized for school discipline are verbal reprimands, detention, fines, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension (Gershoff et al., 2015). Adams (2015) found out-of-school suspension has recently been scrutinized as an ineffective discipline practice, as it allows the student unsupervised time away from school, and therefore the misbehavior is not addressed at all. Researchers have suggested the use of out-of-school suspension as a primary disciplinary consequence negatively impacts student grades (Adams, 2015).

Educational organizations with higher suspension rates tend to rank lower in terms of academic quality and school climate (Omojola, 2013). Alternatively, in-school suspension has increased in recent years as a better alternative, because students must face consequences and stay in the school when possible (Rousmaniere & Smith, 2013). Out-of-school suspension is still used, despite the growing concern of ineffectiveness, due to the need to remove students from the environment for safety and to ensure orderly operations within the school (Omojola, 2013).

The analysis that suspension is not effective for the growth of students has fostered the programs and policies that shift focus to more proactive and individualized assistance (Omojola, 2013). Current disciplinary practices involve both preventative measures and punitive measures and involve a number of people including parents, students, administrators, teachers, and staff (Whisman & Hammer, 2014). Whisman and Hammer (2014) reported on a study published by the West Virginia Board of Education in 2012-2013, which revealed the increase of disciplinary referrals for a single student greatly decreased the student's opportunity to show competence on state testing. The recommendations from this study included implementation of positive discipline approaches and alternatives to suspension, as well as establishing preventative practices (Whisman & Hammer, 2014).

The Duke Center for Child and Family Policy cited several school-wide programs being utilized in this way including Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) and Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS) (Wettach, Owen, & Hoffman, 2015). Wettach et al. (2015) reported programs that target individual students engaged in misbehavior have gained popularity in recent years. Such programs include Restorative Justice, Community Service Programs, Community-School Partnerships, Substance Abuse Programs, and Alternative Schools (Wettach et al., 2015).

Alternative schools that demonstrate success in preventing reoccurrence of behavioral issues are designed with this goal in mind (Browne, 2013). Browne (2013) found these programs operate under the belief learned behaviors can be unlearned, and focus is kept on reinforcing positive behaviors. Increased disruptive behaviors including

acts of school violence have catalyzed the need for change to disciplinary processes to ensure schools are safe learning environments (Anderson, Allen, & Jenkins, 2016).

School Safety

Although a vast majority of students will never experience school violence, the mere possibility of these acts is alarming to educators (Anderson et al., 2016). Acts of violence in schools, such as school shootings, occur only randomly but are continually on the minds of school administrators and law enforcement officials (Kemp, 2014). As reported by the Associated Press (2015), it is nearly impossible to eliminate the risk of school violence without transforming schools into facilities mirroring prisons. However, it is the duty of school districts to implement policies to ensure student safety, maintain the best possible learning environment, and contend with violent offenders (Missouri School Board Association, 2015). However, Lavarello (2015) concluded only 51% of school administrators surveyed believed their districts are prepared for an active shooter event on their campuses. Historically, there has been a rise in legislator awareness of the importance of school safety, triggering laws aimed at preventing school violence (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2014).

The Safe Schools Act of 1994 (SSA) provided competitive federal grant money to assist educational agencies in the effort to ensure schools are safe and free of violence (Mongan & Walker, 2012). According to Mongan and Walker (2012), in order to be eligible for funding through the SSA, school districts were required to adopt a strict zero-tolerance policy on the possession of weapons on school grounds. The Missouri National Education Association (2014) reported the SSA led to the creation of an Office of Safe Schools within the Department of Education within each state. This prompted the

passage of the Missouri Safe Schools Act of 1996 (MO SSA) (Missouri National Education Association, 2014). The MO SSA included many requirements set forth through the SSA but also provided Missouri districts with additional instructions specific to Missouri in regard to policy, enrollment, and records (Quinn, 2013). According to Ifedili and Ifedili (2012), safety and security are needs which must be met prior to individuals being motivated to advance to more complex needs. In addition, Ifedili and Ifedili (2012) found these basic human needs must be initially met if students are expected to respond to educational stimuli.

Intervention Strategies

Over the past decade, multi-tiered intervention strategies have become the prominent means for supporting struggling students (Terrell, 2017). Response to intervention (RTI) started in 2004 when Congress passed federal legislation as part of the IDEA allowing a portion of federal funds previously earmarked for special education students to be allocated for educating regular education students (Stephens, 2013). Stahl (2016) defined RTI as targeted instruction for struggling students using a three-tiered approach. The first tier is instruction, assistance, and support from the regular education classroom teacher (Stephens, 2013). The second tier, according to Stephens (2013), is "supplemental instruction provided by a reading specialist" (p. 1). The third tier varies depending on the individual student and may involve additional individualized support or placement into special education (Stahl, 2016). Although most educators tend to believe RTI is mainly an elementary school initiative, experts have concluded it can be applied to all students at any grade levels (Stephens, 2013).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a three-tiered system which changes teacher responses to student behavior (Terrell, 2017). The OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (OSEP) (2017) listed seven core principles of schoolwide tier one support: (a) effectively teach appropriate behavior to all children, (b) intervene early, (c) use a multi-tier model of service delivery, (d) use research-based scientifically validated interventions to the extent available, (e) monitor student progress to inform interventions, (f) use data to make decisions, and (g) use assessment for three different purposes. Tier two support provides targeted small group intervention for students not responding to tier one support (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [OSEP], 2017). Tier three supports are intense, individualized responses designed to reduce problem behaviors of students not responding to tier one and tier two efforts (OSEP, 2017). These tiered intervention strategies are designed to support struggling students who, without these interventions, might be at risk of educational failure (Terrell, 2017).

At-Risk Students

At-risk students are students considered to be susceptible to educational failure and likely to drop out of school due to multiple at-risk indicators such as failure to meet educational standards, lack of credits earned, pregnancy/parenting, multiple disciplinary incidents, or poor attendance (Hinds, 2013). There is evidence of existing identifiable precursors to students being at-risk of educational struggles and failure (Mahuteau, 2013). Race and ethnicity, poverty, and single-parent families are often predictors of students being at-risk academically (Natriello, 2013). According to Natriello (2013),

minority students demonstrate lower academic performance in nearly every subject compared non-minority peers.

Children who live in poverty consistently perform at lower levels than middle class and upper class peers due to decreased access to academic resources (Natriello, 2013). Natriello (2013) found students from single-parent homes did not perform as well on standardized tests, earned lower grades, and were less likely to graduate than their peers from two-parent homes. Lezotte (2007) discussed shifting United States demographics as a reason for an increased at-risk population:

> The demographic profile of the United States is changing dramatically, fueled by two factors: 1) The number of foreign nationals that have come to the U.S. to attend college and have remained here has increased over the years; and 2) more importantly, the birth rate among the various demographic subgroups has changed dramatically. Middle-class birth rates are well below zero population growth, indicating that overtime this group will become a smaller percentage of the total population of the United States. At the same time, the birth rate among low-income families and those families living in poverty is well above zero population growth, indicating that this subgroup will become a larger percentage of our total population. Said another way, the number of children coming to public school who have been historically the easiest to teach (middle class) is in steep decline and the number of students coming who have been the more challenging to teach (low income) is increasing significantly. The number and percent of minority students continues to increase as well and these students also tend to be disproportionately poor and disadvantaged. (p. 1)

Poverty can be created by the absence of one parent, leaving only one income earner to support the home (Kunz, 2015).

According to Kunz (2015), students from single-parent homes are often faced with educational disadvantages and lower academic achievement stemming from less attention and guidance due to the absence of one parent. Students from single-parent homes find academic achievement more challenging due to emotional effects such as low self-esteem, sadness, loneliness, and feelings of abandonment (Kunz, 2015). These effects can lead to increased anger and frustration, increased risk of violent behavior, and difficulty socializing and connecting with others (Kunz, 2015). Schools are challenged with not only predicting at-risk students but more importantly with developing intervention strategies to close the achievement gap (Mahuteau, 2013).

Achievement Gap

Standardized test data, graduation rate data, and data pertaining to gifted and advanced placement reveal existing gaps in achievement among different groups of students within the U.S. educational system (Milner, 2012). Milner (2012) defined the groups as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and language. Standardized test scores from African-American and Hispanic students tend to be lower than those of their European-American peers (Milner, 2012). Secondly, standardized test scores earned by students from lower socio-economic homes are routinely lower than scores earned by students from higher socio-economic homes (Milner, 2012). Milner (2012) also reported academic struggles among students whose first language is not English compared to students from homes where English is the native language.

Graduation rates in the United States have risen steadily over the past 40 years (Carter & Welner, 2013). However, data illustrate disparities in historically disadvantaged groups such as African Americans and Hispanics (Carter & Welner, 2013). Carter and Welner (2013) reported the graduation rate for White American students is 93.5%, and the Asian American student graduation rate is 83%. Meanwhile, Carter and Welner (2013) reported the African American student graduation rate is 66.1%, and the graduation rate for Hispanics is 71.4%.

Unfortunately, problematic behavior extends from academic to legal, as African American youth tally 45% of juvenile arrests while only making up 16% of the youth population (Carter & Welner, 2013). Milner (2012) warned against focusing on the deficiencies of groups of students and instead encouraged educators to focus on possible inequities in the system that might contribute to achievement gaps. Gaps are evident throughout education and in society with apparent deficiencies in teacher quality, teacher training, curriculum, school funding, income levels, employment opportunities, and affordable health care (Milner, 2012). The lack of attention to these unfortunate divides makes disparities in academic achievement misleading (Milner, 2012).

Summary

At the onset of the literature review for this study, the first noteworthy theme was the fact education is always changing and seems to be in a state of constant reform. This chapter began with an examination of historical reform movements such as equity-based reform, school choice reform, and standards-based reform. Each reform movement was initiated with the intention to accomplish school improvement.

During the course of this review, positive school climate arose as an important factor in school improvement measures. Literature was then reviewed relating to the impact of disruptive behavior on school climate. A review of the impacts of disruptive student behavior naturally led to a review of literature focused on student discipline and school safety.

The next phase of the literature review consisted of common intervention strategies prevalent in schools today, such as alternative school placement. With the bulk of these strategies designed to assist struggling students, research concerning at-risk students was then reviewed. The review concluded with an examination of the achievement gap.

In Chapter Three, a detailed description of the methodology for this mixed-methods study is provided. The perils of not completing high school are discussed, along with the purpose of the study. This study was guided by four research questions and one null hypothesis. In the research design section, a thorough explanation of the data collection is provided. A description of what individuals and groups were involved in the data collection phase is also included. An explanation of the instruments utilized in the data collection phase of the study is offered. A clear, sequential explanation of the data collection process is then provided, followed by a description of how data were collected, organized, and examined in an effort to establish findings and conclusions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology of the study is described. The chapter is divided into the following sections: problem and purpose of the study, research questions and null hypothesis, research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. According to Fraenkel et al. (2012), mixed-methods studies result in both quantitative and qualitative data, which was an ideal methodology for this study.

Problem and Purpose Overview

The profound economic and social impact of dropping out of high school creates an underprepared workforce and limits future opportunities for students to properly care for their families (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). A high school education is imperative to most and "matters to individuals, communities, and society" (America's Promise Alliance, 2014, p. 2). Alternative schools were designed to ensure students at risk of dropping out receive the support they need to stay in the classroom through graduation (Graham, 2013). Researchers have revealed concerns alternative programs are not comparable and are seen as inferior in quality to traditional schools (Caroleo, 2014). However, Caroleo (2014) reported students who successfully complete an alternative education program display increases in motivation, self-esteem, and academic persistence.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact and effectiveness of alternative schools. The first part of this study involved determining which school districts in the southwestern part of Missouri do and do not have alternative schools at the high school level. The researcher determined if there is a substantial difference in the graduation rates of districts implementing alternative schools compared to similar

districts without alternative schools. Perspectives were gathered from school personnel gauging the impact of alternative school implementation on the traditional school climate. Also explored was the motivational impact of alternative school attendance on students. Finally, educators' views on the academic rigor of alternative schools were considered.

Research questions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What statistical difference exists between the graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts that do not have alternative school programs?

$H1_0$: There is no difference between the graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts that do not have alternative school programs.

2. To what extent do high school principals report an improved learning environment in the traditional school with the implementation of an alternative school?

3. What are the perceptions of high school teachers and alternative school teachers regarding student motivation within alternative school settings?

4. What are the perceptions of high school teachers and alternative school teachers with regard to the academic rigor of their district's alternative high school?

Research Design

This study was achieved through a mixed-methods review using both quantitative and qualitative data. A mixed-methods approach can be chosen when there are not enough quantitative data or qualitative data to independently answer the research

questions posed for the study (Creswell, 2012). A mixed-methods design enhances the understanding of a study by eliciting both qualitative and quantitative data, creating a clearer picture of the situation than either type of data would by itself (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The first step in collecting quantitative data is selecting who or what group to study (Creswell, 2012). Initial information was obtained from superintendents in southwest Missouri to form a list of districts with alternative schools as well as a list of districts without alternative schools. Causal-comparative research is a type of quantitative research comparing two or more groups in terms of an independent variable (Kravitz, 2013). In this study, a quantitative causal-comparative approach was utilized to analyze the difference between graduation rates for selected districts with alternative school programs and similar districts without alternative school programs.

Additional quantitative data were gathered through purposive sampling of high school principals in Southwest Missouri Association of School Administrators (SWMASA) districts with an alternative school. When using purposive sampling, an individual is chosen who is believed to be willing and able to provide the necessary information (Creswell, 2012). This sampling was obtained through a cross-sectional survey completed by this predetermined sample of the population (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The major disadvantage to this type of sampling is that the researcher's judgment could be in error (Fraenkel et al., 2012). This survey was administered to report on the improved learning environment in the traditional school upon the implementation of an alternative school.

Qualitative research dictates information is examined at a deeper level, which creates a more profound understanding (Rhodes, 2013). For the qualitative data portion of this study, random sampling was used to select sample participants including high school faculty and alternative school faculty from SWMASA districts with alternative schools. Random sampling is preferred in an effort to obtain a sample that represents the population of interest (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Teachers were interviewed regarding student motivation and academic rigor within alternative school settings.

Population and Sample

An initial request for information was sent via electronic mail (email) to the 123 superintendents on the SWMASA membership listing. According to Creswell (2012), a researcher should select as large a sample as possible from the population to decrease the possibility of the sample differing from the population. However, the sample should only be as large as the researcher can manage with a reasonable output of time and energy (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The information requested from SWMASA superintendents was whether or not their districts have an alternative school at the high school level.

The information obtained was used to make two lists. List One included school districts with an alternative school, and List Two included those districts without an alternative school. The graduation rates of districts belonging to List One were compared to those on List Two in an effort to determine the difference in graduation rates between districts with alternative schools and districts without alternative schools.

Typically, qualitative researchers study a few individuals or a few cases, because the overall ability of the researcher to provide in-depth information decreases with each additional participant (Creswell, 2012). Seven of the districts making up List One were

randomly selected to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. Eligible participants from each of these districts included the English Language Arts Department Head, the Mathematics Department Head, and the Lead Alternative School Instructor.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation portion of this project began by gathering secondary data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016b) on the four-year graduation rates for SWMASA districts. The SWMASA districts were divided into two lists. The first list included districts with alternative schools, and the second list included districts without alternative schools (see Table 1). The four-year average graduation rate for each school was subjected to a *t*-test to determine the statistically significant difference in the mean (*M*) of districts with alternative schools compared to the mean of districts without alternative schools (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The next instrumentation phase for this project consisted of a survey (see Appendix A) created by the researcher using Creswell's (2012) principles of question construction. This survey consisted of 12 statements written to gather data relating to the learning environment witnessed within the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school. The content of these statements was derived from the literature review and the framework of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2015). A Likert-type scale with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" was deemed appropriate to garner perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2012). The survey was field-tested by a group of educators not involved in the study. Each statement was reviewed for clarity and sentence structure. With the comments and suggestions from the

field-test group, the survey statements were revised. The final survey was considered appropriate by the dissertation committee.

The final phase of instrumentation for this project was interviewing selected participants. These interviews were formal in nature and followed a list of 14 questions created by the researcher (see Appendix B). These questions were designed using Creswell's (2012) principles of question construction to elicit answers from respondents that could be compared and contrasted (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The rationale behind this questioning was to gather perceptions of school personnel regarding motivation among alternative school students as well as the level of academic rigor within alternative schools.

In addition to Creswell's (2012) principles of question construction, guidelines drawn from Leedy and Ormrod's (2014) *Practical Research Planning and Design* were also used. These guidelines were as follows: keep it short; keep tasks simple; provide clear instruction; use simple, clear, unambiguous language; give a rationale for items with an unclear purpose; do not "lead" respondents; decide in advance how responses will be coded; check for consistency; conduct one or more pilot tests to check validity of questions; scrutinize the almost-final product again to ensure it addresses surveyor needs; and make it attractive and professional-looking (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Surveys were completed via SurveyMonkey, and interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone. Personal interviews conducted face-to-face are the most effective way of ensuring respondent cooperation, clarification, and completion (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Data Collection

Once Lindenwood Institutional Review Board approval was obtained (see Appendix C), the data collection phase began. Using data obtained from the current SWMASA president, two lists were formed. List One included those districts with alternative schools, and List Two included districts without alternative schools. To ensure confidentiality, each district was assigned a letter in place of the name of the district (see Table 1). Quantitative data were collected on the four-year graduation rates for each school to determine the difference between districts on List One compared to those on List Two.

Emails were sent to the high school principals of the 50 SWMASA districts with alternative schools to introduce the researcher and the proposed project. The email included a recruitment and introduction letter containing the research questions, purpose of the study, confidentiality statement, and appreciation for participation. The email had a hyperlink to the survey questions, and participation in the survey constituted consent. The researcher retrieved survey results instantaneously through SurveyMonkey.

Seven districts with alternative schools were randomly selected to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. Subject-area teachers and alternative school teachers from selected districts were contacted by phone to introduce the researcher and the proposed project. Following verbal agreement, each participant was contacted by email. The email included a recruitment and introduction letter containing the research questions, purpose of the study, confidentiality statement, informed consent form, and appreciation for participation. The email also confirmed the place and time for the interviews to be conducted. Interviews were conducted face-to-face if possible. In

situations where face-to-face interviews were not possible, telephone interviews were conducted.

Data Analysis

The first phase of data analysis was completed by gathering and examining quantitative data to determine if a difference exists between the graduation rates for school districts with alternative schools and similar districts without alternative schools. A *t*-test was conducted to determine if the .05 level of significance was reached, signifying a statistical difference (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The quantitative data examination for this project continued by conducting a survey administered to a sample of the population using an interval-scale model designed to measure the attitudes and opinions of the population regarding the extent to which school personnel report an improved learning environment in the traditional school with the implementation of an alternative school (Creswell, 2014). Data from this survey were collected in the form of a Likert-type scale with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (Creswell, 2012).

The final phase of data analysis involved measuring perceptions that exist among school personnel regarding student motivation and academic rigor within alternative schools. This process began by organizing the vast amount of interview data and converting field notes from the spoken word to a typed text file (Creswell, 2012). The next step required the researcher to analyze and synthesize the qualitative interview data into coherent descriptions of what had been observed (Fraenkel et al., 2012). This was accomplished by a descriptive coding by hand to make sense of the data through text segments and codes (Creswell, 2012). Participants answered the same set of interview

questions in an attempt to reduce interviewer bias and to facilitate the organization and analysis of data (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Summary

The problem and purpose of this study was based upon the negative socio-economic impact linked to being a high school dropout and the effectiveness of alternative schools. The first research question was designed to garner knowledge of how school districts with alternative schools compare to those without alternative schools in regard to graduation rate. The second research question was designed to gather information and perspectives on the impacts of alternative schools on school climate within traditional schools. The third research question involved the level of motivation exhibited by alternative school students as reported by teachers. The final research question allowed for measurement of the level and impact of academic rigor as reported by traditional school teachers and alternative school teachers.

The research design for this study was mixed-methods in nature. A mixed-methods study has definite strengths and was chosen in an attempt to show a clear depiction of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The population consisted of 123 southwest Missouri school districts with graduation rate data entered and compared using a *t*-test. This sample size was selected to decrease the possibility of the sample differing from the population (Creswell, 2012).

In order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, 50 districts were chosen as the sample for the survey and seven districts were chosen for interview purposes. Survey data collection was completed electronically via SurveyMonkey. One-on-one interviews were conducted by asking open-ended questions to high school teachers

regarding student motivation and academic rigor (Creswell, 2012). The data collection phase was followed by an intensive analysis of the information collected.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact and effectiveness of alternative high schools in southwest Missouri. Alternative education programs serve a growing number of students failing and at risk of dropping out of school (Caroleo, 2014). According to Mahuteau (2013), dropping out of high school is associated with disadvantages and consequences that could last a lifetime. Graham (2013) suggested alternative schools are designed so at-risk students receive the support necessary to obtain a diploma.

This study was guided by four research questions. The first research question was posed to determine the statistical difference in the graduation rates of districts with alternative schools compared to districts without alternative schools. For the purpose of this study, graduation rate referred to the adjusted cohort graduation rate definition according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016b):

> The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is the number of students who graduate in four (4) years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class rounded to the tenth. From the beginning of 9th grade, students who are entering that grade for the first time form a cohort that is subsequently "adjusted" by adding any students who transfer into the cohort later during the 9th grade and the next three (3) years and subtracting any students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die during that same period. (para. 6)

The four-year adjusted graduation rate is also a statistic measured nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The second research question was formed to discover whether or not implementation of an alternative school creates an improved learning environment in the traditional school. A positive school climate contributes to increases in academic achievement, motivation to learn, and psychological well-being (Zakrzewski, 2013). The third research question focused on the level of student motivation witnessed within the alternative school setting. The autonomy, relatedness, and competence evident within alternative education programs motivate students by increasing self-esteem and self-worth (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Researchers generally agree competence, autonomy, and relatedness are three of the main contribitors to student motivation (Center on Education Policy, 2012). The final research question focused on academic rigor within the alternative school setting. According to Caroleo (2014), one of the negative aspects of alternative education is the perceived reduced degree of academic rigor.

Data were presented in a three-step approach. The first step of data analysis was completed by gathering and examining quantitative data to determine if a difference exists between the graduation rates for school districts with alternative schools and similar districts without alternative schools. A *t*-test was administered at a .05 level of significance to determine a statistical difference (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The second step of data collection, also quantitative, was administration of a survey to a sample of the population using an interval-scale model designed to measure the attitudes and opinions of participants regarding the extent to which school personnel report an improved learning environment in the traditional school with the implementation of an alternative school (Creswell, 2014). Data from this survey were

collected in the form of a Likert-type scale with responses ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Creswell, 2012).

The third and final step of this study was qualitative in nature and involved the collection of interview data. The interview questions were designed to measure perceptions of school personnel regarding student motivation and academic rigor within alternative schools. Each participant responded to the same 14 interview questions. The data collected were then organized and analyzed by the researcher (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Step One: Graduation Rate Comparison

Alternative schools are designed to ensure students receive the support necessary to graduate high school (Graham, 2013). The first part of this study was to research the effectiveness of alternative schools through an examination of graduation rates. No graduation rate data existed for 19 of the 123 districts, because these districts served students in grades kindergarten through eight only. Four of the 123 districts simply did not have four-year adjusted graduation rates readily available. The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate data were collected for 100 of the 123 participating school districts. Among this group were 50 districts with alternative schools and 50 districts without alternative schools. These data were subjected to a *t*-test analysis to investigate research question one (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mean Graduation Rates for SWMASA School Districts

Year	Mean graduation rate for districts with alternative schools	Mean graduation rate for districts without alternative schools	*p*
FY16	95.2772	93.1504	.033636

Note. $p < .05$.

Step Two: Survey Data

The next step of the study consisted of surveying the high school principal in each of the 50 participating districts with alternative schools. Contact information for the principals was obtained from their respective school websites. The survey was created by the researcher (see Appendix A) and distributed via email. Creswell's (2012) principles of question construction were followed in the creation of 12 statements written to gather data relating to the learning environment witnessed within the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school. The purpose of this survey was to collect data necessary to answer research question two.

The content of these statements was derived from the literature review and was based upon self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2015). A Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," was utilized. Of the 50 surveys sent, 21 (42%) principals responded.

Descriptive Statistics

Ifedili and Ifedili (2012) discussed safety as the first basic human need. In a 2014 study, Wright explained how the basic need of safety must be met to achieve academic success. Disruptive students require teachers to spend instructional time on behavior

management and often make classmates feel unsafe (Thompson, 2015). Stanley (2008) believed a safer learning environment in traditional schools was due to the implementation of alternative schools. In this current study, of the principals who responded, 66.67% agreed traditional school students are safer due to the implementation of alternative high schools. However, 19.05% of principals responded traditional school students are not safer in school due to the implementation of alternative high schools. In addition, 14.29% of principals chose to remain neutral (see Figure 1).

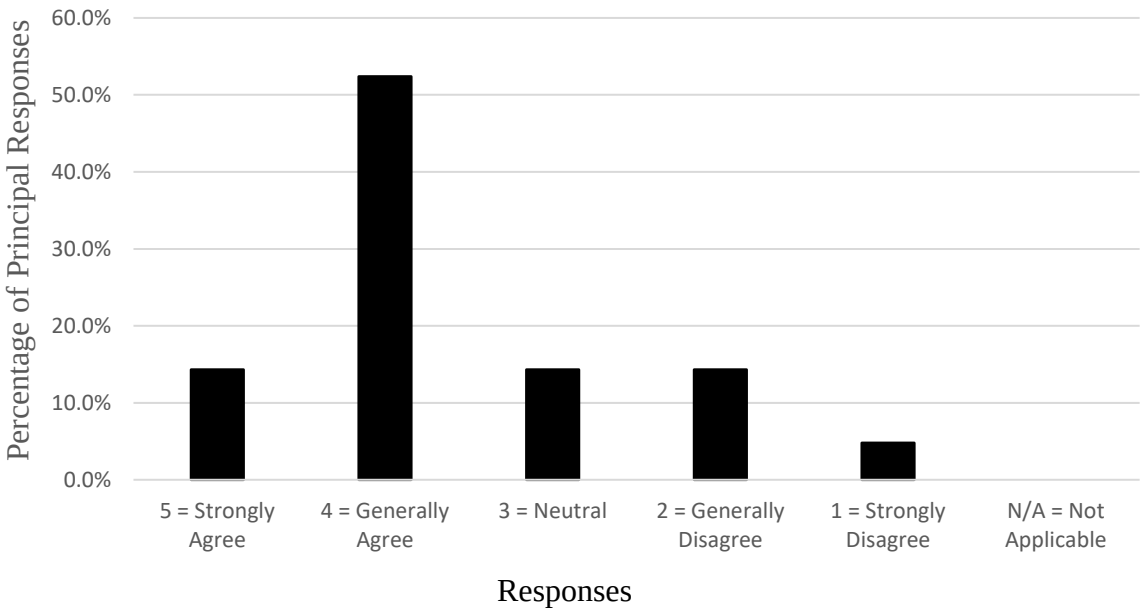

Figure 1. Perceptions of student safety. Statement 1: Traditional school students are safer in school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Thompson (2015) discussed negative effects of disruptive students on classrooms and teachers. The American Psychological Association (2013) described violence against teachers as a national crisis with serious implications including impaired work performance. Removing disruptive and possibly violent students from the traditional school setting and placing them in an alternative school setting improves the traditional school environment for teachers (Stanley, 2008). Of the principals who responded, 57.14% agreed teachers were safer due to the implementation of an alternative school. The percentage of principals who were neutral on the subject was 23.81%. The survey indicated 19.05% of the principals did not believe teachers were safer due to the implementation of an alternative school (see Figure 2).

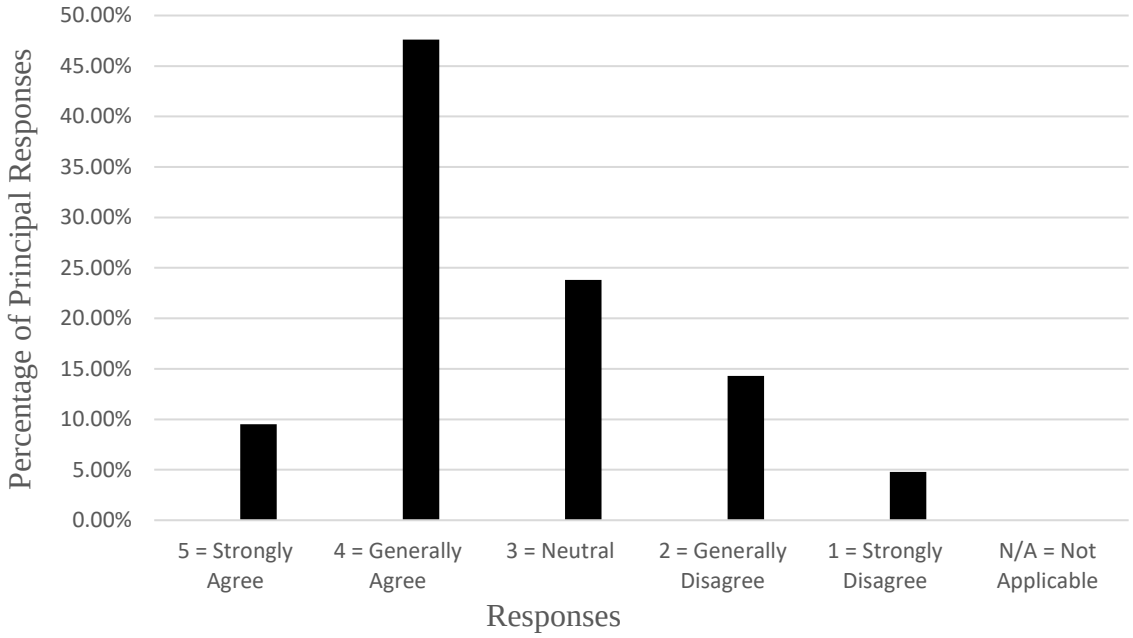

Figure 2. Perceptions of teacher safety. Statement 2: Traditional school teachers are safer in school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Hinds (2013) reported decreased disciplinary referrals in his evaluation of alternative high schools. The number of suspensions and expulsions decrease in traditional schools by housing disruptive students in alternative settings which meet individual needs (Glassett, 2013). In response to whether traditional school administrators handle fewer discipline referrals due to the implementation of an alternative high school, 28.57% of principals strongly agreed and 47.62% generally agreed. Meanwhile, 9.52% of principals surveyed remained neutral, while 14.29% generally disagreed with the statement (see Figure 3).

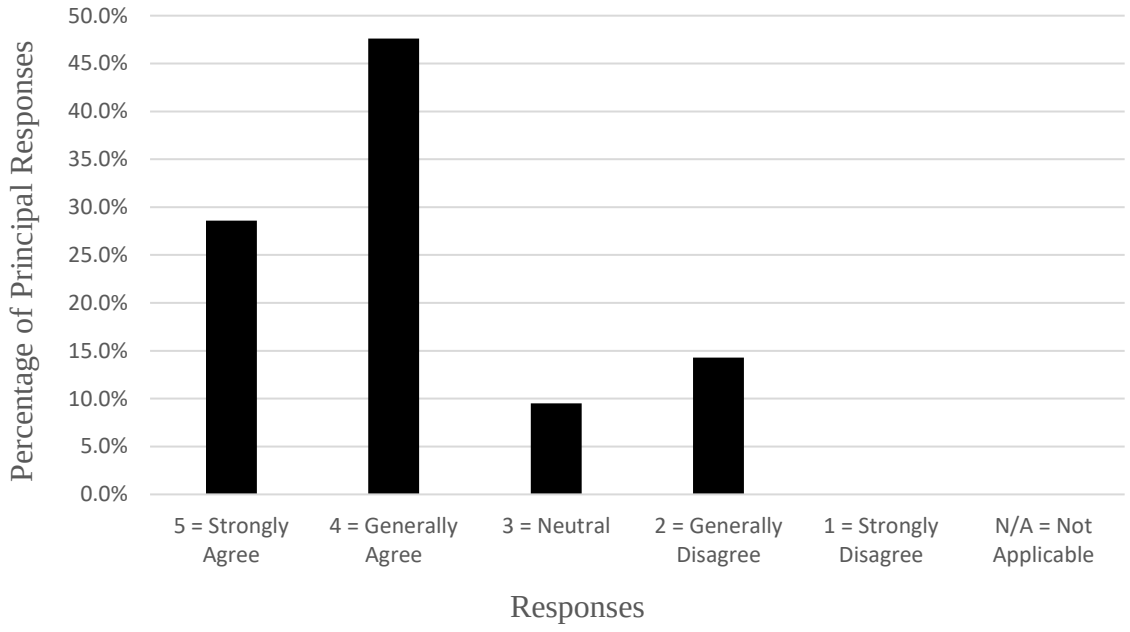

Figure 3. Perceptions of the quantity of discipline referrals. Statement 3: Traditional school administrators handle fewer discipline referrals due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Glassett (2013) discussed a focus on individualized instruction as a reason for increased student engagement in the academic process. Students who are not engaged in the educational process often benefit from the learning environment present in alternative schools (Caroleo, 2014). High school principals were surveyed to determine if traditional school classrooms have a higher degree of student engagement due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Only 4.76% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement. However, 61.9% of high school principals agreed, and 19.05% remained neutral. Finally, 9.52% of principals generally disagreed with the statement, and 4.76% strongly disagreed (see Figure 4).

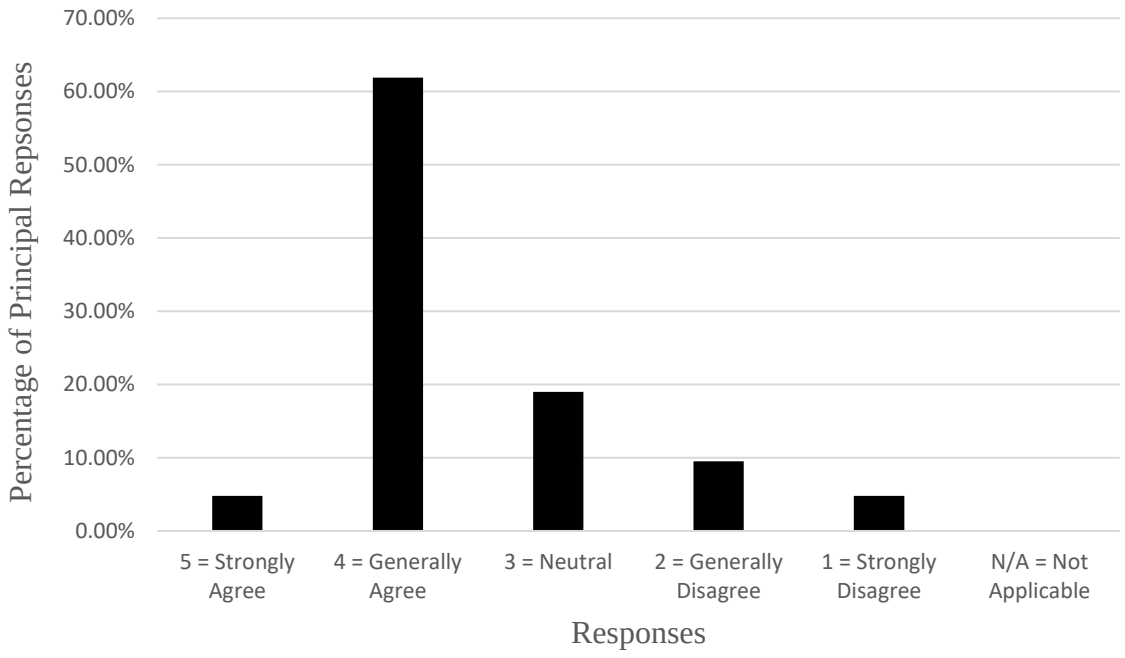

Figure 4. Perceptions of student engagement. Statement 4: Traditional school classrooms have a higher degree of student engagement due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Alternative schools provide a more sympathetic, understanding environment for chronically disruptive students (Caroleo, 2014). Ford (2013) reported disruptive student behavior to be a great detriment to academic achievement. The removal of disruptive students from the traditional school and their subsequent placement in alternative settings allows teachers to focus on student achievement rather than classroom management (Ford, 2013).

Survey statement number five was posed to gather opinions on whether traditional school teachers encounter fewer disruptive students due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Data collected demonstrated 85.71% of respondents agreed to some extent with this statement (9.52% strongly agreed and 76.19% generally agreed). In addition, 14.29% of respondents generally disagreed with the statement (see Figure 5).

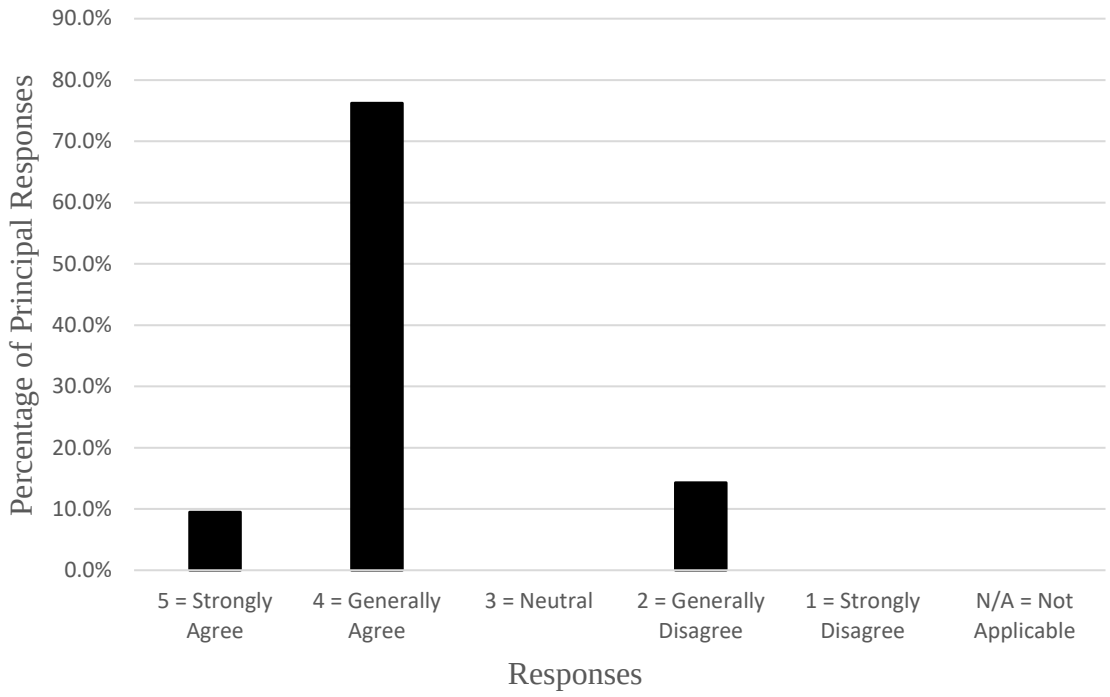

Figure 5. Perceptions of disruptive students. Statement 5: Traditional school teachers encounter fewer disruptive students due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Ryan (2014) suggested the decreasing level of respect demonstrated by students toward teachers is evident when polling data suggested only 31% of students respect teachers. Today's students have grown accustomed to speaking and acting disrespectfully (Borba, 2017). Data were collected for this study to determine if traditional school teachers encounter fewer instances of disrespect from students due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Responses indicated 4.76% of the participants strongly agreed with this statement. Conversely, 4.76% of participants strongly disagreed with the statement. In addition, 61.9% generally agreed with the

statement, while 9.52% generally disagreed with the statement. There were 19.05% of the participants who chose to remain neutral regarding this statement (see Figure 6).

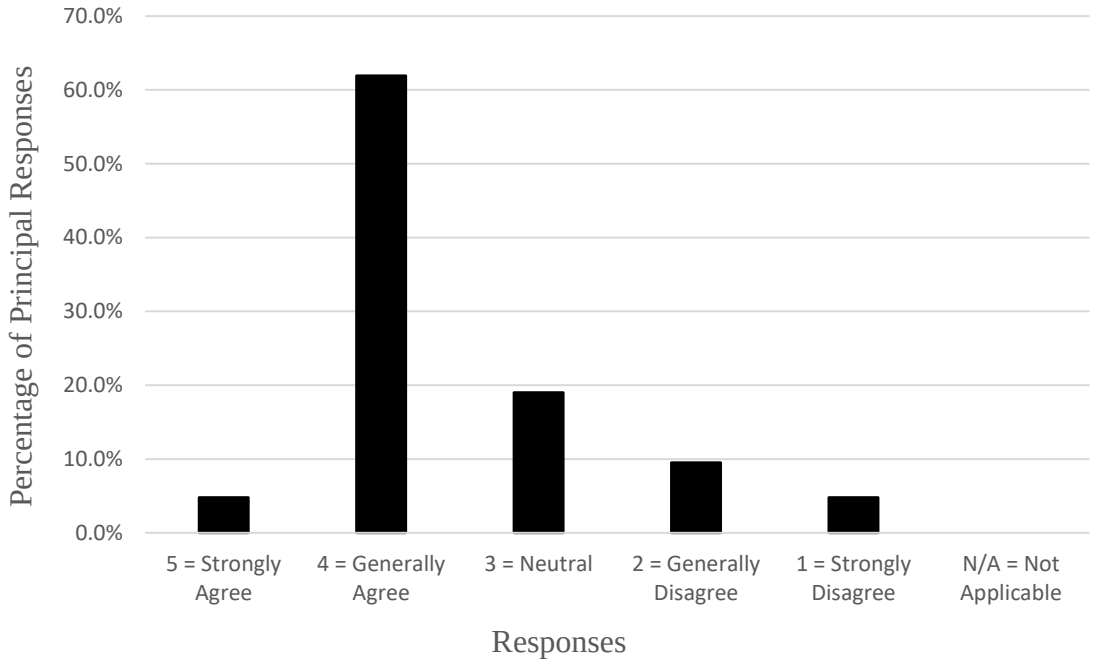

Figure 6. Perceptions of disrespect of teachers. Statement 6: Traditional school teachers encounter fewer instances of disrespect from students due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

A decline in the level of respect students show educators has led to an environment in which students also respect administrators less now than in the past (Ryan, 2014). Responses were gathered to determine if traditional school administrators encounter fewer instances of disrespect from students due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Response data indicated 9.52% of respondents strongly agreed and 57.14% generally agreed with the statement. On the contrary, 14.29% generally

disagreed and 4.76% strongly disagreed with the statement. Data indicated 14.29% of respondents chose to remain neutral regarding this statement (see Figure 7).

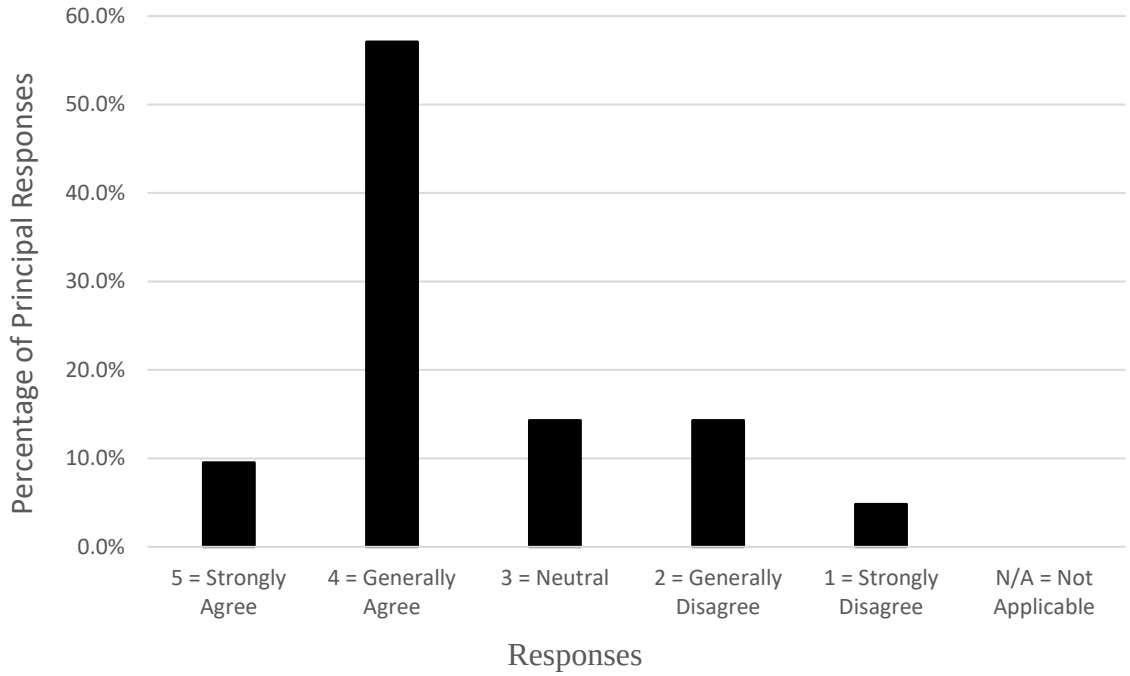

Figure 7. Perceptions of disrespect of administrators. Statement 7: Traditional school administration encounter fewer instances of disrespect from students due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) identified the greatest challenge within an alternative school is getting students to trust teachers. At-risk youth are commonly disinclined to trust teachers, staff members, and adults in general (Caroleo, 2014). Alternative school staff build genuine relationships with students to create an atmosphere of trust, permitting academic achievement to occur (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

In this study, responses were gathered to determine if an increased percentage of trusting relationships between students and staff are fostered due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Data indicated 19.05% of respondents strongly agreed with this statement, while 38.1% generally agreed with the statement. There were 19.05% of respondents who chose to remain neutral on this statement. Meanwhile, 19.05% of respondents generally disagreed with this statement, and 4.76% strongly disagreed with this statement (see Figure 8).

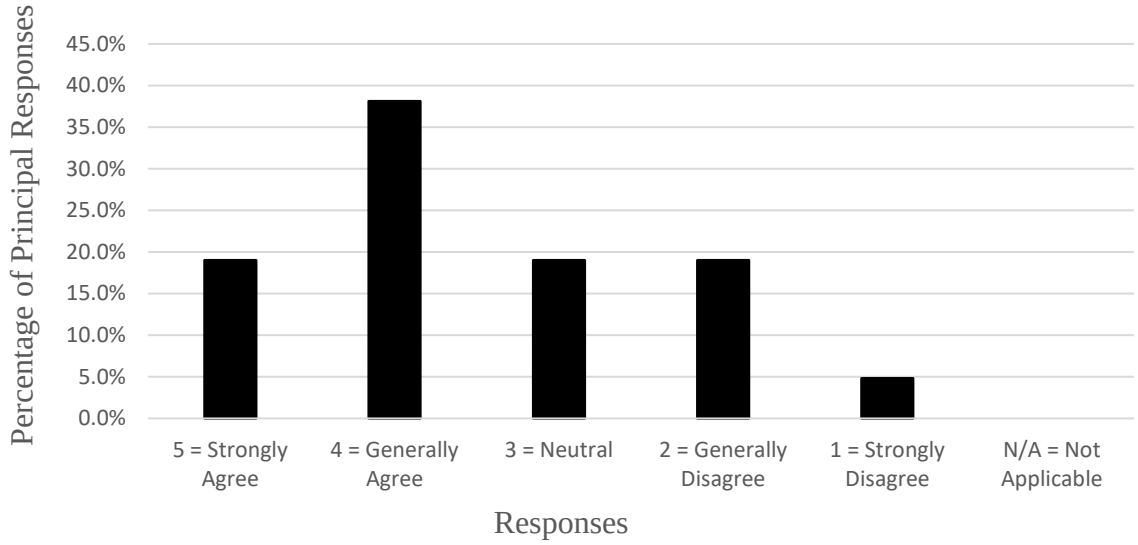

Figure 8. Perceptions of increased trusting relationships. Statement 8: An increased percentage of trusting relationships between students and staff are fostered due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Poor student attendance indicates a student may be at risk of becoming disengaged with school and may ultimately consider dropping out (Stanley, 2008). Alternative programs take strides to increase student attendance due to the belief decreased truancy has a significant positive impact on student achievement levels (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Survey statement number nine was posed to determine if student attendance is improved due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Responses demonstrated 14.29% strongly agreed and 47.62% generally agreed with this statement. Neutral responses were gathered from 14.29% of respondents. In addition, 19.05% of respondents generally disagreed and 4.76% of respondents strongly disagreed with the statement (see Figure 9).

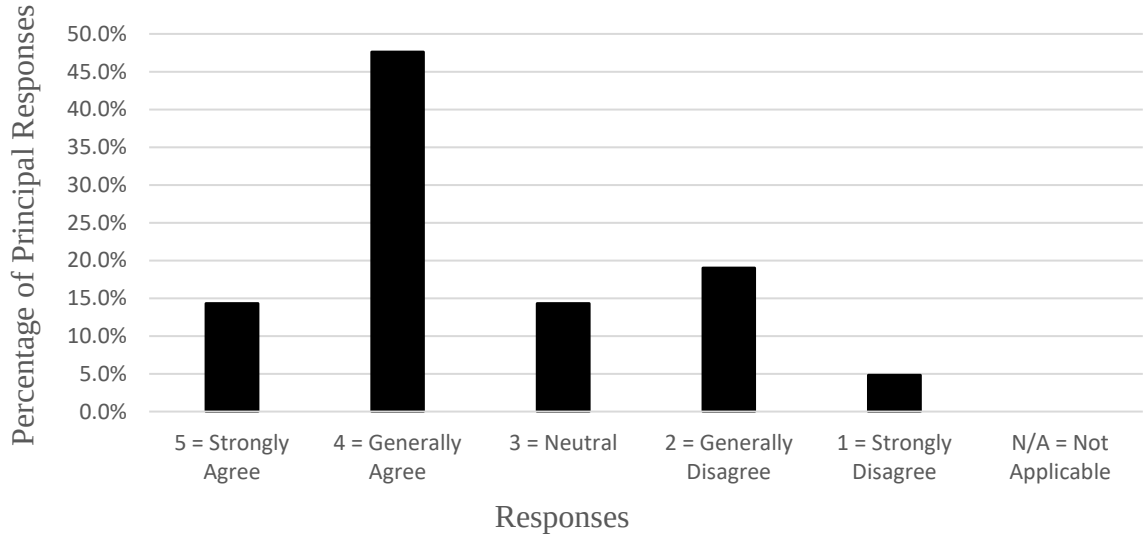

Figure 9. Perceptions of student attendance. Statement 9: Student attendance is better due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Lieszkovszky (2012) reported 80% of alternative schools today are punitive in nature and serve as an educational setting to house disruptive students, many of whom have displayed behavior issues. The removal of disruptive students increases teacher effectiveness, the ability for other students to learn, and the school climate as a whole (Ford, 2013). Data were collected to determine if the overall school climate is better in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Responses from principals demonstrated 25% strongly agreed and 40% generally agreed with this statement. Results revealed 25% of respondents generally disagreed with the statement, while 10% of respondents remained neutral (see Figure 10).

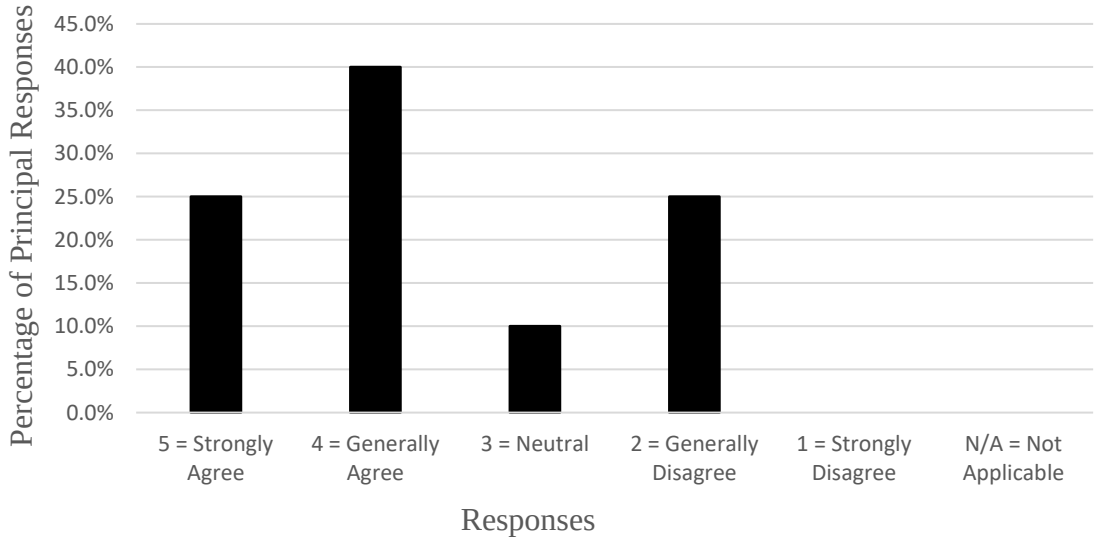

Figure 10. Perceptions of school climate. Statement 10: The overall school climate is better in the traditional school due to implementation of an alternative high school.

Students considered to be disruptive to the educational process are often housed in alternative schools (Caroleo, 2014). The disruptive behavior exhibited by students is detrimental to educators' efforts to maintain a productive educational environment (Ford, 2013). Data were collected to determine if there are fewer disruptions to the educational process in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Data indicated 33.33% of respondents strongly agreed with this statement, while 38.1% generally agreed. There were 23.81% of respondents who generally disagreed with the statement, while 4.76% remained neutral on the subject (see Figure 11).

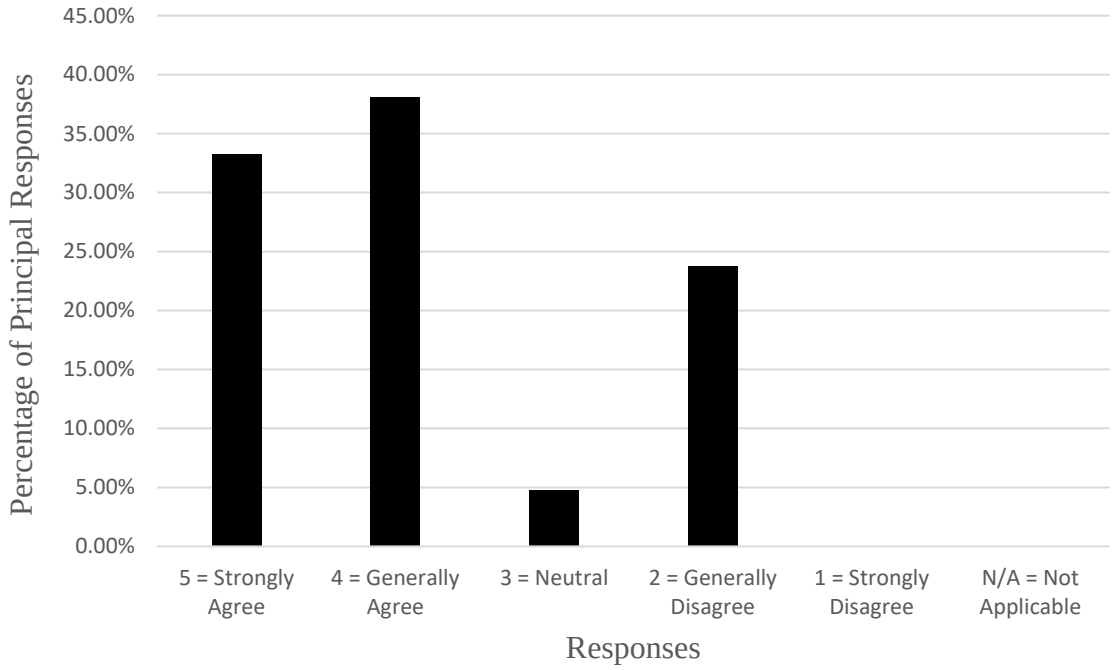

Figure 11. Perceptions of decreased disruptions. Statement 11: There are fewer disruptions to the educational process in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

The level of learning for traditional school students is diminished when disruptive students force a focus on discipline rather than student learning (Ford, 2013). The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2014) reported alternative school implementation increases student motivation by developing learning environments better suited to meet student needs. Survey response data were collected to determine whether student motivation is increased in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative high school. Data indicated 14.29% of respondents strongly agreed, 23.81% generally agreed, and 28.57% chose to remain neutral in regard to this statement. There were 23.81% of respondents who generally disagreed with this statement and 9.52% who strongly disagreed (see Figure 12).

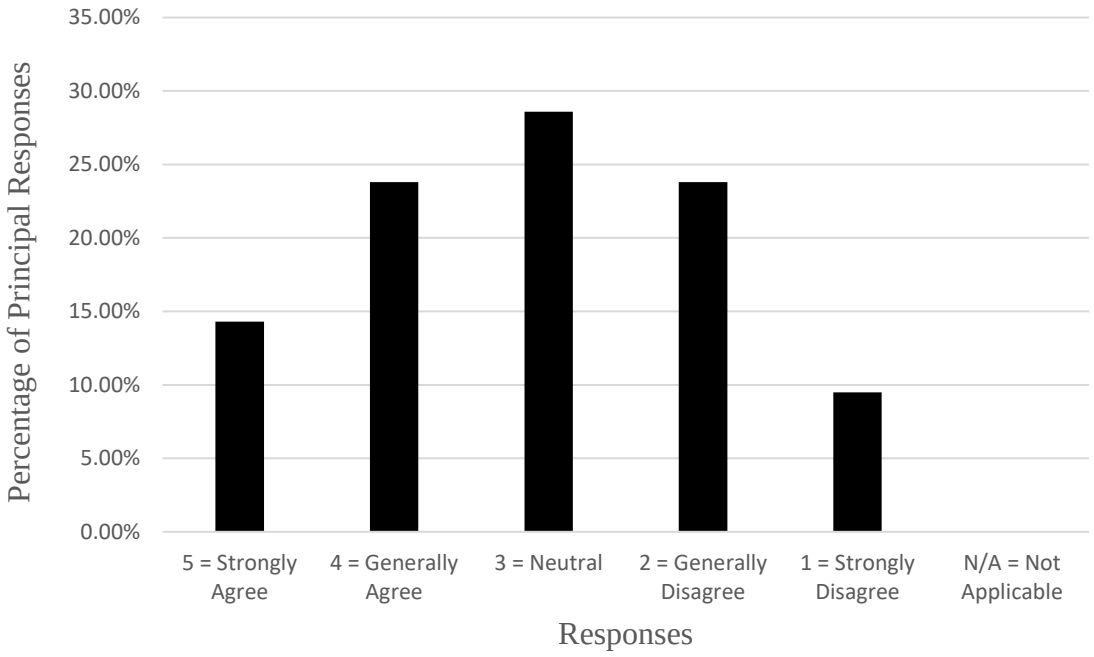

Figure 12. Perceptions of student motivation. Statement 12: Student motivation is increased in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

Step Three: Responses to Interview Questions

For this study, qualitative data were used to expound upon and further enrich the quantitative data collected (Creswell, 2014). These qualitative data were gathered by completing face-to-face interviews with subject-area teachers and alternative school teachers. Nineteen teachers were randomly selected from participating districts with alternative schools. Interviews were conducted to gather perceptions on student motivation and academic rigor specifically relating to alternative school students. Interview questions two through 10 specifically addressed research question three. Interview questions 11 through 14 specifically addressed research question four. Interview responses were recorded, placed into text, organized, and reviewed to identify common themes.

Interview question one. What motivated your district to implement an alternative high school?

Responses from teachers included four reoccurring themes: graduation, dropouts, student success, and credit recovery. Graduation rate and the desire to aid students in their pursuit of graduation was mentioned by over 26% of the teachers interviewed. One alternative school teacher stated the desire "to offer a path to graduation for students who were at risk of not graduating." Dropout prevention was mentioned as a reason by over 42% of those interviewed. A language arts teacher responded, "The district was motivated to implement an alternative high school to decrease dropout rates and meet graduation rate requirements set forth by the state."

Student success, undefined, was stated as a reason by over 31% of those interviewed. A math teacher stated, "[We] needed a place to educate students who were

not successful in the regular school." Finally, credit recovery reasoning was provided by over 21% of teachers interviewed. A language arts teacher wanted "to help struggling students that could not gain the credits they needed in the regular classroom setting." Two out of the 19 teachers interviewed did not know why their district had implemented an alternative school in the first place.

Interview question two. In your opinion, are students in the alternative high school more motivated to follow directions than they had been in the traditional school? Why? Why not?

Over 63% of educators interviewed believed students in the alternative high school were more motivated to follow directions than when they were in the traditional school. One language arts teacher stated, "Students are more motivated to follow directions because they are met where they are and their needs are met allowing them to succeed in a manner not possible in a traditional setting." Just over 5% of those interviewed thought students in the alternative school were less motivated to follow directions than when they were in the traditional school. Teachers who either did not know or believed motivation to be the same accounted for 10.5% of those interviewed. A math teacher responded, "Motivation is typically the same; however, the structured environment leads to success and achievement." There were a significant number, just over 21%, of those interviewed who believed student motivation was dependent on a few variables. A high school math teacher expressed, "When the student has a good relationship with the teacher, I would say yes, but when the student teacher relationship is not very good, I would say no."

Three themes appeared among answers to this question: last chance, relationships, and educational programming. In elaborating as to why students were more motivated to follow directions in the alternative school, 26.3% of respondents believed this was due to the conviction alternative school placement was the student's last chance to graduate. A math teacher stated, "Alternative school students realize this is their last shot at graduating." This realization by the student was attributed to an increased level of motivation.

Relationships, particularly student-teacher relationships, were provided as reasoning in 26.3% of responses to interview question two. Interviewees stated positive student-teacher relationships made students more motivated to follow directions. One alternative teacher responded, "The biggest reason for increased motivation is the forming of positive relationships between student and teacher; students believe the teachers care." Meanwhile, negative student-teacher relationships made students less motivated to follow directions.

Educational programming was mentioned as reasoning in 36.8% of responses. Educational programming mentioned by respondents included self-directed learning, computer-based instruction, individualized instruction, and a more structured environment. A language arts teacher stated, "Alternative school students are more motivated because they receive more one-on-one instruction ensuring understanding, allowing students to see the results of efforts quicker than in the traditional school."

Interview question three. In your opinion, are students in the alternative high school more motivated to show respect to their teacher than they had been in the traditional school? Why? Why not?

In 42.1% of responses, educators indicated a belief alternative high school students were more motivated to show respect to their teachers than they had been in the traditional school. There were 15.8% of respondents who did not believe alternative school students were more motivated to show respect to their teachers. In addition, 42.1% of those interviewed believed student motivation to show respect to teachers was largely dependent on the student-teacher relationship.

Relationship between student and teacher was the most common theme among the responses to question three. Eleven out of 19 respondents mentioned student-teacher relationships as the most important factor in determining student motivation to show respect toward teachers. One alternative school teacher stated, "Students are more motivated to show respect due to the formation of positive relationships with teachers in the alternative school." In situations where positive relationships were created between the alternative school student and the alternative school staff, respondents reported students being more motivated to show respect to teachers than they were in the traditional school. A language arts teacher responded, "Alternative school students are more motivated to show respect due to the creation of an environment of mutual respect where teachers are very invested in students achieving success."

Other themes noticed in responses to question three were last chance, educational setting, and student image. Three out of the 19 responses to this question shared the belief student motivation was based on the realization the alternative school setting was the last chance for academic success and obtaining the goal of graduation. A math teacher said, "The students are more motivated to show respect because if they misbehave, they are done, it is their last chance, there is not plan C." Two of the 19

respondents believed the educational setting played the biggest role in student motivation to show more respect to teachers. They noted the less formal environment with lower teacher-to-student ratio motivated students to show more respect. An alternative school teacher answered, "Students are more motivated to show respect because the student-to-teacher ratio is very low in the alternative school, allowing teachers to give more academic and emotional support to students." Finally, two of the 19 respondents believed student motivation to show respect to teachers was affected most by students wanting to maintain the image of being disrespectful. A math teacher replied, "Students are not more motivated to show respect; they enjoy the notoriety of being so-called bad kids."

Interview question four. In your opinion, do students in the alternative high school display a higher level of respect to their fellow students than they had in the traditional school? Why? Why not?

Over 47% of educators responding to this question believed students in the alternative school displayed a higher level of respect to their fellow students than they had in the traditional school. Conversely, 36.8% of those interviewed did not believe alternative school students displayed a higher level of respect toward their peers. There were three of the 19 respondents, 15.8%, who could not determine whether or not a higher level of respect was evident.

When considering why students in the alternative high school display a higher level of respect for fellow students, three reoccurring themes emerged: enrollment numbers, student similarity, and the amount of time spent together. According to responses, alternative schools have much lower enrollment numbers than the traditional

school, which leads to fewer incidents of disrespect. The smaller number of students, according to respondents, creates fewer student conflicts. One math teacher stated, "They have less problems because it's less kids to deal with." Respondents also reported having a smaller number of students creates a smaller audience and an environment conducive to learning how to coexist. Another math teacher replied, "Alternative school students display a higher level of respect for their peers than in the traditional school because they all feel they are equal and they work together, help one another, and do not judge each other."

Secondly, students in the alternative school realize they have much in common, which leads to more respectful relationships. A language arts teacher said, "Students show more respect to one another because they have similar stories and they are able to relate to one another." Finally, respondents pointed out alternative school students spend much more class time together than students do in the traditional school. This leads to familiarity and thus increased levels of respect among students. An alternative school teacher commented, "They do respect each other more because they are here all day together and there is not the normal high school drama."

Interview question five. In your opinion, are students in the alternative high school more motivated to work cooperatively with others than they were in the traditional school? Why? Why not?

Educator responses to question five indicated 63.2% of respondents believed alternative high school students were more motivated to work cooperatively with others then they were in the traditional school. Data collected indicated 26.3% of respondents did not believe alternative school students were more motivated to work cooperatively

with others. In addition, 10.5% of respondents could not make a determination as to the motivation to work cooperatively. Various themes were shared as reasoning why alternative school students were or were not more motivated to work cooperatively with others.

Three general themes emerged as reasoning behind alternative school students working more cooperatively: limited cooperative learning activities, student similarities, and teacher-led activities. Of those who believed alternative high school students worked more cooperatively, 50% expressed this was due to limited cooperative learning opportunities. Respondents reported a vast amount of the alternative school student's work is solely independent. Therefore, when the students have an opportunity to work cooperatively with others, it is almost refreshing and creates a productive working environment. An alternative teacher stated, "Students are more motivated to work cooperatively because the individualized computer-based curriculum makes students really like the few projects they are allowed to do cooperatively."

Of those who believed alternative high school students worked more cooperatively, 33.3% asserted this was due to student similarities. Respondents reported a family-like atmosphere among students who for the most part considered each other equals. A math teacher replied, "Students are more likely to work cooperatively with one another because they come from similar backgrounds and similar situations."

Of those who reported alternative high school students worked more cooperatively, 16.7% believed this was due to teacher-led activities. These respondents believed team-building cooperative learning activities set forth by teachers not only taught students how to work cooperatively but increased the level of cooperation and

collaboration among students in the alternative school setting. A language arts teacher commented, “The environment created by alternative school staff is geared around cooperation and trying to prepare students for the real world where being a team player is essential to success.”

Among those educators who did not believe alternative high school students were motivated to work cooperatively, two general themes were reported as reasoning: programming and social skills. Of those who did not believe alternative high school students worked more cooperatively, 83.3% believed this was due to programming. These respondents indicated curriculum in the alternative school was administered solely through computer-based independent learning activities. Therefore, there simply was very little opportunity for students to actually work cooperatively with each other. A math teacher replied, “Our alternative school students are not more motivated to work cooperatively because our alternative school programming is computer-based so they basically interact solely with a computer.”

The other 16.7% of respondents believed social skills led to alternative school students’ failure to demonstrate increased motivation to work cooperatively. Respondents reported the social skills of most of the alternative school students were so limited it made it almost impossible for them to work together or to get along with one another in any collaborative activity. A language arts teacher stated, “Students do not work well together due to very low social skills among most of the alternative school students.”

Interview question six. In your opinion, are students in the alternative high school more motivated to complete high school than they were while in the traditional high school? Why? Why not?

Responses to question six indicated 63.2% of educators interviewed believed alternative school students were more motivated to complete high school than they were while in the traditional school. Data collected demonstrated 21.3% of those interviewed believed alternative school student motivation to complete high school was varied and dependent on each student's particular situation. Only 10.5% of those interviewed believed alternative school students were not more motivated to complete school than they were while in the traditional school.

Examination of responses from those who indicated alternative school students were more motivated to complete high school than they were previously highlighted four themes: last chance, pace, hope, and easier in regard to academic rigor. Of those who believed alternative school students were more motivated to complete high school, 25% expressed this motivation was created by the students' realization of alternative school being the last chance for graduation. An alternative teacher stated, "Many of these students are more motivated to complete high school because they understand this is their last chance at getting a diploma."

Another 25% believed motivation was increased by the students' freedom to work at their own pace. An alternative teacher commented, "Students here are more motivated to finish high school because we use computer-based learning that allows them to work through classes at their own rate." These respondents reported alternative school students struggled with the demands and deadlines placed upon them at the traditional school. A

math teacher said, “Students are more motivated because there is not as much pressure from the teacher to stay up with the class.”

Another 33.3% of respondents reporting increased motivation to complete high school articulated the reasoning as hope. They shared upon arrival at the alternative school, students realized there were others like them, and this new setting, along with teachers who treated them with respect, made them hopeful in their endeavor to complete high school. A math teacher replied, “These students now have a light at the end of the tunnel, and the hope of now having a path to graduation motivates them.”

Of those who believed alternative school students were more motivated to complete high school than when they were in the traditional school, 16.7% felt their motivation came from the workload being easier. A math teacher commented, “Yes, these students are more motivated because they have found an easier way to graduate where they don’t have to follow the same rules.” Respondents reported witnessing an increased motivation in students once the students came to the realization the path to graduation had just gotten less rigorous. A language arts teacher replied, “With a less rigorous course load, students begin to see success in their lessons immediately and that helps motivate them to complete high school courses.”

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, some educators participating in these interviews believed decreased academic rigor actually served as a motivator to alternative school students. Also, as previously stated, 10.5% of educators interviewed did not believe alternative school students were more motivated to complete high school than they were in the traditional school. Of this group, 100% believed this was the case due to decreased academic rigor, or “the work being easier.” These respondents admitted these

students were more likely to complete high school than they had been when in the traditional school, but only because the path to graduation had become easier, not because the students were more motivated. One interviewee believed alternative school placement had simply made it harder for the students to fail.

Additional responses to question six indicated 21.3% of those interviewed believed the motivation to complete high school by alternative school students was dependent on each student's particular situation and could only be considered on a case-by-case basis. These respondents asserted the motivation or lack thereof was often dependent on the issues which led to the student being placed in the alternative school. If change of placement to the alternative school helped overcome these issues, motivation often increased. For instance, students who were there due to behavioral reasons or being behind on credits often became more motivated in the new setting due to the alternative setting being able to combat these issues. A language arts teacher stated, "Students placed in the alternative school because behavioral issues interfered with their success, many times they become more motivated when the sources of these issues are removed." However, this same teacher believed if a student was sent there largely due to poor attendance, attendance and motivation rarely changed due to a change of placement.

Interview question seven. What percentage of your alternative high school students do you feel are motivated enough to complete high school?

Data collected from interviews demonstrated 79% of those interviewed were willing to answer question seven in the form of a percentage. One math teacher commented, "I am not knowledgeable enough on the demographics of the alternative school to give a percentage." The answers given ranged from 50% to 100%. When all

answers were tabulated, the mean was 78.9%, the median was 80%, and the mode was also 80%. Although this percentage may seem low when compared to the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate of most districts, one must also consider what one language arts teacher noted: "I would estimate more than 90% of the alternative program's students were at risk of failing to graduate before they were placed in it."

Interview question eight. What percentage of your alternative high school students seem motivated to continue their education after high school?

Data collected from interviews demonstrated 79% of those interviewed were willing to answer question eight in the form of a percentage. One language arts teacher stated, "I do not know all of the students in the alternative school so I don't know a percentage." The answers given ranged from 0-50%. When all answers were tabulated, the mean was 22.83%, the median was 20%, and the mode was also 20%. These percentages indicate a small percentage of alternative school students are motivated to continue their education beyond high school. A common theme among respondents was that most alternative school students who are motivated to continue their education beyond high school aspire to attend a trade school, vocational school, or technical college. One alternative school teacher stated, "Probably only 20% continue education past high school; those who do go to a trade school. College is low on their list; most are in survival mode."

Interview question nine. What percentage of your alternative high school students seem motivated to enter the workforce after high school?

Data collected from interviews demonstrated 89.5% of those interviewed were willing to answer question nine in the form of a percentage. A language arts teacher

replied, “I do not know what most of the students do after high school.” The answers given ranged from 50-100%. When answers were tabulated, the mean was 81.2%, the median was 85%, and the mode was 90%. A common theme from respondents was their confidence in student motivation to enter the workforce, along with doubts about the students’ abilities to maintain gainful employment. One alternative school teacher stated, “I would say 90% enter the workforce, but finding and maintaining gainful employment is doubtful.”

Interview question 10. What percentage of your alternative high school students are unmotivated to the point you believe they will need public assistance after high school?

Data collected from interviews demonstrated 84.2% of those interviewed were willing to answer question 10 in the form of a percentage. One math teacher stated, “Overall, I do not feel I am close enough to these students to answer this.” The answers given ranged from 0-55%. When the answers were tabulated, the mean was 25.66%, the median was 23.75%, and the mode was 10%. One common theme emerging from interviews regarding public assistance was that alternative school students already have experience with and knowledge of public assistance. An alternative school teacher responded, “These students have not learned resources in their homes on how to get and keep a job, but they have learned how to get public assistance.” Respondents indicated many of these students have grown up in homes in which parents are dependent on public assistance, and in some instances teachers reported a motivation for the student to stay in school is so the parent can continue to collect public assistance. One language arts

teacher said, “Many of these students are already on public assistance, and of course, some of them are only in school so they can continue to receive a check.”

Interview question 11. Do you believe the academic programming in your district’s alternative school is as rigorous as in the traditional school? Why? Why not?

Data collected demonstrated 26.3% of those interviewed believed the academic programming in their district’s alternative school was as rigorous as in the traditional school. Themes emerging from this group included a curriculum comparable to the traditional school and often computer-driven, requiring a high degree of mastery. One alternative school teacher said, “The alternative school programming is just as rigorous; to pass you have to have 80% mastery, not the 60% as in the traditional school.”

Data collected from interview question 11 indicated 52.6% of those who responded did not believe the academic programming in their district’s alternative school was as rigorous as in the traditional school. An emerging theme in this group of respondents was that objectives and standards might be comparable to the traditional school, but rigor simply was not. The respondents reasoned a computer-based learning environment made up of mostly multiple-choice questions did not require the in-depth and higher order thinking often expected for traditional school assignments and assessments. One alternative school teacher responded, “Content and objectives in the alternative school curriculum are similar to that in the traditional school, but the rigor in higher order thinking is missing.” In addition, one math teacher mentioned the lack of cooperative learning opportunities, and the students’ ability to redo assignments multiple times tended to “dumb down” the learning process and make it less rigorous.

Additional data collected from interview question 11 indicated 21.1% of respondents believed in some ways the programming was as rigorous but in other ways it was not. Themes emerging from answers given among this group indicated content, content mastery, and the expectation of meeting state standards were as rigorous as within the traditional school. However, these same respondents believed the alternative school was less rigorous in regard to time to complete assignments, volume of work assigned, depth of knowledge in assignments and assessments, and inability to offer rigor present in higher-level courses or laboratory settings. One language arts teacher stated, "The program is more than rigorous enough to meet state standards; however, improvement is needed in teaching high-level depth of knowledge skills, especially critical thinking."

Interview question 12. Considering academic rigor, do you believe a student who graduates from the alternative school is deserving of the same diploma as a graduate from the traditional school? Why? Why not?

Data demonstrated 63.2% of those interviewed believed students graduating from the alternative school deserved the same diploma as traditional school graduates. When justifying this belief, 91.7% offered reasoning why they affirmed alternative school students were deserving of the same diploma as traditional school graduates. Two themes emerged as reasoning from this group: minimum standards met and accomplishment rewarded.

The first theme was a belief alternative school graduates met minimum standards comparable to the minimum standards set forth in the traditional school. One language arts teacher said, "They have passed the same courses in a different format." Of those

who believed the same diploma was warranted, 58.3% communicated this theme as reasoning behind their belief. In advocating for alternative school students gaining the same diploma, respondents spoke to the effort, study skills, and perseverance demonstrated by these students within the alternative school setting.

The second theme evident was that an accomplishment needs to be rewarded. Of those who proclaimed the same diploma should be awarded, 25% shared this very theme. This group shared a belief that although the academic rigor was reduced in the alternative school, the students deserved the diploma all the same. They declared the alternative school graduates had done the work and displayed the knowledge to complete the work put in front of them. One math teacher replied, "They may not have had the same setting or instruction but they have accomplished the goals set forth by the district, and a diploma signifies goal accomplished not intelligence level." Therefore, one math teacher asserted this accomplishment should be rewarded in hopes of building students up and aiding them in being productive and successful in life.

Data demonstrated 26.3% of those interviewed did not believe alternative school graduates deserved the same diploma as graduates from the traditional school. Responses from this group of educators consistently aligned with one common theme: deserving but different. One math teacher stated, "There should be a classification like we do with the honors diploma." Each respondent who articulated alternative school students were not deserving of the same diploma shared the same belief: although students were not deserving of the same diploma, alternative school graduates did deserve a diploma. One language arts teacher stated, "I believe there should be a stratified diploma system, but I do not believe the attendance center should be the sole determining factor."

Interview question 13. Considering academic rigor, do you believe an alternative school graduate to be ready for college? Why? Why not?

Responses to question 13 demonstrated 26.3% of those interviewed believed alternative school graduates were ready for college. Likewise, data indicated 26.3% of those interviewed indicated they did not believe alternative school graduates were ready for college. Of those interviewed, 36.8% reported college readiness among alternative school graduates was dependent upon the individual students. Results indicated 10.6% of those interviewed believed college readiness was dependent upon college choice.

Among respondents who indicated a belief alternative school graduates were ready for college, the common theme seemed to be equality. These respondents shared the belief students had been subject to the same requirements, standards, quality of education, and had been taught the same study skills as their peers in the traditional school. One alternative school teacher said, "The courses they have taken meet the requirements we set out, so they should be at the same advantages and disadvantages of their peers in regular classrooms." This being the case, according to one language arts teacher, "They are equally qualified for higher education of whatever type."

Respondents who indicated the belief alternative school students did not graduate ready for college reported the lack of certain skills. An alternative school teacher responded, "Alternative school students are not ready for college; a successful college student must have self-discipline, time management skills, and at least average writing and communication skills." Respondents reported the academic skillset of alternative school students was low enough that high school completion was the only goal and college readiness was really never a consideration. Another alternative teacher

concluded, “Most students in the alternative school never planned to go to college; high school completion was the goal, so there wasn’t reason to pretend to prepare them for college.”

Respondents who indicated college readiness is dependent upon the individual student shared a common theme of college readiness having more to do with motivation and less to do with academic rigor. These respondents noted those students who have been determined to learn and who prepare for continuing their education will be ready. One language arts teacher said, “College readiness depends on the student. If they use the opportunity for self-directed learning and push themselves to excel, they may do just that.”

Respondents who believed college readiness among alternative school graduates was dependent upon college choice had one clear theme: online or technical college. This group of respondents indicated the computer-based programming present in alternative schools would lead to success in college classes taken online, but not in seated classes. One math teacher stated, “College readiness is largely dependent on what college they pursue; if it is online classes, yes, if seated classes, no.” In addition, these respondents believed these students would be prepared for continuing their education in a technical college. A different math teacher expressed, “Most alternative school students, if they want to go to college, want to go into a technical school.”

Interview question 14. Considering academic rigor, do you believe an alternative school graduate to be career-ready? Why? Why not?

Responses to question 14 indicated 68.4% of those interviewed believed the alternative school graduate to be career-ready. Data indicated only 5.3% of those

interviewed believed alternative school students were not career-ready. Interview results demonstrated 26.3% of those interviewed indicated career readiness was dependent upon the student or the program. One major theme emerged when investigating the data collected in response to this question: workforce readiness versus career readiness.

Interview data suggested 68.4% of those interviewed reported graduates were career-ready. One language arts teacher stated, "I believe alternative school graduates can be just as ready for careers as their traditional school counterparts." Data indicated 73.7% of these respondents believed graduates to be clearly ready for entry-level positions in the workforce. One math teacher responded, "Depending on the career, I would definitely say alternative school graduates are ready for entry-level positions." Many respondents declared an entry-level position could ultimately lead to a career.

Of the respondents who did not believe alternative school graduates were career-ready, 100% stated the alternative school graduates were prepared for entry-level positions in the workforce. Their belief was an entry-level position is not the same as a career. One alternative school teacher replied, "Yes, alternative school graduates are work-ready, but a career implies a life-long job for which they are not ready."

Of those respondents who specified career readiness was dependent upon the student or the program, 80% believed alternative school graduates were ready for entry-level positions in the workforce. This group asserted the alternative school graduates were willing and prepared to work, but were skeptical of their ability to have success in certain careers. One math teacher answered, "Career readiness largely depends on the career they pursue, and if the career depends upon public interaction, most alternative school students will not be ready."

Summary

In this chapter, statistical and descriptive data were analyzed in an effort to gauge the effectiveness of alternative schools through an examination of graduation rates, school climate, student motivation, and academic rigor. Forty educators including high school principals, high school teachers, and alternative school teachers contributed to this study. Information was gathered from superintendents to form a list of SWMASA districts with alternative schools as well as a list of districts without alternative schools. The next part of this phase was quantitative in nature and involved collecting four-year cohort graduation rate data from 100 SWMASA high schools. These schools and their respective graduation rate data were divided into two separate groups – those with alternative high schools in their district and those without. These data were subjected to *t*-test analysis of the mean graduation rates for the 2015-2016 school year. This was done to determine if a statistical difference exists between graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts without such programs.

The second part of this study involved surveying high school principals from SWMASA districts with alternative schools. The survey was written and conducted to evaluate to what extent high school principals report an improved learning environment in the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school. The survey allowed for information to be gathered on topics pertinent to the learning environment such as safety, disrespect, disruptive behavior, student engagement, attendance, climate, and relationships.

The third part of this study involved eliciting perspectives from traditional high school teachers and alternative high school teachers by conducting interviews. Nineteen

teachers were chosen from randomly selected SWMASA districts with alternative high schools. Each teacher interview consisted of the same 14 questions. Interview questions two through 10 gathered perceptions regarding student motivation within the alternative school setting. Interview questions 11 through 14 gathered perceptions with regard to the academic rigor evident within each district's alternative high school.

Chapter Five begins with a review of the purpose of the study. The four research questions are answered. Next, the findings and conclusions are discussed. Chapter Five concludes with implications for practice and recommendations for future projects.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

Alternative education is based on research demonstrating there are a number of ways to become educated, including numerous educational environments and a variety of educational structures (Irvine Unified School District, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the impact and effectiveness of alternative high schools. In this chapter are the summation of findings, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. The following four research questions were created and used to guide this study:

1. What statistical difference exists between the graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts that do not have alternative school programs?
2. To what extent do high school principals report an improved learning environment in the traditional school with the implementation of an alternative school?
3. What are the perceptions of high school teachers and alternative school teachers regarding student motivation within alternative school settings?
4. What are the perceptions of high school teachers and alternative school teachers with regard to the academic rigor of their district's alternative high school?

The null hypothesis for research question one stated there was no difference between the graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts that do not have alternative school programs.

The literature review for this study was divided into four main headings: school reform, school improvement, school culture, and student motivation. For the past 50 to 60 years, public education in America has been subject to constant school reform (Jennings, 2012). Alternative education programs have proliferated continually during this time period (Carver et al., 2010). Public education's rising standards have created pressure on educators to be in a constant state of school improvement (Lezotte, 2007).

This study consisted of gathering four-year cohort graduation rate data from SWMASA high schools. These quantitative data were subjected to a *t*-test analysis to determine if a statistical difference exists between graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts without such programs. Quantitative data collection continued by conducting surveys to gauge to what extent high school principals report an improved learning environment in the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school. The final part of this study, qualitative in nature, involved conducting interviews with high school subject-area teachers and alternative school teachers to gather perceptions on student motivation and academic rigor.

Findings

A statistical analysis was performed to generate an answer for research question one. This analysis was performed by collecting four-year cohort graduation rate data from 100 SWMASA high schools. These schools were divided into two separate groups: those with alternative high schools in their districts and those without. This quantitative data collection was subjected to *t*-test analysis of the mean graduation rates for the 2015-2016 school year. This was done in order to determine if a statistical difference exists

between graduation rates for schools with alternative school programs and similar districts without such programs. According to the results, the *t*-test generated a *p* value of .033636. These data indicated there was a significant difference in mean graduation rates between districts with alternative high schools and those districts without alternative high schools; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

A survey was created by the researcher and completed by high school principals to collect data in an effort to generate an answer for research question two. Data indicated a majority of high school principals believed traditional school students and teachers were safer due to the implementation of an alternative school. Secondly, data indicated a majority of high school principals reported fewer discipline referrals were handled due to the implementation of an alternative school.

In addition, data indicated a majority of high school principals expressed traditional classrooms exhibited increased student engagement, attendance, and trusting relationships between students and staff due to the implementation of an alternative school. Data also indicated a majority of high school principals believed traditional school teachers encountered fewer disruptive students and disruptions to the educational process due to the implementation of an alternative school. Data indicated a majority of high school principals reported fewer instances of disrespect were encountered by traditional school teachers and administrators due to the implementation of an alternative school. Finally, data indicated a majority of high school principals asserted the overall school climate was better in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative school.

Interview data collected to gauge alternative school placement's effect on student motivation revealed teachers indicated alternative school placement led to a majority of alternative school students being more motivated to follow directions, work cooperatively with others, complete high school, and enter the workforce. There were mixed results when determining student motivation to show respect to staff and to fellow students. When discussing effects of motivation on these elements, three reoccurring themes emerged: last chance, educational setting, and relationships. The alternative school as the last chance for students to gain academic success was realized by students and in turn motivated the students to change. The largely computer-based educational setting provided by alternative schools involves different instructional methods, smaller and more structured environments, and placement among peers with similar struggles.

Positive relationships forged between students and teachers were largely reported as reasoning for increased student motivation within the alternative school setting. Additional motivational factors assessed included student motivation to continue education beyond high school as well as the motivation required to avoid relying on public assistance later in life. Teachers expressed opinions suggesting a small percentage of alternative school students would continue their education beyond high school, while some would need public assistance.

Interview data were collected to assess the level of academic rigor existing within alternative schools. Questions were designed to determine if alternative school students were subject to rigorous programming, were deserving of the same diploma, were ready for college, and were as ready for careers as peers attending traditional school. Data showed mixed results in regard to teacher opinions on college readiness and the rigor of

alternative schools versus traditional schools. A clear majority of interviewees believed alternative school graduates deserved the same diploma and were career-ready. Major themes emerging from this line of questioning included comparable minimum standards, goal attainment, and entry-level qualifications. Teachers repeatedly discussed how the curriculum in the alternative school met the same minimum standards as in the traditional school.

However, there was also a common belief the alternative school curriculum was lacking in-depth instruction, was slower-paced, and was lacking in volume of work and cooperative learning opportunities. Teachers who held the belief of alternative school students deserving the same diploma mentioned hard work, perseverance, and meeting the goals set forth to earn a diploma. Teachers clearly believed alternative school graduates were ready for entry-level employment if not a career.

Conclusions

Educators in the alternative education field recognize everyone can be educated, and it is in society's best interest to ensure students graduate from high school (Irvine Unified School District, 2014). A large focus of this study was based on alternative education's goal to increase graduation rates by reducing the risk of students dropping out (Hinds, 2013). The statistical analysis performed to generate an answer for research question one indicated there is in fact a statistical difference between the graduation rates of schools with alternative school programs and similar districts without alternative school programs. These data would seem to support research indicating programs which offer an alternative to the traditional classroom are an effective option for increasing student graduation rates (Schargel & Smink, 2013). Data collected in this study would

most definitely justify implementation of an alternative school for the purpose of increasing a district's graduation rate.

Lieszkovszky (2012) reported 80% of present-day alternative schools are punitive in nature, meaning students are placed into alternative schools largely due to behavioral issues. Disruptive student behavior can have a negative effect on an entire classroom due to teachers spending valuable instructional time on behavioral management (Thompson, 2015). The removal of these students from a traditional school setting and the subsequent placement in an alternative school setting improve the traditional school environment for students and staff, as determined by Schargel and Smink (2013).

Lezotte (2007) discussed a positive learning environment in terms of safety, order, and respect, with a climate free of oppression and a high degree of student engagement. Survey data collected to answer research question two definitely supported this research. Data collected in this study indicated the majority of high school principals reported an improved learning environment in the traditional school with the implementation of an alternative school.

Interview questions asked to answer research question three were designed to elicit high school and alternative school teacher perceptions regarding student motivation within the alternative school setting. Interview data collected demonstrated teachers reported alternative school students were more motivated to follow directions, work cooperatively with others, complete high school, and enter the workforce. Reported increased motivation in these four areas indicated students were more engaged in the educational process. These findings are consistent with those of Glassett (2013), who reported students who arrive at alternative schools disengaged become motivated by

finding some degree of academic success. Interview participants attributed increased motivation in these areas to three reoccurring themes: last chance, educational setting, and relationships.

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2014) discussed alternative education programs as the last chance for a population of students to earn high school diplomas. Interview data indicated a substantial degree of student motivation among alternative school students was attributed to the students realizing the alternative school is the last chance to graduate high school. One math teacher stated, "Alternative school students are more motivated to follow directions in class because they realize this is their last shot at graduation." This conclusion was shared by Caroleo (2014), who believed alternative schooling is seen as a last chance to obtain a high school diploma.

An understanding of student motivation is central to the analysis of student success in an alternative school setting (Glassett, 2013). The theoretical framework of this study was guided by Deci and Ryan's (2015) self-determination theory. Alternative school programs operate with a relatively high degree of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Glassett, 2013). According to Deci and Ryan (2015), self-determination theory focuses on meeting these three psychological needs.

Interviewees credited the educational setting provided in the alternative school as a motivator to students. Students are subjected to a higher degree of autonomy within alternative schools. A student maintains autonomy by having choice in completing a task or choice in how to complete the task (Center on Education Policy, 2012). A math teacher reported, "Students in the alternative school are more motivated because the computer program gives them the ability to work at their own pace and to choose what to

work on." Positive student-teacher relationships, creating a degree of relatedness, were largely credited as a factor in the motivation of alternative school students. Schaps (2003) reported the quality of student relationships with staff members as one of the most important aspects in determining the success of an alternative school environment. According to Deci and Ryan (2015), the establishment of these respectful alliances is referred to as relatedness. During teacher interviews, one alternative school teacher stated, "Students are more motivated because they feel as if the staff treats them with more respect."

Interview data suggested alternative school students were motivated to complete high school, enter the workforce, and in a few instances continue their education due to competence attained during alternative school placement. Often, alternative school students are motivated by academic success achieved for the first time (Brophy, 2013). During interviews one math teacher stated, "Alternative school students are more motivated to complete high school because they are able to see success and progress towards their goals to achieve a goal they would not have without the program." When a student is able to complete a specific task or reach a certain goal, competence has been attained (Deci & Ryan, 2015). Therefore, it can be concluded in many instances the competence attained through success in school is what motivates a number of alternative school students.

Research question four was designed to gather teacher perceptions in regard to the academic rigor of alternative schools. Glassett (2013) suggested students in alternative programs are given an easier route to graduation, decreasing the probability of success after high school. The final four interview questions for this study were designed to

determine the academic rigor in the alternative school in comparison to the traditional school. In addition, teachers were asked to consider the alternative school's impact on student diploma worthiness, college readiness, and career readiness.

A review of interview data indicated a majority of teachers did not believe the academic programming within the alternative school was as rigorous as in the traditional school. These data are consistent with Caroleo (2014), who reported a belief alternative education is often inferior in comparison to traditional school programs. A common belief communicated by interviewees was that the standards taught in alternative schools were the same, but the traditional school covered material at a faster rate, more richly, and more in-depth. Despite the concerns about academic integrity of alternative schools, proponents have argued alternative education programs provide students with a basic education while also building strong relationships between students and staff and making education relevant and challenging to students (Schargel & Smink, 2013).

Although a majority of teachers expressed academic programming in alternative schools was less rigorous, a clear conclusion can be drawn. Teachers agreed alternative school students are deserving of the same diploma as their traditional school peers. This was largely due to an expressed belief in rewarding students for attaining the minimum standards set forth. This belief was consistent with fulfilling the psychological need of competence. Competence is fullfilled when a student successfully completes a given task or reaches a certain goal (Deci & Ryan, 2015).

The final line of questioning during interviews elicited opinions on college and career readiness in connection with academic rigor. According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016a), the goal set forth for every

high school graduate in Missouri is to graduate high school college and career-ready. Interview data on college readiness could be defined as mixed at best. It is safe to conclude from interview data the majority of alternative school graduates, in the opinion of teachers, are not ready for college. In addition, most of the alternative school graduates who are considered ready for college are truly only considered ready for a technical college or a junior college.

Caroleo (2014) reported the minimum requirement to gain successful entry into the workforce is a high school diploma. Interview questioning sought to gather teacher opinions on the career readiness of alternative school graduates. Teachers expressed alternative school graduates were ready to enter the workforce. There was, however, some degree of doubt as to whether or not they were truly ready for a career. A thorough review of the data indicated teachers reported alternative school graduates were ready for entry-level positions in the workforce only. An entry-level position actually transcending into a career was questionable and dependent upon a number of factors.

Implications for Practice

Three findings were sought from this study: (a) comparative graduation rate data from school districts with alternative school programs and similar districts without alternative school programs, (b) the reported improved learning environment in traditional schools upon implementation of an alternative school, and (c) the effects of alternative school placement on students in regard to motivation and academic rigor.

Alternative schools offer a different option to students who struggle to succeed in mainstream education and are at risk of dropping out (Caroleo, 2014). A portion of this study focused on alternative school efforts to increase graduation rates by reducing the

risk of students dropping out (Hinds, 2013). Graham (2013) reported increased graduation rates across the nation largely due to alternative school implementation.

Combatting dropouts and subsequently increasing graduation rates were mentioned by a majority of teachers interviewed for this study as the reasons their respective districts implemented alternative schools. One language arts teacher stated, "The district was motivated to implement an alternative high school to decrease dropout rates and meet graduation rate requirements set forth by the state." Although extensive amounts of research exist crediting alternative education with increased graduation rates, this study did not support such a claim. Statistical data gathered for this study indicated a significant difference in graduation rates of districts with alternative schools compared to districts without alternative schools. These data would support any school district planning to implement an alternative school to boost graduation rates.

Although increased graduation rates are often credited as reasoning for alternative school implementation, students are often placed in alternative schools for behavioral reasons instead of academic reasons (Lieszkovszky, 2012). Disruptive student behavior has negative effects on the quality of education in the classroom due to teachers spending valuable instructional time on behavior management (Thompson, 2015). Removing students who exhibit poor behavior and subsequently placing them in alternative settings creates an improved learning environment in the traditional school (Schargel & Smink, 2013). Data collected as part of this study strongly support this claim. Principal survey data indicated decreases in student discipline incidents and classroom disruptions within the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school. In addition, principals reported increased school safety, student engagement, respect, trust,

attendance, and overall positive school climate in the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school.

The data gathered for this study represent an example of addition by subtraction, meaning data indicate the main improvement may be to the learning environment in the traditional school when a certain population of students are placed within an alternative setting. This would be supported by Schargel and Smink (2013), who reported decreases in harmful behaviors within traditional schools after placement of alternative school students.

Data from this study demonstrated a statistical difference in graduation rates for districts with alternative schools compared to similar districts without alternative schools. These data would signal, for accountability purposes, alternative school implementation is a viable option for any school district in need of increasing graduation rate. However, when looking at quantitative survey data collected from responding high school principals, data demonstrate an obvious improvement to the learning environment within the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school. With this notable improvement to the traditional school, its students, and staff, a look at the effects of alternative school implementation is warranted.

Self-determination theory focuses on interest in learning, valuing of education, and confidence in abilities (Deci & Ryan, 2015). According to Deci and Ryan (2015), self-determination theory places an emphasis on meeting the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. According to teacher interview data, alternative school students are motivated by the level of autonomy, relatedness, and competence present within the alternative school setting. Autonomy is evident in the choices and

flexibility offered to alternative school students. The computer-based system utilized in a number of alternative schools allows students to choose not only what to work on, but also offers the ability to work at their own pace.

Relatedness is evident through the reported positive relationships formed between alternative school students and staff. Researchers such as Caroleo (2014) expressed concerns surrounding the perceived inferior education received in alternative schools. Teacher interview data suggested the belief alternative school programming is less rigorous than what is present in the traditional school. Despite these concerns, the less rigorous programming no doubt assists students in completing tasks and goals. These accomplishments lead to a higher degree of student competence and thus serve as additional motivation.

Glassett (2013), consistent with teacher interview data collected for this study, suggested students in alternative programs are given an easier route to graduation, decreasing the probability of success in college and career. This, coupled with data collected demonstrating alternative school students are clearly on a road to the workforce, would signify a need to concentrate on preparing students for a career by concentrating on vacational, technical, and career training. Alternative schools would benefit from limiting access to advanced college prep coursework to concentrate on teaching vocational skills and work readiness skills necessary to aid students in obtaining and maintaining employment beyond high school (Caroleo, 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are given for future research related to this topic: (a) expand the statistical graduation rate data

comparison to all school districts in Missouri; (b) study the financial side of an alternative education to provide information to interested districts; and (c) conduct additional research into proactive measures to support students to avert the need for alternative school placement.

Statistical data on graduation collected for this study were limited to school districts belonging to the Southwest Missouri Association of School Administrators. According to Creswell (2012), a researcher should select as large a sample as possible from the population to ensure accurate and valid research results. Although the data collected for this study are accurate, they may or may not be indicative of statewide data. The demographic make-up of the majority of schools within this sample is mostly rural with relatively limited diversity. An expanded look at graduation rate data statewide would include urban districts to make it a more diverse field. The researcher would be most interested in a statewide graduation rate data analysis of school districts with alternative education programs compared to those without alternative education programs.

In regard to finance, it is recommended school officials consider both the proposed financial outlay and the student outcomes expected in return (Jackson, Johnson, & Persico, 2016). In the extensive research conducted for this study, little or no information was gleaned as to the cost of alternative school implementation. This may be due to the reported wide variety of alternative education programs in operation across the United States (Lieszkovszky, 2012). However, when recommending the addition of a new program within a district, especially a small district, one of the first questions from staff, community members, and board members will usually be in regard to the cost of

the proposed implementation. With a wide array of research related to alternative school programs, very little includes information related to financing such programs.

Alternative school proponents such as Graham (2013) applauded alternative education for positive aspects such as increased graduation rates. Meanwhile, alternative education critics cited concerns such as students receiving an inferior education (Caroleo, 2014). Ideally, meeting educational needs within the traditional school classroom is the ultimate goal for each and every child, due to research by Terrell (2017), who found taking students out of the regular setting creates a larger learning gap.

Society, students, and their needs are ever-evolving, and instructional strategies should be as well (Stephens, 2013). This being said, there is a constant and never-ending need for research into ways to both motivate and educate students in an attempt to prevent students from becoming disengaged with education within the traditional setting. Of the 100 SWMASA school districts that had readily available graduation rate data, 50 had implemented an alternative school, and 50 had not implemented an alternative school. Comparative graduation rate data collected as part of this study demonstrated a significant difference in graduation rate for those districts with an alternative school compared to those without an alternative school. Although 50 of these districts do not have an alternative school, there are undoubtedly a number of intervention strategies being implemented to sustain or improve district graduation rates as well as to deal with difficult students and maintain a positive school climate. Additional research into successful proactive intervention strategies would be beneficial to the educational community.

Summary

This mixed-methods study was designed to determine the effectiveness of alternative schools by examining graduation rates, school climate, student motivation, and academic rigor. The first part of this study involved identifying which southwest Missouri school districts have or do not have alternative schools. Data were gathered to determine if there was a statistical difference in graduation rates between districts with an alternative school and districts without an alternative school. Perspectives from high school principals regarding the impact of alternative school implementation on the traditional school climate were then collected. Qualitative data were collected to explore the motivational impact of alternative school attendance on students and to elicit educator views on the academic rigor present within alternative schools.

The graduation rate analysis conducted for this study, by means of a *t*-test, demonstrated a statistical difference in graduation rates between schools with an alternative school and similar districts without an alternative school. These data would support implementation of an alternative school for the purpose of increasing a school district's graduation rate. Data collected through a survey created by the researcher and distributed via email demonstrated the majority of high school principals reported an improved learning environment in the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school.

Following these quantitative data collections, the final phase of the study, qualitative in nature, was conducted through face-to-face interviews with subject-area teachers and alternative school teachers. Interviews consisted of 14 questions created by

the researcher. These interviews were conducted to gather perceptions on student motivation and academic rigor specifically relating to alternative school students.

Data collected indicated alternative school students were more highly engaged and more motivated to follow direction, work cooperatively with others, complete high school, and enter the workforce. This motivation was largely credited to three reoccurring themes: (a) the student's realization of the alternative school being a last chance to graduate, (b) a change in educational setting more conducive to the student's wants and needs, and (c) positive relationships created between alternative school students and staff. Data collected to gather perceptions regarding academic rigor within alternative schools revealed a majority of teachers did not believe alternative school programming was as rigorous as what traditional school students encounter.

Despite this perceived lack of rigor, the majority of teachers indicated alternative school students were deserving of the same high school diploma as their traditional school peers. These teachers asserted alternative school graduates had successfully completed the tasks, goals, and assignments set forth by their respective districts. This coupled with the idea of alternative school graduates having met minimum high school standards makes the alternative graduate worthy of the high school diploma.

Teacher interview data indicated a belief most alternative school graduates were not ready for college. Those who were considered ready for college were usually believed to be suited for technical or junior colleges. The consensus among teachers interviewed was alternative school graduates were ready and willing to enter the workforce at entry-level positions. Teachers believed these students had received the training and education necessary to seek and gain employment. The main point of

contention was in defining the difference between entry-level workforce readiness and career readiness. Unfortunately, a number of teachers were skeptical about whether or not alternative school graduates were or would ever be prepared for careers.

In this study research was conducted in an effort to determine the effectiveness of alternative schools through an examination of graduation rates, school climate, student motivation, and academic rigor. Graduation rate data collected demonstrated a statistical difference in graduation rates of districts with an alternative school compared to those districts without an alternative school. These data would demonstrate alternative school implementation may be an effective means of increasing graduation rate.

Survey data collected demonstrated a majority of high school principals reported an improved learning environment in the traditional school upon implementation of an alternative school. These data would indicate a positive effect on school climate. Although academic rigor was reported to be less in alternative schools than in traditional schools, those interviewed reported a higher degree of student motivation among alternative school students. In conclusion, the data collected for this study would demonstrate alternative school implementation has a positive effect on the traditional school as well as the alternative school students.

Appendix A

Survey: High School Principals

1. Traditional school students are safer in school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

   5 = Strongly Agree

   4 = Generally Agree

   3 = Neutral

   2 = Generally Disagree

   1 = Strongly Disagree

   N/A = Not Applicable

2. Traditional school teachers are safer in school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

   5 = Strongly Agree

   4 = Generally Agree

   3 = Neutral

   2 = Generally Disagree

   1 = Strongly Disagree

   N/A = Not Applicable

3. Traditional school administrators handle fewer discipline referrals due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

   5 = Strongly Agree

   4 = Generally Agree

   3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

4. Traditional school classrooms have a higher degree of student engagement due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Generally Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

5. Traditional school teachers encounter fewer disruptive students due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Generally Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

6. Traditional school teachers encounter fewer instances of disrespect from students due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Generally Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

7. Traditional school administrators encounter fewer instances of disrespect from students due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

   5 = Strongly Agree

   4 = Generally Agree

   3 = Neutral

   2 = Generally Disagree

   1 = Strongly Disagree

   N/A = Not Applicable

8. An increased percentage of trusting relationships between students and staff are fostered due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

   5 = Strongly Agree

   4 = Generally Agree

   3 = Neutral

   2 = Generally Disagree

   1 = Strongly Disagree

   N/A = Not Applicable

9. Student attendance is better due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

   5 = Strongly Agree

   4 = Generally Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

10. The overall school climate is better in the traditional school due to implementation of an alternative high school.

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Generally Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

11. There are fewer disruptions to the educational process in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Generally Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

12. Student motivation is increased in the traditional school due to the implementation of an alternative high school.

5 = Strongly Agree

4 = Generally Agree

3 = Neutral

2 = Generally Disagree

1 = Strongly Disagree

N/A = Not Applicable

Appendix B

Interview Questions

High School Principals, Teachers, and Alternative School Teachers

1. What motivated your district to implement an alternative school?
2. What factors, if any, make students in the alternative school more motivated to follow directions than they were in the traditional school?
3. In what ways are students in the alternative school more or less motivated to show respect to their teachers than they were in the traditional school?
4. In what ways do students in the alternative school display higher and/or lower levels of respect to their fellow students than they did in the traditional school?
5. What evidence, if any, demonstrates students in the alternative school are motivated to work more or less cooperatively with others than they were in the traditional school?
6. What evidence, if any, demonstrates students in the alternative school are more motivated to complete high school than they were while in the traditional school?
7. What percentage of your alternative school students do you feel are motivated enough to complete high school? Why?
8. What percentage of your alternative school students seem motivated to continue their education after high school? Why?
9. What percentage of your alternative school students seem motivated to enter the workforce after high school? What factors aided in determining the percentage?
10. What percentage of your alternative school students seem unmotivated to the point you believe they will end up on public assistance? Why?

11. Do you believe the academic programming in your district's alternative school is as rigorous as in the traditional school? Why or why not?
12. Considering academic rigor, do you believe a student who graduates from the alternative school is deserving of the same diploma as a graduate from the traditional school? Why or why not?
13. Considering academic rigor, do you believe an alternative school graduate to be ready for college? Why or why not?
14. Considering academic rigor, do you believe an alternative school graduate to be career-ready? Why or why not?

Appendix C

IRB Approval

LINDENWOOD

LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI

DATE:	November 22, 2016
TO:	Mark Piper
FROM:	Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board
STUDY TITLE:	[983722-1] A Study of the Effectiveness of alternative Schools through an Examination of Graduation Rates, School Climate, Student Motivation, and Academic Rigor.
IRB REFERENCE #:	
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:	November 22, 2016
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Exemption category # *1*

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office.

If you have any questions, please send them to IRB@lindenwood.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board's records.

Appendix D

Informed Consent

LINDENWOOD

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Survey

A Study of the Effectiveness of Alternative Schools through the Examination of Graduation Rates, School Climate, Student Motivation, and Academic Rigor

Principal Investigator Mark H. Piper
Telephone: [redacted] E-mail: [redacted]

Participant_____ Contact info _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Mark H. Piper under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this research is to study the effectiveness of alternative schools in regard to graduation rate, school climate, student motivation, and academic rigor.

2. a) Your participation will involve:

   - The completion of a brief Likert-type survey.
   - Please select the link provided or you may copy and paste the link into your internet browser.

   b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be 10 to 15 minutes.

   Approximately 120 subjects will be involved in this research.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to knowledge about the effectiveness of alternative schools.

5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study, and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Mark H. Piper, at [redacted] or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Sherry DeVore, at [redacted]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Marilyn Abbott, Provost, at mabbott@lindenwood.edu or 636-949-4912.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I may retain a copy of this consent form for my records.

I consent to my participation in this study by completing the survey.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Perceptionsofalternativehighschools

Appendix E

Informed Consent

LINDENWOOD

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Interview

A Study of the Effectiveness of Alternative Schools through an Examination of Graduation Rates, School Climate, Student Motivation, and Academic Rigor

Principal Investigator Mark H. Piper
Telephone: [redacted] E-mail: [redacted]

Participant_____ Contact info _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Mark H. Piper under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this research is to study the effectiveness of alternative schools in regard to graduation rate, school climate, student motivation, and academic rigor.

2. a) Your participation will involve:

   - The completion of an interview consisting of 14 questions.
   - Where and when the interview will be conducted will be determined through phone or email conversation.

   b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be 15 to 30 minutes.

   Approximately 120 subjects will be involved in this research.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to knowledge about the effectiveness of alternative schools.
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any

questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study, and the information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Mark H. Piper, at [redacted] or the Supervising Faculty, Dr. Sherry DeVore, at [redacted]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Marilyn Abbott, Provost, at mabbott@lindenwood.edu or 636-949-4912.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature Date	Participant's Printed Name
Signature of Principal Investigator Date	Investigator Printed Name

Appendix F

Letter of Introduction

<Date>

Dear School Administrator,

I am a doctoral candidate at Lindenwood University. I am seeking information regarding the effectiveness of alternative high schools. My research will provide information to schools, administrators, and teachers by evaluating the impact alternative schools have upon graduation rates, school climate, and student motivation. In addition, educator perspectives will be gathered regarding academic rigor in alternative schools. The sample for this research will include high school principals, subject-area high school teachers, and alternative school teachers.

If you agree to participate in this research, your participation will involve completion of a Likert-type survey. Completion of the survey will represent your consent. A hyperlink for the survey is included on the consent form.

All information received from the survey will remain confidential. Names will not be used in this dissertation nor will references be made to any individual in a way that may identify such person. This study may be presented as educational research or published for educational purposes. If you would like information regarding the findings, you may email me at [redacted].

Thank you for considering participation in this research.

Sincerely,

Mark Piper

Appendix G

Letter of Introduction

<Date>

Dear Teacher,

I am a doctoral candidate at Lindenwood University. I am seeking information regarding the effectiveness of alternative high schools. My research will provide information to schools, administrators, and teachers by evaluating the impact alternative schools have upon graduation rates, school climate, and student motivation. In addition, educator perspectives will be gathered in regard to the academic rigor in alternative schools. The sample for this research will include high school principals, subject-area high school teachers, and alternative school teachers.

I am requesting your participation in this research. If you agree to participate in this research, your contribution will consist of participation in an interview. Interviews will take place in person if possible and by phone if necessary. If you agree to participate, please notify me via email. With this correspondence I have included a copy of the Informed Consent form for your review. A hard copy of this form will be provided for you to sign at the time of the interview.

All information received from the interviews will remain confidential. Names will not be used in this dissertation nor will references be made to any individual in a way that may identify such person. This study may be presented as educational research or published for educational purposes. If you would like information regarding the findings, you may email me at [redacted].

Thank you for considering participation in this research.

Sincerely,

Mark Piper

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Vita

Mark Harris Piper currently serves as the superintendent of schools for the Hartville R-II School District in Wright County, Missouri. Piper holds an Education Specialist degree in Superintendency from Southwest Baptist University, a Master of Education degree from William Woods University, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education from Southwest Missouri State University.

Prior to his current role, Piper served the Hartville R-II School District as elementary principal for nine years. Piper started his educational career in the Dallas County R-I School District, where he taught for two years and held an administrator/teacher role for two years.