Spring 5-2012

The A+ Schools Program and School Improvement

Ashley Suzanne Moyer
Lindenwood University

The A+ Schools Program and School Improvement

by

Ashley Suzanne Moyer

May 2012

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

The A+ Schools Program and School Improvement

by

Ashley Suzanne Moyer

This Dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Lindenwood University, School of Education

Patricia Conner — 01-18-12

Dr. Patricia Conner, Dissertation Chair — Date

Sherry DeVore — 01-18-12

Dr. Sherry DeVore, Committee Member — Date

[signature] — 01-18-12

Dr. Terry Reid, Committee Member — Date

Kathy Grover — 01-18-12

Dr. Kathy Grover, Committee Member — Date

Declaration of Orginality

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: Ashley Suzanne Moyer

Signature: Ashley Suzanne Moyer Date: 01-18-2012

Acknowledgements

I would like to give my sincere gratitude to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Patricia Conner, for helping me through the process of writing and always encouraging me to keep writing. In addition, I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Sherry DeVore, Dr. Kathy Grover, and Dr. Terry Reid, for all of their diligence with my paper and continued patience with me. Thank you to the A+ Coordinators in Missouri for their participation in the survey and interviews. I could not have completed the dissertation without your participation.

Also, I am very grateful for my family and friends for their love, support, and patience through this enduring process. To my husband, Marc, and my parents, Barbara and George, I want to thank you for always being there to encourage me to push on and listen to me talk about the dissertation process. Finally, I want to thank God for His grace and love to allow me to finish this extensive task.

Abstract

This study examined Missouri's A+ Schools Program and its impact on school improvement. Effective schools research combined with the mission learning for all provided a conceptual foundation for guiding research development. A mixed-method design allowing a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data was applied using telephone interviews and Likert-scale surveys from A+ Coordinators having two or more years' experience. Questions about the A+ Schools Program's success centered on the following: graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation, rigorous coursework, and at-risk students. As a result, four themes emerged; the first of two were students realizing the importance to graduate and enhanced at-risk programs. Both A+ Coordinators interviewed and those surveyed concluded, the program forced districts to develop methods for increasing graduation rates as well as tracking and maintaining at-risk students. However, the third theme revealed while curriculum and assessment changes were implemented, the changes may not be attributed to the A+ Schools Program. A fourth theme discovered the A+ Schools Program prepared students for college and career paths by counseling them to enroll in appropriate rigorous coursework. A+ Coordinators perceived positive transformations in their districts to be a direct result of the A+ Schools Program. Districts seeking an A+ designation must continue adhering to a strict effective schools model, and the implication for practice is Missouri legislators must maintain funding in the A+ Schools Program with additional schools being designated.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Study

In 1993, legislators initiated the Outstanding Schools Act creating the A+ Schools Program to ensure "all students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well prepared to pursue advanced education and employment" (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MODESE], 2009, para. 1). This program is in place in many high schools across Missouri and serves as a component of school improvement. The A+ Schools Program is similar to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in that both mandate schools meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) in additional areas beyond achievement: attendance, post-secondary education, and high school graduation rate. One-third of students who enter high school and do not graduate have a reduced chance of obtaining high-wage jobs or attending college (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan supported efforts to increase the number of students graduating from high school and college and are focusing on the reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act which would change previous legislation set forth from the NCLB Act (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b).

In 2009, 48 states joined to adopt a common core of educational standards (The Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO] & National Governors Association [NGA], 2010). Standards were developed to prepare students to acquire knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and careers (CCSSO & NGA, 2010). Furthermore, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009b), federal education policy should support college and career readiness standards to ensure graduation rates.

Consequently, college preparation and vocational programs will be more rigorous (Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust, 2008). There are three primary goals of the A+ Schools Program:

> All students graduate from high school; all students complete a selection of high school studies that is challenging and for which there are identified learning expectations; and all students proceed from high school graduation to a college, or post-secondary, career-technical school, or high-wage job with workplace skill development opportunities. (MODESE, 2008a, p. 1)

Designation as an A+ School is a three-year process in which schools develop plans to meet 11 requirements addressing school improvement issues such as graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation, rigorous coursework for post-secondary education or workforce, and at-risk programs.

Conceptual Framework

Effective schools research provided the lens to view the A+ Schools Program and its impact on achievement. Edmonds (as cited in Lezotte, 1992) proposed:

> [Through] the leadership of the principal . . . substantial attention [must be given] to the quality of instruction; a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus; an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning; teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery; [and] the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation. (para. 2)

Additionally, Marzano's (2003) meta-analysis of 35 years of research on effective schools concluded a "guaranteed and viable curriculum; challenging goals and effective

feedback; parent and community involvement; safe and orderly environment; and collegiality and professionalism" (p. 15). Implementing the characteristics of effective schools would achieve a positive impact on school improvement (Marzano, 2003).

Effective school educators are passionate about their jobs, excellent instructors, and committed to the mission statement "learning for all students" (Lezotte, 1992, p. 2). The characteristics of effective schools are drawn from the following correlates: "instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, safe and orderly environment, climate of high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, positive home-school relations, [and] opportunity to learn and student time on task" (Lezotte, 2009, p. 5). The correlates for effective schools have expanded over the years, but the core beliefs have continued (Lezotte, 1992). The core beliefs focused on instructional leadership, mission, high expectations, learning and student progress, and community relationship with the school (Lezotte, 1992). The effective school correlates correspond to the A+ Schools Program requirements of challenging coursework, community partnership, mission statement, and high expectations.

Statement of the Problem

In 2009, only 53% of students graduated from high school with their original cohort (Garland & Wilber, 2009). Furthermore, Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust (2008) reported "four out of every 10 new college students need to take a remedial course, including 25 percent of new students at four-year colleges and universities and 60 percent at two-year institutions" (p. 6). To make certain all students are equipped for college and career readiness, schools must require challenging coursework for all (Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust, 2008). To ensure preparedness of all students for

college or a career, the A+ Schools Program requires all students graduate having progressed through rigorous coursework (MODESE, 2008a).

According to Schmoker (2006), the majority of schools do not provide effective instruction. In classrooms, instruction is occurring with no connection to standards or curriculum (Schmoker, 2006). Schmoker's (2006) research revealed when there are no clearly defined objectives and standards, meaningless activities occur in the classroom. In addition, standards have been benignly neglected by educators for years and a curriculum cannot be guaranteed unless it is monitored (Schmoker, 2006). Poor instructions was remedied within the A+ Schools Program specifically monitoring standards in the curriculum (MODESE, 2008a), and the lack of preparation in rigorous coursework was to rectify the primary cause for failure in college (Schmoker, 2006).

The A+ Schools Program requires schools to examine the graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation system, rigor of coursework preparing students for post-secondary education or the workforce, and the at-risk program, which if implemented appropriately, would enhance student achievement (Missouri Connections, 2009). The overarching questions become: Is the A+ Schools Program implemented successfully in Missouri high schools? Do A+ Schools Program requirements impact school improvement?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how the A+ Schools Program requirements have impacted school improvement in participating high schools in Missouri.

Research questions. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the graduation rate?

2. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact curriculum and assessment?

3. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the career preparation system?

4. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment?

5. How has the A+ Schools partnership plan been perceived to impact at-risk students?

Significance of the Study

In the 2009 Missouri legislative session, legislators debated the requirements of the A+ Schools Program (University of Missouri Office of Government Relations, 2009). The University of Missouri Office Of Government Relations (2009) reported the 95th Senate legislative session sought to change the A+ Schools Program to primarily a scholarship program instead of a school improvement program. The A+ Schools Program would continue to require high school students to graduate with a 2.5 grade point average (GPA) and a 95% cumulative attendance rate; however, the A+ Schools Program would no longer include the school improvement component (Logan, 2009). Logan (2009) found legislators preferred *all* schools have the opportunity to be involved in the A+ Schools Program. By spring of 2009, only the 274 schools meeting the requirements were allowed to participate in the program because the rest of the Missouri schools had not

completed designation process or applied to the A+ Schools Program (MODESE, 2009). The results of this study provided further insight into the perceived impact of the A+ Schools Program as a means to school improvement.

Definitions of Key Terms

The terms in this study include the following:

Adequate Yearly Progress. (AYP). A measure of growth to determine if a school district has met required communication arts and mathematics goals, attendance rates, and graduation targets (NCLB, 2002).

Designated A+ School. An A+ School that has completed the three-year designation process and been designated by the Missouri State School Board (Missouri General Assembly, 2007).

Partnership Plan. A partnership plan developed with business leaders, teaches, senior citizens, parents, and college representative to meet the goals of the A+ Schools Program, identify dropouts and interventions service for at-risk students, ensure counseling and mentoring services are provided to students to prepare for the work force and postsecondary education, and secure procedures for community volunteers in the school (MODESE, 2008a).

Limitations

The following limitations of this study included:

Instrumentation. The primary quantitative instrument was a survey. Bias is a possibility as respondents have an enhanced preconceived understanding of the A+ Schools Program. Bias is defined by Creswell (2008) as respondents not explaining the truth about the research. However, a response rate of higher than 50% was achieved,

thereby creating a sufficient sample size to draw strong conclusions (Creswell, 2008). The primary qualitative instrument were the interview questions which were posed to the participants via telephone. The method did not allow direct contact with the participants, which potentially hampers the interviewer's ability to gauge the facial responses to particular lines of questioning. However, the interview does allow a researcher to clarify the partcipants' questions, which is not possible when using other instruments (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

Sample. While having a large sample size to prevent sample error is important (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006), only A+ designated high schools were considered and asked to be in the study. The interview participants were chosen as a purposive sample, which is defined as researchers "[using] judgment to select a sample that they believe, based on prior information, will provide the data they need" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 101). Consequently, judgment may be made in error (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). As of spring 2009, 48% of the Missouri high schools were designated A+ Schools (MODESE, 2009). Only A+ Coordinators holding their position for at least two years prior were included in the interview portion of this study. Unfortunately, "researchers can never be sure that their sample is perfectly representative of the population" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 103).

Summary

The Missouri legislators enacted the Outstanding Schools Act which included components of the school improvement initiative containing the A+ Schools Program. Continued emphasis on school improvement was evidenced by the NCLB mandate holding school districts accountable for student achievement. Requirements of the A+

Schools Program coincide with school improvement by all students graduating from high school with a rigorous curriculum to prepare students to pursue post-secondary education or high-wage jobs (MODESE, 2008a). Emerging from effective schools research was the mission statement "all students can learn" (Lezotte, 1992, p. 2). The A+ Schools Program continues to address requirements correlating with state and federal guidelines. Requirements of the A+ Schools Program investigated in this study were graduation rate, quality of curriculum and assessment aligned to state standards, career preparation system, rigor of coursework preparing students for post-secondary education or the workforce, and an effective at-risk program.

In Chapter Two, a review of literature related to the history of school reform, school reform, effective schools, school level factors, Outstanding Schools Act, and the components of the A+ Schools Program was presented. A description of the methodology used in the research design was explained in Chapter Three. The results of qualitative and quantitative data were explored in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, a summary of results and recommendations were shared.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

The A+ Schools Program was created from the Outstanding Schools Act following a publication of *A Nation at Risk.* As determined by this report, America's school systems needed improvement, and numerous initiatives were created to enhance schools. The purpose of this study was to examine how A+ Schools Program requirements have impacted school improvement. Within the review of literature, history of school reform, school reform, effective schools, school level factors, Outstanding Schools Act, and the components of the A+ Schools Program were explored. Additionally, research included the following items: graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation, rigorous coursework for post-secondary education or workforce, and at-risk programs.

History of School Reform

In the early 20th century, the National Education Association developed a report, from the group name the Committee of Ten (Mirel, 2006). The members of the Committee of Ten concluded, "all public-high-school students should follow a college preparatory curriculum regardless of their backgrounds, their intention to stay in school through graduation, or their plans to pursue higher education" (Mirel, 2006, p. 15). From the Committee of Ten members, it was proposed that high schools give all students a rigorous education (Mirel, 2006). Before 1910, the purpose of high school was to prepare for a college education (Goldin, 1998).

Conversely, the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education committee proposed to accommodate the immigrant population through differentiated high school courses (Mirel, 2006). The Cardinals Principles of Secondary Education committee did not

believe immigrant students were as intelligent and as able to handle rigorous coursework (Mirel, 2006). According to Goldin (1998), "the high school enrollment rate rose from 18 percent to 73 percent and the graduation rate increased from 9 percent to 51 percent during the three decades after 1910" (p. 347). Furthermore from1910 to1940, many high school students graduated and proceeded to direct employment (Goldin, 1998). After 1934, more high schools started training students in practical arts, and the development of vocational courses began (Goldin, 1998). As a result, between 1928 and1973 foreign language, math, and science courses taken by high school students dropped. By the early 1960s, the number of science, math, and English remedial courses increased dramatically (Mirel, 2006). In the 1960s, educational standards altered (Mirel, 2006). For example, the following courses were considered core classes: rock poetry, yearbook, and consumer math, and none of the alternative courses were accepted curricula before the Cardinal Principles committee recommendations in education (Mirel, 2006). These courses were not typical math, science, and English classes taken in a high school. However in 1983, with the report of *A Nation at Risk*, the Cardinal Principles were rejected (Mirel, 2006). By 1986, 45 states had increased graduation requirements marking the most significant change since 1930 (Mirel, 2006).

School Reform

Nation at Risk. The 1983 document, *A Nation at Risk*, informed the public of a trend toward mediocrity in American education, which without correction could result in foreign competitors surpassing the knowledge of American citizens (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) also found high school students were graduating

unprepared for college or the work force. Recommendations from *A Nation at Risk* were to increase graduation requirements, raise quality of standards and expectations of students, use school time more effectively, and provide stronger leadership and fiscal support (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As a result, educators experienced a renewed sense of urgency to raise standards and improve achievement. A *Nation at Risk* influenced Missouri legislation in the development of the A+ Schools Program encouraging all students to graduate and continue with a career or post-secondary education (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

No Child Left Behind. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in January 2002, "allowing children to have a high quality education and obtain proficiency on state tests and standards" (NCLB, 2002, p. 15). Members of Congress mandated states develop an accountability system to measure student achievement (Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006). One of the accountability measures developed was adequate yearly progress (AYP) which determined the level of achievement (MODESE, 2008d). AYP was the minimum growth required of that school to be proficient by 2013 to 2014 (Yell, et al., 2006). The accountability measures began with test scores from all 50 states from the 2001 to 2002 school year (Guilfoyle, 2006). All school districts were required to reach an AYP goal yearly and have all students proficient by 2014.

Student achievement under NCLB changed curriculum in schools across the nation (Guilfoyle, 2006). After the initial law was signed into effect, modifications to requirements of the law were made allowing schools to meet AYP. For example, one change was a growth model pilot program enabling states to track individual student

scores (Guilfoyle, 2006). Students who were able to demonstrate growth over four years, or by eighth grade, would be considered "on track to be proficient" (MODESE, 2008d, para 3). Schools in a district would still meet AYP if students were on track towards proficiency (MODESE, 2008d). NCLB was continuously evolving through legislation, but each school within a district was required to meet AYP (Garcia, 2010).

Adequate yearly progress (AYP). Each state defined the target rate percent for students reaching proficient or advanced each year, and a state test was the primary factor in determining AYP (Yell, et al., 2006). Additional factors for meeting AYP were high school graduation rate and attendance in elementary and middle schools (MODESE, 2008e). In conjunction with NCLB, the A+ Schools Program required participating students to maintain a 95% attendance rate and graduate from high school (MODESE, 2008a). Therefore, mandates from AYP align with the A+ Schools Program requirements to close the achievement gap.

Conceptual Framework

In 1966, members of the Coleman Report concluded the education level of a student's parents prevented the student from learning in spite of the type of instruction (Lezotte, 2009; Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). However, these conclusions led education researcher, Ron Edmonds, to publish a paper in 1982 disputing the influence of family in educating students (Lezotte, 2009). Researchers of effective schools found schools with successful students were thriving regardless of the student's socioeconomic status (Lezotte, 2009). As a result, effective schools movement members initiated a mission for the learning for all students (Lezotte, 2009). In 1982, Edmonds identified the first correlates of effective schools; however, the correlates have been revised to the

following: “high expectations for success, strong instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, opportunity to learn/time on task, frequent monitoring of student progress, safe and orderly environment, [and] positive home-school relations” (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, pp. 1-2).

The effective schools correlates were guided from a mission statement learning for all students (Lezotte, 2009). The early effective schools movement viewed the school as a system modeled after Deming’s Total Quality Management model, which defined “a system as a network of interdependent components that work together to accomplish the aim of the system” (as cited in Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 29). According to Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011), Deming’s first standard relates to the schools clear mission statement since previously schools have had a very unclear mission statement. Effective schools had one philosophy in common, “the primary aim of the public school is that of teaching and learning, and the others must be seen as being a service to it” (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 30). Therefore, even though American education has a responsibility to feed and transport students; the primary focus must be teaching and learning (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

Deming’s second standard indicated the system must be able to be managed (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) believed that Deming’s standards tied to effective schools. Effective schools use data to guide school performance and schools have an annual federal assessment to measure student progress (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

For the school to become truly effective, schools must move beyond the level of annual assessments to ongoing assessments of each child’s progress. That will

> require a monitoring system as sophisticated, thorough, and matter-of-fact about analyzing measures of student performance as they currently are about measuring and monitoring attendance. (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 30)

Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) noted, technology allowed a sophisticated data system for gathering and reporting student achievement and "the future looks bright regarding the ability of schools to manage the learning mission" (p. 31).

According to Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011), Deming's third standard specified educators need to believe in all aspects of the learning for all mission statement. Some educators have pessimistic views regarding testing procedures and results (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). All educators need to support all facets of assessments for the mission statement to be fulfilled (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

The effective school theory was initiated by Edmonds and continued by the effective schools researchers Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) who wanted to ensure all students have equal opportunities for education. The first correlate of an effective school was identified by high student achievement for all student sub-populations allowing for customization of "instruction as the focus of reform efforts" (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 15). Furthermore, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) noted, "the effective school is built on a foundation of high expectations, strong leadership, unwavering commitment to learning for all, collaboration, differentiated instruction and frequent monitoring of student progress" (p. 11). All students have the right to an education to ensure success in postsecondary education (CCSSO & NGA, 2010). With demands of college and workplace jobs all being basically the same, all students should be educated in the same manner (Schmoker, 2011). In effective schools, staff, teachers, administrators, students,

and community embrace the mission of learning for all (Lezotte & McKee Synder, 2011). Within effective schools, administrators and faculty are committed to collect and analyze results for teaching and learning (Lezotte & McKee Synder, 2011). Finally, effective schools guarantee quality and equity for all students. Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) stated, "over the years the effective schools researchers have been both surprised and impressed with how durable these correlates have proven to be across time and settings" (p. 31). When all correlates are implemented, "their ability to add value to student learning is beyond what a single teacher can do working alone" (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 33).

The second of the effective schools correlates was the belief all students will learn and master the intended curriculum (Lezotte, 2009; Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Teachers' belief in a student's ability affects their academic success. The Met Life survey of the American Teacher in 2009 observed "educators have long been aware of the 'Pygmalion effect' in schools--the process through which students whose teachers expect them to learn do, and those not expected to learn do not" (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 39). In addition Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) referenced researcher Carol Dweck, as she explained a fixed mindset and a growth mindset have significant effects on educator's practices. Educators with a fixed mindset on student intelligence believe student learning is predetermined (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Teachers who believe student intelligence develops and changes have a growth mindset allowing purposeful learning for students in the classroom (Dweck, 2010; Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Students master standards through improvement over time in a growth mindset classroom (Dweck, 2010). In effective schools, a growth mindset was evident

where high standards and high expectations are in place (Lezotte & McKee, 2011). Therefore, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) stated "if educators believe that all students can and will learn, positive outcomes are likely to be achieved" (p. 50).

The third correlate developed by Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) indicated mission statements, core beliefs, and core values are ignored in some schools. However, if teachers knew the mission, schools would achieve; if teachers did not clearly understand the mission; achievement would be stagnant (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Education stakeholders need to understand an "effective school is a school that can, in outcome (performance or results) terms, reflective of its learning for all mission, demonstrate the presence of equity in quality" (Lezotte, 2009, p. 6). A we expect success attitude promotes teachers to enforce the mission of the school (Westerberg, 2009). "All means all" (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 66) which includes special needs students. Otherwise standards are compromised by educators and there will not be "equity in quality" (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 66).

As indicated by Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011), organizations have two systems: intended and actual. In the school setting, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) associated the intended structure with mission, curriculum, and standards. In addition, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) connected the actual system to daily classroom instruction. Curriculum actually taught is developed by teachers collaboratively through standards (Schmoker, 2011). Overall, even though educators sensed urgency to improve student achievement, an effort to slowly process and discuss values, beliefs, and mission still exists (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

The fourth effective schools correlate was the opportunity to learn and time on task (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Time on task simply is not just measurable time, but a time when all students can engage in learning (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). When children are born, they have an innate ability to learn (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Learning occurs before a child enters school and learning is based on previous experiences (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). With the benefits of early childhood education, America should ask why has there been very little done to get all students involved in these programs (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). The cost of preschool programs is an investment that will close the achievement gap in learning (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). In addition, technology allows students to learn at an earlier age and more often, but low socioeconomic students do not have access to the technology creating a larger gap in learning (Barton & Coley, 2009; Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) advised schools change chronological age for beginning school by ability of the student, and change the calendar by reducing the time on vacation in summer. If age dictates when a child begins school rather than development readiness, some disadvantaged students start academically behind their classmates. Due to summer vacation, the disadvantaged student will remain academically delayed unless teachers differentiate instruction (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). The use of an agrarian calendar creates a gap in student learning because of summer break (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Cumulating summer breaks increase the achievement gap and consequently effect students in postsecondary education and the workplace (Smink, 2011). However researchers suggest summer education allows continued

learning for disadvantaged students (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011; Smink, 2011). In addition, advantaged students take opportunities during the summer to use technology to further learning by using a computer, and playing developmental games, thereby, improving students' knowledge (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Low socioeconomic students do not have the same access to technology outside of school, so as a result the learning gap increases during summer break (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011; Smink 2011). Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) expressed the following:

> the fundamental challenge for school leaders is to find policies and structures that will level the playing field (both within and outside the school) to ensure that students have access and opportunity to use online technology to actually increase time on task. (pp. 78-79)

The fifth effective schools correlate was frequent monitoring of student progress utilizing "a variety of assessment procedures" (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 91). Over the years, effective schools educators examined instructional practices because assessment results were not adequate (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Therefore, educational leaders shifted focus and wanted teachers to instruct for understanding not coverage of topics due to students not performing at a proficient level (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). While the amount of knowledge available for teaching is infinite, curriculum and instruction should be reduced to a manageable amount (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Formative assessment is a process that allows frequent monitoring during instruction and feedback allows teachers to observe if students mastered the standard (Popham, 2008). Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) believed effective schools educators should teach for mastery of priority standards and abandon non-priority standards to

adequately teach material. Effective school leaders ensure the time required to teach for mastery equals the time and resources available (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

The effective schools correlate of frequent monitoring causes critics to complain "schools have placed too much emphasis on test scores" (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 92). Popham (2008) agreed there was too much emphasis on test scores because tests are given one day and tests scores can change daily. Furthermore, these objections intensified when NCLB testing requirements were mandated (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). However, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) reported, NCLB assessments and state assessments on English Language Arts, math, science, and social studies once per year do not qualify as effective monitoring because feedback must be given immediately. In addition, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) responded to critics by stating that testing is only a small portion of monitoring student progress, and greater student achievement occurs when the teacher reviews student work daily and provides corrective feedback immediately (Marzano, 2003).

Frequent monitoring of student progress, formative assessment, can be completed as quickly as a teacher can adjust instruction (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008; Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Formative assessment is instruction occurring within the classroom (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2008). Therefore, if monitoring occurs every 10 minutes, then the teacher adjusts instruction every 10 minutes (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). The more quickly feedback is administered; the quicker adjustments are made to assist the learner in mastering the objective (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Increasing the amount of feedback is an important correlate of student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) stated, "on the other hand, if the teacher or the school

is not going to adjust what they are planning to do based on the results of student monitoring, why bother monitoring at all?" (p. 93). Without frequent assessment and timely feedback, "students may struggle without intervention for months, falling further and further behind their peers (Lezotte and McKee Synder, 2011, p. 94). As students fall behind they lose hope in their ability to succeed, disassociate from school and increase their possibility of dropping out (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Consequently, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) recommend timely and corrective feedback is essential for students to achieve.

School Level Factors

Marzano (2003) identified five factors affecting schools in relation to student achievement. The five school level factors are a "guaranteed and viable curriculum; challenging goals and effective feedback; parent and community involvement; safe and orderly environment; and collegiality and professionalism" (Marzano, 2003, p. 15). Three of these factors were contained within the A+ Schools Program requirements.

Guaranteed and viable curriculum. The first related goal was a "guaranteed and viable curriculum" with five steps, which Marzano (2003) reported have "the most impact on student achievement" (p. 22). What teachers teach in their classroom matters remarkably in how students learn (Schmoker, 2011). In a guaranteed and viable curriculum educator's identify and communicate all content in a sequential pattern allowing students to learn all essential concepts in a protected instructional time (Marzano, 2003). There are three types of curriculum: intended, implemented, and attained (Marzano, 2003). The intended curriculum is developed by the state and school

for a course being taught, the implemented curriculum is instruction presented by the teacher, and the attained curriculum is what students actually learn (Marzano, 2003).

A potential problem is a teacher ignoring the curriculum. Schmoker (2006) asked an assistant superintendent of instruction "…how much influence this document [curriculum guide] had on what was actually taught. She [assistant superintendent] paused and then said, 'None'" (p. 37). The significance is immeasurable damage was occurring to students' learning by a guaranteed and viable curriculum not being taught (Schmoker, 2006). Marzano (2003) expressed these differences between actual curriculum and taught curriculum, which surprised educators. Essentially, the actual curriculum depends upon the teacher you have at a particular school (Schmoker, 2011). Students need educators to use a curriculum that is guaranteed and viable (Marzano, 2003). The A+ Schools Program requirements caused schools to focus on a monitored curriculum (MODESE, 2008a). Thus, Marzano (2003) acknowledged, if states give clear guidelines for the content taught in the classroom, teachers will not be able to disregard or amend the guidelines; otherwise, students will not have a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

According to Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chappuis (2005), "we need to ensure that the written curriculum is also the taught curriculum" (p. 56). Lezotte (2009) agreed, students learn what is taught, but there is a huge gap between what is taught and what is tested. Public education places emphasis on content standards for courses and grade-level content; therefore, it is a surprise that implemented curriculum and intended curriculum are different (Marzano, 2003). To ensure a curriculum is guaranteed, "states and districts give guidance to teachers regarding the content to be addressed in specific courses and at

specific grade levels. It also means individual teachers do not have the option to disregard or replace assigned content" (Marzano, 2003, p. 24). Curriculum is guaranteed when a district can ensure the curriculum is taught in every classroom and viable when aligned with state and national standards (Crawford, 2011). According to Schmoker (2006), almost every state provides resources helping teachers align curriculum to state assessments. Additionally, states have sample tests with detailed answers for teachers use (Schmoker, 2006).

To develop an effective curriculum, Chappuis et al. (2005) determined many districts work in vertical teams routinely with state standards to develop appropriate content.

> A locally developed high-quality curriculum, reflecting state standards and aligned to national standards where appropriate, sufficiently specific, and consistently formatted across subjects and grade levels for easy use, is the foundation of quality assessment, because it states what should be assessed to track student progress and when made public in a variety of ways and formats, it becomes a guide for all stakeholders to use in helping students learn. (Chappuis et al., 2005, p. 55)

The curriculum work completed by teachers is complex and demanding for several reasons. The first reason is teachers in the past worked alone using only state standards to write curriculum (Chappuis et al., 2005). Therefore, the task of collaborative planning was not received well. Once collaborative curriculum alignment has been started, Chappuis et al. (2005) recommended it needed to be ongoing to ensure the intended curriculum was the implemented curriculum.

With curriculum aligned to standards, educators then collaborated and wrote common learning expectations (Chappuis et al., 2005). To ensure success, continued teacher collaboration was necessary to refine lessons and assessments within the curriculum (Chappuis et al., 2005; Schmoker, 2011). Teacher's instructional goals were planned to track student progress on assessments, and adjust instruction and assessments for students (Chappuis et al., 2005).

Marzano (2003) agreed with the effective schools correlate, opportunity to learn (Lezotte, 2009), where students needed time to master the content. Since the amount of content was increasing and instructional time was staying the same, students would not be able to adequately learn all material (Marzano, 2003). As a result, Marzano (2003) explained schools need to provide direct instruction on essential content. To guarantee essential curriculum was taught, administrative monitoring was necessary (Marzano, 2003). Teacher collaborative groups positively affect student achievement when essential content were considered concerning lesson plans and assessments (Chappuis et al., 2005). Consequently, administrators can see evidence of the lesson plans through discussions or reflections of lessons covered in collaborative groups (Marzano, 2003).

Marzano (2003) recommended five steps to a guaranteed and viable curriculum. The first step was to "identify and communicate the content considered essential for all students versus what is considered supplemental or necessary only for those seeking postsecondary education" (Marzano, 2003, p. 25). If all standards were covered, increased instructional time would be required (Marzano, 2003). However, Marzano (2003) calculated "standards identified across 14 subject areas would require 15,465 hours to address adequately, but there are only 9,042 hours of instruction currently

available (p. 26). In essence, to teach all standards, schools would need to expand to grade 21 to fit in all standards (Marzano, 2003). The Third International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS) concluded U.S. teachers were expected to cover more material than teachers in other countries; therefore, Marzano (2003) recommended schools drastically reduce the amount of content teachers are required to address in class. After unpacking standards and allowing teachers to pick essentials, Marzano (2003) determined schools should provide a clear representation of essentials versus what was determined for post-secondary education.

The second step to a guaranteed and viable curriculum, as posed by Marzano (2003), was to "ensure that the essential content can be addressed in the amount of time available for instruction" (p. 29). Teachers need to determine how much instructional time it takes to cover the essentials by creating a curriculum calendar (Westerberg, 2009) The curriculum calendar will focus teachers on priority standards (Westerberg, 2009).

According to Marzano (2003), after the first two steps of the process are completed, a viable curriculum is created. The third step Marzano (2003) revealed was to "sequence and organize the essential content in such a way that students have ample opportunity to learn it" (p. 30). A school district must take time to "identify the essential instructional concepts, organize into big ideas, and establish a sequence for the topics or big ideas" (Marzano, 2003, p. 30). Marzano's (2003) third step coincides with the process of unwrapping of the standards. The unwrapping process aligns standards through nouns and verbs and creates big ideas to answer essential questions (Westerberg, 2009). The fourth step identified by Marzano (2003) was to "ensure that teachers address the essential content" (p. 30). To ensure effective instructional practices are occurring in

schools, principals ask for evidence of lessons or units in classes and conduct conferences with the teacher (Marzano, 2003). Finally, the fifth step Marzano (2003) recommended was to "protect the instructional time that is available" (p. 31). For example, administrators must be efficient with the time allotted for breaks, lunch, and announcements, and specify certain times for learning, so students know when learning must occur (Marzano, 2003). These five steps are recommended to help ensure the curriculum is guaranteed and viable (Marzano, 2003).

Challenging goals and effective feedback. The second school level factor Marzano (2003) addressed, which aligns with the A+ Schools Program, was "challenging goals and effective feedback" (p. 35). According to Schmoker (2011), teachers and students need goals to achieve. If there are no goals, then learning is not effective (Marzano, 2003). Hattie and Timperley (2007) believed lessons should be challenging and feedback timely. Marzano (2003) determined challenging goals and effective feedback were aligned with the effective school movement, in which all students must be challenged to effectively master standards. Therefore, goals established for students will allow students to succeed (Marzano, 2003).

Mandated standardized tests, do not offer timely feedback of results (Marzano, 2003). For example, the Missouri state test is administered in the spring, and the data are received in the fall (MODESE, 2008c). Students have already been promoted to another grade level before test data are available. In addition, testing just once a year is below the minimum frequency level considered for academic performance on specific knowledge and skills (Marzano, 2003). This falls well below the adequate quarterly feedback recommended by Marzano (2003).

Hattie reported, “The most powerful single modification that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be dollops of feedback” (as cited in Marzano, 2003, p. 37). In addition, timely feedback, such as formative assessment, provides teachers advice throughout the learning experience (Chappuis et al., 2005). In essence, assessment feedback needs to be specific to the curriculum and taught to guarantee student mastery (Marzano, 2003).

One of the action steps Marzano (2003) recommended was to “establish specific, challenging achievement goals for the schools as a whole” (p. 40). When school-wide goals are set, it is crucial to limit the number (Marzano, 2003; Westerberg, 2009). Schmoker observed a few schools that set short term goals with significant results:

> Between 1997 and 1998, Bessemer Elementary School in Pueblo, Colorado, increased the percentage of students who were at or above grade level in reading from 12 percent to 64 percent. George Washington Vocational and Technical School in downtown Brooklyn, New York, reduced the number of students failing every class from 151 to 11 in one semester. Amphitheater Middle School reduced the number of referrals from 250 to 95 in a year’s period of time. As these examples indicate, schoolwide goals can be quite varied. (as cited in Marzano, 2003, pp. 45-46)

The type of goals can be varied depending on the school, but setting a few goals in a short time does work (Marzano, 2003).

Marzano (2003) related, “unless a school employs assessments that are specific to the curriculum actually taught, it cannot accurately determine how well its students are learning” (p. 38); therefore, curriculum written in the schools needs to be viable

(Marzano, 2003). As presented by Chappuis et al. (2005), formative assessments need to be evaluative, and feedback needs to be delivered specifically in teacher assessments. The state tests are too general to be viable (Marzano, 2003). The A+ Schools Program requires schools monitor a student's progress in specific standards (MODESE, 2008a). Each student's goal is to obtain mastery of these standards before graduation.

Outstanding Schools Act: A+ Schools Program

The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 was passed to improve public education in Missouri (MODESE, 2008b). The members of the Missouri legislature intended to provide students with the academics necessary to succeed in life by creating the Outstanding Schools Act. The issues identified in the act were quality of schools and funding for the education system (MODESE, 2008b). The Outstanding Schools Act accomplished the following: strengthening education, adopting challenging performance standards, developing curriculum frameworks, implementing an assessment system, ensuring accountability, and increasing equity for students (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993). Two of the reforms initiated in the Outstanding Schools Act were the A+ Schools Program and the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993).

Within the Outstanding Schools Act, the A+ Schools Program was created to improve the education system in participating schools of Missouri (MODESE, 2009). The primary goal of the A+ Schools Program "is to ensure that all students who graduate from Missouri high schools are well-prepared to pursue advanced education and/or employment" (MODESE, 2009, p. 1). The goal created by legislators encouraged districts to strive for excellence in education. From the beginning of the program in 1997

through the 2008 to 2009 school year, 274 high schools were designated as A+ high school. (MODESE, 2009). Many students have been successful in A+ Schools Program due to the three main goals: all students will graduate, all students will complete a challenging selection of studies; and all students will continue to college, post-secondary vocation, technical school or a high-wage job after graduation (MODESE, 2009; Missouri General Assembly, 2007).

A+ requirements. Eleven requirements support the three goals of the A+ Schools Program to guarantee A+ designation and continuation (A+ Schools Programs Established, 2009). The requirements include the following:

- establish measurable district-wide performance standards for the three goals of the program (MODESE, 2008a, p. 1);
- specify the measurable learner objectives that students must demonstrate in order to successfully complete any individual course offered by the school, and any course of study which qualifies a student for graduation from the school (MODESE, 2008a, p. 1);
- offer a career preparation system (MODESE, 2008a, p. 3);
- require rigorous coursework with standards of competency in all academic subjects for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment (MODESE, 2008a, p. 4);
- [develop a] partnership plan (MODESE, 2008a, p. 5);
- [define a] student eligibility system (MODESE, 2008a, p. 7);
- [gather] historical data (MODESE, 2008a, p. 8);

- [conduct a] local on-going evaluation of the A+ Schools Program (MODESE, 2008a, p. 9);
- [guarantee] sustainability of the A+ Schools Program (MODESE, 2008a, p. 9);
- meet performance standards under the Missouri School Improvement Program (MODESE, 2008a, p. 10);
- [and develop] spin-off activities that came about as a result of the implementation of the A+ Schools Program. (MODESE, 2008a, p. 10)

The A+ Schools Program requirements guide each school toward designation and sustain a program for school improvement.

Graduation rates. One of the three major goals of the A+ Schools Program was all students will graduate, making graduation rates an emphasis within the A+ Schools Program (MODESE, 2008a). Also, one of the measures of academic progress with federal accountability and AYP is the graduation rate (MODESE, 2008d). All states were mandated to set their own standards for graduation rate percentages (Education Commission of the States, 2008), but by "2012-2013, the U.S. Department of Education will require all states to calculate graduate rate the same way" (Almeida & Steinberg, 2008, p. 25). One problem comparing graduation rates is the way states record student dropout rates, and no standard is set for an adequate comparison (Almeida & Steinberg, 2008). When the federal government planned for a common graduation rate, graduation rates from all states were comparable.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), the dropout rate is excessively high and should be lowered. Former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, determined, "When more than 1 million students a year drop out of high school, it's more

than a problem, it's a catastrophe" (Associated Press, 2008, p. 4). America needs to become serious about the graduation rate. Missouri has implemented the A+ Schools Program to help with the graduation rate and at-risk students (A+ Schools Program Established, 2009).

All students count toward graduation rates, so at-risk students should be monitored carefully because they are potential dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). A first grader identified with social and behavioral problems may later drop out, and a more concentrated effort should be focused on middle and high school students who are potential dropouts (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). In 2008, former U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, initiated a program called, America's Promise Alliance to assist in the struggle of student dropouts (Almeida & Steinberg, 2008). According to Almeida and Steinberg (2008), Achieve Inc. and Jobs for the Future proposed a focus on the following items:

> A high school diploma that signifies college and work-readiness, pathways to graduation and college success for struggling and out-of-school students, turnaround of low-performing high schools, increased emphasis on graduation rates and college readiness in next-generation accountability, and early and continuous support for struggling students. (p. 26)

Therefore, importance of graduation, help with at-risk students, and preparation for a career are essential for students to succeed.

Identifying dropouts. Research from Achieve, Inc. (2006) indicated students' social and family backgrounds can affect student graduation. Factors included: low socioeconomic status, minority males, multiple school attendance, single parent families,

education of parents, little parental support, students as parents, or full-time working student in which all affect whether a student drops out of school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Participants in a 1990 Federal Survey indicated that "out of 21 possible reasons reflecting a wide range of educational and personal factors, 51% of dropouts reported, 'I didn't like school,' and 44% said, 'I was failing'" (Achieve, Inc., 2006, p. 5). Further research indicated dropping out of school results from struggles in academic performance and disengagement in school (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). In addition, other studies indicated smaller schools, relationships with faculty, and more focused and rigorous curriculum were helpful to retain students through graduation (Achieve, Inc., 2006).

Achieve, Inc. (2006) researchers noted the transition years between middle and high school are associated with dropouts. Middle school students who decline in academic performance and have low attendance rates are at a greater risk for dropping out (Achieve, Inc., 2006). A large number of the same students leave school when repeating their 9th grade year (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). These students may have been retained as freshman for two or three years (Achieve, Inc., 2006). As members of Achieve, Inc. (2006) related, "while there is no single pathway that every dropout follows, there are common patterns, common crises in the pipeline, and common signposts, too" (p. 15). Many students return multiple times to a school before officially dropping out (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009), and according to Achieve, Inc. (2006), this gives educators time to intercede before it is too late.

The National Governors Association (NGA), represented by Princiotta and Reyna (2009), declared the dropout rate was costing the nation more than $300 billion dollars in lost wages, and in turn, was creating a burden on the economy. The NGA

members wanted governors to adopt the following four actions: "promote high school graduation for all, target youth at-risk of dropping out, reengage youth who have dropped out of school, and provide rigorous relevant options for earning a high school diploma" (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009, pp. 4-5). These actions coincide with A+ Schools Program requirements mandated by state legislators: all students will graduate, rigorous coursework, and at-risk programs for students. The A+ Schools Program requirements of the partnership plan necessitated a strategy to "detail the procedures used in the school to identify students that [*sic*] may drop out of school and the intervention services to be used to meet the needs of such students" (MODESE, 2008b, para. 4).

Princiotta's and Reyna's (2009) research revealed that "among 18-24 year-olds, an estimated 4.9 million lack a high school diploma" (p. 6), and "more than 17% of high school dropouts unemployed almost triple the rate of students who complete some post-secondary education" (p. 9). In addition, high school dropouts make $7,000 less, on average, than a high school graduate (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). In 1970, dropouts could find work; now, those low-skill jobs have been exported to other countries (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Furthermore, by 2012, 63% of U.S. jobs will require some type of postsecondary schooling (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). The idea of working hard and sacrificing to achieve the American dream is unrealistic as companies lack trained applicants (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

Ability to drop out. According to the NGA, it is too easy for students to drop out (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Many state laws allow students to drop out before the age of 18, which sends a mixed signal as educators work to keep students in school while the state allows students to drop out before the age of 18 (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

However, in the last few years, due to mandated AYP graduation rates, some states have increased the age students must attend school (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

Curriculum and assessment. While graduation is important, curriculum and assessment are also monitored within the A+ Schools Program due to the requirement that "the district must specify the measurable learner objectives (competencies) that students must demonstrate in order to successfully complete any individual course offered by the school, and any course of study which qualifies a student for graduation from the school" (MODESE, 2008a, p. 2). A+ Schools teachers choose a three to five measurable goals to be monitored in every class, evidence of the three to five measurable goals are demonstrated through lesson plans (Marzano, 2003; MODESE, 2008a). The lesson plan documentation could include the following: instructional strategies, content standard, process standard, activities, and assessments (Marzano, 2003; MODESE, 2008a).

Marzano (2003) believed schools that "establish specific, challenging achievement goals for the school as a whole" (p. 40) will succeed with the correct action plan to sustain the program. Essential goals for instruction allow teachers to focus on student mastery (Westerberg, 2009). Selected measurable learner objectives are different for each A+ School, and each district's teachers determine which objectives students must master (MODESE, 2008a).

At-risk program. Requirement five of the A+ Schools Program includes a partnership plan with the following components: "identification of at-risk students to include at-risk intervention strategies utilized by the district; mentoring/counseling services; recruitment of community volunteers; internships and apprenticeships"

(MODESE, 2008a, p. 5). The partnership plan requires schools to "detail procedures used in the school to identify students that [*sic*] may drop out of school and the intervention services to be used to meet the needs of such students" (MODESE, 2008a, p. 5). The counseling department or at-risk coordinator in each district verifies procedures are in place (MODESE Missouri Center for Career Education, [MCCE], 2008).

Early warning data systems. Data from middle and high schools help counselors and teachers with the transition period between 8th and 9th grade (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Previously, only some school districts implemented early warning systems, but when mandated in Pennsylvania at the state level, the duplication efforts among school districts were minimized (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). For example, Pennsylvania schools have been able to identify "80% of dropouts by the end of 9th grade" (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009, p. 23).

The Consortium on Chicago School Research created an on-track indicator predicting the probability that freshman would graduate on time (Olson, 2006). The indicator was 85% accurate, and students were counted successful if they were able to be promoted to the 10th grade and failed less than one core class (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). In addition, attendance rates were monitored continuously since it is a sound indicator of course failure (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Furthermore, in Philadelphia, researchers and educators found that graduation indicators were discovered as early as 6th grade (Olson, 2006). Therefore, starting in first grade, any student not at grade level was mandated by the administrators of Philadelphia to complete an additional 120 hours of instruction (Olson, 2006).

Alternative schools. Alternative schools are not included in the federal accountability system, and as a result, scarce resources are not used to fund these programs. Therefore, each state is left to define alternative schools (Barton, 2005; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). An at-risk student's typical reasons for low attendance are "poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with early withdrawal from school" (Barton, 2005, p. 20). Students who attend alternative schools are potential dropouts and at least 16 or 17 years old (Barton 2005). The alternative school is important in helping students to graduate, but there are no national level data to support state programs (Barton, 2005), and without national mandates, there are more student dropouts than available seats in alternative schools (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). In comparison with other alternative variations similar to at-risk programs, the A+ Schools Program monitors intervention strategies and alternative education delivery systems relevant to the school district (MODESE, 2008a).

The Talent Development High School (TD), is an example of an at-risk program, and is a research-based model developed by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At-risk (Barton, 2005). The approach used at the TD focused on 9th grade students, professional development for teachers, and learning communities within the school (Barton, 2005). Student at-risk programs, such as the, TD have interventions for students to work with teachers and transition back into the regular classroom. Also included were academies for freshmen who shared the same teachers and classes (Olson, 2006). This model had freshman take two courses in English and math courses allowing students to be prepared for 10th grade college-prep classes (Olson, 2006). The TD included, "extended block scheduling, double dosing of key subjects, and specialized

curricula for 9th grade" (Herlithy, 2007, p. 9). If a student is two or more years below grade level, the student enrolls in remediation courses allowing them to progress to algebra and English by second semester of the 9th grade year (Herlithy, 2007). These classes allow students to catch up to their original cohort. Each semester class equals one credit allowing students to achieve 32 credits, which are more than offered by a traditional high school (Herlithy, 2007). Furthermore, freshman in the TD are enrolled in a freshman seminar helping build relationships, social skills, and study skills (Herlithy, 2007). The TD program has realized successes in attendance rates, course credit earned, and promotion to 10th grade (Olsen, 2006). Districts in Philadelphia, Kansas City, Chicago, and Chattanooga have implemented similar TD programs at the high school level in their districts (Herlithy, 2007).

Communities in Schools, another at-risk program, developed partnerships between schools and community agencies (Barton, 2005). These partnerships have allowed for individual and group counseling (Barton, 2005). Volunteers offer students tutoring in core subjects (Barton, 2005). Oregon legislators enacted a law allowing districts to contract with community-based alternative education programs, and in 2006, there were 22 Communities in Schools groups dedicated to helping at-risk students (Olson, 2006). The Communities in Schools groups and the public schools they served had common expectations for students with alternative education settings (Olson, 2006). The community group was able to secure funding through workforce, housing, and community funds otherwise unavailable to schools (Olson, 2006).

Georgia implemented an at-risk program using graduation coaches to work with at-risk students from grades 8 to 12 (Herlithy, 2007). As the coaches worked with at-risk

students, they introduced them to community members who acted as mentors and coached the students toward graduation (Herlithy, 2007). Graduation coaches are trained by Communities in Schools which work with at-risk students throughout the United States.

Another at-risk program was The Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP) which randomly selected 9th grade students who were at-risk (Barton, 2005). The program's focus is tutoring, computer instruction, after school programs mentoring, community service opportunities, and financial incentives (Barton, 2005). A study of five cities revealed the QOP accomplished significant, positive impacts on the following: raising academic skills, augmented receipt of honors and awards, higher high school graduation rates, increased college attendance, and improved community service (Jobs for the Future & National Council for Workforce Education, 2010).

In addition, an at-risk program, High Schools for Equity, helped five California schools make a positive impact on minority and low-income students on graduation (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008). The five schools in the California program include: Amino Inglewood Charter High School, Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy, June Jordan School for Equity, Leadership High School, and New Technology High School (Stanford University & Justice Matters, 2007). Teachers reinforced personalization with students, provided a rigorous and relevant curriculum, and established professional learning and collaboration (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008).

Of the schools, Amino Inglewood, offered a rigorous college-prep curriculum with academic supports to help all students (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008).

The rigorous college-prep curriculum allows for minority and low-income students to have the same opportunities as other students in different communities (Stanford University & Justice Matters, 2007). The June Jordan School "provides a project-based college-preparatory curriculum infused with social justice and civic-engagement themes" (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008, p. 14). College-prep curriculum allows low socioeconomic students to be involved in American culture, and in addition, a community service approach allows students to engage with community leaders and gain a sense of rapport with them (Stanford University & Justice Matters, 2007). Students who are at-risk do not necessarily have the same opportunities as other students, making the alternative school necessary for their success.

Within all five schools, students were placed in groups of 15 to 20 students with a leader to guide them in academic and personal relationships (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008). The courses were rigorous, relevant, and applicable to real-world supporting students as they struggle within low-income or minority status (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008). The small groups also allowed students to learn clear teacher expectations (Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008).

Career preparation. Another requirement of the A+ Schools Program is career preparation (MODESE, 2008a). Career pathways connect high school to the workplace as a guide for students to follow (Whitaker, 2008). Counseling programs support a student in career planning through explorations of careers in classes and internships (Whitaker, 2008). According to Fox (2010), school counselors were the greatest sources of information in helping students select a career pathway.

Career paths or clusters, "represent a nationwide effort to help learners obtain knowledge and skills they need for career success" (Sibert, Rowe, & McSpadden, 2007, p. 36). The Nebraska education department supported career paths by ensuring "that all students graduate and are prepared to take three steps: continue learning throughout their lives, enter a career field, and contribute to our democratic society (Sibert et al., 2007, p. 36). In Nebraska, there are six career fields, including 16 career clusters (Sibert et al., 2007). In addition, personal learning plans help students graduate and take rigorous coursework by choosing courses aligning with their career cluster (Sibert et al., 2007). Missouri, Virginia, and Alabama have similar career fields and career clusters (MODESE, 2007; Sibert et al., 2007). According to MODESE (2007), Missouri career clusters "provide all students the academic preparation, flexible focus, seamless transitions, and transferable skills to help them develop and pursue their interests, abilities, and career goals" (p. 1). In addition, Missouri counselors provide an opportunity for students to create a personal plan of study to guide them in taking rigorous courses to help with educational and career goals (MODESE, 2007). Overall, U.S. schools have redesigned to provide students with career cluster choices to prepare for a better transition after high school (Dedmond, 2008).

Counseling. According to the American Schools Counselor Association (2011), in 2009-2010 school year, there was only one certified counselor in 459 students in high schools. The recommended number is one certified counselor in 250 students in high school (American Schools Counselor Association, 2011). Furthermore, counselors have a wide range of tasks to complete. For example, counselors schedule classes, transition students to college, handle attendance situations, support students' personal problems,

administer standardized tests, and work with students at-risk of dropping out (Barton, 2005).

At-risk reform. According to Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, all students require nurturing, but at-risk students require even more.According to Stanley and Plucker (2008):

> In a study conducted for the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation, *The Silent Epidemic-Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, researchers worked solely with students who had left high school early and found that 56% of students had felt they could go to a school staff member about school problems. Only 41% felt they could go to a staff member about personal problems. (p. 2)

As indicated by the Silent Epidemic, "38 percent of students said they were failing one or more courses when they dropped out" (Stanley & Plucker, 2008, p. 3). Through the High School Survey of Student Engagement, high school students were questioned, and the results revealed "two out of three students are bored in school at least once a day" (Stanley & Plucker, 2008, p. 3). Nationwide studies have seen success with students graduating when they have smaller classes, personal relationships with adults, and a rigorous curriculum (Olson, 2006).

Rigorous coursework. An additional requirement of the A+ Schools Program is to provide rigorous coursework for post-secondary education or workforce (MODESE, 2008a). Although there have been successful high graduates without postsecondary education, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009a) reported, "the era in which a high school graduate could earn a living wage has ended in the United States" (para 1). Another goal of the A+ Schools Program is for "all students [to] proceed from high

school graduation to a college, or post-secondary career-technical school or high-wage job with work place skill development opportunities" (MODESE, 2008a, p. 1). The abilities as well as the numbers of students graduating have effects on communities, states, and the American society (Alliance for Education, 2008). As reported:

> Only about a third of the students who enter ninth grade each fall graduate four years later prepared for college or work. Another third leave high school with a diploma but without the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary education or the twenty-first century workplace. The remaining third do not graduate from high school within four years. (Alliance for Excellence Education, 2008, p. 1)

Ninety percent of the fastest growing and best-paying jobs require some post-secondary education (Alliance for Excellence Education, 2008). Therefore, it is essential that students are prepared to enter college, post-secondary school, or high-wage job with appropriate skill levels (MODESE, 2008a).

College preparation. San Diego State University partnered with Sweetwater Union High School District in a college-preparation program (Hebel, 2007). The program assured college entrance as a freshman for any student at Sweetwater who completed college-preparatory classes, maintained a grade-point average (GPA) of at least 3.0, and met proficiency standards for the university level work (Hebel, 2007). With this incentive, college-prep course work by Sweetwater students became the norm (Hebel, 2007). With the new program, participation in advanced placement and International Baccalaureate tests increased three times (Hebel, 2007). As a result of the program, remedial help at the college campus level decreased (Hebel, 2007).

History of education reform. U.S. education reforms of the 1990s and 2000s have revealed reform was concentrated in elementary schools and overlooked transformation in the secondary schools (Wise, 2008). In the 21st century, profitable jobs demand post-secondary education (Wise, 2008). Even though the United States has made great strides, the workplace needs more college educated workers to be globally competitive (Wise, 2008). Some high schools are now aligning with college and career expectations by increasing demands through a rigorous curriculum (Wise, 2008).

However, according to the Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust (2008), high school achievement and graduation problems have not been resolved with NCLB. Therefore, members of the Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust (2008) recommended high school students prepare for post-secondary education and work place-readiness because of rigorous requirements in the workplace. In addition, the ACT researchers revealed student's college and career readiness skills have no difference (Achieve, Inc. & The Education Trust, 2008).

Rigor. According to the National High School Center, the world's workforce requirements cause high schools to meet the demands of a rigorous curriculum for students (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). As stated by Kennelly and Monrad (2007), "raising high school academic rigor and keeping students in school need not be mutually exclusive" (p. 11). Rigorous schools combine the following to achieve success: assistance in sustaining students graduate on time, allowing supplemental learning time, arranging engaging work that is challenging even in remedial courses, aligning standards to college and career readiness, and concentrating on transition periods (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

As indicated by the Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust (2008), courses which have been documented as college prep, such as algebra and trigonometry, "are now required for entrance into a broad range of postsecondary training programs and careers" (p. 13). College and career readiness graduation requirements still recommend other non-core courses: practical arts, fine arts, and foreign language are listed as valuable courses for students (Achieve, Inc. & The Education Trust, 2008).

Summary

School reform has always existed, but in 1983 the document, *A Nation at Risk*, informed the public of the mediocrity of American education (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983). Another major reform was NCLB requiring states to be accountable for student achievement (Yell, et al., 2006). Effective schools correlates were developed by Edmonds and Lezotte (2009); the mission was learning for all students (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

The Missouri's Outstanding Schools Act initiated the A+ Schools Program to help with school improvement (Missouri Governor's Office, 1993). The A+ Schools Program was aligned with the effective Schools research. Schools Level Factors emphasized parts of the A+ Schools Program: opportunity to learn, guaranteed and viable curriculum, and challenging goals and effecting feedback (Marzano, 2003). The A+ Schools Program led a concentrated effort on improving graduation rate, developing curriculum and assessments, offering career preparation system, ensuring rigor of coursework preparing students for post-secondary education or the workforce, and enforcing an at-risk program. A+ Schools Program coordinators were proponents for helping schools have the

components to improve schools. Graduation rates in the U.S. were low and at-risk students had state intervention program to prevent them from dropping out.

In Chapter Three, the methodology using interviews and surveys were discussed. The results of qualitative and quantitative analysis of Chapter Four were presented. Finally, in Chapter Five, the conclusions, implications for practice, and further findings were discussed.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Educators complete research because it adds to the knowledge base, improves practice, and informs policy debates (Creswell, 2008). Within Chapter Three, the problem, purpose, and research perspective were presented. Then, the population and sample of the research were discussed. The instruments used in the research, the process of and data collection, and the data analyses were described.

Problem and Purpose Overview

Some students do not graduate high school with their cohort and are not ready for college due to a lack of rigorous coursework in high school (Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust, 2008; Garland & Wilbur, 2008). In addition, Schmoker (2006) determined curriculum needs to be refined using standards which are monitored. As a result, the A+ Schools Program addresses graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation system, rigor of coursework preparing students for post-secondary education or the workforce, and at-risk programs developed from the partnership plan. The purpose of this study was to examine how the A+ Schools Program requirements have been perceived to impact school improvement in participating high schools in Missouri. Research about the A+ Schools Program helps legislators, administrators, teachers, and parents understand the programs impact on meeting school improvement goals.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research in the study.

1. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the graduation rate?

2. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impacted curriculum and assessment?

3. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the career preparation system?

4. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment?

Research Perspective

In this research project, a mixed-method approach was utilized which considers qualitative and quantitative data and allows the study to "address broader or more complicate questions" (Yin, 2009, p. 64). By using both survey and interview data, reliability and validity of the results were strengthened. According to Creswell (2008):

> The mixed methods researcher collects both the quantitative and qualitative data concurrently or simultaneously during the study. The mixed methods researcher compares the results from quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine if the two databases yield similar or dissimilar results. (pp. 557-558)

A descriptive design applying the use of themes in analyzing the qualitative data and descriptive statistics to display the quantitative data was employed. Qualitative data from four A+ Coordinators were gathered through telephone interviews. The interviews topics concerned graduation rate, career preparation, rigorous coursework, and at-risk programs. The qualitative data examined from the interviews were collected in a text format to identify themes. Additionally, 274 A+ Coordinators were given the opportunity to take the survey and 187 A+ Coordinators responded about the impact of the A+ Schools Program on school improvement. After the surveys were administered to A+

Coordinators, the results were displayed using tables and graphs. A triangulation of the data was accomplished through interviews, surveys, and themes emerging from the two data sources. According to Creswell (2008), a mixed-methods approach provides a complete picture of the study.

Population and Sample

Any Missouri school district designated by or before the 2008 to 2009 school year was counted as an A+ School. Schools have three years to complete requirements to receive A+ designation. Although the A+ Schools Program is a Missouri only initiative, 274 of the 570 public high schools in the state participate (MODESE, 2009). A+ Coordinators were the population surveyed. Consequently, all of the A+ Coordinators who were designated as such by 2008 to 2009 had the opportunity to complete the survey.

The sample for the interview was taken from the same population of A+ Coordinators. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE, 2009) website provided a list of A+ Coordinators. As a result of recommendations from a MODESE A+ Coordinator, A+ Coordinators were chosen by a purposive sample to determine the interview participants. The intended sample consisted of A+ Coordinators who remained in that position for at least two years. The purposive sampling methods were selected in an effort to assure the participants knowledge and an understanding of the A+ Schools Program. The four A+ Coordinators who were interviewed were from varied school populations of students. The interviews concerned graduation rate, career preparation, rigorous coursework for post-secondary education or workforce, and at-risk programs.

Instrumentation

Interview questions. Interview questions (see Appendix A) were devised from the five research questions: graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation system, rigorous coursework in preparation for post-secondary school or the workforce, and at-risk program. Each of the research questions had two to three specific questions asked to each interview participant. The questions were open-ended to offer a variety of perspectives on the A+ Schools program. The questions were reviewed by Lindenwood University professors and A+ Coordinators to ensure reliability. If at any time during the interview an A+ Coordinator chooses not to answer the question, it was permitted.

Survey. A survey (see Appendix B) was constructed utilizing a Likert-scale format. Using five themes of A+ Schools Program requirements: graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation system, rigorous coursework in preparation for post-secondary school or the workforce, and at-risk programs were chosen. Each theme in the survey consisted of four to nine questions for A+ Coordinators to complete. The question answers were strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree to maintain consistent responses. A field-test survey was administered with 20 A+ Coordinators to ensure reliability.

Data Collection

A written proposal of the project and a description of the research design were presented and approved by the Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board (IRB) on May 2009 (see Appendix C). Quantitative data were collected by a Likert-scale survey and created using an online survey tool, SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey.com, 2010). A

cover letter was sent electronically to each A+ Coordinator describing the purpose of the survey. Participants were asked to read the letter of consent (see Appendix D) and accept terms of the study. The letter contained assurance that information was anonymous and data collection would be secured for five years and then destroyed. Participants were not required to answer all questions. The survey was available through SurveyMonkey electronically for 14 consecutive days.

Then, research for the qualitative portion of the study was conducted. The handling of the interview questions were in the same consistent manner as the survey questions. Initially, the interview participants were contacted by telephone and requested to provide their postal mailing addresses (see Appendix E). The letter of participation (see Appendix F) and letter of consent was mailed via the post office to participants to read and sign, thereby accepting the terms of the study. The intent of the letter was to assure participants personal information was anonymous and data would be secured for five years and then destroyed. After the letter of consent was signed and returned via the post office, participants were contacted by electronic mail to confirm a date and time for the interview, and the questions were electronically mailed to each participant.

The interviews were conducted via telephone and audiotaped using a digital recorder. Each participant was asked each question and allowed time to answer. The participants were asked after each question if they had any further contributions to the question. Some participants would add additional comments and after given time to compose their opinions. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if there was anything else they would like to add to the conversation about the A+ Schools Program.

Questions allowed respondents to interpret, internalize and vary answers. This aided the interview process by opening up new avenues for discussion. Every effort was made to recognize and set aside any prior judgment or bias experienced A+ Coordinators had at the time of the interview.

Each A+ Coordinator interviewed was identified by a letter designation to respect anonymity and confidentiality. Responses were audiotaped, and the information was transcribed verbatim for analysis. The transcripts were presented electronically to the interview participants for review to ensure accuracy. Revisions were made at the participant's request.

Data Analysis

A survey response rate of greater than 50% was achieved and considered acceptable to compile data. However, 158 to 187 A+ Coordinators answered the questions on the survey because A+ Coordinators were not required to answer each question. The survey data were compiled using Excel to make tables and figures.

Interview results were transcribed verbatim. Initially, all transcripts were read carefully to acquire a sense of the whole interview responses. The second time all transcripts were read, notes were jotted in the margin. Then, each question was read for interpretation. Any underlying meanings in two to three words were written down in the margins. The process of coding the transcript began with identifying text fragments by placing a bracket around them and writing a phrase describing the fragment. One list was compiled with all the code phrases. The list was color coded by identifying similar codes. In addition, the list was compared to quotes from the participants and color coded

according to the code phrases. The list of codes was color coded according to the code phrases.

A comparison of the survey findings were color coded with the codes from interview. The data were triangulated to see the commonalities and the interviews reinforced any evidence presented from the surveys. The codes were reduced to form four themes which provided the most evidence.

Strategies applied. The use of open-ended questions in an interview and online Likert-scale survey aided in the triangulation of data. Triangulation ensured not one method would be relied upon more than another (Creswell, 2008.). The following strategies were used in the study:

Bar graph. A bar graph was the format chosen to display the quantitative data collected by the Likert-scale survey. Data was arranged in a bar graph to allow for graphic illustration (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

Coding. Coding is a process used to make connections between text allowing themes to emerge (Creswell, 2008). Coding was completed after transcription of the interview responses to find themes. Creswell (2008) recommended the following steps for coding qualitative data:

1. The researcher should read all interview transcripts and make notes.

2. Choose one document and ask, what the person is communicating.

3. Write down two or three words and place a box around them.

4. Identify text segments related with a single code, and make a list of code words.

5. Repeat will all interview transcripts and reduce the list of codes.

Frequency tables. A frequency table is a technique for summarizing categorical data shown on each survey question (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Data were collected from the frequency table and transferred to a bar graph.

Themes. Themes represent the major ideas represented within the research (Creswell, 2008). Themes appear in coding of the qualitative data (Creswell, 2008). After coding of the data, four themes were present.

Ethical Considerations of Study

Each A+ Coordinator surveyed was identified by number and interviewees were identified by letter to assure anonymity. During data collection, data were not shared with individuals outside of the study. Any participant who did not wish to respond, even after consent, was respected.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to examine how the A+ Schools Program requirements have been perceived to impact school improvement in participating high schools in Missouri. A mixed-method approach was conducted with quantitative data from survey completed by A+ Coordinators and qualitative data from interviews completed by four A+ Coordinators. The topics investigated in the survey and interviews were graduation rate, career preparation, rigorous coursework, and at-risk programs. Surveys were compiled into Excel through tables and figures. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and then, coded. The codes were triangulated using the survey and interview data to find four themes.

Data results of the interviews and surveys were presented in Chapter Four. The surveys consisted of tables and graphs of the responses. Interview responses to the

themes were provided. All data were related to the purpose and research questions of the study. Then, the findings of the research and offered any ideas for additional research were discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to examine how A+ Schools Program requirements have impacted school improvement. Originally, problems included low high school graduation rate (Garland & Wilbur, 2009), and students were not prepared for rigorous coursework at postsecondary institutes (Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust, 2008); and secondary curricula were not monitored or aligned with standards (Schmoker, 2006).

A mixed-method study was created integrating and merging qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell, 2008). This study was designed to gather and analyze perceptions of A+ Coordinators. A survey was employed to collect responses from the A+ Coordinators on graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation system, career and college ready coursework, and at-risk programs. To gain further insight into the A+ Schools Program, four experienced A+ Coordinators were interviewed. Effective schools research provided the conceptual framework to which the A+ Schools Program was viewed and its impact on school improvement. The effective research correlates were "instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, safe and orderly environment, climate of high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, positive home-school relations, opportunity to learn and student time on task (Lezotte, 2009, p. 5).

In this chapter, the survey, interview responses, and data analysis of the study were presented. Next, the survey results were examined through tables and figures. Then, the interview questions were discussed. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the graduation rate?

2. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impacted curriculum and assessment?

3. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the career preparation system?

4. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment?

5. How has the A+ Schools partnership plan been perceived to impact at-risk students?

Survey

A survey was administered to 20 A+ Coordinators to examine trends in the group (Creswell, 2008). A Likert-scale survey was created, using an online tool, consisting of five themes with multiple questions within each theme for A+ Coordinators to answer. A letter of recruitment was sent electronically to each A+ Coordinator in Missouri explaining the purpose of the study. Then, the survey was available through SurveyMonkey to all A+ Coordinators choosing to participate. Participants read the letter of consent, and if willing to contribute, accepted the terms of agreement by completing the survey. The respondents were assured any personal information remained anonymous and data collection was to be secured for five years and then destroyed. Participants were not required to answer all questions on the survey. The survey was available for 14 consecutive days, and each A+ Coordinator surveyed was identified by a number to respect anonymity and confidentiality.

Interview Protocol

The protocol used to collect data increased the reliability and helped guide the research in the case. Since interviews are more open-ended, researchers may need to ask additional questions not on the original interview list (Yin, 2009). The researcher has to be flexible with the participants schedule by conversing at a time when the respondent is available (Creswell, 2008). In addition, the researcher may have to refrain against comments since he or she is very familiar with the topic (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) determined:

> Throughout the interview process, you [the interviewer] have two jobs: (a) to follow your own line of inquiry, as reflected by your case study protocol, and (b) to ask your actual (conversational) questions in an unbiased manner that also serves the need of your line of inquiry. (p. 106)

Initially the interview respondents were contacted by the telephone. Then, the contributors made available their mailing addresses. The letter of participation and letter of consent were mailed to respondents to read and sign, thereby accepting the terms of agreement. The signed forms were mailed back to the interviewer. Within the letter respondents were assured of anonymity and the data would be secured for five years and then destroyed. After the letter of consent was received by mail and signed, contributors were contacted by email to confirm a date and time for the interview.

Interview

Interviews were conducted via telephone and anonymity was assured before the interview was conducted. Throughout the telephone interview of one and one-half hours, participants spoke candidly about the A+ Schools Program. Persons interviewed were did

not have to answer questions at any time during the interview and were given the opportunity to share other pertinent information related to A+ Schools Program. With consent from participants, interviews were audiotaped. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim ensuring valid information from the recording. Each A+ Coordinator interviewed was assigned a data code, or letter, so responses would be attributed correctly.

Data Analysis

When analyzing text in qualitative research, the data must be coded to aid in interpretation (Creswell, 2008). Creswell (2008) defined coding as "the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data" (p. 251).

Survey data were compiled into tables and graphs. Then, survey and interview data were coded by highlighting matching themes. The triangulation of the data was achieved through interviews and surveys, and interview responses reinforced insight from the responses collected from the surveys. Four themes emerged:

1. The A+ Schools Program emphasizes the importance to graduate,
2. The at-risk programs were enhanced and more students were able to graduate,
3. Curriculum and assessment did not change necessarily due to the A+ Schools Program, and
4. Students focused more on career plans which helped them complete a more rigorous selection of courses.

These themes aligned with the effective schools framework of learning for all. The A+ Schools Program modeled effective schools because of the focus on high expectations, student learning and making progress (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011).

Survey Results

The questions were presented in a Likert-scale format: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly agree. The responses were initially collected and organized within SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey, 2010).

Graduation rate and curriculum and assessment. A major goal of the A+ Schools Program was all students will graduate (MODESE, 2008a). In addition, another requirement was students would complete a range of subjects requiring curriculum goals (MODESE, 2008a). The first section of survey questions consisted of nine questions concerning graduation rate and curriculum and assessment topics pertaining to the A+ Schools Program. Then, data from nine questions on graduation rate and curriculum were summarized by a chart as shown by Table 1 and as shown in Figure 1 with categorical data. A majority of A+ Coordinators responded either strongly agree or agree for questions concerning graduation rate and curriculum and assessment.

Of participants surveyed, concerning graduation rate and school improvement, 100 strongly agreed the A+ Schools Program had a positive effect on students proceeding from high school to a post-secondary education or the workplace. Out of 166 participants surveyed, 128 strongly agreed or agreed the A+ Schools Program had a positive impact on graduation rate. In addition, 118 participants strongly agreed or agreed the A+ Schools Program had a positive impact on students completing a challenging selection of courses. Overall, participants strongly agreed with all questions concerning graduation rate and school improvement involving the A+ Schools Program.

Table 1

School Improvement with the Implementation of the A+ Schools Program

Answer Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	n =
A. Graduation rate	42	86	26	10	0	164
B. Students graduating from high school	39	92	27	8	0	166
C. Students completing a challenging selection of courses	42	76	32	18	0	168
D. Students proceeding from high school to a post-secondary education or the workplace	100	61	14	3	0	178
E. Proper use of curriculum and assessments	39	89	19	13	2	162
F. Measurable learner objectives (competencies)	42	84	19	13	0	158
G. Proper use of activities and assessments in the classroom	24	89	26	19	0	158
H. Mastery level of objectives (competencies)	29	105	16	16	0	166
I. Tracking of mastery level objectives	39	103	26	11	0	179

Note. n = the number of participants for each question.

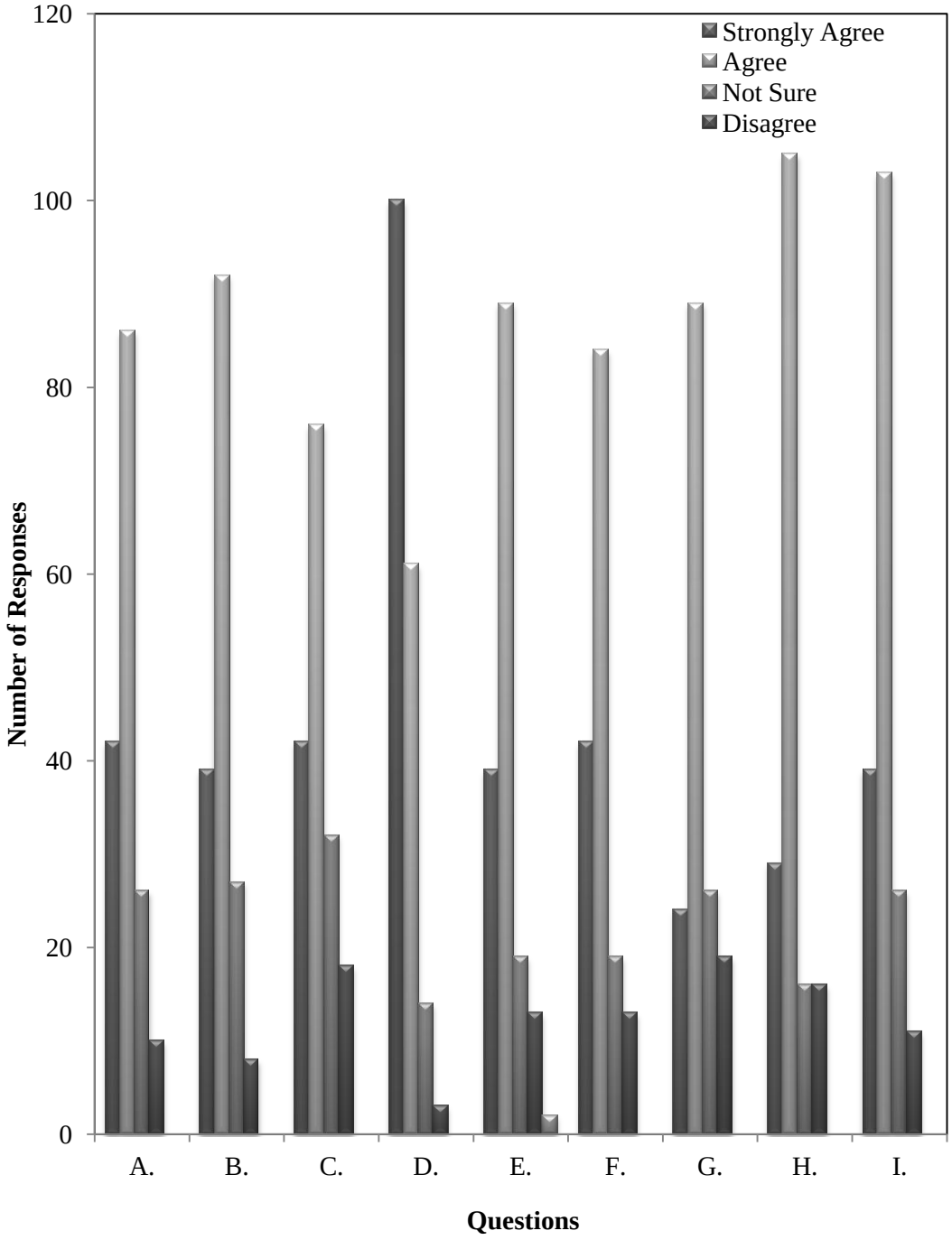

Figure 1. Graduation Rate and School Improvement. A. = graduation rate; B. = students graduating from high school; C. = students completing a challenging selection of courses; D. = students proceeding from high school to a post-secondary education or the workplace; E. = proper use of curriculum and assessments; F. = measurable learner objectives; G. = proper use of activities and assessments in the classroom; H. = mastery level of objectives; I. = tracking of mastery level objectives.

Career and preparation system. The second section of the survey consisted of four questions concerning career and preparation systems applying to the A+ Schools Program. The responses from the four questions on career and preparation system were summarized by a frequency table as shown in Table 2. In addition, categorical data were presented as show in Figure 2.

Over 90% of participants surveyed agreed or strongly agreed development of 4-year plans (personal plan of study) and selection of career pathway for students had been positively affected by the A+ Schools Program. Out of 187 participants, 169 strongly agreed or agreed the A+ Schools Program positively impacted the selection of career pathway for students. Zero participants strongly disagreed that the A+ Schools Program positively impacted the high school counseling program. Almost 70 % of participants agreed the comprehensive K-12 counseling program was positively affected by the A+ Schools Program.

Table 2

Career Preparation System with the Implementation of the A+ Schools Program

Answer Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	n =
A. Comprehensive K-12 counseling program	29	87	31	21	0	168
B. High school counseling program	53	76	16	18	0	163
C. Development of 4-year plans (personal plan of study)	84	84	3	5	3	179
D. Selection of career pathway for students	82	87	8	10	0	187

Note. n = the number of participants for each question.

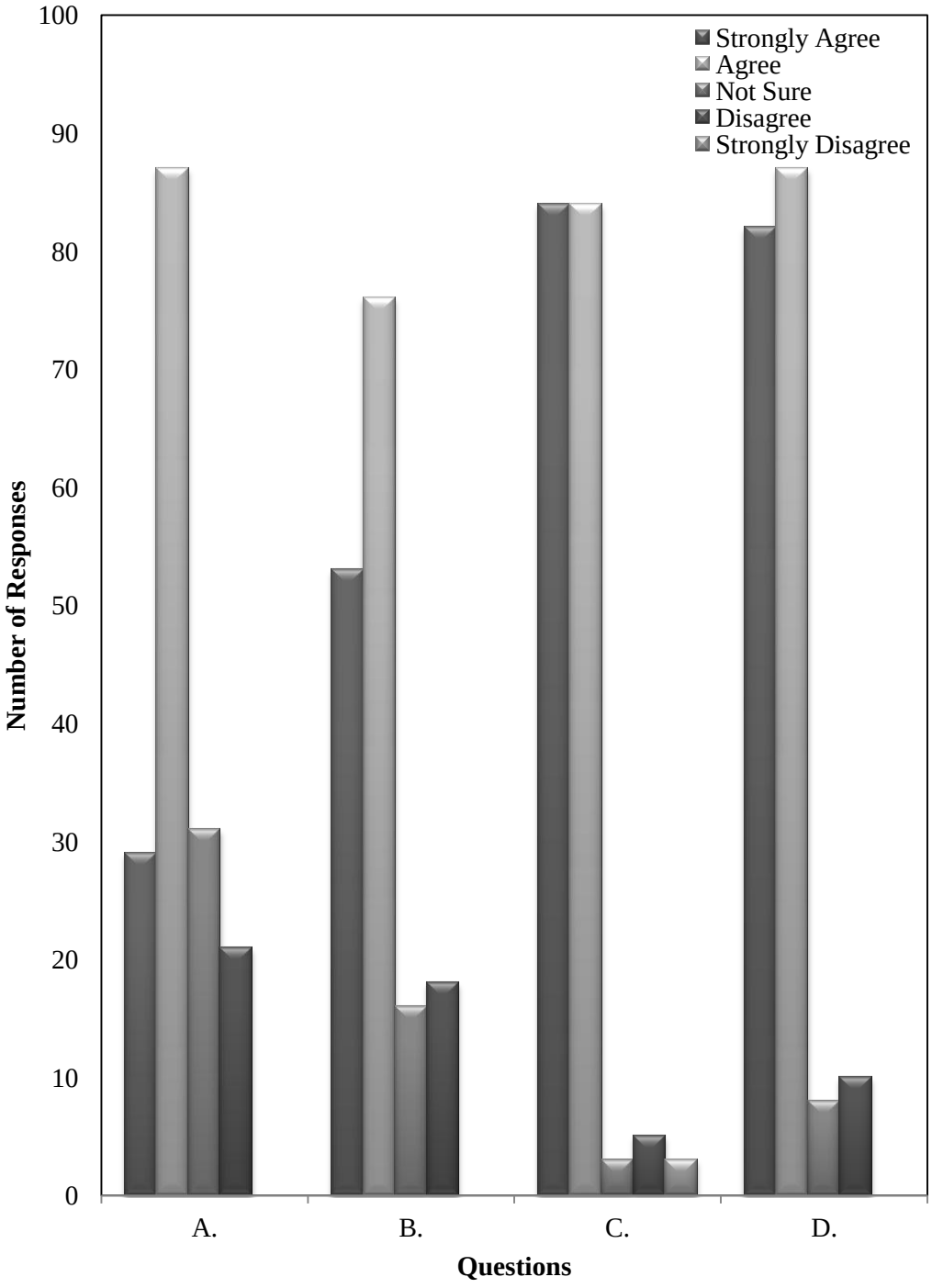

Figure 2. Career Preparation System. A. = comprehensive k-12 counseling program; B. = high school counseling program; C. = development of 4-year plans; D. = selection of career pathway for students.

Rigorous coursework. The third section of survey questions consisted of five questions concerning rigorous coursework. As shown in Table 3, the categorical data were represented and as shown in Figure 3 the chart corresponds to the categorical data. The first question addressed if appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter post-secondary education and the results showed 82% of participants strongly agreed or agreed. The next question addressed if appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter a high-wage job and the results showed 72% of participants strongly agreed or agreed. Mixed opinions were evident with the type impact of the number of dual credit or advanced placement courses. Over 70% strongly agreed or agreed the A+ Schools program positively impacted the number of upper level course offerings and eliminated general track courses that did not prepare students for employment or post-secondary education.

Table 3

Rigorous Coursework with the Impact of the A+ Schools Program

Answer Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	n =
A. Appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter post-secondary education	50	87	11	18	0	166
B. Appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter a high-wage job	26	95	29	18	3	171
C. The number of dual credit or advanced placement courses	53	63	24	29	2	171
D. The number of upper level course offerings	50	74	13	26	0	163
E. Eliminating general track courses that did not prepare students for employment or post-secondary education	59	81	18	12	0	171

Note. n = the number of participants for each question.

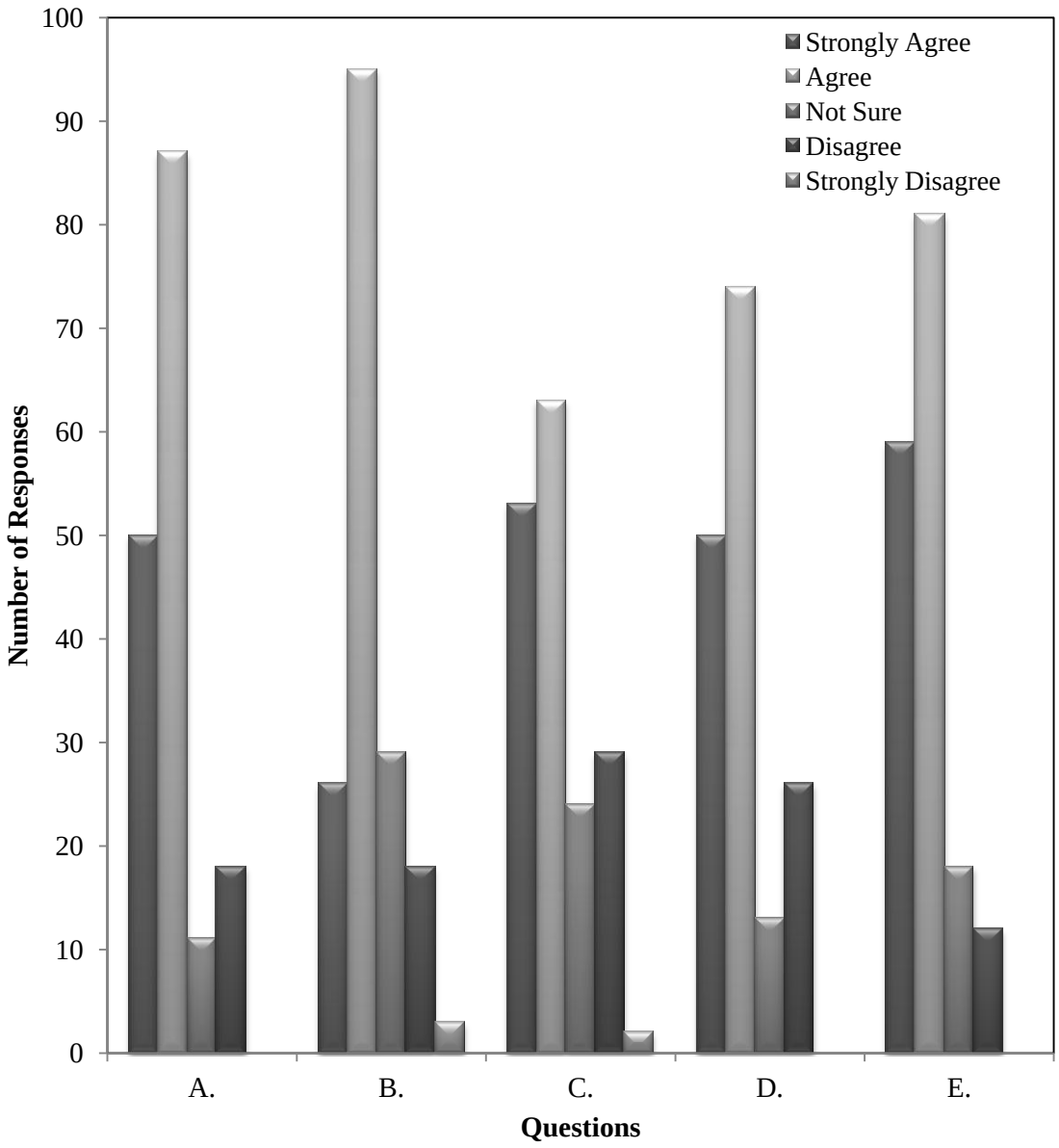

Figure 3: Rigorous Coursework. A = appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter post-secondary education; B = appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter a high-wage job; C = the number of dual credit or advanced placement courses; D = the number of upper level course offerings; E = eliminating general track courses that did not prepare students for employment or post-secondary education.

At-risk program. The fourth section of survey questions consisted of five questions concerning at-risk programs. As show in Table 4, the questions were compiled in a Likert-scale and presented in a chart as shown in Figure 4. Each at-risk program response had over 100 participants strongly agree or agree on a positive impact of the A+ Schools Program. Only one question, attempting to counsel or recover students from dropping out, had a response of strongly disagree with the impact the A+ Schools Program had on the at-risk programs. Fifty-five participants were not sure or disagreed with the positive impact on the A+ Schools Program concerning implementation or referring of alternate education programs.

Out of 179 participants for the question addressing did the A+ Schools Program develop or enhance your school's at-risk program, 137 participants strongly agreed or agreed. Almost 70% strongly agreed or agreed that the A+ Schools had a positive impact on referral procedures for at-risk programs. In addition, 76% of participants continued to agree that intervention strategies for the at-risk students were positively impacted by the A+ Schools Program.

Table 4

At-Risk Programs with the Impact of the A+ Schools Program

Answer Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	n =
A. Developing or enhancing your school's at-risk programs	58	79	18	24	0	179
B. Referral procedures for at-risk programs	29	82	18	31	0	160
C. Attempting to counsel or recover students from dropping out	53	71	18	24	3	169
D. Intervention strategies for the at-risk students	45	82	16	23	0	165
E. Implementation or referring of alternate education programs	39	84	29	26	0	178

Note. n = the number of participants for each question.

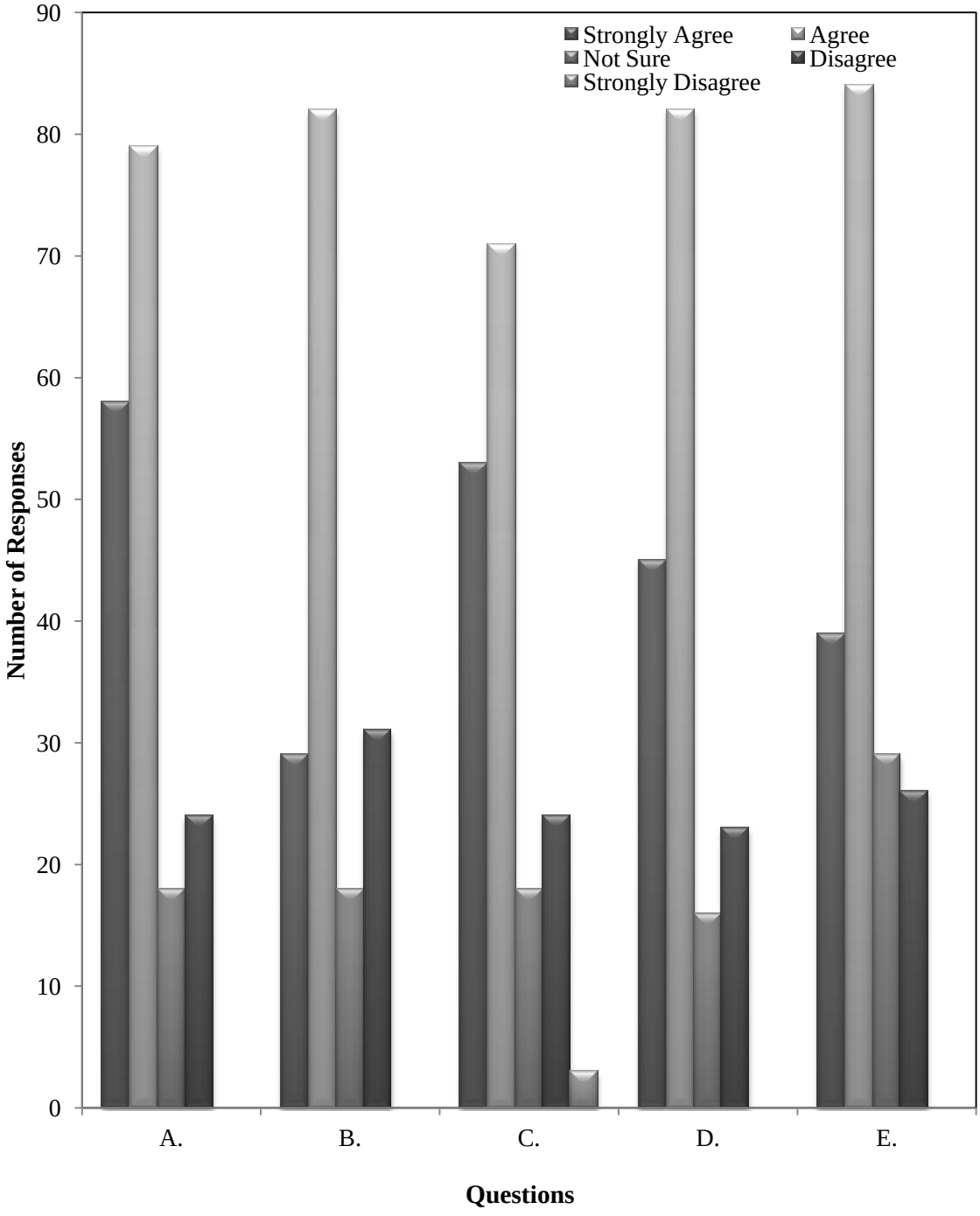

Figure 4: At-Risk Programs. A = developing or enhancing your school's at-risk programs; B = referral procedures for at-risk programs; C = attempting to counsel or recover students from dropping out; D = intervention strategies for the at-risk students; E = implementation or referring of alternate education programs.

Interview Questions

Theme one: graduation rate.

Interview question 1. How has the idea of graduating from high school changed over the last several decades among community members, parents, and students?

The first theme was centered on graduation rate and how the A+ Schools Program increased high school graduation. In the past forty years, working society has changed because originally students who dropped out of school could find a job, but now many jobs have disappeared overseas (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). The National Governors' Association (NGA) suggested governors "promote high school graduation for all, target youth at-risk of dropping out, reengage youth who have dropped out of school, and provide rigorous relevant options for earning a high school diploma (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009, pp. 4-5). Results of interview responses varied but continued to provide evidence of the importance to graduate.

In response to the first interview question, A+ Coordinator A replied, "a high school diploma is a necessity with the job situation. It is very unlikely that you are going to get a job without it. Plus, the military requires a high school diploma to join." A+ Coordinator B stated, "Ten years ago, students and parents of students, it wasn't their goal to go to college. It was their goal to come to school and not necessarily graduate." A+ Coordinator C commented, "A+ has just made everyone more aware of it, about the whole issue that all students need to graduate." A+ Coordinator D responded, "A+ helps students to set a goal beyond high school, which in turn, increases graduation."

Interview question 2. What are some of the strategies your school has used to help students graduate?

Through the effective schools framework, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) recommended all students have equal opportunities for education, and schools need to customize and differentiate instruction to serve learning needs of all students. Members of the NGA reported, "Schools lose students because they do not provide rigorous and relevant content that is connected to the real world" (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009, p. 31). Therefore, alternative schools have served a method in the United States to help students graduate from high school. However, there is not a federal program for alternative school; therefore, schools have little money allocated for alternative schools (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Many alternative schools, such as Talent Development, Communities in Schools, High Schools for Equity focus on building relationships with students (Barton, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Friedlaender, 2008; Herlithy, 2007).

In answering the second interview question, an emerging strategy appeared; three interviewees agreed at-risk programs or alternative schools had changed their graduation rate since becoming an A+ School. A+ Coordinator A expressed:

> We have an alternative school program. If the principal or parent thinks that a student is going to dropout, then we can put them going to school on a part-time basis, and they can work or have an internship the rest of the time, or they can take college classes.

A+ Coordinator B responded:

> We are trying to build a lot of relationships with parents and students by giving them the resources; so they know what opportunities are out there. We are trying

> to take more tours of businesses that require more education. We also are trying to get them on college campuses more so that the students are more comfortable being in that atmosphere. Once they have been exposed to it [college] they feel like they can do it. It makes them feel like they are able to do it. So that is one of things we have done. We have tried to get them to different places within our community and out to different colleges. We have also brought in different information and resources.

A+ Coordinator C reported:

> We have a class of students at the high school that are at-risk. In that class, there is a teacher that monitors their progress. It is like a guided study hall. It has had a huge impact on our dropout rate. When we surveyed students who dropped out, we ask them about what had the most effect. They said, when they fell behind their peers. We added extra classes (IT) [guided study hall for at-risk students] to where they could catch up on credits and be with their class which is a guided study hall.

A+ Coordinator D acknowledged:

> [We] now have a credit recovery program… for students who have fallen behind to stay in school and graduate on schedule. We have another program ….which has been in place for several years, which works on a plan for [at-risk] students that meet twice a month between teachers, parents, and students.

Interview question 3: In your opinion, how has the graduation rate been impacted by the A+ Schools Program?

Since one of the goals of the A+ Schools Program is for all students to graduate; the A+ Schools Program focuses on making sure students graduate (MODESE, 2008a). The goal correlates with the mission of learning for all in effective schools research (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). A+ Coordinator A explained, "We have fewer students dropping out than before. But our dropout rate has never been that bad. Our graduation rate is always higher than the state average. We probably had fewer students drop out." A+ Coordinator B responded:

> Yes, definitely. I think it [graduation rate] has become more important. I do not know if the students feel really if A+ is helping them to graduate but they know that graduation is one step towards going to college to use their A+.

A+ Coordinator C stated, "Well, it [graduation rate] has improved. We have always had a pretty good graduate rate." A+ Coordinator D said, "It [graduating] helps students set a goal beyond high school which in turn increases graduation. Many of these students would not be setting goals and going on to community college or other post-graduate education without A+."

Theme two: curriculum and assessment.

Interview question 1. How has the A+ Schools Program impacted curriculum and assessment?

The second theme involved how the A+ Schools Program impacted curriculum and assessment with mixed opinions emerging from the interviews. According to effective schools researchers, Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011), all students need to

master and learn curriculum as well as schools monitoring student work and giving feedback which leads to greater student achievement. Marzano (2003) agreed with Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) and reported a guaranteed and viable curriculum "has the most impact on student achievement" (Marzano, 2003, p. 22).

Curriculum and assessment is an essential component of all Missouri schools. A+ Coordinator A responded:

> I am not sure that they consider it a result of the A+ program. But we are a PLC school. Teachers are revising curriculum and assessments. New person [curriculum director] on staff is strong on instruction. We [school A] started becoming a PLC school at the same time that we were going through A+ designation. So I do not know which way. We are working on common assessments and smart goals. All ties into A+.

A+ Coordinator B addressed curriculum and assessment:

> We have such a large curriculum department program in place already. Our curriculum is updated within each department every five years due to the MSIP cycle. I do not know that we have changed that as much for A+ for us.

A+ Coordinator C's addition concerning curriculum and assessment was "I definitely know that focusing on A+ competencies everyone perceives as an A+ initiative. Also, the push to have more college prep classes, and more vocational classes. Everyone still remembers when we did away with overall general classes." A+ Coordinator D noted the A+ Schools Program contributed to "A+ competencies, scoring guides and tracking competencies. Some teachers had to complete incomplete curriculum."

Interview question 2. Describe how your school chose the 3-5 measurable objectives and now use the objective in activities and assessments.

Curriculum and instruction should be a manageable amount of information (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Furthermore, curriculum work should be completed with teams of teachers with continued collaboration to refine lesson and assessments (Chappuis et al., 2005). In the A+ Schools Program, schools are required to "specify the measurable learner objectives (competencies) that students must demonstrate in order to successfully complete any individual course offered by the school, and any course of study which qualifies a student for graduation from a school" (MODESE, 2008a, p. 1). Within that requirement, employees of DESE stated "The district shall identify a sub-set of 3 to 5 of the total measurable objectives of the school to track multiple times across all content areas and multiple courses within content areas" (MODESE, 2008a, p. 2). A+ Coordinator A responded, "I had basically the department heads form a committee. Then, we looked at the placemat, MAP scores, and ACT scores. Targeted the weak area and that is how they were chose. A+ Coordinator B related a similar process to A+ Coordinator A:

> We sat down with all of our department chairs and said what are the 3-5 most important things that students must leave this high school with? Then, we started looking at the placemat. Yes, we agreed that there were tons of knowledge, but if we had to narrow down what would make them lifelong learners was all on the process side. We just decided to make those process standards our A+ objectives.

A+ Coordinator C explained:

> We chose them by PLC. In the small group PLC, each group looked at the process standard and picked what they felt was most important and worked best in their curriculum. Then, I tallied all of them and went back to large group PLC meeting and we picked our top three from that. Then we added to that the two competencies that had come up as weaknesses on our MAP results. Then, the teachers made the assessments or activities.

A+ Coordinator D reported:

> Teachers discussed what students need for life after high school. Curriculum director also looked at MAP scores, along with goals and standards. MAP scores and other areas of lower performance were aligned with the goals and standards. Of these, teachers selected the four objectives that best fit the needs of our students. Curriculum Director and teachers then developed scoring guides to be used building wide for assessing A+ Competencies. Students benefited with all classes assessing in the same way. Students now see uniformity of expectations across the curriculum and can no longer play one class against another and they now have a better idea regarding what is expected of them.

Interview question 3. Do you believe that your students have mastered skill sets they may have not mastered without the emphasis on the 3-5 measurable goals?

Effective school researchers, Lezotte & McKee Snyder (2011), explained in order to master the curriculum some standards may need to be abandoned and time required to teach mastery must match the time and resources available. Marzano (2003) also recommended essentials be mastered by discontinuing other standards. However, A+ Coordinator A did not feel sure this occurred. A+ Coordinator B expressed:

> Absolutely again, because of the more rehearsals you have on any of those things the better the students are going to do, even the ones that really had just the mastery level or not met have improved. If even just their comfort level on doing the different processes or the different content standards has improved over that in the 10 year span, we have been doing them.

A+ Coordinator C explained:

> Well, I think it [setting measurable goals] has helped. I think it [mastery of measurable goals] is focusing again. When you are thinking about those things, then, you are focusing on them. The ones [measurable goals] that we put in are far as those objectives were a weakness on our MAP. Then, those results did approve the next year. So, we did have the data to prove that, but I do really feel that it [setting measurable goals] is just an awareness are more aware looking at those things.

A+ Coordinator D reported, "Yes, students mastered skill sets where they had less exposure before A+ tracking."

Theme three: career preparation system.

Interview question 1. In what ways do you think the A+ Schools Program has contributed to the career preparation system?

The A+ Schools Program requirement relayed "procedures must have been implemented within the district or school to prepare students upon graduation to successfully enter and progress in employment and/or post-secondary studies" (MODESE, 2008a, p. 3). Career pathways and personal plans of study help guide students through high school in a successful manner to succeed after graduation

(MODESE, 2007; Sibert, et al., 2007; Whitaker, 2008). The third theme emerging was students were more focused on career plans and developing their four-year plan/personal plan of study. A+ Coordinator A explained:

> I think it [A+] has made us more focused. Before student did go through making a four-year plan and revising them, but I do not think students really thought about what courses they were putting down. When we started becoming A+, we made a career booklet with all the career paths and occupations. Then, we put sample class schedules for 9, 10, 11, and 12 for each of the [career] paths. I think the students are a little more focused on what classes they need to take for their career path.

A+ Coordinator B replied, "I feel like we have made a huge impact on the career preparation system. At our high school, we have implemented college and career activities at every grade level and sometimes throughout every core course." In addition, A+ Coordinator B continued:

> But, I feel like just that exposure to careers and the more they hear about it [careers] and the more they know what is out there [society]. It [exposure] just gives them a better shot of understanding and why it [four-year plans/personal plans of study] is important to go to college and important to have a plan for the future and goals. They can then plan their personal plan of study that way. I think it [four-year plans/personal plans of study] is very beneficial for our kids.

A+ Coordinator C answered:

> Before we had A+, we did not talk much about careers. Every teacher had their curriculum and did talk a little. But now it [careers] is the fabric of the high

> school. Now, the teachers have the career information as part of their curriculum. If they are going to teach a skill, then, they are going to say how this might be used in the career or the real world. It rolls it all together and makes more sense. We have career fairs. We track and keep record of A+ about their career interest that was developed all through A+.

A+ Coordinator D added:

> There is much more discussion in general regarding careers and training for them. Hearing about the A+ Program and knowing they [the student] can earn tuition for training has led many students to consider/plan for training beyond high school, and [the student] talk a lot more about careers. Tutors model for younger students as they talk about A+ opportunities and career plans. High school teachers are beginning to make better links between the curriculum they teach and careers or the way it is used in the workplace.

Interview question 2. How has the emphasis changed in the last decade concerning students' personal plans of study?

In Missouri, personal plans of study have been used to steer students in appropriate classes helping guide them into a career cluster (MODESE, 2007). Other states have used similar personal learning plans to lead students to a particular career pathway (Sibert et al., 2007). A+ Coordinator A reported:

> We didn't have them [personal plans of study] back then. I think it [personal plans of study] has made the parents more aware of what their kid should be taking. They have that career booklet and if my kid wants to do this, then, these are the

> classes they should take. I think it [personal plans of study] has made the parents more aware.

A+ Coordinator B explained, "Everything used to be paper pencil, and basically [now] a technology change. We went from the career pathways to the more specific career clusters. Do not remember if they [School B] did career pathways before A+ or not." A+ Coordinator C reemphasized, "Personal plans of study are used and again. The students are not just filling out the paperwork like four-year plans." A+ Coordinator D responded:

> Personal Plans of Study have evolved from a four-year plan to a six-year plan Personal Plan of Study. Now that students identify what they want to do the first two years out of high school, it is much easier for them with help of counselor and parents to plan a course of study while in high school, taking classes to prepare for the next step, rather than a random selection of coursework. Parents are more involved with the Personal Plan of Study. Personal Plan of Study helps counselors to keep students on track with their career plans.

Interview question 3. What do you see a future opportunities for the A+ Schools Program concerning the career preparation system?

None of the respondents could think of a future opportunity surrounding the career preparation system and A+ Schools Program that could be changed.

Theme four: rigorous coursework.

Interview question 1. In what ways do you think that society has made it important to pursue post-secondary education?

American businessmen, Hunt and Tierney (2006), indicated that to obtain a middle class lifestyle Americans need a higher education. As reported by members of

Alliance for Excellent Education (2009a), the era has passed where high school graduates can earn a living wage. Students need to be ready for some form of post-secondary education. A+ Coordinator A reported:

> I think because most employers would like for their employees to have some kind of skill already. So they [employers] do not have to go and teach them a skill. They [employee] have some kind of skill already or some education background on what they are doing. With the job market the way it is, employers can be a lot more selective on who they hire. I think that impacts it [job hiring] too; because if you have skill sets or post-secondary training, it increases your chances of getting a job or even getting an interview. High school diploma is not good enough now.

A+ Coordinator B explained:

> I just think that it [postsecondary education] goes back to research shows that the salary differences between students who have a two year degree, four year degree, or a master's degree. It [job success] really has just become more and more important to have those advanced degrees to be successful. The way the economy is right now. Everything is more and more competitive than it [jobs] was *[sic]* before. So, we have people who have owned their own business that are now working at fast food restaurants. And I think the ones that had a good solid educational background are the ones kind of coming to the top, and there are more job opportunities for them. Right now employers could really pick and choose who they want, and the person with a college degree regardless of it has to do with that specific career or not. It [job success] has shown that they [postsecondary graduates] have the perseverance to stick with things. They

> [postsecondary graduates] have the ability to learn and accomplish things. I think those people are just going to come out on top and that has become more and more important right now.

A+ Coordinator C reported:

> Jobs that are out there whether they [the students] are right out of high school or whether with a technical degree or even with a four-year degree have increase the technology use where a few years ago a kid could get out of high school or even dropout of high school and get a job in a factory and still support their family very well. Jobs just aren't their anymore. They [the students] have to have more technical skills because there are college graduates still looking for jobs. You know those jobs are taken by people who are more technically aware and have the education. So, those on the job training only jobs are fewer. They [on the job training jobs] are out there, but they do not pay as well.

A+ Coordinator D commented "85% of jobs today require some type of training beyond high school. In most cases, a high school education or lack of skills will not command job/career with a high enough wage to support a family."

Interview question 2. How do you feel your high school prepares students to pursue a post-secondary education or a high-wage job?

NGA recommends states focus on rigorous and relevant content and opportunities for dual credit and internships (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). An A+ Schools Program requirement statement is "establish rigorous coursework with standards of competency in all academic subjects for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment" (MODESE, 2008a, p. 4). Rigorous coursework such as dual enrollment or advanced

placement courses has occurred in A+ Schools, since the formation of the A+ Schools Program.

A+ Coordinator A stated, “We do as well as most schools.” In addition, A+ Coordinator A commented they had numerous dual enrollment courses. A+ Coordinator B shared their school had 60 college credits that high school students could take before graduating from high school. Prior to being an A+ School, A+ Coordinator B did not have dual enrollment and now they have a faculty member that “has a block a day dedicated solely to the dual credit program.” A+ Coordinator B added the faculty member “needs to make sure our curriculum matches the colleges and that our teachers have their advanced degree to teach those.” A+ Coordinator C agreed “dual enrollment courses and technical courses have been pushed” since the A+ Schools Program started in their school. A+ Coordinator C again responded:

> Career awareness. We do try to help the kids set career goals. So, if you have those goals, then, you can ask are you doing what it is going to take to get those goals and get that. Then, you can realize your full potential to reach their goals.”
>
> A+ Coordinator D reported, “We have added several dual enrollment and advanced placement courses since being an A+ School.

In addition, A+ Coordinator D replied, “More students are planning ahead in terms of careers and classes leading toward the career.”

Interview question 3. In your opinion, how have the A+ Schools Program requirements helped to improve your school’s rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or a high-wage job?

A+ Coordinator A reported:

> We went from a 10-block to seven period day. 10-block offered a chance for varied courses. To fill schedule, students just picked courses because they liked the teacher or their friends were in the course. In the seven period day, we dropped electives. In a way it is kind of good; so, they do not have choices on what to take. They [the students] are more focused to take courses that will help them with their career courses. We have retained a lot of our advanced courses.

A Coordinator B explained:

> One of the things we did do is, we had a great curriculum in place and our dual credit continues to grow each year. But, we did make sure we got rid of all general tracking courses and any of those lower level English, math classes and made those more into a college prep or more of a career prep type class. We changed some of the bottom level English classes to technical communication classes. Things [classes] that would help to prepare the kids that are for career not just get an English credit and be done.

A+ Coordinator C replied:

> I think so. I think there have been other problems [not A+] that have helped the push to add extra hours as far as dual enrollment courses, extra vocational courses and technical courses. We have a whole new building that is just technical classes. We can't keep enough CADD classes because the kids want them. Like I think I have said this before, another awareness issue, because of A+, we think about it more. We now say we have to do this. I am not sure; we wouldn't have done it anyway.

A+ Coordinator D responded:

> We have added several advanced placement courses. Students now have an opportunity to graduate with 27 college hours and we are working on 30 hours. More students are planning ahead in terms of careers and classes leading toward the career.

Theme five: at-risk programs.

Interview question 1. Do you feel that the at-risk program has been improved due to the implementation of the A+ Schools requirement?

The partnership plan required by MODESE (2008a) includes procedures for identifying students at-risk of dropping out, and interventions used with at-risk students. Many programs are available helping at-risk students, but there is not a federal program (Barton, 2005; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). Former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, initiated a program to help reduce the dropout rate (Almedia & Steinberg, 2008). The need for at-risk programs is great because "when more than 1 million students a year drop out of high school, it's more than a problem, it's a catastrophe (Associated Press, 2008, p. 4).

The following responses emerged about at-risk programs. A+ Coordinator A acknowledged:

> We had a strong at-risk program before A+. Actually it [at-risk program] is not as strong as it was the year before due to budget cuts. That is one of the places they cut this year. The at-risk teacher is still here, but the separate alternative teacher is gone. The at-risk teacher had the alternative program moved into her room. And it [alternative program] is basically computer based, and [students operate] as fast as they can work the program.

A+ Coordinator B concurred:

> Yes, and one of the big reasons I think is because we had the opportunity to organize our at-risk intervention strategies. We had a lot of people doing a lot of great things and some [intervention strategies] were overlapping. Some [programs] were not using our resources and staff effectively. But with the A+ program, we [staff] have been able to sit down and outline what we have and tried to make sure we are not overlapping if we didn't need to. And really make those interventions teams and staff members work together, and so, I think in that way we have really grown our intervention strategies a great deal. With things that A+ implemented itself, as far as interventions . . . the school was already doing [all the] programs. I think we have merged it [intervention strategies] together and made it work a lot better and more efficiently.

A+ Coordinator C responded:

> Yes, I think so. Some of the big things we do, people do not even realize that they were originally started by A+. We started out doing something called eagle time which is now called star time. Several of the programs we do; A+ was originally doing it. Our career action plan started out as A+. Somebody else handles that now, but the [continued] training and other things are helping the kids to see a point in school, and I think it helps those at-risk kids.

A+ Coordinator D replied, "Job Shadowing and tutoring helped to improve an established at-risk program." A+ Coordinator D did not further speak of the at-risk program, but discussed the tutoring program that A+ students complete for the requirements to be eligible.

Interview question 2. What do you see as future opportunities for your school concerning at-risk students through your school's partnership plan with the A+ Schools Program?

A+ Coordinator A would like to see a GED options program come to their school. A+ Coordinator B explained:

> We would like to increase our community members mentoring students. I think a big part of it [at-risk program] is just a personal touch with somebody outside the school system. Kids get used to seeing us all of the time, and they get tired of hearing the same things from us or they think just well they have to say that they care about me. They are my teacher, and they do not realize that society cares about them. Society cares about them, and the more positive people they have in their life, we just feel that is going to make a positive impact on what their expectations are for themselves for their future. A lot of our students, especially the at-risk group, we are looking at working with, they are going to be the very first person in their family to have a high school diploma. So, college just seems really out in the future, but when we pair them with community leaders it gives them another adult in their life that is saying I have done this. It [high school diploma] is possible for you, and I will help you in any way that I can. So, it [students graduating] is, just one more person, reinforcing that they can do what they want to do with their future.

A+ Coordinator C reported their school would really like to add COE [specific business courses], but the budget will not allow it. A+ Coordinator D did not comment about the at-risk students and A+ Schools Program. However, A+ Coordinator explained:

> As recently stated on CNN and by Governor Nixon himself, we must have a trained workforce in order to attract industry (to Missouri). A+ Schools Program is definitely a piece in the puzzle. With high school students planning for a career, seeking training after high school and Missouri have a trained workforce. A trained workforce helps to attract industry and new industry in Missouri contributes to progress for the state.

Summary

Examined in Chapter Four were the data compiled from survey and interview responses. An explanation of protocol and the process of data analysis were presented to describe the perceptions of the A+ Schools Program in the following areas: graduation rate, career preparation, curriculum and assessment, and rigorous coursework for post-secondary education or workforce, and at-risk programs. Survey data were collected and examined for trends in tables and figures. The results of the surveys were compared to the interview responses to identify emerging themes.

The findings were discussed in Chapter Five. Each of the five research questions results were presented. Then, conclusions from each of themes were discussed from the study. Finally, implications for practice and recommendations for future research were presented.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how A+ Schools Program requirements have impacted school improvement in participating Missouri high schools. The MODESE (2008a) goal for the A+ Schools Program is the following:

> All students graduate from high school; all students complete a selection of high school studies that is challenging and for which there are identified learning expectations; and all students proceed from high school graduation to a college, or post-secondary, career-technical school, or high-wage job with workplace skill development opportunities. (p. 1)

The goal was supported in the interview process when A+ Coordinator C explained, "A+ has just made everyone more aware of issues in school." Even though graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, rigorous coursework, career preparation, and at-risk students are issues educators know are problems, the A+ Schools Program draws those educational issues closer to the forefront. Through the framework of effective school research, Edmonds (as cited by Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 7) reported:

> We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children who schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

In addition, Schmoker (2006) stated:

> Imagine a time in the near future…when people speak matter-of-factly about how dropout rates and the achievement gap are inexorably shrinking, when record

> numbers of students are entering college, and when professors are noticing how much more intellectually fit each year's freshman have become. (p. 2)

The challenge is for educators to make improvement in education by focusing on instruction (Schmoker, 2006).

The population of A+ Coordinators included all A+ Schools. All A+ Coordinators in the state were asked to complete a cross-sectional survey on the impact of the A+ Schools Program on school improvement in their school district. In addition, four A+ Coordinators were interviewed concerning graduation rate, career preparation, rigorous coursework for post-secondary education or workforce, and at-risk programs. They were selected from a pool of A+ Coordinators with at least two years experience. This was done to ensure a well developed knowledge base. Responses from phone interviews and cross-sectional surveys were utilized to triangulate data.

In this Chapter, a summary of the findings was presented. Next, conclusions were drawn from the research. Finally, implications for practice were determined and recommendations for future research were examined. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the graduation rate?
2. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact curriculum and assessment?
3. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact the career preparation system?

4. How has the A+ Schools Program been perceived to impact rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment?

5. How has the A+ Schools partnership plan been perceived to impact at-risk students?

Findings

The survey results and transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to determine themes. Four overarching themes were evident from the data for the study: importance to graduate, at-risk programs were enhanced enabling more students to graduate, curriculum and assessment did not change necessarily due to A+ Schools Program, students focused more on career plans helping them complete a more rigorous selection of courses.

A conceptual framework of effective schools research was used to support the findings. Effective schools correlates developed from the mission statement learning for all students (Lezotte, 2009). The first correlate ensures opportunities for all students to excel (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Subsequently, the second correlate guarantees teachers will believe students can master the curriculum (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Next, the third correlate allows stakeholders to understand the mission (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Then, the fourth correlate advises effective schools to allow all students the opportunity and time to learn (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Finally, the fifth correlate utilizes frequent monitoring in classrooms to confirm mastery of standards (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Applicable information contained in the review of literature such as Marzano's (2003) school level factors, graduation rates, at-risk programs, and career preparation were used to investigate each of the research questions.

Research question 1. How has the A+ Schools Program impacted the graduation rate?

The importance of graduating from high school has grown over time. In the past, graduation was not a requirement for success, but in the 21st century to earn a living wage, persons must receive education or training post graduation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a). Overall, participants in the survey and interview expressed A+ Schools Program positively impacted the graduation rate. A+ Coordinators interviewed explained as part of the requirements an alternative program became available to reach all students and help them graduate. A+ Coordinator B also explained students need to see what is available outside of high school. A+ Coordinator B's school takes their students out in the community where business workers explain to students what they need to succeed and graduate from college. In addition, A+ Coordinator B stated high school graduation is just one step in the process. Furthermore, A+ Coordinator D reported after the interview process graduation rates had increased in their district. With the emphasis of the A+ Schools Program goal of wanting all students to graduate, the A+ Coordinators interviewed expressed a sentiment that the overarching goal of "all students graduate from high school" (MODESE, 2008a, p.1) caused schools to focus more on graduation.

Research question 2. How has the A+ Schools Program impacted the curriculum and assessment?

Through the correlates of effective schools research, all students can learn and schools control whether a student is able to master the curriculum through the selection of standards (Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011). Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) reported, "If the intended, taught, and tested curricula are not aligned students pay the price. No

matter how hard they work, students will never meet the specified standards if those standards aren't taught in the schools" (p. 80). A+ Coordinators in the survey primarily agreed the A+ Schools Program had a positive impact on curriculum and assessment. The interviewed A+ Coordinators did not necessarily believe the A+ Schools Program impacted their curriculum and assessments. However, the surveyed coordinators could not express this perception as this was not a possible selection and the limiting nature of the Likert- scale survey where responses are in numerical value only.

A+ Coordinator A responded, "I am not sure they consider curriculum and assessment as a result of the A+ Program." A+ coordinator B explained they use PLC groups, and A+ Coordinator C expressed, "We have such a large curriculum department program in place already . . . I do not know that we have changed that as much for the A+ for us." A+ Coordinator D did say that some curriculums had to be completed before they were designated as an A+ School. Therefore, the theme found was A+ Schools Program cannot be the sole reason that curriculum and assessments were changed.

Research question 3. How has the A+ Schools Program impacted the career preparation system?

Career preparation is a guide for students to follow in school and continue to the workplace (Whitaker, 2008). Career paths are decided mostly through interest inventories and they help students have a focus (Whitaker, 2008). Missouri has six career paths containing 16 career clusters for students to choose from (MODESE, 2007).

A+ Coordinators surveyed and interviewed agreed the A+ Schools Program has positively impacted student career paths and personal plans of study. A+ Coordinators interviewed said career planning and activities were not a focus before being designated

as A+. Furthermore, A+ Coordinator A responded, "Before, students did not go through making a four year plan and revising them, but I do not think students really thought about what courses they were putting down." A+ Coordinator C expressed:

> Before we had A+, we didn't talk much about careers. Every teacher had their curriculum and did talk a little. But now it is the fabric of the high school. Now the teachers have the career information as part of their curriculum.

In addition, A+ Coordinators acknowledged parents were more involved in the process of creating the student's personal plans of study. A+ Coordinator D explained:

> Personal plans of study have evolved from a four-year plan to a six-year plan personal plan of study. Now that students identify what they want to do the first two years out of high school, it is much easier for them with help of counselor and parents to plan a course of study while in high school, taking classes to prepare for the next step, rather than random selection of coursework.

The emerging theme from research was planning a career path through a personal plan of study and a significant impact by the A+ Schools Program was perceived by the A+ Coordinators.

Research question 4. How has the A+ Schools Program impacted rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment?

Hunt and Tierney (2006) explained, an increased rate of high school students were taking college readiness courses, but not enough were taking the appropriate courses. In the A+ Schools Program, these translate to the following: all students will complete a challenging selection of studies, and all students will continue to college, post-secondary vocation, technical school or high-wage job after graduation (MODESE,

2009; Missouri General Assembly, 2007). According to the members of Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), 90% of the fastest growing and best-paying jobs require some post-secondary education. Therefore, students need to be prepared to enter some type of post-secondary education.

The A+ Coordinators interviewed agreed that post-secondary education is vital for students to succeed in the work force. A+ Coordinators interviewed and surveyed agreed that students were taking more advanced courses since the implementation of A+ Schools Program in their school. A+ Coordinator B explained that prior to being designated A+ the school did not have dual enrollment courses. Now the school offers up to 60 college credits that a student may obtain before high school graduation. A+ Coordinator C added, "dual enrollment courses and technical courses have been pushed" since implementation of A+ Schools Program. The fourth theme consisted of students using their personal plan of study to take more rigorous courses.

Research question 5. How has the A+ Schools partnership plan impacted at-risk students?

Using the framework of effective schools research, Lezotte & McKee Snyder (2011) reported, "the effective school is characterized by high overall student achievement with no significant gaps in that achievement across the major subgroups in the student population" (p. 15). As reported by members of Achieve, Inc. (2006), some of the dropout factors are low income, minority male, transfers from schools, and single parent families. Lezotte and McKee Snyder (2011) proclaim that educators form impressions and expectations based on a student's socioeconomic status. Ron Edmonds expressed:

> How many effective schools would have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children? If your answer is more than one, then I submit that you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that basic pupil performance derives from family background instead of school response to family background. (as cited by Lezotte & McKee Snyder, 2011, p. 43)

Of the A+ Coordinators surveyed 76% agreed or strongly agreed that the A+ Schools Program positively impacted at-risk programs. Furthermore, every A+ Coordinator interviewed explained the positive effects from the A+ Schools Program concerning at-risk programs. From the interview and surveys, a theme formed showing the positive effects A+ Schools had implementing and adapting existing at-risk programs. A+ Coordinator B explained the A+ Schools Program allowed their school to organize existing intervention strategies and allowed intervention strategies existing to merge and strengthen into a great at-risk program. A+ Coordinator C had several programs created originally by A+ Schools Program to intervene with at-risk students.

Conclusions

Contained within the context of the survey and A+ interview responses, the perceptions of the A+ Schools Program on Missouri school improvement were examined. Four themes emerged from the study in response to the research questions: importance to graduate, at-risk programs were enhanced and more students were able to graduate, curriculum and assessment did not change necessarily due to the A+ Schools Program, students focused more on career paths which helped them complete a more rigorous selection of courses.

A+ Schools Program was considered by A+ Coordinators to be a major reason in reinforcing graduation. A+ Coordinators perceived the A+ Schools Program as helping align or include new types of intervention strategies to allow all students to graduate. A+ Schools emphasizing all students will graduate parallels with effective schools research. A+ Coordinators interviewed relayed credit recovery programs were created to help students by A+. For example, A+ Coordinator C explained their school surveyed students who dropped out; and asked them 'What had the most effect?' The students said, "when they fell behind their peers in classes." As a result, the school created a credit recovery classes allowing them to stay with their peers in core classes and not just go to the alternative school.

A+ Coordinators surveyed agreed, the A+ Schools Program impacted curriculum and assessment in their school. However, A+ Coordinators interviewed were able to deepen understanding. The A+ Coordinators felt curriculum and assessment work was going on their schools, but not necessarily because of the A+ Schools Program. The A+ Coordinators accepted the fact curriculum and assessment work may have been completed regardless of the A+ Schools Program.

From the results of the surveys and interviews, career paths and personal plans of study were positively impacted by the A+ Schools Program. A+ Coordinators interviewed noted career paths were not emphasized at their schools prior to A+ Schools Program. The student may have had a four-year plan, but it did not direct them toward a career path. Personal plans of study allowed students to select appropriate courses for their career path and allowed for more input from counselors and parents.

In alignment with career paths and personal plans of study, the results show A+ Schools students were taking more rigorous courses to prepare them for post-secondary education. All A+ Coordinators interviewed agreed dual enrollment courses had increased or implemented because of the A+ Schools Program. One of the A+ Coordinators indicated there were 60 college credits offered in their high school. Another coordinator added, technical classes had risen since they were designated as A+, and they had to build a new building for those types of classes.

Overall, A+ Coordinators agreed the A+ Schools Program has positively impacted graduation rate, at-risk students, career planning, and rigorous coursework. The A+ Coordinators interviewed noted curriculum and assessment was a result of many different programs and may have occurred regardless. A+ Coordinators desire students to be prepared to take courses that lead to graduation and a successful life.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study were based on data gathered from schools designated as an A+ School by spring of 2009. Almost 100 more schools have become an A+ Schools since spring of 2009. Only 48% of Missouri schools were designated as an A+ School when the research was completed. The limitation for the interview portion was only A+ Coordinators who had been that position for at least two years were included. Survey responses may show bias because these coordinators have specific knowledge of the A+ Schools Program. However, they were specifically chosen for this knowledge base.

In addition, the Missouri Department of Higher Education and MODESE are both in control of A+ Schools Program. MODESE is still charged with the school improvement component of the A+ Schools Program and those components have not

changed. In addition to prior requirements for an A+ student, a new rule was mandated from the State of Missouri on October 31, 2011. The new requirements are the following: students may be able to obtain 25% of tutoring requirements from job shadowing,

> Beginning with the high school senior class of 2015, have achieved a score of proficient or advanced on the Algebra I end of course exam, or beginning in 2015, if you do not meet the Algebra I end of course requirement, you may regain eligibility by completing your first semester at a participating institution with a minimum of 12 hours and a 2.5 grade point average. (Missouri Department of Higher Education, 2011, p. 1)

The A+ Schools Program and A+ Coordinator is not the sole component of implementing each of the requirements for A+ Schools. Any educator involved in an A+ School helps in implementation of the A+ requirements; and some requirements overlap with additional state mandates. Therefore, A+ Coordinator's need to remember they are not the only factor in a school causing graduation rates to rise, helping at-risk students, maintaining and creating curriculums and assessments, preparing students for rigorous coursework for postsecondary schools and workplaces, and planning a career. All educators contribute to all of the requirements of A+ Schools and many may have been done regardless if the school was A+.

Recommendations for Future Research

During the interview process, A+ Coordinators stated that A+ made them more of aware of issues in their school. One A+ Coordinator commented that some A+ requirements may have been completed whether "we were an A+ school or not." Therefore, research conducted on non-A+ Schools compared to A+ Schools in regards to

the requirements could lead to a more thorough study. How do A+ Schools and non-A+ Schools compare concerning graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career planning, rigorous coursework, and at-risk programs?

Since a small number of A+ Coordinators were interviewed, the sample size could be increased to include varying sizes of districts and regions of Missouri. In addition since the A+ Schools Program has grown, it would be interesting to research where or not new A+ Schools were consistent in implementing requirements as A+ Schools. A case study investigating how new A+ Schools implement the requirements similar to a more established program.

Summary

The A+ goal of all students will graduate emphasized A+ Schools allowing for opportunities to show the importance of graduation. However, A+ Coordinators interviewed did not feel A+ was the only factor affecting curriculum and assessments. Also, the career preparation system of career paths and person plans of study were used in a manner to help guide and prepare students. Then, the A+ Coordinators agreed that more advanced type courses were offered to better prepare students for post-secondary education. Lastly, A+ Coordinators expressed that the at-risk program was enhanced by implementation of the A+ Schools Program.

This mixed method study examined the perceptions of Missouri A+ Coordinators regarding the following components of the A+ Schools Program: graduation rate, curriculum and assessment, career preparation system, at-risk programs, and rigorous coursework for postsecondary education or workplace. The data compiled were viewed through the lens of effective schools, and the belief all students can learn. Through data

analyzed, the following four themes emerged: importance to graduate, at-risk programs were enhanced and more students were able to graduate, curriculum and assessment did not change necessarily due to the A+ Schools Program, and students focused more on career paths which helped them complete a more rigorous selection of courses.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Research Question 1: How has the A+ Schools Program impacted the graduation rate?

1. How has the idea of graduating from high school changed over the last several decades among community members, parents, and students?
2. What are some of the strategies your school has used to help students graduate?
3. In your opinion, how has the graduation rate been impacted by the A+ Schools Program?

Research Question 2: How has the A+ Schools Program impacted curriculum and assessment?

1. In your opinion, what changes to curriculum and assessments do educators perceive as being a result of the A+ Schools Program?
2. Describe how your school chose the 3-5 measurable objectives and now use the objectives in activities and assessments.
3. Do you believe that your students have mastered skill sets they may have not mastered without the emphasis on the 3-5 measurable goals?

Research Question 3: How has the A+ Schools Program impacted the career preparation system?

1. In what ways do you think the A+ Schools Program has contributed to the career preparation system?
2. Has the emphasis changed in the last decade concerning students' personal plans of study? How?
3. What do you see as future opportunities for the A+ Schools Program concerning the career preparation system?

Research Question 4: How has the A+ Schools Program impacted rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or employment?

1. In what ways do you think that society has made it important to pursue post-secondary education?
2. How do you feel students your high school prepares students to pursue a post-secondary education or a high-wage job?
3. In your opinion, how have the A+ Schools Program requirements helped to improve your school's rigorous coursework for students pursuing post-secondary education or a high-wage job?

Research Question 5: How has the A+ Schools partnership plan impacted at-risk students?

1. Do you feel that the at-risk program has been improved due to the implementation of the A+ Schools requirements?
2. What do you see as future opportunities for your school concerning at-risk students through your school's partnership plan with the A+ Schools Program?

Is there anything else you would like to add to today's conversation about the A+ Schools Program?

Appendix B

Survey Questions

Survey will be given SurveyMonkey.com. The questions will be in a Likert-scale form: Strongly Agree, Agree, No Opinion, Disagree, and Strongly Agree.

A. School Improvement (Requirement 1 and 2)

The implementation of the A+ Schools Program has positively impacted the following:

1. Graduation rate
2. Students graduating from high school
3. Students completing a challenging selection of courses
4. Students proceeding from high school to a post-secondary education or the workplace
5. Proper use of curriculum and assessments
6. Measurable learner objectives (competencies)
7. Proper use of activities and assessments in the classroom
8. Mastery level of objectives (competencies)
9. Tracking of mastery level objectives

B. Career Preparation System (Requirement 3)

The implementation of the A+ Schools Program has positively impacted the following:

1. Comprehensive K-12 counseling program
2. High school counseling program
3. Development of 4-year plans (personal plan of study)
4. Selection of career pathway for students

C. Rigorous Coursework (Requirement 4)

The implementation of the A+ Schools Program has positively impacted the following:

1. Appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter post-secondary education
2. Appropriate academic preparation courses were provided to enter a high-wage job
3. The number of dual credit or advanced placement courses
4. The number of upper level course offerings
5. Eliminating general track courses that did not prepare students for employment or post-secondary education

D. At-Risk Programs (Requirement 5)

The implementation of the A+ Schools Program has positively impacted the following:

1. Developing or enhancing your schools at-risk programs
2. Referral procedures for at-risk programs
3. Attempting to counsel or recover students from dropping out
4. Intervention strategies for the at-risk students
5. Implementation or referring of alternate education programs

Appendix C

10-74
IRB Project Number

Lindenwood University
Institutional Review Board Disposition Report

To: Ashley Moyer

Dr. Sherry Devore

The IRB has reviewed the application you submitted for expedited review. There were no concerns with ethical issues or impact on human subjects.

Jeanie Thies

5/11/10

Institutional Review Board Chair Date

Appendix D

Lindenwood University

School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

"The A+ Schools Program and School Improvement"

Principal Investigator: Ashley Moyer Telephone: 417-887-9373
E-mail: asm757@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

2. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Ashley Moyer under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this study is to examine how the A+ Schools Program requirements have impacted school improvement in participating high schools in Missouri.

2. a) Your participation will involve:
   - Answering survey questions concerning the A+ Schools Program. The questions will relate to the A+ Schools Program requirements: Graduation Rate, Curriculum and Assessment, Career Preparation, Rigorous Coursework for Post-Secondary School or Workforce, and At-Risk Programs.

   b) The amount of time involved to complete the survey will be 15 minutes or less.

   All A+ Coordinators in Missouri will be invited to participate in this study.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

4. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge concerning the A+ Schools Program and school improvement.

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 for five years and then destroyed.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, if any problems arise, or you would like a copy of the results you may call the Investigator, (Ashley Moyer at 417-887-9373) or the Supervising Faculty, (Dr. Sherry DeVore at 417-881-0009). You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

   By completing the survey, you consent to participate in this study.

   Thank you for your time,

   Ashley Moyer _____

   Date

Please click here <hyperlink> to complete the survey.

Appendix E

Letter of Participation

<Interview>

<Date>
<Title> <First Name> <Last Name>
<Position>
<School District>
<Address>

Dear <Title> <First Name> <Last Name>,

Thank you for participating in my research study *The A+ Schools Program and School Improvement*. I look forward to talking with you on <date> <time> to gather your perceptions and insights into the A+ Schools Program. I have allotted one hour and 30 minutes to conduct the phone interview.

Enclosed are the interview questions to allow time for reflection before our phone interview. I have also enclosed the Informed Consent Form for your review and signature. If you agree to participate in this study, return the signed consent form. I have provided a self-addressed stamped envelope for your convenience.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Confidentiality is assured. If you have questions, please call or e-mail (417-887-9373 asm757@lionmail.lindenwood.edu). Once this study has been completed, the results will be available to you by request.

Sincerely,

Ashley Moyer
Doctoral Candidate
Lindenwood University

Appendix F

Lindenwood University

School of Education
209 S. Kingshighway
St. Charles, Missouri 63301

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

"The A+ Schools Program and School Improvement"

Principal Investigator: Ashley Moyer Telephone: 417-887-9373
E-mail: asm757@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Participant _____ Contact info _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Ashley Moyer under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this study is to examine how the A+ Schools Program requirements have impacted school improvement in participating high schools in Missouri.

3. a) Your participation will involve:
   - A phone interview in which you may respond to open-ended questions concerning the A+ Schools Program. The questions will relate to the A+ Schools Program requirements: Graduation Rate, Curriculum and Assessment, Career Preparation, Rigorous Coursework for Post-Secondary School or Workforce, and At-Risk Programs.

   b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be one hour and 30 minutes. The phone interview will be audiotaped.

   *** I give my permission for the interview to be audiotaped (participant's initial _____).**

   Four A+ Coordinators in Missouri will be interviewed.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.
4. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge concerning the A+ Schools Program and school improvement.

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.

7. 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 for five years and then destroyed.

8. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, if any problems arise, or you would like a copy of the results call the Investigator, (Ashley Moyer at 417-887-9373) or the Supervising Faculty, (Dr. Sherry DeVore at 417-881-0009). You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) through contacting Dr. Jann Weitzel, Vice President for Academic Affairs at 636-949-4846.

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

References

A+ Schools Program Established, Missouri Rev. Stat. § 160-545 (2009).

Achieve, Inc. and The Education Trust. (2008). *Making college and career readiness the mission for high schools: A guide for state policy makers.* Retrieved from http://www.achieve.org/measuresthatmatter

Achieve, Inc. (2006). *Identifying potential dropouts: Key lessons for building an early warning data system.* Retrieved from http://www.achieve.org/files/FINAL-dropouts_0.pdf

Allensworth, E. M. & Easton, J. Q (2007). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in chicago public high schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in freshman year.* Retrieved from University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research website: http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/07%20What%20Matters%20Final.pdf

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2008). *Every student counts: The case for graduation rate accountability.* Retrieved from www.all4ed.org/files/ESC_FedPolicyGRA.pdf

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2009a). *High school dropouts in America.* Retrieved from http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates_FactSheet.pdf

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2009b). *Reinventing the federal role in education: Supporting the goal of college and career readiness for all students.* Retrieved from http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/issue_policy_briefs

Almeida, C., & Steinberg, A. (2008). Raising graduation rates in an era of high standards. *Education Week , 27* (44), 25-62.

Associated Press. (2008). *High school graduation rates plummet below 50 percent of some U.S. cities*. Retrieved from http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,344190,00.html

American School Counselor Association (2011). Retrieved from http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?pl=655&sl=658&contentid=658

Barton, P. E. (2005). *One third of a nation: Rising dropout rates and declining opportunities.* Retrieved from Educational Testing Service http://www.ets.org/research/pic

Barton, P.E. & Coley, R. J. (2009). *Parsing the achievement gap ii.* Retrieved from Educational Testing Service http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICPARSINGII.pdf

Boykin, A.W. & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn: Moving from research practice to close the achievement gap.* Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J. Jr., & Morison, K. B., (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts.* Retrieved from http://www.ignitelearning.com/pdf/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf

Chappuis, S., Stiggins, R. J., Arter, J., & Chappuis, J. (2005). *Assessment for learning: An action guide for school leaders.* Portland, Oregon: Educational Testing Service.

Chappuis, S. & Chappuis, J. (2008). The best value in formative assessment. *Educational Leadership, 65*(4), 14-19.

Crawford, J. (2011). *Using power standards to build an aligned curriculum: A process manual.* Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press A Sage Company.

Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Friedlaender, D. (2008). Creating excellent and equitable schools. *Educational Leadership, 65*(8), 14-21.

Dedmond, R. M. (2008, September). Freshman transition: A preparatory course to career clusters. *Techniques, 83*(6), 8-9.

Dweck, C. (2010). Even geniuses work hard. *Educational Leadership, 68*(1), 16-20.

Education Commission of the States. (2008). *State graduation rate goals for high school accountability.* Washington D.C.: ECS.

Fox, S. S. (2010). *An analysis of the development and implementation of career clusters and career pathways in the waup area school district.* Retrieved from http://www2.uwstout.edu/content/lib/thesis/2010/2010foxs.pdf

Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. R. (2006). *How to design and evaluate research in education.* Boston, Massachusetts: McGraw-Hill.

Garcia, T. (2010, February 8). *Obama proposal to change NCLB gets thumbs-up from San Gabriel Valley*. Pasadena Star News. Retrieved from http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/news/ci_14361520

Garland, E., & Wilber, C. (2009, April 22). *High school grad rates rise in some major cities, but significant work remains to curb dropout crisis.* [Press release] Retrieved from http://www.americaspromise.org/About-the-Alliance/Press-Room/Press-Releases/2009/2009-April-22-High-School-Graduation-Rates-Rise.aspx

Goldin, C. (1998). America's graduation from high school: The evolution and spread of secondary schoolig in the twentieth century. *The Journal of Economic History, 58* (2), 345-374. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2566738

Guilfoyle, C. (2006). NCLB: Is there life beyond testing? *Educational Leadership, 64* (3), 8-13.

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta analyses relating to achievement.* New York, New York: Routledge.

Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research, 77,* (1), 81-112. doi: 10.3102/003465430298487

Hebel, S. (2007). Partnership expands the college track. *The Chronicles of Higher Education, 73,* (2), 34-38.

Herlithy, C. (2007). *State and district-level support for successful transitions into high school.* Retrieved from National High School website: http://www.betterhighschools.com/docs/NHSC_TransitionsReport.pdf

Hunt, J. B., & Tierney, T. J. (2006). *American higher education: How does it measure up for the 21st century?* (National Center Report 06-2). Retrieved from The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education: http://www.highereducation.org/reports/hunt_tierney/index.shtml

Jobs for the Future & National Council for Workforce Education. (2010). *Breakthrough: The breakthrough practicing guide.* Retrieved from http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/BT_Documentation_June7.pdf

Kennelly, L. & Monrad, M. (2007). *Approaches to dropout prevention: Heeding early warning signs with appropriate interventions.* Washington, DC: National High School Center.

Lezotte, L. W. (1992). *Revolutionary and evolutionary: The effective schools movement.* Retrieved from http://www.effectiveschools.com

Lezotte, L. W. (2009). *Effective schools: Past, present, and future.* Retrieved from http://www.effectiveschools.com/main/resources/resources-44-45.html

Lezotte, L. W. & McKee Snyder, K. (2011). *Re-envisioning the correlates: What effective schools do.* Bloomington, Indiana: Solution Tree.

Logan, L. (2009, May 13). Missouri scholarship expansion cut out of legislation. *Columbia Missourian*. Retrieved from http://www.columbiamissourian.com

Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action.* Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

Mirel, J. (Winter 2006). The traditional high school: Historical debate over its nature and function. *Education Next, 14-21.* Retrieved from http://www.educationnext.org

Missouri Connections. (2009, August 24). *Schools, students achieve more with A+.* Retrieved from http://www.missouriconnections.org

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2007). *Student pathways to success: Four recommendations to promote a practical focus on improving student achievement in every missouri public school.* Retrieved from http://dese.mo.gov/divcareered/Career_Clusters/whitepaper_missouri_july2007.pdf

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2008a). *A+ schools designation checklist.* Retrieved from http://dese.mo.gov/forms/divimprove/MO5002301.pdf

Missouri Department of Elemenary and Secondary Education. (2008b). *Curriculum frameworks-Preface.* Retreived from http://dese.mo.gov/divimprove/curriculum/frameworks/preface.html

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2008c). *Missouri assessment program: Technical report 2008.* Retrieved from http://www.dese.mo.gov/divimprove/assess/tech/documents/2008MAPTechnicalReport.pdf

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2008d). *Missouri's AYP Growth Model.* Retrieved from http://www.dese.mo.gov

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2008e). *Missouri school improvement program: Understanding your APR 2008-2009.* Retrieved from http://www.dese.mo.gov

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2009). *Facts about Missouri's A+ schools program.* Retrieved from http://dese.mo.gov/divimprove/aplus/proginfo/documents/factsheet-clr.pdf

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education & Missouri Career Center for Career Education. (2008) *Comprehensive guidance program: Responsive services referral process.* Retrieved from http://missouricareereducation.org/curr/cmd/guidanceplacementG/responsive/index.html

Missouri Department of Higher Education. (2011). *A+ Scholarship Program.* Retrieved from http://www.dhe.mo.gov/ppc/grants/aplusscholarship.php

Missouri General Assembly. (2007). *Chapter 160 schools general provisions: Section 160.545.* Retrieved from http://www.moga.mo.gov/statutes/C100-199/1600000545.HTM

Missouri Governor's Office. (1993). *A primer to the outstanding schools act.* Retrieved from ERIC: ED 3691950

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for education reform.* Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html

No Child Left Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 2, 115 Stat. 15 (2002).

Olson, L. (2006, June). Opening doors [Supplemental issue]. *Education Week, 25,* 23-30.

Popham, W. J. (2008). *Transformative assessment.* Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

Princiotta, D. & Reyna, R. (2009). *Achieving graduation for all: A governor's guide to dropout prevention and recovery. Retrieved from http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/0910ACHIEVINGGRADUATION.PDF;jsessionid=78606B9CFADEEC21E92FD75723FF8D51*

Schmoker, M. (2006). *Results now: How we can achieve unpredecented improvements in teaching and learning.* Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

Schmoker, M. (2011). *Focus: Elevating the essentials to radically improve student learning.* Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

Sibert, B., Rowe, A., & McSpadden, P. (2007, September). The career cluster initiative: Three state outline implementation progress. *Techniques, 82*(6), 36-40.

Smink, J. (2011, July). *This is your brain on summer.* New York Times. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/28/opinion/28smink.html

Stanley, K. R., & Plucker, J. A. (2008). *Improving high school graduation rates.* (Research Report No. 06.7). Retrieved from Center for Evaluation & Education Policy website: http://www.iub.edu/~ceep/projects/PDF/PB_V6N7_Summer_2008_EPB.pdf

Stanford University & Justice Matters (2007, November). *High schools for equity policy brief.* Retrieved from http://www.srnleads.org/press/pdfs/hsfe_policy_brief.pdf

SurveyMonkey.com (2010). Powerful tool for creating web surveys. Retrieved from http://www.surveyMonkey.com

The Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association. (2010). *Common core state standards initiative frequently asked questions.* Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/

University of Missouri Office of Government Relations. (2009, April 10). *Legislative update: A+ program could get a boost from Missouri promise legislation.* Retrieved from https://www.umsystem.edu/ums/departments/gr/newsletter/090410/041009.pdf

Westerberg, T. R. (2009). *Becoming a great high school: 6 strategies and 1 attitude that make a difference.* Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD.

Whitaker, J. (2008, September). Career pathways: What they are and why we need them. *Technique, 83,*(6).

Wise, B. (2008). High schools at the tipping point. *Educational Leadership, 65*(10), 8-13.

Yell, M. L., Katsiyannas, A. & Shiner, J. G. (2006). The no child left behind act, adequate yearly progress, and students with disability. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 38,*(44), 32-39.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research design and methods.* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, California: Sage.

Vita

Ashley graduated from Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU), currently Missouri State (MSU), in December of 2000 with a Bachelor of Science in Education in Unified Science-Biology. She earned a Masters of Arts Degree in Education Administration at Lindenwood University, in May 2006.

Ashley has taught high school science classes at the public Clever High School, in Clever, Missouri. She has taught since the fall of 2001 and has worked with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in curriculum and the Missouri Assessment Program. In January 2008, Ashley also became an A+ Coordinator for Clever High School, and the school was designated as an A+ School in the spring of 2010. She is the co-chairperson for the Southwest Missouri Area A+ Coordinators, has served on the professional development committee at Clever for six years, and has been the chairperson for the committee for four years.