

THE STUDY OF STUDENT RETENTION AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN AN URBAN
SCHOOL DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL "REACH OUT TO DROPOUTS" INITIATIVE

A Final Defense Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Loria D. Ewing

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THE STUDY OF STUDENT RETENTION AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN AN URBAN
SCHOOL DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL "REACH OUT TO DROPOUTS" INITIATIVE

An Abstract
of A Doctoral Thesis Presented to the
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Doctor of Education
in Professional Leadership

by

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ABSTRACT

Currently, the United States is graduating only 70% of its population. The American dream will be difficult to obtain without a high school education in a 21st century global society. Moreover, according to Lange (2004), America's premier academic ranking is diminishing in comparison to other countries. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development places the United States 18th among the 36 nations affiliated with their organization; with South Korea being ranked 1st with a graduation rate of 93%. This continued concern addressed by several presidential administrations including the former President of the United States, George W. Bush. His administration established the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and the current President of the United States, Barack Obama, who recently addressed the high school dropout rate in the Blueprint for Reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2011. These federally mandated charges have obligated school districts across the country to develop action plans to address student needs. In the state of Texas, the Texas Education Agency enacted the Student Success Initiative designed to assist students considered 'at risk' in meeting state and district educational goals. Meeting this need has also become an integral part of the state's Expectation Graduation program. Under this program, urban school districts in the Texas developed and implemented an initiative known as the *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk. During this walk, thousands of educators knock on the doors of student labeled 'dropouts' with the hope of returning them to school.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of this annual walk. Namely, this study asks the following questions: Do the targeted students return, complete and or graduate? This study disaggregates the data provided by an urban district in which approximately 600 students targeted to return to high school before and after the annual walk. From these targeted 600 students, a convenience sample consisting of 251 students derived from the archival. From those 251 convenience sample students used from the archival data obtained during the research, 43 students returned, completed or graduated. This study investigates why seven of the 43 students that returned completed or graduated after the annual walk – namely, what influencing factors contributed to their decision to return, and what influenced them to remain in high school as adult students.

An analysis of the interviews yields the students' own explanations that substantiate the characteristics or 'risk factors' known to high school dropouts, but inspire educators to continue to establish positive relationships and focus on learner centered instruction. This study is a growing part of a body of research on student retention as related to high school drop outs. Student retention is based on the verb 'retain' or 'keep'. Using the archival data provided by an urban school district in Texas and the rich interviews of returning adult students targeted after the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk, this study solidify through lived experiences data heard throughout the media.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Went to jail for a year and nine months and realized I did not graduate from high school. My friends were graduating, so I felt stupid. I became a Christian in jail, and my mother passed away while I was in jail, this was very hard. When released I kept going to church and found a job, then started thinking about school. I was asked to come back, by the teachers. They told me to just call the school. So one day I called the school and told them that I was interested. It had to be God, because when I came back to school everything was set up and ready for me. Look at me now about to graduate. All my other friends are in gangs and I am graduating late, but I am graduating.”

~ Raheem (African American male)

Background

A central concern for educators in the United States is the nation's diminishing ranking as the premiere academic system in comparison to other countries. For many years, K-12 public school has been the foundation and springboard for all fields of study. Yet, public education has experienced a significant shift towards the current technological age, and now more than ever, educators must understand that an educational system that is both viable and innovative is the key to ensuring that the United States will remain globally competitive. President Barack Obama (2011) addressed this issue in the Blueprint for Reform of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act (ESEA) in which he states:

It is time for all of us, no matter what our backgrounds, to come together and solve this epidemic. Stemming the tide of dropouts will require turning around our low-performing schools. Just 2,000 high schools in cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia produce over 50% of America's dropouts... Let us all make turning around our schools our collective responsibility as Americans.

America's high schools have become the gatekeepers to college, the workforce, the welfare and the correctional systems. Thus, solid schools are the engine necessary for the construction of solid, productive, just societies and citizens. Unfortunately, a number of school-based issues are leading to stressed and negative societal norms. For example, high school dropout rates have reached a critical stage and are causing a national crisis, especially within the world of education. In addition, this is a continuous topic of discussion in the media (United Business Media, 2011). In some communities, high school completion rates are below fifty percent of the student population (Lange, 2004). Subsequently, these students excluded from participating and achieving the "American Dream", which typically translates into less stable careers, few career opportunities in general, and more stressed family and home situations. These individuals are also at risk of terminating their high school careers without the academic, vocational, employability or technological skills needed to function in this ever-evolving complex global economy of the 21st century. Additionally, these students will likely lack the necessary knowledge and skills to be viable citizens in today's increasingly competitive workforce.

Currently, legislation and research are two areas that are continually developing in

order to address the issue of increasing high school dropout rates. For instance, the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act ("Public Law 107-110," 2001) requires states to align their educational programs with their school reform plans (Jorgenson & Hoffman, 2003). Districts mandated to construct accountability systems, and develop high stake assessment instruments to meet federal guidelines. The state-based norms assist with the implementation of federal mandates. Urban school districts are developing and implementing programs based on contextualized learning and teaching models designed to provide the mandated alignment, while providing students with relevant academic content.

Contextual teaching and learning develops a link between subject content and realistic life situations. Contextual teaching and learning places emphasis on problem solving, realizing teaching and learning need to take place with varied characteristics, showing students how to monitor their learning so they become self-regulated learners, placing emphasis on the diverse backgrounds of students, while encouraging students to learn from each other and via authentic assessments (Irrel, 2000). Realistic life situations provide the learner relevance in the educational process. Parent and teacher associations work collaboratively with teachers in an effort to engage students, families, and community business partners to present academic knowledge in the context of career themes (Specht, 2001). Furthermore, dictating career themes, such as communication, media, arts, business, information technology, engineering, human services, education, international studies, medicine, health, and the environment, better prepares the student for the workforce (Talley, 2010). Talley (2010) noted that students need expanded choices for coursework, with career planning opportunities; that is, they should be

allowed to enter programs at multiple grades, academics integrated with vocational coursework; they should experience real life situations interjected into the curriculum; and they should receive opportunities for business partnerships. In addition, this exact process should provide leaderships and recruiters in various areas of work force development with a reliable pipeline to fill areas of need (Specht, 2001; Talley, 2010). Thus, the better prepared American students are for the workforce, the better prepared they are to compete in a global economy.

The future of America's economic growth, national security, and world leadership position is dependent on the country's ability to educate each and every child within the nation's borders. Even one child without the job training skills needed to compete in the 21st Century workforce is one child too many. America cannot afford to leave one single child behind. One of the reasons for high unemployment rate is the issue of mismatched skills (Thomas & Date, 2006). The co-CEO of Apollo group, Greg Cappeli, also stated, "Our nation is facing a critical disconnect between the skills our workforce brings to the job, and what businesses need" (Cappeli, 2011). Students who have graduated from high school do not possess the skills needed to perform in the American workforce. Clinton (2011) noted that jobs were available, yet the skills needed to perform these jobs are not present in graduating high school students. Stated in other words, America has job opportunities, yet it lacks the required number of qualified candidates (Root, 2004). If this necessary skill acquisition is an obstacle for high school graduates, then what is the outcome for students who have not completed high school?

An educational system that allows even one student not to complete high school should raise considerable concerns both within the world of academia and in the society

as a whole. Luckily, school districts throughout the country and in particular states are developing and implementing programs that will allow students to remain in school until the point of completion. In addition, school districts are focusing on students who labeled “at-risk” and not able to progress successfully through the public school system within the current, traditional track (Abrams & Haney, 2004). Students labeled “at-risk” are students defined as neglected and delinquent (LEP, single parent household, incarceration, etc.). The designation of “at-risk” means supplemental funding to state and local education agencies (Texas Education Agency, 2011). Texas Education Agency (2011) sets aside funding designed to improve the educational services provided to children in facilities for the neglected or delinquent. These facilities are referred to as “public schools”. The funding set aside is to assist these students with acquiring the knowledge and skills contained in the state content standards. The goal here is that these students will meet the same student performance standards that all children in the state expected to meet. Those students labeled as “at-risk” have a higher probability of not completing high school and becoming “dropouts”. Districts target these students through a variety of initiatives. These initiatives assist students in their return to school (Council for Exceptional Children, 2011; Cassel, 2003; Lamm, 2005). For example, one such initiative with this precise purpose entitled the *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk, which is an organized effort to return students to school.

In 2004, under the direction of former Mayor Bill White and Houston A+ Challenge, the city of Houston set out to increase student retention rates in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) with the assistance of former Superintendent Aberlado Savedra. Houston A+ Challenge is an organization that promotes change in the

public, educational system (Damon, 2011). In particular, this organization focuses on those students located in the Houston area. Houston A+ Challenge utilized the efforts of principals and teachers to target specific schools. The organization desires that educators work with these schools assuring preparedness for postsecondary success. Damon (2011) holds that educators commit to ensuring that all students in the public educational system are college-ready, and that they make all attempts to provide adequate resources for students, administrators, teachers and community leaders. In order to understand this context, it is also necessary to note that this collaborative effort was a direct response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (Jorgensen & Hoffman). In addition, project members' concern stemmed from the fact that six out of ten ninth-grade students in HISD did not complete or graduate from high school, and were becoming relegated to the ranks of the student "dropout".

Each year hundreds of volunteers walk the streets of Houston, knocking on doors, looking for students who have dropped out of high school. Administrators, counselors, and teachers take the retrieved former students to a local high school to re-enroll. The *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk is one aspect of "Expectation Graduation", which is an initiative that assists districts accountability departments with the retention, completion, and graduation rates (Damon, 2011).

It is important to introduce students to a variety of pathways (i.e., ones other than their previous traditional tracks). Hence, once students re-enroll, these new pathways can be used in order to graduate or complete high school in a more fitting manner. For instance, diversifying students' potential pathways to graduation allows them to complete coursework on-line, night classes, and flexible scheduling (Sparks, 2011). Furthermore,

given that some students may now have children of their own (or left school as a direct result of pregnancy and/or family obligations), this school support model also provides day care for students with small children. Developing individual educational plans for these students also helps to assist students in meeting their unique academic and personal needs.

The present researcher has participated directly in this annual walk, yet has now begun to question the *Reach Out to Dropouts* initiatives effectiveness. This study will explore whether this initiative yields authentic, research-based results. How many students – once recruited – complete the necessary course work or graduate after the annual walk? In addition to exploring the final outcomes of this initiative, however, the researcher will investigate some of the central questions related to the dropout issue as a whole. Namely, why do students drop out of school? And, if students do return, what influences them to remain in school, and what are their plans after high school? In fact, these actual questions defined the purpose of the research.

Evaluating the effectiveness of student retention in a dropout initiative is the basis of the study. Currently, objective research studies are necessary in order to analyze the effectiveness of dropout prevention or reduction initiatives in high schools. Furthermore, given that many districts spend large sums of money supporting and implementing these initiatives, it behooves educators to examine whether the initiatives are a cost effective method for building human capital. Therefore, the present study will analyze archival data to determine the number of students that return, complete or graduate after the recruitment campaign led by the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk. Additionally, interviews were conducted to analyze qualitative data. In addition, these interviews

specifically noted why students drop out of school, and what influences them to remain enrolled after returning. Do these students return, complete, and then graduate?

Statement of the Problem

In the present American educational system, over a million of the students who enter ninth-grade each year fail to graduate with their peers four years later. Perhaps a more shocking and poignant statistic is that approximately seven thousand students withdraw from American schools each day (Lange, 2004). The era in which a high school dropout could earn a living, or even receive a decent wage, has ended in the United States. Within this countries current economic climate, dropouts significantly diminish their chances of securing a decent job and, therefore, having a promising future. Moreover, not only do these individuals not meet the requirements of an education, they also constitute a substantial financial and social burden for their communities, states, and country as a whole.

Graduation rates are one of the key indicators used as an adequate measure of how schools are ultimately performing. Foreman and Sanders (2001) revealed the American public was in the dark with regard to the true drop out statistics of its schools. These indicators are now rigorously scrutinized; thus, revealing the extent of the crisis within the American high school. More recently, however, reputable, independent research has exposed low graduation rates hidden beneath inaccurate calculations and inadequate data (Ford 2003). Historically, Americans completing high school was not a necessity to obtain the American dream.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that all public schools and school districts be held accountable for ensuring high levels of achievement for all students. As

part of this requirement, states must consider graduation rates as an academic accountability indicator at the high school level (National Association of High School Principals, 2011). Therefore, districts calculate a longitudinal rate. The longitudinal rate is based on data from individual students tracked over time. The students tracked are drawn from a ninth-grade entry cohort who will graduate with a regular diploma in four years. Adjustments to the original cohort may be made for students who join or leave the school system at any grade level during that four-year period. This is the method employed in 10 states: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Michigan, New York, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington (National Association of High School Principals, 2011). The law defines graduation rates for public secondary schools as “the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years” (NCLB, 2002). Tracking individual students’ movements in and out of school provides districts with greater accuracy.

In an effort to retain their students, one urban school district developed strategies found in their district action plan. This district action plans outline the most desirable process to be utilized during an academic school year with the hopes of reaching targeted goals. One of the initiatives, known as the *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk, is used to increase the district retention rates. Following in the footsteps of the Houston Independent School District, another urban independent school district also participated in the program. The district addressed this issue in its “Board of Trustees Operating Procedures”, and the wording to support this effort can be found in Goal 2 of the document. Specifically, the goal of the district is to “improve student preparation for college and career,” and continues under Strategy 4, stating that it “will improve the

completion and graduation rate” (Alief Independent School District website). One of the initiatives listed to assist with the completion and graduation rate is the *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk. And, following implemented of 2009-2010 year event, the district’s completion rate increased from 6.2% to 86.9% overall. (Alief Independent School District website).

Research Questions

Student retention is vital for Americans to compete globally with other countries in the current economic market. Therefore, keeping in mind America’s current need to increase student retention and districts efforts to retain students in mind, the present study will explore the following questions:

1. How many students return after the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk and complete or graduate?
2. What characteristics or affect students dropping out of high school?
3. What characteristics or factors in an urban school district located in Houston contribute to students remaining in school after returning?

Definition of Terms

This study addresses student retention as related to completion and graduation rates. Texas Education Agency standards define the terms used throughout this study and the structuring of high school programs around individual courses. Structuring high school courses around individual courses permits passing and failing at the course level to determine successful course completion. Students may be classified at the same grade level for two consecutive years by failing to earn credit in a single course, or taking fewer courses than required in one year. Additionally, depending on local school district

policies, the practices employed allows students to remain in a grade two consecutive years (Texas Educational Agency, 2001).

The definition of a “retained” student (also contextually referred to as retention) is a student remaining in school (Texas Educational Agency, 2001). The word “retention”, which is used throughout this study, relates to the Student Success Initiative (SSI) enacted by the 76th Texas Legislature in 1999 and modified by the 81st Texas Legislature in 2009. The goal of the SSI is to ensure that all students receive the instruction and support they need to be academically successful and remain in school until graduation or completion. SSI attempts to ensure that schools, parents and community members work together in meeting individual student needs. The ultimate goal in this particular case is that the student graduates or completes with his or her original ninth-grade cohort class.

The Texas Education Agency (2001) states that students enter with a group of peers known as a “cohort” and graduate within the time frame allotted by the district and state. Thus, the year in which a student enters school determines their cohort. Cohort students have five years to graduate. “Graduating” is completing the required coursework with the students’ cohort in a timely fashion, which entails a five-year extended longitudinal graduation rate. A five-year extended longitudinal graduation rate is the percentage of students from a class of beginning ninth-graders who graduate by the fall one year after their anticipated graduation date; that is, within five years of the beginning of their ninth-grade. Thus, if a student enters their ninth-grade in the 2011-2012 year, the student is then part of the 2014-2015 cohort. “Completion” is defined as graduating, continuing in high school in the fall after expected graduation, or receiving a

General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Therefore, the term “completion rate” simply means that the student completed high school, but he or she does not have to adhere to the time frame put in place in order to graduate. This is a five-year extended longitudinal completion rate. A “five-year extended longitudinal completion rate” is the percentage of students from the same class who complete their high school education by the fall one year after their anticipated graduation date (Texas Educational Agency, 2001). “Promotion” defined in this study as a student progressing to the next grade level and meeting all requirements. “Placed” or “social promotion” is when a student progresses to the next level without meeting all grade level objectives (i.e., allowing a student to progress to the next grade level with his or her peers, but not fulfilling all of the requirements of his or her current grade level). Specifically, the state of Texas does not officially recognize “placed” or “social promotion”. Students allowed matriculation to the next grade level are labeled as “promoted”.

The research will also make reference to the term “single parent household”. A single parent household is a home where the custodial parent, or the person having most of the day-to-day” responsibilities in the raising of the child(ren), is categorized as the dominant caregiver. The “dominant caregiver” is the parent with whom the children holds residency with the majority of the time. In the case of separation or divorce (i.e., children living with their custodial parent and having visitation with their noncustodial parent), the custodial parent is a “single parent”. In western society, in general, following separation, a child will end up with the primary caregiver – usually the mother, and a secondary caregiver, usually the father (Parents Without Partners, 2006). “Parental education” refers to the level of education the parent, custodial parent, caregiver or

guardian. A family's gross income, which is reported to the United States Government through federal tax reports, is the method in which TEA defines low income. For example, a family of four is designated low income if their total income for 2011 does not exceed \$28, 665.00 (Texas Education Agency, 2011). "Incarceration" is the detention of a person in prison, typically as punishment for a crime or custodial sentence (webster-dictionary.org).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Educators in the United States are critically concerned with the country's ranking among other countries in relation to education. In order for America to continue to remain competitive in today's global economy, educators must retain students and prevent them from progressing through the public school system within acquiring the essential knowledge, skills, and traits necessary for success in life and education. The following literature review analyzes case studies that reviewed data as related to student retention and state rankings. Furthermore, the literature review discusses the history of student retention over a thirty-year period; it explores how keeping a student in the same grade to lowers the self-esteem of children; and, it emphasizes why standardized testing should not be utilized as a single measure as related to retention. Ultimately, the reoccurring theme is that retaining students in schools and increasing graduation rates are vital to the strengthening of American students' marketability.

Retention Statistics

Texas Education Agency (2009) reported that the average dropout rate for males was 4.6%, as compared to females 3.5%. African American (6.7%) and Hispanic (6.0%) dropout rates were still above the Asian (2.4%) and White (7.3%) rates. And, from 2002-2009, these statistics represented an overall increase in the state dropout rate of 3.9% to 4.1%. According to a 2003 national statistics data report, which includes a male demographic aggregate, the United States schools retain 65% of its male population (Greene, 2003). In terms of the demographic breakdown, White males retained at 78%;

Asian males at 72%; African American rate of 55%; and Hispanic rate of 53% (Greene, 2003). Thus, a student dropout rate for students of color inevitably has an effect upon the number of males eligible for gainful employment, especially with regards to African American and Hispanic students. Additionally, results from the same national statistics also reveal that 72 % of female students graduated in 2003. However, the research also demonstrates that females graduate in greater numbers than their male counterparts. For example, White male students maintained a 78% graduate rate; as compared to the 83% White female student graduation rate (5% points fewer than their female counterparts).

Moreover, in a finding related to both ethnic and gender expresses. Asian males graduate at a rate of 72%, as compared to a 75% graduation rate for Asian females (3 % points fewer than their female counterparts) (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). The United States Department of Education (2010) noted an increase in student retention, as compared to the 2003 findings noted by Green. And, by 2007, the African American retention rate increased from 55% to 61.7%. In addition, the Hispanic rate increased from 53% to 63.5% (Green, 2003; Department of Education, 2010). Despite the gains in the African American and Hispanic communities, the White and Asian rates are higher with the White rate increasing from 71% to 81%, and the Asian rate from 74% to 91.4% (Green, 2003; Department of Education, 2010).

Green (2003) notes that the graduation rate gaps are not only larger for minority students, as compared to White or Asian students, but that there is an increased gap based on gender. For example, in 2003, African-American females attained a 59% graduation rate, while their male counterparts only attained a graduation rate of 48%. In addition, the Hispanic female graduation rate for the same year was 58%, as compared to a 49%

graduation rate for their male counterparts (see Figure 1). Therefore, one can conclude that female students are more likely prepared than their male counterparts to matriculate into and succeed in higher education and, afterward, the work force. Ryak (2007) indicates that this phenomenon (gender vs. race) is compounded within urban populations, which typically results in large urban school districts experiencing especially high dropout rates. In fact, dropout rates in districts throughout the nation have increased tremendously since the 1970s (Smith, 2001).

Statistics in the Texas Education Agency (2011) display a surge in student retention. In sum, in the year of 2010, 84.3% of all students graduated with the members of their cohorts; whereas, 92.7% graduated, continued or received a GED. More specifically, African Americans graduated at 78.8% with members of their cohort, and 88.2% graduated, continued or received a GED. Interestingly, as compared to the national average, the American Indian rates were greater within the state of Texas. As noted by the Department of Education (2010), this particular population held a national retention rate of 64.2%, whereas 84.2% were graduating in the state of Texas (TEA, 2011), with 94.9% graduating, continuing and receiving a GED. Further, the Asian/Pacific Islander rate in Texas was also slightly higher when compared to the federal statistics from the Department of Education. Specifically, TEA (2011) reported that 93.8% of the Asian/Pacific Islander population graduated in 2011; whereas, the national statistics showed that 91.4% of this population graduated across the nation, with 97.7% of these students graduating, continuing and receiving a GED. Texas also reported higher rates in the Hispanic communities' graduation rate (78.8%) (TEA, 2011), as compared to the 63.5% reported nationally by the Department of Education (2010).

White students in Texas also reported higher retention numbers than the national average one year prior. White student retention rate in Texas were reported at 91.6%, with graduation, continuing and GED rate of 96.5% (TEA, 2011), as compared to the nation's 81% reported by the Department of Education (2010). According to TEA (2011), 81.9% of economically disadvantaged students in Texas graduated with their cohorts, and 92.2% graduated, continued or received a GED.

The research related to student dropout statistics also highlights an extremely favorable common trend, which researchers and educators alike must be aware, – namely, the process of dropout is slow and progressive, rather than short-term and abrupt. Stated more clearly, students do not simply make snap decisions in their ninth-grade to dropout; rather, there are a number of early behaviors and/or habits that may signal one's likelihood of dropping out in later grades. For instance, Layne (2009) states that students slowly “fade out” of the school system; they do not drop out or withdraw. Hence, using this definition means that there may be students – even present within the walls of schools today – who are essentially slipping through the cracks. These students are likely to become “dropouts”. Therefore, if we are to identify and avoid such scenarios in an effective manner, educators must begin finding ways to assist in credit recovery (Rumberger & Lin, 2008), because once the students fall behind with regard to credits, catching up becomes more difficult. Ideally, effective instructional practices are the key to the resiliency of the American education system as whole; however, specific, well-planned and research-based interventions are quite vital if there educators hope to close the current achievement gap.

The unfortunate reality for many unsuccessful students is that they become part of

or continue to be a part of the numbers related to welfare and/or the correctional system. High school is the gateway to college, the workplace; and, unfortunately, it can also serve a pathway into the welfare and correctional systems.

Cassel (2003) states one million of the nation's three million inmates are high school dropouts. Of that population, 80% are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Research findings also support the notion that many inmates never developed or went through the stages needed to establish, aim for, and fulfill positive personal goals (Cassel, 2003). Upon their release from correctional facilities, many former inmates are unable to gain meaningful employment because they have not obtained a high school education, as well as their overall lack skills needed to fulfill personal goals. This unfortunate cycle constitutes a significantly large loss in manpower; but, more importantly, it is reflective of a society where each citizen is not a full participant and contributor. The cause of this phenomenon, however, is due to the loss of "educational opportunity". Improving student retention in public education is, therefore, imperative if the United States hopes to move forward as a strong and successful nation.

Since the early 1980s, educators, policy makers, and various other individuals within the public sphere have heavily discussed the need to improve public schools. Drucker (1989), for example, noted that schools needed to move toward technology and work harder on closing the gaps needed to compete globally. In addition, he stated the United States began falling behind in education – more than the country had in the last 300 years. If the educational system did not make the necessary improvements, it would ultimately be failing students. Once again, therefore, one central theme remains: The United States must improve its educational system and keep students in public school.

More specifically, if the system improves, and students attain the skill base needed to compete globally, than retention numbers will improve.

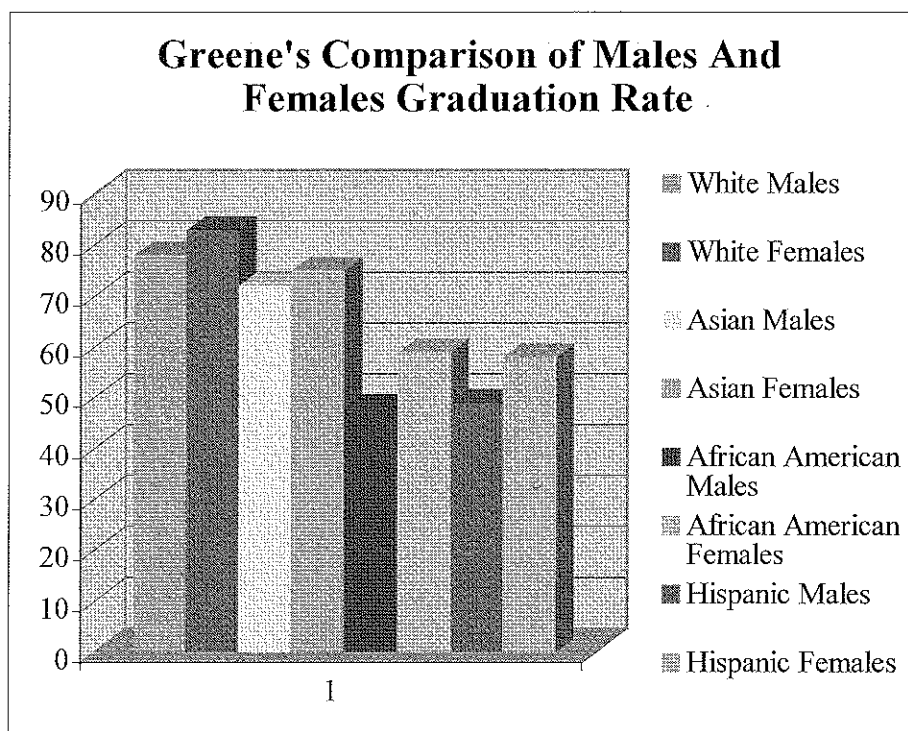


Figure 1. Greene's comparison of males and females graduation rates. This figure illustrates graduation rates for different student ethnicities and genders.

There are various components that contribute to student success in graduating from high school and securing jobs. The states with the highest retention rates are New Jersey (88%), followed by Wisconsin, Iowa, and North Dakota (each with a rate of 85%). Those states with the lowest retention rates are South Carolina (54%), Georgia (56%) and New York (58%), respectively (Mishel, 2006).

Yselta, a school district in Texas, which consists primarily of Native American and Hispanic students, has improved its student retention rates. Ten years ago, however, this district was operating at the designated state minimum; yet, most admirably, a

substantial turnaround has taken place, and they have become the first urban district to be named a “Recognized District”. The dropout rate during 1997-2001 years in Texas for the same populations is as follows: African American (18.9%), White (26.2%), Hispanic (53.2%), and Native American (.02%). The graduation rate in the state of Texas in 2000-2001 was 81.1%. African American students had a graduation rate of 77.7%; White students 86.8%; and Hispanic students 73.5%. Specifically, this district has an overall retention rate of 84%, and, as stated earlier, is 10% higher than the statistics in 2000-2001. It was vital to improve statistics amongst the Hispanic population. Yselta is one of nine district schools named National Blue Ribbon Schools, while eight others are National Title One Distinguished Campuses (Yselta ISD, 2010).

History

Throughout the history of the American public education system, the retention of poor, minority and males students has represented a difficult and ongoing challenge. Sanders (2000) examined the manner in which urban schools have defined education. In addition, during the years 1947-1951, Thomas noted that 65% of all African Americans graduated from high school. It should also be noted that this number included both boys and girls. More importantly, the African American graduation rate during these years was comparable to other ethnic groups. Prior to the 1960s, the majority of all workers resided in various fields of manual labor fields. Furthermore, the number of single parent households was fewer than in today’s American society. Thomas (2009) asserts, therefore, that these societal factors had a sizeable (i.e., positive) contributing effect on student stability within the education system. Student family stability also had a positive effect on students completing high school. In order to highlight America’s shifting

society context, it should also be noted that high school was a terminal degree – that is, a high school education once made students employable.

Then, beginning in the 1970s, the ending of the industrial revolution and the subsequent onset of the informational age caused a paradigm shift in American education. The new aim of the informational age was to gain competitive advantage internationally through the creative and efficient use of various innovative technologies. Ogilvey (2006) states that the public, educational system originally inherited its characteristics from the agricultural and industrial eras. Thus, every aspect of learning used a standardized factory model of efficient, large-scale production. In fact, the factory model, which was actually useful during the agricultural and industrial eras, was adopted as the American school model. Similarly, like the industrial factory model, American students began to be viewed as a commodity which had to be “produced” rather than developed. Therefore, educators wanted to model schools after factories (Ogilvey, 2006). Unfortunately, this one-size fits all approach left too many students behind as the instructional, constructivist demands of the information age began to take root.

From 1972-1996, as changes in the educational system progressed toward a more technology-based learning format, students from low-income families became more likely to drop out of high school when compared to students from middle- and high-middle-income families. Also, through what might be best described as a widening “digital divide”, students from lower income families either did not own or could not access the technology needed to stay abreast with those students from higher income families (Thomas, 2009). Thomas (2006) also states that such families are the “working poor”, and the same families that were part of the manual labor statistics prior to the 1960s. The

societal and educational shift from the industrial age to the informational age caught these families off guard. Research by Gambio (2011) demonstrates that, when compared to their White ethnic counterparts, African American, Hispanic and Native-American dropout rates have increased tremendously since 1960. This finding comes despite the onset of integration following the Little Rock Nine in 1957 and the onset of the informational age (Gambio, 2011).

Federal law under the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution has outlawed the segregation of public schools; yet, economic segregation still exists in many schools . Lower income areas are often populated by poor whites, African Americans and Hispanics. Thus, the cycle continues despite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which was as a part of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's "War on Poverty" (Brown & Nagine, 2011). The act funded primary and secondary education, but forbade the establishment of a national curriculum, which allowed states to retain control of their educational systems. This act placed emphasis upon equal access to education, established high standards and began enforcing, accountability within American schools. These efforts carried out in hopes of narrowing the achievement gap between students with fair and equal opportunities to achieve an exceptional education. Additionally, this act mandated funds authorized for professional development, instructional materials, for resources to support educational programs, and for parental involvement promotion (Brown-Nagin, 2011).

The decade of the 1980s represents another key turning point in American education policy legislation. Namely, The National Commission on Excellence in Education established in August 1981 (A Nation at Risk, 1983). This organization

deliberated to “review and synthesize the data and scholarly literature on the quality of learning and teaching in the nation’s schools, colleges, and universities, both public and private, with special concern for the educational experience of teen-age youth”, (U.S. Department of Education 1983). Upon completion of their examination into the state of the American education system, this group published a poignant report titled *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), which cited the following key findings:

- I. 13% of all 17 year old students could be considered functionally illiterate.
40% of all minority students are functionally illiterate.
- II. College Board Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores continue to decline in all areas.
- III. 40% of 17-year-old students cannot draw inferences from written text; one fifth can write a persuasive essay, and one third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.
- IV. Remedial mathematics courses have increased by 72% at the college and university level.
- V. Content of the curriculum has become diluted, and students are not completing vocational or college preparatory coursework. More students are on the “general track”.
- VI. With a decline in homework, fewer requirements in mathematics and science, and “written down” textbooks, the overall expectations in education decreased.
- VII. Students spent less time on their homework than in the past.
- VIII. Education is not attracting the academically astute students. Thus, the

report predicts a teacher shortage.

The findings in this report led to the development of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA), which revitalized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This initiative allowed for increased federal funding in the educational system (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003). The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 was a significant product of former President Bill Clinton's administration, and one of its main goals was to reform education. Most notably, this act provided the program now known as Title I, designed to help disadvantaged students by holding schools accountable for their results. Thus, all students were to be taught at the same level.

Jorgensen and Hoffman (2003) noted that this act also paved the way for the establishment of Charter Schools, which provide a competitive, market-based school model that gives parents an alternative route to educate their children. Districts then began to receive funding to assist with Safe and Drug-free schools. In addition, professional development enhanced for educators through the Eisenhower Professional Development aspect of the act, and there was a substantial increase in bilingual and immigrant education funding through Impact aid. Technology training and implementation now became mandatory structures in public schools (Sanders, 2000). This training and implementation was in lieu of crowded classes, inexperienced teachers, and high teacher turnover.

The United States government understood that children in poverty are more likely than others to experience educational difficulties than those in middle/upper incomes areas regardless of race. Now that the IASA act was in place, the department of

education enacted *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, which considered the needs of all students in 1994. Paris (1994) placed the focus on accountability and alignment standardized testing became a targeted measurement of student success.

The United States now experiencing a shift toward curricular alignment, and high-stakes testing has progressed full force to match the demands of the worldwide market. Subsequently, on January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 into law (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003). This new mandate, therefore, reshaped public education across the nation and began a new era of accountability. In addition, with this new era came standardized testing, district control, parental involvement and new federal funding. The goal of the NCLB act was to “see every child in America-regardless of ethnicity, income, or background-achieve high standards” (Rod Paige, U.S. Dept. Of Ed., 2003)

Rod Paige, the former superintendent of Houston Independent School district, followed George W. Bush to the white house as the U.S. Secretary of Education. Therefore, NCLB based on a Texas model. However, Texas has not been seen as a good measure because of its high stakes, high pressure testing (Giambo, 2010). Florida followed suit using Texas as a model. Thus, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) developed. The pressure from this high stakes testing, however, increased the number of students dropping out of school in Florida. In fact, the majority of the students who completed the assessment had difficulty with the measurement. Giambo (2010) also recognized Florida’s large limited English population as another important consideration with regard to the overall measurement performance. For example, from 2007-2008, from over two and a half million Florida students, 8.7% (or nearly a quarter

million) could be categorized as limited in English. Thus, students became discouraged with the educational system and the number of students transferring to GED programs increased by 32%. The graduation rate for LEP students is 44%, as compared to 66% for all students in the state of Florida. Namely, retaining low income minorities and limited English proficient students (LEP) at higher levels than white English speaking students. However, analysts also believe that these graduation-retention numbers may be lower due to data input inaccuracies (Giambo, 2010).

Ryak (2007) noted students are not making the educational gains made before 1990. Despite developing a tougher curriculum with more college preparatory coursework. And, graduating low income and minority students' proficiency scores in mathematics, reading and science continue to fall behind those of graduating whites (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Moreover, students who have not mastered reading by the third grade have more difficulty in school. Reading levels often affect all aspects of placement for elementary students. In many areas, due to testing, second grade is the last chance to learn the art of reading (Bowman-Perott, 2010).

Additionally, in comparison to students from more affluent schools with smaller minority populations, students who attend secondary schools with high poverty levels and high percentages of minority students are more likely to be taught core academic subjects by teachers who did not major in these subjects. Furthermore, educators must also consider the critical junction between adolescence and preadolescence, which represents an extremely pivotal point in a student's academic and developmental life (Smith, 2001). Thus, after receiving poor instruction during this critical, developmental phase, students earn the label "at-risk" because they have not received the instruction needed to be

productive (Sparks 2011; Ryak, 2007).

History has shown that once educators define students as 'at risk', the expectations levels placed upon them tends to decrease (Covey, 2008). At this point, lower expectations equate to lowered standards with regard to education as a whole. Thus, students need to be recaptured during their middle, intermediate and high school years (Smith, 2001). There have been some positive gains; yet, until we truly have high standards for all children, a focus on teaching and learning, develop strong partnerships with communities, monitor student performance, and target students' areas of greatest need, educators will struggle in the area of high academic output that lowers student dropouts.

Self Esteem

Thomas and Date (2006) suggest that urban, public schools are achieving little in the current educational environment. The Council for Exceptional Children (2011) states several contributing factors in particular, such as low expectations from parents, teachers, and community (i.e., all stakeholder); thus, creating a negative cultural schema. This phenomenon is extremely ironic and seems counterintuitive, especially considering that the passing of educational and civil rights legislation carried out in order to protect these populations.

Student retention has also been related to student-teacher relationships (Sanders, 2000). In fact, students' perceptions related to student-teacher relationships have an impact on academic achievement (Smith 2001). Using panel data drawn from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988, findings suggest that the greater the teachers' expectations for the student, the greater his/her actual academic achievement

(Sanders, 2000). It may be concluded through evidence from other studies, therefore, that teacher-student relations have a positive and significant influence on students themselves. Once again, a positive teacher, yields better results from a student.

Teachers that emphasize or highlight the negative aspects of race and/or social economics have a tendency to use teaching styles and strategies at the lower levels of Blooms Taxonomy. The National Society for the Study of Education (2000) notes that Blooms Taxonomy refers to a classification of the different objectives that educators set for students (i.e., learning objectives), which were led by Benjamin Bloom (1956). Bloom's Taxonomy divides educational objectives into three "domains": Cognitive, Affective, and Psychomotor (sometimes loosely described as knowing/head, feeling/heart, and doing/hands, respectively). Within each of these domains, learning at the higher levels is dependent on having attained prerequisite knowledge and skills at lower levels. Moreover, Bloom's Taxonomy motivates educators to focus on all three domains, which ultimately facilitates a more holistic education. Teaching on the lower levels of this pedagogy might prove effective within the traditional, factory-designed educational model of the past; however, it does not effectively serve today's students because it does not allow them to construct knowledge via authentic synthesis and evaluation. Simply stated, this educational methodology does not engage students as authentic learners responsible for their own education (i.e., ownership). Hence, the more engaged a student is in the overall educational process; the more the student desires to attend school. Moreover, the more engaged the teacher; the more engaged the student, and better quality education can then be received by all (Nowicki & Duke, 2004).

As a direct result of decades of increasing accountability, educators also feel

pressure to have students perform at high levels on test. In turn, students that are not performing, or cannot perform, at said levels are often overlooked – or worse, pushed aside – in order for testing data to reflect more positive numbers. Therefore, teachers may appear less caring (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). The current reality within the American educational system is that school officials have developed schools around the concept of “testing”. If not monitored intelligently, such a system can foster an environment of apathy for individual student needs and foster a culture of “low expectations” for those students viewed as less able to master curriculum (Council for Exceptional Children, 2011). Students that have several risk factors (e.g. single parent household, parental education lacking, low income, early incarceration, etc.) often view schools as “uncaring” environments and, subsequently, the educators therein are view as uncaring themselves (Thomas and Date, 2006; Smith, 2001).

Jimerson (2001) goes on to state that primary or early retention will yield immediate results; yet, these gains are typically lost within a year or two. Students entering adolescence begin to have self-esteem problems and eventually drop out of school. Many of these students often experience behavior problems and difficulty developing social relationships with those younger than themselves, which can eventually lead to a low overall self-concept. Once an individual has progressed into adulthood, having a negative self-concept makes it harder to find employment. As a related result, they are in lower-paying jobs (Cassel, 2003).

Cassidy and Bates (2005) reported when a school is visibly appealing in combination with a caring atmosphere students have a greater likelihood of academic success. Thus, it is critical that the school must have a clear vision statement, and staff

must dedicate the time to understand the student's frustrations (Covey 2008). In addition, it is also vital that both school administrators and teachers understand that this approach requires teaching the "whole child", rather than focus on standardized academic outcomes alone. Cassel (2003) noted once students have the skills needed to progress through the school environment in a positive manner, and learn the problem solving skills needed to be successful, the higher the probability for student success. Nevertheless, many students with multiple risk factors do not know how to navigate through society in a positive manner (Smith, 2001; Nowicki, 2010; Duke, 2004). These students are more likely to interact and communicate through the use of violence, intimidation and force, especially as a counter-method for self-preservation and survival. Therefore, developing the positive skills needed to navigate through school should be a method adopted by educators for the purpose of enhancing students' sense of empowerment and self-respect. As a direct result of such efforts, students who respect themselves, as well as others, are less likely to be violent. Ultimately, caring schools produce caring students. In turn, caring students are more likely to achieve due to successful society and academic integration into much more inclusive educational environments.

Retention Intervention

Kaufman (2001) states that many teachers retain students because they do not feel the students are ready for the next academic grade level. This form of retention has a tendency to foster low self-esteem and, therefore, students are at jeopardy of becoming "dropouts" (Sparks, 2011). Ezarik (2003) also finds that retention is not profitable, and the use of retention at the primary level may only be beneficial in the short term remediation. In fact, once a student reaches puberty, early retention often causes social

aggravation (Smith, 2001). In other instances, retention used to settle educators' suspicions that a student may have a learning disability (Payette, 1998). Moreover, educators may suggest this method of retaining students to address differences constitutes a form of retention as an intervention.

Educators across the spectrum agree that intervention should occur before keeping a student in the same grade. Padron (2009) noted more interventions and interventionist embedded in a district or school environment would help students academically. Ezarik (2003) states that social promotion, which is the act of placing a student in the next grade based on age, should not be not viewed as a choice for intervention. Many of these students are developmentally prepared to progress; yet, they lack the proper academic skills needed to performance successfully in subsequent grades. Ezarik (2003) also suggests the use of multiple measures in order to determine promotion or placement. Therefore, due to the high stakes of third grade testing year, the need to intervene in reading is undoubtedly critical (Bowman-Perott, 2010). In addition, students labeled as "at-risk" should be placed in classes that will better serve their academic needs (Cassel, 2003). This theory coincides with the Response to Intervention (RTI) model utilized throughout the state of Texas. Texas Education Agency (2011) defines (RTI) as a model addressing the needs of all students through a continuum of services which provide: (1) high-quality instruction and scientific, researched-based, tiered intervention strategies aligned with individual student need; (2) frequent monitoring of student progress to make results-based academic or behavioral decisions; (3) data-based school improvement; and (4) the application of student response data to relevant educational decisions (such as those regarding placement, intervention, curriculum, and instructional goals and

methodologies). Studies now demonstrate intervening may be the best form of intervention (Barnett, Jones, & Lentz, 2009).

Various educational researchers, such Kaufman (2001), as well as Rumberger & Lim (2008), have continued to explore the rate of retention in American schools. One research finding showed that the retention of students at the elementary level (K-3) had increased, with males being retained two thirds more than females (Kaufman, 2001). Based on these findings, the researcher critically noted that the American educational system is failing students (Kaufman, 2001). In 1995, it was discovered that young adults between the ages of 16-24, who repeated one or more grades were 13.3% more likely to drop out when compared to other school peers (Kaufman, 2001). A noteworthy discovery concluded that, although males are retained at a higher rate than females, the dropout rate for retained males is lower than that of retained females (Green, 2004). Green (2004) also noted higher retention numbers for Black students' average more than White or Hispanic students; the retention rate of black students is a direct correlation to dropout rate; however, the percentages cannot be predicted. Smith (2001) and the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) also discovered that economic factors did have a much larger influence on retention/dropout rate. Moreover, once retained, students from lower economic levels are at a greater risk with regard to dropping out of school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Standardized Testing

Lange (2004) argues that standardized testing, the media, and failing school systems continue to perpetuate the century long practice of retaining students. The strong emphasis on testing had a significant effect on the American education system. Studies

question if improvement in test scores signal improvement in learning (Cannell, 1997; Linn, Grave, & Sanders, 1999; Shepard, 2000).

Other studies point to standardized tests' narrowness of content, their lack of matching the curricula and instruction their neglect of higher order thinking skills, and the limited relevance and meaningfulness of their multiple choice formats (Baker, 1999; Herman, 1999; Shepard, 1990). This effect takes place not only in the inner cities, but also in schools located in the suburbs. More and more, educators are concentrating so much on tested items and not addressing vital parts of the curriculum (Ryak, 2007). In essence, the test is now viewed as "running the curriculum" and retaining those students whom cannot master the test (Ryak, 2007). In the end, as a direct result of such a focus, educators retain students, which can cause permanent damage to them socially.

Therefore, student retention directly affects a student's individual self-esteem (Padron, 2009). A district's curriculum can hinder below and above average learners if the district bases curriculum primarily on average learners' level of success or need. Furthermore, Lange (2004) argues against the method of using a single testing measurement to determine the academic potential of a student. The National Association of School Psychologist and the National Council of Measurement in Education also support this finding (Lange, 2004). As a more viable and effective alternative, Ezarik (2003) believes in using multiple measures to determine end of the year placement. Unfortunately, however, many educators rely solely on the data derived from one standardized test.

The practice of labeling student "at-risk" charges educators with the task of monitoring students closely throughout their educational career (Abrams & Haney,

2004). The goal is for all students to experience academic success. Teachers must hold conferences with their students *and* with students' parents as well. Many of the students not performing well on standardized test may have one or more of the risk factors indicated in these studies (i.e., low income, race, family status, parental education and or language) (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Understanding a student's background helps to improve the relationship with the student. Therefore, students labeled as "at-risk" become an indispensable part of the educational process rather than a non-participant (Nowicki & Duke, 2004).

Rather than simply using standardized testing as a general panacea, Jimerson (2001) recommends tracking students over a three- or four-year process by examining a number of different variables, such as retention rates, class sizes, interventions and use of data to diagnose. Designing schools to meet the students' needs, not the school's needs. Thus, such a change would entail cultural shifts in both local school centers and/or districts. These changes can take from three to five years.

Empowering Teachers

In order to keep students in school, teachers need to be better prepared and empowered. Teachers need to be given the tools needed to be successful. Ezarik (2003) is in favor of progressive and relevant professional development as a potential method to achieve such an aim. In particular, professional development should be learner-centered if it is to be effective, and if it is going to be useful for teachers. Padron (2009) feels that educators must first have to admit they have a systemic problem that has to be addressed. Schuldt (2009) also suggests some ways for principals to assist teachers in becoming instructional leaders on their respective school campuses. This suggestion is to provide

teachers ownership over educational initiative. This may then contribute to increased rates of teacher-student interaction. In contrast to leadership concepts espoused prior to the 1990s, geared primarily toward administration and teacher/staff management, today's principals must emphasize joint and interdependent partnerships with teacher-leaders. Moreover, in today's educational environments, the instructional leadership flows in a circular motion. Today's effective instructional leaders must also possess a variety of new skills, traits and attributes, such as high expectations, a deep understanding of curricular alignment and design, and cultural awareness. Lastly, the quintessential school leader of the 21st century must also enlist the support and effort of diverse and variety stakeholders, especially among parents, community members, and local business leaders.

Schuldt (2009) further developed seven standards for instructional leaders (see Figure 2). This development elevated the responsibility of the teachers and provided them with increased influence in the classroom. Therefore, teachers can be able to experience increased autonomy and responsibility for the direct education they are providing for their students. Thus, using this lens for educational leadership, the teacher is a visionary leader, strategic planner, and change agent. In order to function effectively, the teacher must have the ability to communicate; to be a role model, a nurturing approach that supports the affective development of his or her students.

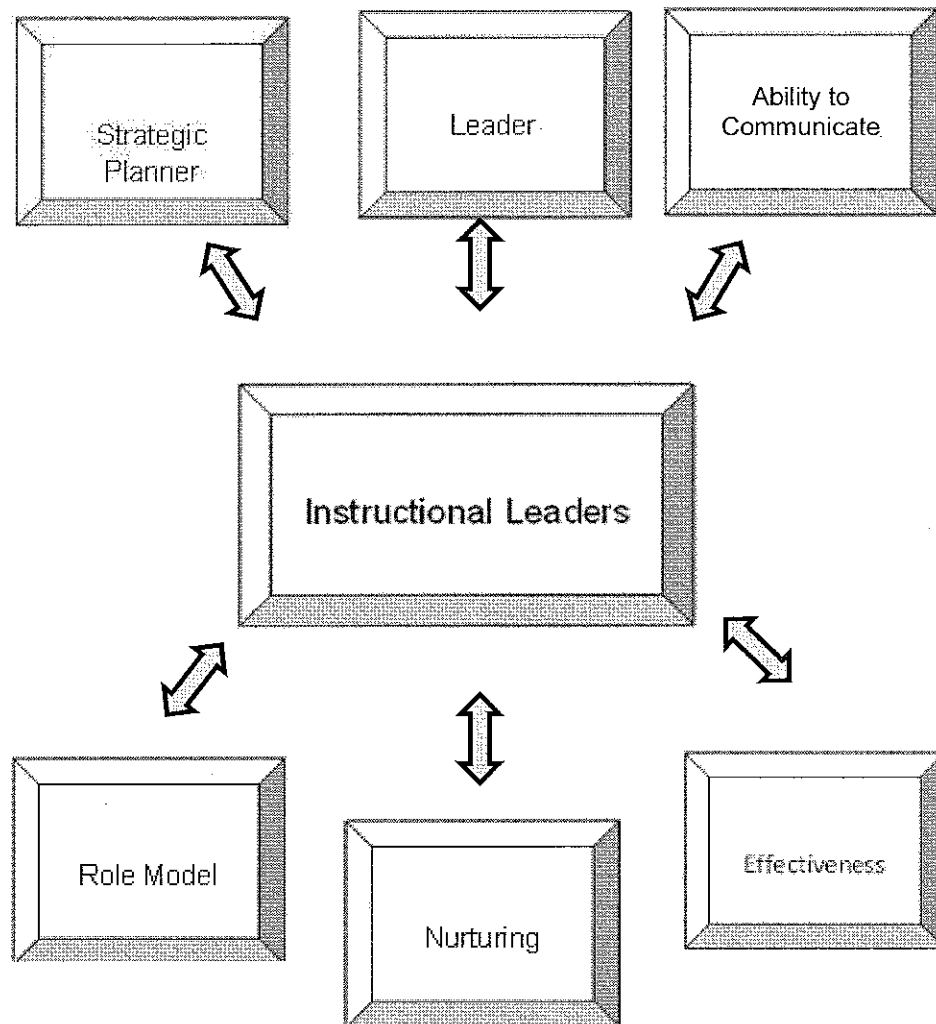


Figure 2. Standards for instructional leader. This figure illustrates Schuldt's (2009) standards for instructional leaders.

The evolution of the term “instructional leader” from administrator to teacher has raised the standards of education in general (Hoerr, 2007). Teachers who are a part of the school (i.e., those who have a vested interest in the campus and have “bought into” its overall mission) assist in developing a stronger institution (Covey, 2008). Subsequently, a stronger institution develops stronger students in terms of academics. Stronger students academically enhance student excellence; which, in turn, enhances student retention. This educational environment (i.e., culture) fosters an atmosphere (i.e., climate) that allows teachers to lead and stay informed, develop leadership roles, continue to learn, ease time constraints, create connections to the community, and grow as instructional leaders outside of the classroom walls.

Giving teachers the power needed to lead educationally with relevant, insightful, student-centered lessons will enhance the educational system. With such teacher empowerment in mind, Finnan and Chasin (2007) developed accessible theories that could be utilized in order to increase student engagement. More specifically, this research (Finnan & Chasin, 2007) asserts that if educators develop learning centers that focus upon authentic student engagement, then the quality of students’ learning itself would increase. In addition to being “learner-centered”, these centers should also focus on “hands-on” activities that are rigorous and challenging curriculum. Furthermore, such activities and pedagogic practice should be embedded within education programs that set extraordinarily high academic standards for students. The belief here is that lessons that integrate “real-world” connections accelerate the learning process (Specht, 2003). Thus,

this approach lends more academic influence to the educator as well as the program itself.

Empowering Students

The educational research of Wyatt (2009) focuses not only on student retention, but also on developing an environment conducive for the academic growth of male students in particular. Like many other researchers exploring this topic, Wyatt (2009) started by reciting the low retention rate of African American males in a low income Chicago neighborhood. This study that took place over four years (2004-2008), through the American School Counselors Association, with African American educators as participants. The study participants formed an organization entitled *The Brotherhood*, which based, its philosophies on the principals of Kwanzaa – specifically, Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith). The program itself took place over a thirty-week period, and surveyed 1700 student on an annual basis. The data set included descriptive factors, such as income, special needs, ESL and GPA information. The program also contained three goals, which were established with the assistance of the community. The first goal was to improve academic achievement through strategic and creative lesson planning. The second goal was to enhance personal-social development through community service. Finally, the group was to create collaborative enrichment opportunities through student leadership.

In a comparison with their non-*Brotherhood* members, the program outcomes demonstrated that the cumulative GPAs of the *Brotherhood* members increased from 2.43-2.83. The students also participated in a survey showing they experienced growth

with regard to their personal view of themselves. This study also assisted the school counselors in taking a closer look at the needs of the communities. Keeping in mind that the data obtained was from 2004-2008, it should be noted that each of the male students' participants graduated from high school, and had an increase in self-esteem. This study is also a salient programmatic example for schools because it explores how to mitigate risk factors related to "dropouts" through means aside from standardized, cognitively-based testing.

Nowicki and Duke (2004) developed a study entitled Effective Learning Program (ELP) using students with several risk factors, such as low income, race, family status, parental education, and limited English proficiency. The study determined that smaller classes had a decidedly positive effect on students – namely, rather than instituting the thirty-to-one ratio, it suggested that classrooms be reduced to a ratio of fifteen-to-one. In addition, implementing an atmosphere of caring throughout the school and the staff actively built an atmosphere of family. The staff taught the students social, educational, community, as well as workplace survival skills. The researchers determined early on that many of the students did not know how to control the world around them. Overall, they lacked "locus of control" within their personal lives and activities, especially those related to school interactions. Hence, the students had to learn that the world does not control them; rather, that they could control various aspects of their own everyday world. To this end, the school staff provided students with enriched coursework with the belief they would success – that is, a program fashioned in the order of a typical gifted and talented program. Then, the staff tested the students following specific learning exercises, which led to a program geared toward delayed gratification. The subsequent

results were quite impressive because scores and student engagement increased.

Risk Factors and Characteristics

Lamb (2003) performed an analysis that identified the risk factors related to high school dropout rates. Those risk factors related to what educators could do to improve teen programming efforts, as well as decrease high school dropout rates. Analyses of several databases were performed to compare drop out information. Then, by determining high school retention risk factors and relating this data to 4-H programming, the study drew conclusions and planned strategies.

The study also discussed the correlations between dropping out of high school and life in general. For example, the overall earnings of a high school dropout are lower than for those students who choose to remain in high school. Moreover, unemployment is more prevalent amongst high school dropouts. Young women that drop out of high school are more likely to become single parents, as compared to young ladies that do not drop out of high school. High school dropouts are more likely to enter and experience the penal system, as opposed to those who do not drop out (Ryak, 2007). Ultimately, the research suggests that most high school dropouts eventually regret their decision.

In 1992, the unemployment rate for high school drop outs was 11%, as compared to 7% for high school graduates who did not attend college (Lamb, 2003). Additionally, the median full-time employment income of high school dropouts was half that of students with a high school education (Ryak, 2007). Thus, dropouts do not have the employment skills needed for the American work force, but they also lack the employment skills that would be required to avoid a life of limited opportunities and high potentiality for crime.

Incarceration is an unfortunate – yet common – reality for many retained students. The current U.S. incarceration demographics, moreover, appear to mirror the same students that schools are failing. Across the country, 68% of state prison inmates do not have a high school diploma. According to various researchers, a 10 percentage-point increase in graduation rates has historically reduced murder and assault rates by approximately 20 percent (SLJ Staff, 2008). States with high graduation rates historically have lower incarceration rates. States with higher dropouts have more residents in prison than states with lower dropouts. Additionally, many of the inmates in correctional facilities have addictions, which typically hinder interpersonal growth.

Of the 2.3 million inmates crowding this nation's prisons and jails, 1.5 million meet the DSM IV medical criteria for substance abuse or addiction. Another 458,000, while not meeting the strict DSM IV criteria, had histories of substance abuse; were under the influence of alcohol or other drugs at the time of their crime; and, committed their offense to get money to buy drugs. Many individuals are also incarcerated for an alcohol and/or drug law violation (SLJ Staff, 2008). These two groups combined constitute 85 percent of the U.S. prison population. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) (2006) at Columbia University also reveals that alcohol and other drugs are significant factors in all crime. In 2006, alcohol and other drugs were involved in these inmate offenses:

- 78 percent of violent crimes;
- 83 percent of property crimes; and
- 77 percent of public order, immigration or weapon offenses; and probation/parole violations.

As a result, this hindrance causes a failure to develop problem solving skills required to be a functioning member of society (Cassel, 2003), which eventually leads to a major loss in the manpower needed for competitiveness (and even participation) in a new, growing and global workplace.

Lamb (2003) derived data that depict how certain risk factors can impact whether or not a student graduates from high school. The study concluded that 4-H programs are not the only extracurricular activities that can be designed to enhance a students' academic career. The 4-H program developed a mission statement that allows education to support community diversity and respect cultural awareness; thus, allowing students and adults to work to their full potential. In order to design a successful youth program, the "risk factors" within a community must first be established.

The study used archival data and interviews to establish risk factors associated with high school dropouts. Using this data, the researcher identified the following five risk factors as having a strong impact on student retention: Test scores, number of parents, natural parents, parents' educational back ground, and extracurricular activities. Nowicki and Duke (2004) also identified the following similar risk factors: income, race, family status, parental education and language. It should be noted that the more risk factors a student must overcome the higher the probability that the student will not graduate from high school. And, students who do better in school, stay in school, and are more likely to graduate. Bandura (1993/1997) believed that people achieve what they believe.

Lamb's study did take into consideration the number of people with the title "parent or guardian", but concluded the background of those titled "parent" or "guardian"

has an influence on retention. Students in households of parents that do not graduate from high school are at greater risk (Ryak, 2007). Hence, one of the difficulties for teachers is to encourage students to have higher life goals without insulting their parents.

Testing occurs when children enter school. And, if those scores are used as a form of diagnoses – as opposed to a single measurement for placement – intervention will accelerate, rather than lead to an increase in retention. These students can then be placed in the appropriate programming.

Further, those students who are involved in extracurricular activities have a greater chance of graduating from high school. Students with risk many factors of dropping out of extracurricular activities are more likely to drop out of high school, especially in comparison to students without many risk factors. In connection with this finding, research shows that one hour of extracurricular activity has a positive influence on graduation rates (Lamb, 2003). Lastly, those students involved in extracurricular activities often develop a positive system that positively influences their peers' decisions to remain engaged in school culture.

The number of risk factors a student has to overcome also has an impact on retention. For instance, if one were to add two or three risk factors to the student's life plate, his or her probability of dropping out would increase tremendously. Students in areas with several or all of the risk factors identified above have the greatest struggle with retention. Poor teaching and low expectations are certainly poignant indicators here; yet, the outside (i.e., non-school) factors in their lives are often their reason for dropping out of school. Ryak (2007) conducted a survey of over 1500 students throughout the country labeled as "dropouts". In particular, these students had to overcome risk factors. In

addition, 47% of the students felt that their classes were not engaging; 81% reported that they needed real-world opportunities; 75% stated that they desired smaller classes; and, 71% of the students wanted increased parental involvement.

Padron (2009) also found that those students labeled “at-risk” enjoyed being able to attend community college after high school. Many of the students truly benefited from high school courses taught at the community college, or college courses taught at the high school. This class structure gave students the feeling of empowerment and control over their educational destiny. Padron (2009) also encouraged school districts to develop partnerships with local community colleges to create like initiatives. It is pertinent to note here that students feeling the power of attending college while in high school increases retention rates. The present challenge lies in the financing of high school/community college partnerships specifically for at-risk student populations. Lamb (2003), like Wyatt (2009), concluded that providing a culturally-supportive environment with extracurricular activities enhances a student’s probability to graduate from high school.

Learner Centered Education

Covey (2008) developed a learning environment in which student leadership is fostered and developed. An ordinary school located in Raleigh, North Carolina took on the task of developing a school based on Covey’s *Seven Traits of Highly Effective People*. Ultimately, this approach led to the development of a learner-centered school. In this particular case, the school demographics were ESL (18%), free or reduced lunch (40%), and others placed in special education (21%). Also, the school building was over fifty years old and employed a mature staff.

Covey (2008) believed that making a truly learner-centered school environment would improve student achievement, enhance self-esteem and confidence in the students, decrease discipline problems, increase educator job satisfaction, improve school culture, improve positive parental engagement, and foster better relationships with community leaders and businesses. Cassidy and Bates (2005) also believed that a school established on “caring” fosters leadership and grows students. The question poised to all stakeholders was “Are today’s young people adequately prepared to take advantage of the expanding opportunities and duly equipped to deal with the accompanying challenges?” (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 7)

The above research (Covey, 2008) also stated that school administrators realized that parents wanted their children to be prepared for the global economy. The once perceived perspectives of Asian parents (i.e., the importance of technology, global skills, analytical skills, life skills and values) have now become the concerns of all parents. In short, these particular parents desired that their children learn beyond the Three R’s. Business owners and community leaders also desired that schools develop productive citizens who will assist in nurturing the economy. Furthermore, educators in Covey’s study desired their lessons be relevant. Student engagement is vital both within the school environment and within home environment. All stakeholders desired to develop life, career, learning, innovation (especially through critical thinking, problem solving, and various other higher-order thinking skills), as well as technology skills. The students desired a quality education, friends, and to have fun while learning in a safe environment. Ultimately, such factors could provide them with a “peace of mind”.

Covey’s study set out to develop student leaders’ one child at a time, which would

build and contribute to the creation of a family relationship within the school environment (Nowicki & Duke, 2004). The first step in the process was to determine how to make the “7 habits” adequately fit into a school model. In other words, character education was not to be a separate entity; rather, this approach viewed character education as embedded within the school culture. During the first year of this program’s implementation, the school leaders utilized a pilot approach, which used only one classroom per grade level. Then, following the pilot program, student test results increased from 84% to 87%. Again, the next year, the entire school took on the program’s format, and the scores jumped from 87% to 94%. In the end, the scores elevated and stabilized at 97%. Thus, A.B. Combs had become one of the top-rated magnet schools in America. Yet, changing the school culture was not an easy endeavor.

Later, in 2004, Covey developed an 8th Habit entitled “find your voice and help others find theirs”, which he incorporated into the already existing framework (p.48). He realized that culture is not just talking the talk, but walking the walk. Importantly, these opportunities for leadership activities and opportunities to shine lead to student success. This novel focus on leadership now allowed students to apply for a variety of jobs, it enhanced student talent, and school pride could be expressed through a more diverse range of activities, such as the fine arts. Within this structure, however, it was mandatory that school and program leaders develop a positive and common language. As a corollary, students assisting with a major decision in the school environment, such as the hiring of staff members, truly fostered confidence in the student leaders. Once this learner-centered environment became more successful, other students began to emulate A.B. Combs, and the process filtered to several other elementary schools. Eventually, it

began filtering through middle and high schools as well. Now a school in Alief ISD has also decided to implement this model and the principal will be traveling to schools in Texas to study its effectiveness.

Classism

Payne (2002) conducted research on the effect that class has interpersonal relationships through supervision. In 1995, her first publication titled *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* was written to assist educators working in public schools with high poverty levels. She continued her work with a study, in 2002, which explored the hidden culture of class. The purpose of the study was to help supervisors understand the nuances of class within particular contexts. Many educators promote middle class values, but students born in poverty experience starkly different, survival-based values (Sparks, 2011; Nowicki & Duke, 2004). The study goes on to explore the various levels of class and the hidden language or culture that exist within each station or class in society.

Payne states that in order for educators to move a population forward, they must first understand the hidden culture the population experiences. Thus, respecting and being sensitive to those in or transitioning from these classes is of utmost importance if one is to move a school forward and, therefore, change a school's culture. Payne also advocates for respecting and being sensitive to cultural differences as it relates to classes.

Review of Literature Summary

Greene (2003) presents the data to substantiate the need for an intervention to assist students with their graduation and retention rates from high school. As alluded to earlier, the overall retention rates for females are higher than the overall male retention rates in America. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that more American females

participate in the global economy. However, this concern is magnified in urban school districts, where the average retention rate for females is 58.5 percent and 48.5 percent for males. States with lower minority rates have higher retention rates, and southern states are still struggling in the area of retention.

Sanders (2000) recounts the history of urban education over a thirty-year period, and states that students in these environments are readily labeled as “at risk” – a perception which appears to have become the reality of urban school districts even despite legislation. Once again, teachers that focus on race and income in a negative manner tend to teach within the lower realms of Blooms Taxonomy.

Kaufman (2001) concludes that having a student remain in the same grade after puberty can be viewed as punitive. Nonetheless, the probability of a student dropping out of school after remaining in the same grade in elementary school is more likely than a student that has never been retained. One may not be able to change the system completely, yet is still possible to learn how to work within the system at hand to institute and encourage necessary changes. Knowing that retention will continue to exist; that suspensions will continue to occur; and that states will continue to test, it is essential to ask a critical question: How do we now merge those entities in a positive manner to foster change?

Lange (2004) supports the argument against standardized testing used as a single measurement or indicator for student mastery of concepts. The research suggests that there are other factors that need to be explored when making the decision to retain a student. Jimerson (2001) examines the affects retention on students’ self-esteem, and he subsequently noted that other avenues need be explored when making such decisions.

Schuldt (2009) develops the belief that administrators need to assist teachers in becoming strong instructional leaders. The teacher becoming a stronger instructional leader will enhance their ability to communicate, being a role model, and assisting with nurturing. More importantly, however, teachers who are stronger instructional leaders also help to retain students.

Wyatt (2009) places a focus on retaining urban African American male students through empowerment by designing curriculum and environments that embrace their culture. The offshoot of such approaches, therefore, is that educators can then assist them in their improvement of self-esteem. Lamb (2003) also places emphasis on student empowerment through the development of extracurricular activities designed around the “risk factors” identified, while also embracing diversity and increasing retention. Covey (2008) realized that schools were not meeting the needs of students; therefore, he developed a system that was learner-centered. Furthermore, Payne (2002) continues to explore the hidden languages between the various classes and how being sensitive to that language will assist with the supervision or education of all people. Overall, America is graduating 70% of its overall population, and studies indicate that ‘The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002’ requires that we leave no child behind.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Studies have shown that student retention is lower in urban school districts (Abrams & Haney, 2004; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Kennelly, 2007). Additionally, in 2003, America only retained 70% of its students (Greene, 2004). Student retention is a critical issue in America. Educators given the charge not to leave any students behind supported demands of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 ("Public Law 107-110," 2001). Therefore, school districts have begun to institute initiatives assisting with student retention. Texas school districts charged by the Texas Education Agency's Student Success Initiative (SSI) to monitor the progress of students matriculating through the high school; monitoring these students starting with their 9th grade cohort (Rafoth, Dawson, & Carey, 1988). This monitoring begins with a student's placement in his or her 9th grade cohort. Determining the completion or graduation rate by the percentage of students from a class of beginning ninth-graders who graduate by the fall one year after their anticipated graduation date; that is, within five years of beginning ninth grade. A five-year extended longitudinal completion rate is the percentage of students from the same class who complete their high school education by the fall one year after their anticipated graduation date (TEA, 2011). Completion may be defined as graduating, continuing in high school in the fall after expected graduation, or receiving a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Texas Educational Agency (2011) noted that a five-year

extended longitudinal dropout rate is the percentage of students from the same class who, by the fall one year after their anticipated graduation date, drop out before completing their high school education. Dropouts count according to the definitions in place the years they drop out. However, the Texas Educational Agency definition changed in the 2005-06 academic year. Longitudinal rates for classes in which the national dropout definition phased in or fully incorporated (i.e., classes of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009) are not comparable from one class to another, nor are they comparable to rates for prior classes.

Establishing the cohort for a five-year extended longitudinal rate occurs when calculating four-year rates and consists of the same students. The statewide five-year cohort adds no students; yet, a student's status or district may change on the fifth year attendance or performance (TEA, 2011). Some students who continued high school left, not graduated, received GED certificates, or dropped out, the total number of students with final statuses at a campus, district, region, or the state may change according to the Texas Educational Agency (2009). Texas Educational Agency (2009) reports show results for the class of 2008 as of the fall after the class expected to graduate. In this instance, according to the calculated rates, the cohort trailed for an additional school year in which students graduated, received GEDs, or dropped out. As an example, the five-year extended longitudinal rate for graduation is calculated by dividing the number of students who graduated by the fall in one year after their anticipated graduation date by the number of students in the class (Texas Education Agency 2011). School districts with this responsibility develop programs and initiatives to assist with student retention beginning with a student's ninth-grade cohort. One of the initiatives implemented in the

greater Houston area is titled the *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk, which is a systemic strategy designed to return students labeled “dropouts” in high school.

Each year thousands of volunteers pace the streets of Houston knocking on doors and inviting former students back to school. These students were not successful with mainstream education; therefore, educators make attempts to re-route them through non-traditional avenues in order to reach the goal of continuation, completion or graduation. Non-traditional avenues offered include night classes, online courses, and Saturday coursework. Childcare also provided for students with children. In addition, the walk has provided the school district officials and community leaders with a better understanding of the issues and roadblocks that confront many of the students who have left school. Through the increased awareness of students’ reasons for leaving school, districts and the wider community are doing a better job of responding to student needs and crafting solutions that enable student retention.

Allensworth (2005), the Council for Exceptional Children (2011), Kaufman (1995), Rumberger (2008), Sanders (2000), and Thomas (2006) focus on the reasons student completion and graduation rates are low. Greene (2006) focuses on demographical areas with low student retention rates. The present study, however, focused on the effectiveness of the initiatives related to the Student Success Initiative and Expectation Graduation called the *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk in a school district in the greater Houston area. The study attempted to account for how many students return after the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk and complete or graduate. It also looked into what characteristics or factors students in an urban school district located in Houston affect students dropping out of high school. Lastly, this study explored what

characteristics or factors in this urban Houston school district contributed to students remaining in school after returning.

The *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk focuses on returning high school dropouts to school. This study analyzed their continuation, completion or graduation rates. In addition, the student subjects in this study were drawn from a large urban district located in Houston, Texas. The purpose of this study was to determine how many students continued, completed or graduated from high school after returning from the annual walk entitled *Reach Out to Dropouts* (i.e., the program's overall effectiveness).

This chapter addressed the methodology employed in this study. The sections included in this chapter are: (1) research questions (2) hypothesis (3) participants, (4) data sources (5) procedures, (6) data analysis and (7) limitations.

Research Questions

Student retention is vital for Americans to continue competing on a global level with other countries. America has heard the charge to increase student retention. School districts are making efforts to retain students. The researcher explored the following questions:

1. How many students return after the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk and complete or graduate?
2. What characteristics or factors do students in an urban school district located in Houston affects students dropping out of high school?
3. What characteristics or factors do students in an urban school district located in Houston contribute to them remaining in school after returning?

Participants

School district. The Alief Independent School District, which has 45,410 students from every modern country in the world, and over 80 languages or dialects, has agreed to participate in this study. The majority of the students within the district are Hispanic, African American and Asian. In terms of the overall student demographics, the district currently has 22,360 Hispanic students, which represent 49.2% of the total student population. The African American population is 15,356 students, or 33.8% of the district. The White population is 1,720 students, or 3.8% of the overall population. The Native American population is 219 students, or 0.5%. And, the Asian Pacific Islander population is 5,755, or 12.7% of the overall district student population.

The district also has 35,632 economically disadvantaged students, which represents 78.5% of the district's total student population. Given these numbers, the Alief Independent School District qualifies as a Title I district. In comparison to student populations from districts with higher incomes, Texas Education Agency guidelines (2010) describes a Title I district as having a high proportion of students coming from families with lower incomes that qualify for free and or reduced lunch. In this case, many Alief students reside in apartment complexes. In addition, the residents receive federal and refugee-sponsored housing within the district. The majority of the students within the district students (30,924) are also as "at-risk", which represents 68.1% of the overall student population. In sum, there are 24 elementary schools, 6 intermediate schools, 6 middle schools, 4 major high schools, and 4 alternative education schools

within the district. This study will specifically focus on the 4 high schools and 4 alternative school settings.

Student subjects. There are a total of 251 students from a database of 600 students used for the study. This database was developed by Pupil Personnel and housed by Special Populations in the Alief Independent School District. The students participating in the study had a target graduation date of May 2010. In addition, the finalized student data, which was presented to the researcher in a chart format, included information such as the students' names, student identification numbers, addresses, and present grade at the time the student stopped attending high school. In addition, it is important to note that the "students" specifically selected to participate are now adults (i.e., 18 or above). Further, the demographic populations included in the study are 119 Hispanic participants (39%), 98 African American participants (39%), 28 Asian participants (11%), and 6 White participants (2%). With regard to the study's gender demographics, the majority of the students that analyzed using the archival data were male. Overall, there were 176 male students and 75 female students that participated in the study. The number of economically disadvantaged students analyzed in the archival data was greater than the district average of 80%, and nearly all of the students in the archival data were economically disadvantage (98%). From the 251 students analyzed using the archival data, 7 students participated in the focus group.

Data Sources

The archival data obtained from Alief Independent School Districts database in the form of charts. Each chart contained the names, student identification number, address, and year students withdrew from school and grade level at the time of dropping

out.

The study consisted of the following components:

Component One: Manually discovering the students that dropped out of high school prior to graduating from high school in 2010.

Component Two: Analyzing withdrawal codes reported to the state of Texas.

Component Three: Interviewing a focus group of students that did return, complete or graduate to learn the personal reasons behind the numbers.

Component One will determine whether the annual walk entitled *Reach Out to Dropouts* is effective based on the number of students returning to school, continuing, completing, or graduating after recruitment by school personnel on this target start date.

Component Two will analyze the reasons presented to the state of Texas. Lastly, Component Three will analyze the personal reasons students do not complete school, as well as why they choose to return, complete or graduate. The researcher has volunteered in this initiative for the past three years and has personally returned students to school. Reasons stated in E School Plus included obtaining a GED, not meeting attendance requirements, not passing the TAKS test, pregnancy, not returning at the beginning of school and labeled a “no show” or whereabouts unknown, legally 18 and voluntarily withdrawing from school, transferring to another school (district, city, state or private), reporting to an alternative placement and not returning, and, finally, incarceration (juvenile or adult).

Procedures

The study was conducted in an urban school district in the Houston area, which

serves over 45,000 students with every modern country represented, over 80 languages or dialects, over 80% free and reduced lunch, and a majority of minority students. This school district has reached "Recognized" status according to the Texas Education Agency reporting scale, which means that approximately 80% of the students reached mastery of targeted skills in all tested subject areas. In total, the collection, data entry, and analyses of this research spanned nine months.

Pupil personnel services provided the student names in their database to the Special Population department. The Special Populations department provided the researcher with the identification numbers of the students who withdrew from school prior to completion or graduation. In sum, there were approximately 600 student names given to the researcher. The school district determined student selection guidelines and based those guidelines on the year of graduation. The calculated year of graduation was also based on the year the student entered their ninth-grade and placed were into a cohort. The students in this study were targeted based on Texas Education Agency requirements for continuation, completion or graduation cohort, and the districts ratings.

Based on their entering cohort, and with the granted permission of the urban school district, the data in this study was developed from those students schedule to graduate in the 2009 and 2010 academic year. Once permission was granted to obtain copies of the database, the researcher examined each document and located the target students in the district database. Then, after locating the students within the district database, the researcher manually recorded whether the students enrolled, graduated or completed. The research also noted the sex, national origin, language and income level of each student at this time. The researcher used archival data and developed a list of

students for the formation of a focus group. After this step, each student contacted and invited to be interviewed. Given that a majority of the students that returned and graduated or completed were enrolled in Taylor High School in Alief ISD, the data guided the researcher to meet with this particular campus principal.

The accountability assistant principal assisted the researcher in locating the students generated by the researcher through the database. The accountability assistant principal monitors and tracks students labeled “at- risk” once they are placed into a cohort. Subsequently, a total of 20 students were targeted. The researcher designed a focus group to interview and determine why the students “dropped out” of high school and why they had returned. The students identified to attend the focus group for interviewing purposes were given permission forms to participate in the study. In addition, on the specific day of the focus group, the students were given the freedom to decide how the interviews would be conducted. The students decided to each speak with the researcher individually, and they were each given 30 minutes in order to complete the interview. In addition, a light breakfast provided, and there were a total of 7 students that participated in the focus group. In terms of the actual procedure employed during the interview, each student was asked the same four questions, and then the researcher hand recorded the answers they provided. In recognition of their participation, each participant was given a gift card of \$10.00 from a local fast-food restaurant. Then, the researcher analyzed the findings using phenomenology – or “lived research”. Finally, the researcher met with the Superintendent of Special Populations, reviewed the data, and conducted an informal interview this individual.

Logistics

Permission to conduct this research was obtained through the school district and Department of Human Subjects at the University of Houston, which permitted the researcher access to the data archived in the special populations department. This data was housed in one central location, and it was agreed that the researcher keep the data in that particular location. The information was also displayed in the form of Excel developed charts. Additionally, the researcher was allowed to developed a data set or disaggregate the data to determine the effectiveness of the *Reach Out to Dropouts* program by analyzing how many students return, continue, complete or graduate after the annual walk.

The researcher followed several steps to disaggregate the data. First, the researcher obtained permission from the district. Second, the researcher assured district officials that any information would not be removed from the district office. Third, the researcher took all student identifiers (i.e., students' names) off of the data set, and only used the students' identification numbers. The researcher understood that student identification numbers were information that could not be traced (i.e., communicated) beyond the district. The researcher then searched for students in the live district search engine called E-School Plus. This approach allowed the researcher to determine whether the students had, in fact, re-enrolled in school after the annual walk. Fourth, the researcher determined whether the students (once re-enrolled) continued by looking in the district entry/withdrawal data base. District officials informed the researcher that a student continues once he or she attends one class after returning. Finally, the researcher tracked the students to see whether they graduated or completed after continuing. It

should also be noted that the researcher is the first in this district to obtain this data in isolation. Once students return to their campuses they become a part of the campuses tracking system. Thus, given that no other researcher has analyzed the data solely from the annual walk, the researcher will be developing the data set. The researcher will also use the codes found in the E-School Plus system at the time of a student's withdrawal to determine the reason(s) why the student dropped out or left high school.

Data Analysis

The researcher disaggregated the data by determining the number of students who graduated, completed or returned based on the information obtained. The researcher disaggregated information, created, and displayed new data in the form of charts. Then, the researcher obtained "lived experience" information from students' qualitative interview responses. Once again, the form of qualitative research applied here will be the phenomenology method, or "lived" research. In essence, phenomenology seeks to describe basic lived experiences (van Manen, 1999). Phenomenology is both the "description of the lived-through phenomenological or quality of lived experience and the description of meaning of the expressions of lived experience." Ultimately, a deep questioning of an experience is at the heart of every phenomenological research endeavor. Groenewald (2004) also noted that phenomenology encompasses the notion that behavior is determined by the way a person perceives reality, rather than by an objective, external reality. One aim of qualitative phenomenology, or "lived" research, is to provide a multidimensional understanding of a person's experience of a condition that goes beyond an everyday or common sense awareness, which leads to a more informed, nuanced and empathic practice (Curry, Nembhard and Bradley, 2009; Kearney, 2001;

Mattingly, 1993; Shepard et al., 1993). Yet, this sort of qualitative enquiry has attracted little attention from physiotherapy researchers (Rauscher and Greenfield, 2009). The seven student interviews in this research focus on the multidimensional understanding of the student's experiences of conditions, as well as the reasons behind the numbers collected in the archival data. This qualitative, phenomenological, or "lived" research aims to demonstrate how educators can better understand student experiences, and how the findings might be used to meet the needs of "at-risk" students prior to their dropping out of high school. The following questions – in the following order – were asked to each focus group interview participant:

1. Why did you drop out of high school?
2. Who or what influenced you to return to high school?
3. After returning, why have you remained?
4. What are your plans after completing high school?

Phenomenology, or "lived" research, is both a philosophy and a family of research methods concerned with exploring and understanding human experience (Langdridge, 2007). Researchers using these methods aim to uncover the meaning of an individual's experience of a specified phenomenon by focusing on a concrete, experiential account that is grounded in everyday life (Langdridge, 2007). For example, the experience of leaving high school and being labeled a dropout, or the experience of returning to high school and understanding what influenced the person to remain, are ideal episodes that Phenomenology could center upon. In addition, using the specific issue at hand, these methods seek to understand why a person might leave high school and return, what makes them remain, and what they will they do after high school

graduation. In an all-encompassing view of the information, it is easy to see a pattern emerging. These patterns are typically known and described as “themes” (Aronson, 1994). Therefore, this research entails structuring the phenomenological research thematically.

Once obtaining the data from the data set the researcher compared data obtained based on the expectations:

1. Once they return from the annual walk entitled *Reach Out to Dropouts*, students do not continue, complete or graduate from high school. In this case, the researcher will determine using the district database if the students that return continue, complete or graduate from high school.
2. The majority of those students who do complete do not further their education beyond high school. Determining the answer to this question through the focus group segment during the interviews.
3. The majority of the students that become dropouts do so because of family pressure. This final question answered using the database, as well as through the focus group segment during the interviews.

Summary

Three questions guided this study in examining the effectiveness of the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk. Those students targeted were compared based on the number of students that returned, continued, completed, or graduated after re-enrolling. The researcher will be developing the data set. The study utilized a focus group in order to examine the reasons students withdraw, return, and complete school after “dropping out”.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

“Went to jail for a year and nine months and realized I did not graduate from high school. My friends were graduating, so I felt stupid. I became a Christian in jail and my mother passed away while I was in jail, this was very hard. When released I kept going to church and found a job, then started thinking about school. I was asked to come back, by the teachers. They told me to just call the school. So one day I called the school and told them that I was interested. It had to be God, because when I came back to school everything was set up and ready for me. Look at me now about to graduate. All my other friends are in gangs and I am graduating late, but I am graduating.”

~ Raheem (African American male)

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine whether students return, complete, or graduate after recruitment during the annual walk or recruitment effort known as *Reach Out to Dropouts*. The research questions were as follows: How many of these students actually return, complete, or graduate after being recruited? What was their primary

reason for “dropping out” of school and what or who influences them to remain?

The archival data used in the study provided by an urban district in the Houston area. The school district has approximately 45,000 students and takes pride in being a Title I, or low income, school district, as compared to other school districts in the state of Texas. The archival data derived from the school district data base provided by the Pupil Personnel department, yet housed with Special Populations. Subsequently, the researcher disaggregated the data. The students identified in the study classified as “dropouts” and solicited during the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk. They were solicited for the 2009-2010 academic school year. The researcher established a focus group with seven participants in order to obtain reflective narratives. Chapter Four presents the findings of the archival data and the narrative findings of the students that participated in the focus groups.

Historical Context

In 2004, in a partnership with Mayor Bill White, Houston A+ Challenge, and the City of Houston, and under the leadership of former Houston Independent School District Superintendent of Schools, Aberlado Saavedra, the district took on the charge of reintegrating students labeled as “dropouts” back into their schools. The data driving this decision illustrated four out of ten ninth-grade students graduated from high school in 2003 (HISD 2004). Thus, finding this data unacceptable, the district solicited the help of the community (e.g. educators and businesses) to assist them with the effort of locating and encouraging students to return to public school to earn a high school diploma. Therefore, on a balmy Saturday in the month of September, thousands of volunteers walk door-to-door searching for students to welcome back to school. Recruiting the students

was part of the districts retention initiative titled "Expectation Graduation". The annual walk has attracted more than 20,600 volunteers who personally visit youth who do not return to school. The walk has expanded and now includes twenty-two cities across Texas and eighteen Houston-area school districts.

With regard to the isolation of dropout populations in these areas and regions, the addresses of those students who have not reported back are verified after the first week of school. Then, teams of volunteers go door-to-door in order to encourage students to return to the district's schools. In addition, school districts can arrange to enroll returning students at the time of returning.

Programmatic Goals

Overall, the program has the following four primary goals:

- Increase graduation rates in the community;
- Increase awareness about completing high school;
- Initiate community partnerships and resources to address the dropout problem;
and
- Develop alternative education strategies; such as mentoring efforts, single parent and truancy programs.

The purpose for the walk is not only to address a local concern, but also a national concern. The United States currently graduates 75 percent of its population with no respect to race or income (Greene, 2004). Educators face significant challenges associated with preparing students to participate in a global economy; moreover, the United States is no longer the world leader in education. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development places the United States 18th among the 36 nations.

Comparatively, South Korea, ranked 1st in terms of global educational competitiveness, graduates 93 percent of their high school students on time, while only 75 percent of students in the United States receive their diplomas. With such comparisons in mind, the seemingly downward trend of U.S. education worries economists. Kirkegaard (2010) states, "The United States has rested on its laurels way too long other countries have increasingly caught up and surpassed the United States." In addition, Freeman (2009) reiterates, "We've been asleep for a good number of years as a country; it's not that we're doing horrible. But the other guys are moving faster." The United States has fallen to "average" among international education rankings released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. With regard to this educational rating, on a scale of 1-1,000, America has received scores around 500. In particular, this nation has received the following ratings in the primary educational content competencies: 487 in math, 500 in reading, and 502 in science, respectively. Moreover, among adults age 25-34, the U.S. is ninth among industrialized nations in the share of its population that has at least a high school degree. According to McGaw (2010), the United States was first in the world as recently as 20 years ago. McGaw is a spokesman for the Paris-based Organization for Cooperation and Development, which is a 30-nation organization that develops the yearly rankings as a way for countries to evaluate their education systems and determine whether to change their policies. McGaw implies that the United States needs to resume its leading place in education.

The Organization for Cooperation and Development report bases its conclusions related to achievement mainly on international test scores released in 2010. They show that compared with their peers in Europe, Asia and elsewhere across the globe, 15-year-

olds in the United States are below average in applying math skills to real-life tasks. Specifically, the top performers in this international ranking included Finland, Korea, the Netherlands, Japan, Canada and Belgium. Again, according to McGaw (2010), the low performance ratings are not acceptable, especially given the substantial amounts of funding the United States spends per student on education. On all levels of education, the United States spends \$11,152 per student. That is the second highest amount – behind the \$11,334 spent by Switzerland. The best schools in the U.S. are extraordinary; however, the concern lies in the diversity of quality institutions. The educational bars in many schools have not been placed high enough.

The Bush administration instituted the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) with the expectation of raising the standards of low income and minority schools. The evidence of the success of this act has not yet been determined by the international community. The United States institutions of higher learning are still amongst the world's leading institutions, yet the public education system is the area in which student retention interventions require implementation. The implementation of the annual walk as one local resource or effort to assist with this growing national student retention concern led to this study.

Superintendent for Special Populations

The organizer of the annual walk in Alief Independent School District, Superintendent for Special Populations, was interviewed by the researcher for the purposes of this study. In the interview, she discussed the process in which students drop out of school. After reviewing and studying the results obtained by the researcher, the Superintendent for Special Populations stated, "[T]he data was accurate." The first

question asked was: How do you feel about the initiative *Reach Out to Dropouts* being the organizer in Alief Independent School District? She stated that students do not make a conscience decision to leave school. She blames adults for ignoring the students and not seeing their needs. Again, she reiterated the notion that the overall process of dropping out begins with students missing school or being absent. In almost every case, those students who complete high school despite adversity connect to an adult that cares. The Superintendent for Special Populations felt that one of the mistakes she made at the beginning of the *Reach Out to Dropouts* initiative was that she underestimated the difficulty of receiving support at the campus level. She felt that campuses would support the students whole heartedly once they returned, especially considering the many interventions put in place on the campus level through the accountability administration. Unfortunately, she did not see this happening in the large high schools. She feels that educators think students are excited and ready to return. Yet, in reality, students feel a sense of terror after dropping out, and upon returning to the school environment. She stated, "The students are excited when the person knocks on the door to welcome them back to school and, for a moment, they feel as though, they can do it or graduate." It is critically necessary to realize, however, that the students need that support on a consistent daily basis, rather than simply on the day they are welcomed back.

The Superintendent for Special Populations truly believes that any student who enrolled in her school district and did not graduate "was owed a good education." Otherwise, we as educators are "losers" – not just the students. In other words, according to the Superintendent for Special Populations, "we owe them the education they did not receive, and we owe them for our shortcomings in not adequately addressing their needs

the first time around.” “That is our charge as educators” she stated. Overall, the Superintendent for Special Populations is disappointed in educators’ efforts because the effort is not simply to welcome students back into schools; rather, it is to retain them in the long-term and, ultimately, see them graduate. Toward the later portion of the interview, after looking at the data from an objective perspective, and seeing that the program has experience 2% growth in the area of retention, she began to describe how she was glad to have elementary administrators on board because the issue of student dropouts is not just a secondary-level concern. “We as educators need to let students know how resilient they truly are and what they can overcome,” she stated.

The Superintendent for Special Populations works hard with principals and counselors by attempting to have them teach the total child, and by being objective concerning their educational placement. All of her interactions with these leaders are not personal in nature; rather, her concerns and conduct are purely in the interests of the children she serves. In her mind, and in the informed opinion of the present researcher, the answer is clear: Students need to attend school. Nevertheless, due to the mandatory attendance laws enforced in the state of Texas, students in the past have felt that once they missed 10 days it would be better “to withdraw” from school. There are no courts in the land that would say to a child “you cannot come back to school because you have missed 10 days.” Therefore, we “as educators need to stop telling students once they have missed 10 days it is better to withdraw.”

The Superintendent for Special Populations states that “we as adults do not want the students absent excessively because it becomes an adult issue and “we do not desire to provide the make-up work”. Hence, it becomes an imposition on us as adult educators.

Unfortunately, however, we often do not try to discover the meaning behind the absence. Therefore, as with many other student-centered issues, educators should seek to find the root of student absence issues by understanding the “why” to get to the “what”.

As mentioned earlier, most students do not drop out of school because they do not like school. Rather, they drop out because the “teacher did not like me”; “the work was too hard”; “I could not find the assistance I needed to be successful”; and, “*no one cared*”. The reasons she has heard over the years are as follows:

- Someone does not like me;
- A family member is ill;
- I have to work; and
- I have children.

The Superintendent for Special Populations then stated the students having these concerns at home and then hearing them on the campuses just validate them making the decision not to continue. She strongly feels that this is not the message educators need to send. Hence, educators send the message and then reinforce those that do not value education and, therefore, the students feel comfortable with their decision to withdraw.

When working with students, she attempts to allow students to predict their future scenarios if they continue down their path as a high school dropout. In particular, she asks the student to consider where they will be in five years if they were to continue to work for the companies they work for as dropouts. She asks dropout students whether they will be able to “own their homes, cars and live a comfortable life?” Therefore, she uses self-talk and self-reflection to illustrate that dropping out of school is not an option for these youth. Furthermore, she always tells students that high school is a “gateway” to

your further. She also tells them that they cannot let go of their future and that they must do whatever to get through that gate.

For this reason, she designed two separate initiatives, titled SOAR and SOAR night school, so that students could have flexible schedules that can provide them the freedom to attend classes and still address the needs mentioned above. In particular, the SOAR program runs from 6:30 a.m. – 10:00 p.m.. The hope is that there are *no excuses* for students in that they can literally “drop in” to school. Furthermore, TEA has given students permission to receive credit by “seat time”, rather than receiving credits via the traditional school model design. Specifically, seat time is the time in which a student is present to class and complete coursework. The SOAR program funded by a federally based grant, which assists those students that have not been successful with the traditional route. Given that the program is being carried out in a district where 87% of their students are receiving free and reduced lunch, and have to work, this is an optimal programmatic format. In short, the life situations of these students leave them with unusually few options. Most importantly, they must work to assist their families. Therefore, educators have had to create a system within a system; yet, educators also need to establish reinforcements in the general public (i.e., the student dropout’s present environment) that work to push the students and that help them realize that they can beat the odds staked against them.

Additionally, The Superintendent for Special Populations tried to bring a few medical clinics into the high school campuses, but instead families use the Harris County District Clinic located on Boone Road as part of the initiative. The district has also hired a liaison to assist students with the paperwork needed to qualify for CHIPS and

Medicaid. Although many students in this district are uninsured, or under insured, we hope to remove these barriers by providing them with access to appropriate medical care.

Students that need assistance with daycare are referred to PEP. This organization connects the students with daycare facilities in the area that will provide child care while the student attends school. In addition, vouchers are provided when students need assistance with daycare while in school.

A liaison from the Children's Defense campaign also works with the district to help students get services needed for their families. This initiative has been of considerable assistance to the district, especially because over 50% of the students do not speak English (Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Burmese, Ibo, Yoruba, etc.) which is part of our LEP population. Many Asian students enter the school over age for their grade levels and counted as refugees. And, due to the location of our school district, and the number of apartments, many families use federally funded programs and sponsors to reside in the area.

Catholic charities and the Chinese community center are extremely active in supporting the refugee populations within the Alief district. It is also pertinent to note that many of our students have never been exposed to a formal educational setting. Their first time in a formal school setting is when they came to our school district. Sometimes they are 16 and 17 years of age, which can be overwhelming. For instance, some are learning how to "read" at 16 and 17 years of age. Students at that age have a higher probability of dropping out because they are, in essence, adults that need to provide for themselves or their families. As the interview continued The Superintendent for Special Populations shared how she started walking in the program as a teacher and assistant

principal, and that she truly feels that schools should walk and connect with the community. When people think of Alief they do not think of one particular school; rather, they think of an entire district. Her philosophy is “it does not matter where you come from, it matters where you are headed and end up, that you are going in the right direction and that you are not stagnant. The person I am today is not the person I was. I have become this person because of mentors, positive role models, teachers, and people that have pushed and pushed and pushed. That is what I expect our teachers to do. So it is essential to connect with the community.” She ended by saying, “Our district, with these low income, nontraditional, none English speaking kids, has been recognized and met AYP for the past two years. We stand as high as the districts with all of the money and family support. Poor little Alief stands up against the Goliaths.”

Post-Walk Student Data

Research Question One

RQ1: How many students truly return, complete or graduate after being recruited during the annual walk ‘Reach Out to Drop Outs?’

A total of 251 students identified through the archival database of Alief Independent School District. The data base consisted of students that were to be recruited during the 2010 annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk. The top three reasons for withdrawal among those identified are (a) whereabouts unknown, (b) absenteeism, and (c) being too far behind in credits.

The demographics of the district are presented in the following table:

Table 4.1

Demographics of Students in District as compared to the state of Texas

Category	District Population	District %	State Population	State %
African American	15,356	33.8%	676,523	14.0%
Hispanic	22,360	49.2%	2,342,680	48.6%
White	1,720	3.8%	1,607,212	33.3%
Native American	219	0.5%	18,890	0.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5,755	12.7%	179,473	3.7%
At-Risk	30,924	68.1%	2,275,895	47.2%
Eco. Dis.	35,632	78.5%	2,848,067	59.0%
LEP	16,709	36.8%	815,998	16.9%

Note: Eco. Dis. = Economically Disadvantaged; LEP = Limited English Proficient.

Looking at the Academic Excellence Indicator System data presented in the state of Texas AEIS reports, the district is a not only majority minority but it is also, as compared to other Texas school districts, majority low income and limited English proficient. The district is more than double the state's African American population at 33.8%, as compared to the Texas average of 14%. Moreover, the Hispanic population within the district is 49.2%, which is higher, yet closer in alignment with the state population of 48.6%. Yet, the district's White population is only 3.8% - a large

discrepancy as compared to the state's average of 33.3%. The district also has a large number of economically disadvantaged and limited English students as compared to the state of Texas. The districts economically disadvantaged percentage is 78.5%, while the state's percentage is only 59% (nearly a 20% differential). The district's limited English proficiency percentage (16.9%) is more than twice that of the state percentage (36.8%). Thus, the Alief district prides itself in being a majority minority, majority low income district – a fact *supported* by the data presented by the state of Texas.

Once the students identified in the urban district displayed above, the students were then labeled as “dropouts” by the school district. The students that were identified as “dropouts” were being recruited based on the 2009-2010 completion rates. This completion rate is a part of the district rating for the 2010-2011 academic school year. These students were placed in a cohort by the school district. Moreover, the information shared with the researcher was in raw format – that is, it only contained the student identification number, the grade at the time of withdrawal, the last known address for the purpose of retrieval, and the location of the addresses based on a map of the city of Houston. In addition, all of the students identified by the researcher were over the age 18. Then, the researcher used the student identification numbers to manually disaggregate the data for the study as follows:

- Race
- Sex
- Economic Status
- Limited English Proficiency

The following table presents a more-detailed description of each of the above-listed categories for the students identified as “dropouts”:

Table 4.2

Total Number of Students Targeted by Race

Category	Total Recruited	Percentage Recruited
African American	98	39.04%
Hispanic	119	47.41%
White	6	02.40%
Asian/Pacific Islander	28	11.15%
Total	251	100%

There were 251 student records randomly reviewed by area for the study. The percentages of the random students reviewed by race in the study closely mirrored the percentages of students by race in the district. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the random sample was reflective of the district as a whole.

Additionally, the students included within this study were also examined on the basis of gender. The following table displays the specific numbers of males and females studied:

Table 4.3

Gender of Students in Study

Category	Total Recruited	Percentage Recruited
Male	176	70%
Female	75	30%
Total	251	100%

Next, the students were randomly selected based on the disaggregated data and the district number of male students and female students in the random sampling reflected the need to improve or look at the manner in which males are being taught as opposed to females. Based on the information generated from the table listed above the percentage of students that drop out of school based on gender in the district and in the random sampling mirror the numbers noted by the Green (2003) and the Department of Education (2010) which states majority of the students that ‘dropout’ are male. This particular approach also aligns with the national concern for male retention – namely, one central question: What is needed to keep male students in school?

The students were also disaggregated based on income and English language development. The students labeled as LEP are students that have a language other than English listed on their Home Language Survey. The Home Language Survey is the documentation used to determine the language needed to service the student.

Table 4.4

Income and LEP Status of Students

Category	Total Recruited	Percentage Recruited
LEP	138	56%
Economically Disadvantaged	256	98%
Total	N/A	N/A

When looking at this data and knowing that the student labeled as LEP (limited English proficient) placed another language other than English on their Home Language Surveys, the conclusion can be made that more support is needed for students that come from homes in which English is not the dominant language. Many of those students identified their dominant language as Spanish. A majority Hispanic district with a large ESL population has more risk factors than most districts in the state of Texas. A similar at-risk trend is also evident with the number of low income students that were 98% of the students that have been labeled as “dropouts”. This also coincides with the research that supports developing more programs and initiatives to support our LEP and economically disadvantaged population. The Texas Education Agency as initiated the Student Success Initiative to assist students in these categories labeled ‘at risk’.

Furthermore, such overall trends tend to be compounding in nature because the majority of students who have dropped out of school have been identified as having more than one risk factor. Hence, the more risk factors a student has the higher probability the student will not be successful in school.

Once the data was disaggregated the researcher then manually extracted the

students that returned after being recruited during the annual walk. Using the data provided above, which was derived from the school districts database entitled E School Plus, the researcher made notes on each student describing why the students withdrew from school and whether the students had completed or graduated. For district purposes, if a student returns for a certain period of time they completed and therefore the district meets state retention standards. For the purpose of the study, the researcher wanted to know the number of students that not only completed but also those who had graduated from one of the local accredited schools. The information in Table 4.5 below illustrates the percentages of students that were recruited after the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts Walk* that did actually complete or graduate from one of the urban school districts high schools. The researcher presented the information in two ways: (a) The percentage of the students studied that completed as compared to the total number of students recruited, and (b) the number of students that completed as compared to the students recruited within a particular category.

Table 4.5

Students that Completed/Graduated by Category Compared to Whole (N=251)

Category	Number Targeted	Percentage Targeted	Number Returned	Number Completed/ Graduated	Number Returned/ Graduated
African American	98	39.04%	45	16	35.55%
Hispanic	119	47.41%	51	23	45.09%
White	6	02.40%	2	1	50.00%
Asian/Pacific	28	11.15%	9	3	33.33%
Total	251	100%	114	43	37.71%
Male	176				
Female	75				
LEP	138		26	10%	
Eco. Dis.	246		42	17%	

Note: Eco. Dis. = Economically Disadvantaged; Pacific = Pacific Islander.

A total of 251 students were randomly chosen through the archival data after being recruited on the day entitled *Reach Out to Dropouts*. Of those 251 students, 43 not only returned to school but also completed and/ are graduated, which represent 16% of the total students recruited. Furthermore, this number was higher than anticipated, especially taking into conclusion the number of addresses that were no longer valid. It is important to note that this district has a mobility rate of approximately 40% - a number that fluctuates on a monthly basis. Subsequently, the students were compared to the

students within the categories to determine the percentage of students within a category return and complete and/or graduate. Of those 114 students that returned, 43 not only returned to school, but also completed and/or graduated, which represents 37.71% of the students targeted.

Table 4.6

Students that Completed/Graduated by Category Compared to Category

Category	Number Recruited	Number Complete/ Graduate	Percentage Complete/ Graduate
African American	98	16	16%
Hispanic	119	23	19%
White	6	1	16%
Asian/Pacific	28	3	11%
Male	176		
Female	75		

Note: Pacific = Pacific Islander.

After examining the data presented in Table 4.6 it is noted that approximately 16% of the students in all categories that are recruited return and complete or graduate. Therefore, the retention percentages are congruent across the board for all students that are recruited after the annual walk.

The school district's implementation of the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk as one on the programs to increase student retention appears to be a success with 43 students returning out of 251 students recruited. Yes, thousands of volunteers walk the streets on

a Saturday morning in September; yet, ultimately, approximately 16% of the students they recruit to return, complete and or graduate.

Post-Walk Results

Research Question Two

RQ2: Why do the students drop out and what influences them to remain after returning?

In this section the researcher reports what was learned through the interviews, as well as reports upon those research tools that helped answer the aforementioned research question. The interviews also provided the students an opportunity to tell their stories. Lastly, each of the students within this particular study attended the same high school.

Narrative Descriptions

Raheem (African American Male)

"Went to jail for a year and nine months and realized I did not graduate from high school. My friends were graduating, so I felt stupid. I became a Christian in jail and my mother passed away while I was in jail, this was very hard. When released I kept going to church and found a job, then started thinking about school. I was asked to come back, by the teachers. They told me to just call the school. So one day I called the school and told them that I was interested. It had to be God, because when I came back to school everything was set up and ready for me. Look at me now about to graduate. All my other friends are in gangs and I am graduating late, but I am graduating."

Raheem. This young man felt that his graduating was fate. He is an adult student living in his own apartment. He grew up in a single parent household with no father

figure. He started out making good grades in elementary school, but he then began to hang out with the wrong crowd in middle school 'getting into the negativity thing that led me down the wrong path'. Later, he became a member of a gang, yet never disclosed the name of the gang. He stated that hanging out with the gang members led to him eventually drop out of his high school. Once again, he did not desire to go into details. Instead, he simply continued to say, "My friends were negative and I did not have a job." Nonetheless, the researcher ensured that his emotional space was respected, especially with regard to his clandestine responses. When asked why he returned to school, he implied that being in jail for one year and nine months, as well as his mother's passing while incarcerated, had had a tremendous influence on his overall decision to return to school 'I realized I didn't graduate from high school and felt stupid'. He discussed it with his father (despite not being raised by him) as he was picked up from jail and learning how his mother passed. His father encouraged him to return to school. Raheem also developed a relationship with God while in jail 'my relationship with God made me think it was time to do the right thing', and credits God as his main influence. He was astonished that the "teachers" were able to find him when he was released from jail and invited him to return high school.

One day he picked up the phone, calling the high school, inquiring about his ability to return. The answer was yes, he was welcome to return. He feels it was fate or God that allowed the "teachers" to find him and his returning to school. He was happy to find that everything was set up and prepared for his return.

After returning, the factors that have allowed him to remain include being around people that desire an education. He reflected on how 'the last time I was in school most

of my friends were not interested in school and were in gangs'. Unlike his previous experiences and negative environments, he has now been able to meet positive friends and people in school. In essence, he is now a part of a positive gang. Furthermore, his teachers are a very positive influence in his life, and he has fallen in love with school 'my teachers are a positive influence in my life and encourage me to succeed'. Raheem feels that educators are always trying to help him. He owes a lot to his teachers; they truly seem to care. Finally, Raheem states he will do whatever God has for him to do after high school. He has a list of things he would like to do, but really does not know where to start. He loves animals and would love to be a veterinarian or another aspect of medicine. He may attend Houston Community College. He is just happy to be graduating. Raheem never thought he would. His was elated as he stated 'No haters in my life'.

Lucinda (African American Female)

"I just want to take care of my child and be a good mother, the mother that I never had. One day I want to come back to school and tell my story. I wanted to come back and my grandmother told me to go back after the school contacted me. I am about to graduate."

Lucinda. Lucinda's child became her inspiration to return to school and graduate with the help of her teachers and encouragement from her grandmother. Lucinda comes from a single parent household, but regards her grandmother as her "mama". She dropped out of school because she had her baby and needed a babysitter. Her mother could not help her with babysitting because she had a baby at the same time and would state 'I'm not taking care of both of our babies I have to work'. So, Lucinda had to drop out to take care of her child. Her mother stated, "She could not take care of both babies,

while Lucinda went to school.” Her mother also taught her how to use the social services.

In her particular case, Lucinda was sitting at home with her baby and the school contacted her by leaving a note on the door. Her grandmother told her that she needed to return to school. Lucinda’s mother did not graduate from high school and her grandmother desired her to graduate from high school. She remembers her grandmother stating ‘you should graduate from school, your mother didn’t graduate, and you should because you want to do something with your life’.. Therefore, Lucinda called the school and told them she was ready to return, but she did not have day care to take care of her baby. She was so happy and surprised when the school stated they had a daycare for her child. Currently, Lucinda has re-enrolled in high school and is about to graduate.

She gives credit to her teachers and grandmother for keeping her in school she clearly stated they continue to tell her ‘oh, you doing so good’. When she graduates she really just wants to be a “good mother” – that is, the mother her mother never was for her. She really wanted me to know that she did not stop going to school; rather, that the birth of her baby forced her to stop. Now, though, Lucinda is so happy that the school helped her with daycare in order to complete her high school degree. In addition, to her great surprise, the district says they will help her with daycare if she goes to Houston Community College. She plans on enrolling in Houston Community College and continuing at the University of Houston. Her cousin is about to graduate from the University of Houston in accounting. At the present time she is so happy that she is going to graduate and very thankful for the assistance with daycare in high school and as she enters Houston Community College. Lucinda ended the interview proclaiming ‘I

can't wait to grow up and speak at schools about my life'.

Angela (African American Female)

"My principal made me come back. She would not leave me alone. The teachers and administrators came to my job and they wanted me to come back to school. Staff started encouraging me to return to school and I lost my job. So, why not go back to school."

Angela. Angela is an adult student. She comes from a single parent household, and she was having problems with her mother. They were not getting along. Her mother had her paying the bills, but was still treating her like a child. Ultimately, mother and daughter both thought it was best for her to move out of the house because they simply did not get along. Angela became very quiet at this point in the interview. Then, when she did actually move out she had to get a job to pay her bills, which often meant she would be working very late hours. Eventually, she slowly stopped attending school because of the combination of shift work and long hours.

One day a school administrator came to her job and it startled her. She was in the corner on her cell phone and jumped off the phone telling her friends "my principal is here, what I did?" Her principal then encouraged her back to school and reminded her of her wonderful personality and intelligence. At first, she was not going to return, but her principal did not stop "hounding her", she stated with laughter. Eventually, she lost her job at Popeye's; she could not find another job; hence, she decided to call the school to see if it was too late to re-enroll. Her principal told her that she was more than welcome to return. Since her return, her teachers have been her primary influence; she still lives independently; and her teachers have made her feel as though she can, in fact, graduate. She stated, "Everybody has been behind me graduating," and, "The people [here] want

me to leave the school with a diploma.” Angela was so happy to tell me that she is about to graduate. She then added ‘why shouldn’t I graduate I’m doing really good here and everyone been on my behind about graduating’.

She is torn as to what her future holds. She desires to attend Houston Community College, but she is also interested in the armed forces. She has her eyes on the Air Force. Right now she is just happy that she had a second chance to graduate with a diploma.

Amanda (African-Hispanic Female)

“I love the way the school has set up my schedule to allow me to work and attend classes.”

Amanda. This particular student was raised in a single parent household. Her dominant language is Spanish, but she prefers to be known as “black”. Later, she proudly stated she was Dominican. Her interview was very short with direct closed answers. Amanda stated that she did not graduate because she did not have all the credits necessary to graduate. Nevertheless, she passed all of her TAKS test before she stopped going to school. She never stated why she was not attending class, but simply reported that she was *absent*. In her words ‘I didn’t dropout I just stop coming, I passed my TAKS test, I just stop coming. She never explained why she stopped coming. The interviewer later learned she was a single parent.

In Amanda’s particular case, the school contacted her about returning and she spoke to her mother and they decided it would be best. She wanted a better life – although she never defined what “a better life” specifically entailed. She simply made it clear that her goal is to have a ‘better life’. She later contacted the school to see if she could return. Ultimately, the school welcomed her back. She has enjoyed high school

this time because she is enrolled in a program that allows her to leave early so that she can work. She is doing very well in classes and making good grades. She did state how happy she was to be graduating 'it feels good to be graduating and making good grades'. And, after high school she desires to work full time, but would eventually like to attend Houston Community College. Her interview may have been short because she had to rush to her last class.

Lakeisha (African American Female)

"I have so much support; my foundational background is strong from my parents, to the faculty and staff at my high school. I am a determined person. I am not a quitter. I do not fail. If you do not plan ahead, then you plan to fail.

I am going to graduate."

Lakeisha. This student resides with both of her parents and truly believes 'God sets us up to tell a story'. In addition, she was very concerned about her older brother. He has joined a gang despite the opportunities her parents have tried to give them he continues to walk down what she calls "the wrong path". She truly does not want to imitate the path he has taken. She describes him as 'the smartest, sweetest person in the world'. She goes on to say 'he doesn't appreciate the job daddy got him at Methodist hospital, how many 20 year olds do you know have a 401K'.

Lakeisha I states that she was a very strong student, and that she is a student athlete. She has always enjoyed school, but dropped out due to an injury. She tore her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and missed too many days after her surgery 'I didn't want to leave school; I just could not make it'. Eventually, her absenteeism subsequently led to her dropping out of high school. She was depressed for a while, yet she knew that

she needed to return to school.

The school phoned her father and he encouraged her to return. She realized that she needed her education to advance in this world. She may not be able to play basketball, but she can go further with an education. Once she returned it was so easy for her to remain because she has always enjoyed school. Her original plan was to go to college using her basketball, but this time her focus is on getting her education 'if I can play basketball, I can get an education and have a career'.

She has a lot of support and believes that she is blessed with a strong family background. Her father went to college, but did not graduate. Her mother, on the other hand, just graduated from high school. Her parents are very active in the church and supportive of her returning to school. For instance, Lakeisha stated, "The teachers and staff at the high school will not allow you to not believe in yourself," and, "There is no way they will allow you to fail." She sees herself as a very determined person with a lot of goals and ambition. Thus, failure is not an option for her, as she states, "If you do not plan ahead, you plan to fail."

After completing high school she is truly excited about going to college. She will begin at Houston Community college and then transfer to a large university. She has no idea at this point which university she desires to attend, just that she will attend a large university. She still has a desire to play college basketball, but now the focus is on education. Lakeisha cannot wait to start a "life of responsibility"; and having a high school diploma helps her start that endeavor. She firmly believes 'freedom has restrictions; you have not made it until you have papers! Everyone has equal opportunity, it's just the route you take, everyone route to success is different.

Balara (Hispanic Female)

“My mother works with me and I make more money than she makes. It hit me I needed to graduate or I will be working a lot, with a little money. I have to finish because of my son.”

Balara. This student is an independent student and a single parent. She was raised between two adults, but this equation did not include her biological father. Her mother left the man that raised her when she was supposed to graduate. She was supposed to graduate last year, but she moved in with her son’s father ‘tired of my mother and her boyfriend(s), so I moved in with my baby daddy’. Then they eventually broke up, so she tried to move in with her mother. Next, her mother broke up with the man she was living with, so the two of them moved to Missouri City and she left the high school she had been attending.

At one point during the research interview, Balara began to cry because she did not like living with her mother ‘my mother got mad at me because I had better tips than her at the restaurant, but I can speak English’. Further, she did not know anyone at her new school ‘I hated that school, I did not know anyone’. She eventually started missing school, and she was now going to school in another district, which began to issue her citations for truancy. Ultimately, this sad trend was now costing her family money. She could not afford to pay the truancy tickets, and did not want to attend court, so she withdrew ‘couldn’t pay those tickets, needed to get back in school. Next, she started working in the evening and helping her mother pays the bills. When the school year ended and summer arrived she would see graduation “stuff” in the stores and go home crying thinking ‘why didn’t I graduate’.

Balara always wanted to attend college. Friends would see her at the restaurant telling her they were enrolling in college and graduated, which would also make her feel sad. She continued working. Then, in September, she was contacted about returning to her original high school. She stopped living with her mother and thought about returning, yet she did not return 'what could I do, I have a son'. Instead, Balara continued working, but eventually made the decision to return to her original school later that December. It was very hard because all of her friends were gone, yet her focus was now centers fully on her son. Now, Balara is graduating!

Balara returned to her school because of her son. Even though she was working and getting paid, she could not provide him with what he wanted only what he needed 'I want my son to have a good life'. In addition, she did not desire to be like her mother. For instance, working at the same restaurant as her mother and making more money than her was a big eye opener for Balara. She knew she was not making much money, so it has to be hard for her mother. She truly realized that she was working very hard for 'very little money'. Moreover, Balara often had to work the night shift, which did not allow her to see her son. She did not desire to work like that for the rest of her son's life. Quality time with her son is very important 'I need to be with my son'. Once she was recruited and decided to return she realized that graduation was a must. She wants "a better job and have a better life." With this in mind, her son was her primary influence, and her life now is dedicated to him. She is very thankful to the teachers for all of their inspiration, but her son is her primary force.

When she completes high school she would like to attend Houston Community College and take her basics, but she really has no idea what she will do after taking her

basics. At this point she is taking things “one day at a time.” Balara’s strongest subjects are math and science, and she would love to do something business related. In addition, she has thought about being a teacher. Balara believes going to Houston Community College will give her a chance to think about what she truly desires to pursue with her life. Her mother hopes that Balara will become a nurse, but that is not for her. Balara wants to be a role model for her son; she wants her son to go to college; and she wants to “do something big!”

Reynardo (Hispanic Male)

“My mother does not support me. She tells me that I will never be an American. It is hard for you without a diploma. I have to show my son he can get a diploma. My son is my inspiration. I do not want my son to know or remember me by the bad things I have done. Before returning to school he prayed to Jesus for a second chance.”

Reynardo. This particular young man is an independent student raised in a single parent household, and his dominant language – he states – is not really Spanish. He was proud to tell me he was Aztec. He has had to learn to speak, read and write Spanish and English. He is not an American citizen. He dropped out of school because he had to support his son ‘my son is my life’. And, before having his son, he was in a gang but did not disclose the name of the gang. He was hanging with a very negative crowd and he made many poor choices ‘they didn’t want to do anything, but hang out’. However, he wanted it noted that he is a *former gang member*. He does not want his son to become a gangster. While in gangs he was almost killed five times. Rather than follow this life path, Reynardo wants his son to know that ‘he can grow up and be whatever he wants to be in life’. Reynardo dropped out of school almost two years ago, yet he has returned at

the age of 20. He wishes his mother was more supportive. She would tell me that I 'was never going to be anything'.

Reynardo was also sent to jail for a period of time, but did not desire to talk much about his time in jail. He did state, however, that most of his friends are still in jail. After being released from jail, breaking up with his son's mother, and working for very little pay, he decided to return to school. He remembers someone from the school contacting him. And, although he did not attend at first, he eventually decided to re-enroll and now he enjoys attending school. He proudly proclaims "I like learning".

In reality, Reynardo returned to school for his son – his primary life inspiration. Additionally, he wants to be a positive role model in his son's life, especially considering his father was not a positive role model. Aside from this particular fact, Reynardo did not want to discuss issues related to his father and withdrew for a moment. Furthermore, he separated from his mother because she did not believe in him. His mother has not encouraged him to achieve an education. She does not have an education and Reynardo truly feels she does not desire him to do better than her in life. He did not understand why 'a parent would not want their child to do better than them, I only want my son to do better than me'.

Reynardo currently works cutting yards, and he fully respects the owner of the company for which he is currently working. The owner has become a surrogate father and is encouraging him to remain in school. He stated 'he loves me like the father I never had and says he will help me go to college'. He only makes approximately \$200.00/week, and most of that money goes to his son. Yet, Reynardo still wants to provide more for his baby. Everything he buys is for his son, not for his own gain.

Reynardo's school program allows him to attend classes part-time, which also allows him to work. In addition, he is trying to obtain a visa, and is currently considered a Mexican citizen. He goes back and forth to Mexico about every six months.

Before returning to school he prayed to Jesus for a second chance 'God is the center of my life'. He was pleasantly surprised when the school officials contacted him. He has truly enjoyed his second opportunity. The primary reason for remaining in school is his son, but he also gives a lot of credit to his teachers because they have truly made him feel that he can succeed.

After he completes high school he plans to continue working for his employer. His employer does everything for him and states he will help him pay for his college education; that is, as long as he desires to attend college. He just wants Reynardo to attend school and take care of his son. He was recently promoted to manager of the lawn care service. Reynardo thought about going to the military, but does not want to be separated from his son. It is hard for him emotionally at this time because his son is living with his ex-girlfriend. Most of the people he knows cut lawns or clean houses. Many days he works from 5:00 p.m.-6:00 a.m. and then he goes to school. He realizes that if he does not graduate he will continue work cutting lawns or in the fast food industry. He thought about getting a GED, but he really wanted to get his diploma "I want my son to know that you can do it, it is for my son".

Reynardo would really like to become a mechanic; therefore, completing his citizenship is very important. For the time being, though, he will continue to cut lawns and live with his employer. This arrangement is allowing him to attend school and take care of his son. Once he figures out how to obtain his citizenship he will begin attending

Jose also noted that working for the lawn service is not bad. Moreover, he enjoys being a manager. He does not desire to own a lawn service; yet, he likes to “fix things.”

Themes

The Focus group interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to give voice to the numbers that were disaggregated using the data and provide a multidimensional understanding of the student's experience of a condition that goes beyond an everyday or common sense awareness and which leads to a more informed, nuanced and empathic practice. Additionally, however, the researcher noticed an number of emergent, reoccurring themes that rose out of the study participants' responses. The reoccurring themes centered around parenthood, lack of positive role models and wanting a better life. The students interviewed had many of the risk factors related to dropouts. They also accredited many of the same influences as to remaining in school after returning.

Negative Themes

Majority of the students interviewed had a very low opinion of the adults with the title 'parent' in their lives. They did not speak of their parents in a positive light. Two statements resounded 'I want to be a better mother than my mother ever was...' " 'My mother did not want me to do better than her...." 'I got tired of living with my mother and her boyfriend..... and finally 'my mother was jealous of me because I had better tips, but I can speak English and she can not "I had to leave my home because I could not get alone with my mother....". Lamb's study did take into consideration the number of people with the title "parent or guardian", but concluded the background of those titled

“parent” or “guardian” has an influence on retention. Students in households of parents that do not graduate from high school are at greater risk (Ryak, 2007).

The students always felt they had a purpose, but lacked positive images and finances to make their dreams come true. Parents were often seen as competition as the students became adults. None of the students went into in depth conversations concerning the personal habits or behaviors of their parents, but they felt the need to work. Working assisted the family. All of the students were ‘low income’ and described every adult in their environment as being ‘low income’.

Working was a ‘must’ for financial support in the homes because majority of the students came from single parent households with the mothers as the ‘head of household’. There was little to no mention of a male or positive male image in the home. The female head of household was not spoken of with much respect. The male students both lived independently. One student’s mother died when while he was in prison. He only mentioned his father picking him up from ‘jail’. The second male student continuously discussed his mother’s ‘lack of support and encouragement’. He actually felt she did not desire him to succeed or in his words ‘do better than him’. These students came from a world in which the parent’s behaviors also mirrored those of a child with little or no money and lack of positive guidance. Nowicki and Duke (2004) also identified the following similar risk factors: income, race, family status, parental education and language. It should be noted that the more risk factors a student must overcome the higher the probability that the student will not graduate from high school. And, the students who do better in school stay in school and are more likely to graduate. Bandura (1993/1997) believed that people achieve what they believe.

This led the students to find comfort in the relationships with peers. Friends or peers did not influence them to as they stated 'do the right things'. Their peers encouraged them to skip school, steal from stores, 'hang out' and experience adult sexual relationships. Some of the students reported 'living with a boyfriend or baby mama' at 16 and 17 years old. The male students admitted to 'being in gangs' and going to jail. They both admitted 'most of their friends had gone to jail'. All but one of the female students are single parents hanging out with other young single parents. While the students did not want to go into details over their past lives, the quietness in the room and looks on their faces while being questioned told a silent story. Only one student reported being a member of any student organizations or playing sports. This student was also the only student to speak highly of her parents. So it can be concluded the phrase 'you are the company you keep' may have some truth.

Risk factors established during this research was supported. Throughout the research it is stated 'being a single parent, parents educational and income level, and peers developed have an influence on students. The negative themes discovered during the research were reinforced by the interviews. Hence, one of the difficulties for teachers is to encourage students to have higher life goals without insulting the parents.

Positive Themes

All of the students had a reason to remain in school after returning and the reoccurring theme desired to have "a better life". The definition of a better life included attending college for all of the students and being better parents than their parents were for most of them. Majority of the students are now parents and state their 'children are their inspiration'. All of the young ladies desired to give their children a 'good life so

one day they can grow up and do better than they have done'. The district being able to provide day care for the students as they attended school was of assistance to the students. The young ladies also spoke of 'using the day care when going to HCC'. Only one male stated he had a child. His child was his total inspiration. He did not desire his child to live the same lifestyle he lived in his past. This truly supported once again how poor parenting and the decisions we make as parents do influence our children's behaviors in both a positive and negative manner.

The students also gave a lot of credit to their teachers. Good positive teachers produce good strong students. Student retention has also been related to student-teacher relationships (Sanders, 2000). Educators had a positive influence on the students from knocking on the door inviting them to return, leaving a hanger on the door, chasing them down at work, a phone call stating 'you are welcome to return' or in the words of the student 'hounding me'. The students did not feel they could be successful without their teachers' encouragement. In fact, students' very perceptions related to student-teacher relationships have been known to have an impact on academic achievement (Smith 2001). Using panel data drawn from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988, findings suggest that the greater the teachers' expectations for the student, the greater his/her actual academic achievement (Sanders, 2000). It may be concluded through evidence from other studies, therefore, that teacher-student relations have a positive and significant influence on students themselves. This particular finding answers an essential question: What happens to the twinkle in the child's eye after elementary school? Once again, the more positive the teacher, the better results yielded by the student.

Many of the students live independently with a different set of peers. The students no longer hang out with the students that influenced them to participate in socially acceptable behaviors such as drinking, stealing, participating in gangs and adult sexual situations. They have learned to 'hang out with the students that desire to learn and enjoy school. Relationships in the church have not only given the students a new set of positive peers, but also a strong sense of belonging. This new found positive 'gang' and sense of belonging led to accomplishing something they never felt they would or could accomplish 'graduation'. Now all desire to come back to the community as 'positive role models' helping other students in need.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter Four was to discuss the findings to the two research questions:

RQ1: How many students truly return, complete or graduate after being recruited during the annual walk Reach Out to Dropouts?

It was determined that many school districts in the state of Texas try to meet the national goal by reaching out to dropouts during an annual walk that initiated in partnership with the Houston Independent School District. The walk is now being emulated by many districts throughout the state. In one urban school district approximately 400 students were recruited during the annual walk. Of the 400 students recruited 251 were studied for this particular research project. And, it was determined that 43 of the students (15%) that were recruited during the walk did actually complete or graduate from the local high school.

Once it was determined how many students returned or completed after being

recruited the researcher then the following question was presented:

RQ2: Why do the students drop out and what influences them to remain after returning?

Of the 43 students that completed or graduated, seven participated in a focus group. It was discovered that several risk factors influenced the students dropping out of school. The factors were: being raised in single parent households, growing up to become single parents, poor parenting examples, gangs, incarceration, and negative peer pressure. The factors that have influenced them remain in school after returning as adults include: having children or becoming parents, educators, desiring to be positive role models, and wanting to continue education in order to have a better life.

Over a million of the students who enter ninth-grade each year fail to graduate with their peers four years later. And, having one student not completing high school causes great concerns. School districts throughout the country and state, therefore, are developing and implementing programs to assist with students remaining in school until completion. School districts are also focusing on students who are labeled “at-risk” and not able to matriculate through the public school system using the traditional track. Students labeled “at-risk” have a higher probability of not completing high school and becoming “dropouts”.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Gone are the days when a man like my grandfather – a man with less than a high school education – can support a family and pay his son's college tuition through a life spent farming. Gone are the days where a high school education could guarantee the financially successful adult life of a Detroit factory worker, Los Angeles waitress, or Philadelphia custodian. America began as an agricultural society in which making a living primarily derived from the use and or ownership of land. People born into indentured and bonded slavery, and then later obtained freedom, developed the opportunity to become economically successful in America through the use of land. Thus, a formal education was not needed to guarantee a profitable adult life during this time period. Furthermore, many Americans during this era did not have an education beyond "grammar school". Eventually, the industrial revolution opened up American passage ways and afforded Americans citizens more opportunities to become profitable economic citizens with a high school education. America has now entered the age of technology and the playing field has increased becoming "worldwide". Therefore, Americans now compete for jobs and careers with members of a truly global citizenry. These current-day jobs often require a college degree at the very minimum. Therefore, if we are only graduating 70% of our high school students, are we preparing them to work in this global society? In order to ensure a secure economic future in 21st century

America, a high school education is an absolute necessity.

Graduation rates are used as an indicator of how schools are ultimately performing. Moreover, America's high schools have become the gatekeepers to college, the workforce, the welfare, and (unfortunately) the correctional systems. Simply stated, solid schools help to build solid citizens. Sadly, though, high school dropout rates in the U.S. have reached a critical stage; they now represent an issue of national crisis and concern; and they have become part of President Barack Obama's reform platform (EASA) for 2011. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which was developed under President George W. Bush, dictated federal mandates that required school districts to assure that all students would receive a quality education. Nonetheless, students have been left behind for several reasons.

In almost every case, students do not simply "dropout" on a whim; rather, they stop attending for a variety of very specific reasons. For instance, work is one particular reason that may choose to leave a school system. In this particular instance, the student may feel that he or she must work to support family, which may include their own parents, or children they have parented themselves. This particular outlook of family interdependence can become generational and, therefore, a student "risk factor". Not speaking English, or being a limited English speaker, also puts students at particular risk of dropping out. Many of these students come from other countries and can become discouraged due to their lack of language, as well as their lack of understanding of their new cultural norms and environments. Typically, schools are not genuinely learner-centered environments. In fact, many American school systems still operate on the modeled developed during the industrial revolution in which a high school education

could be considered a terminal degree. Many schools also maintain low expectations, and instruction is delivered at the lower levels of Blooms Taxonomy. As a result, students often become bored with school and find peers more exciting. And, unfortunately, some high school dropouts eventually become entrenched in the correctional system. These societal factors each affect student retention in their own unique manner.

School districts across the country began to implement programs to assist with the retention of students. The Texas Education Agency implemented the Student Success Initiative to support students experiencing academic difficulties. Subsequently, Expectation Graduation stemmed from this particular initiative. This initiative placed an expectation on Texas educators to improve the retention rates of Texas public schools. Expectation Graduation implemented one initiative, known as the *Reach Out to Dropouts* annual walk, to increase the retention rate of a district. An urban Independent School District participated in the program; thus, following in the footsteps of the Houston Independent School District, and as a direct response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

Annually, thousands of volunteers walk the streets of Houston knocking on doors with hopes of returning students that did not graduate or complete high school to their campuses. This initiative partially supports both a national- and district-based agenda by meeting the need to increase student retention rates. The researcher found this study fascinating because, since it was conceived in her own urban area school district, she was an actual participant in the annual walk.

Findings and Interpretations

Obtaining a marketable education in the 21st century is vital to experiencing the American dream. The American dream will be very difficult to obtain without a high school education. The United States of America is making student retention one of its main objectives, as noted by President Barack Obama (2011) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. And, with these mandates, school districts have developed initiatives to assist with the charge mandated by the federal government. The initiative *Reach Out to Drop Out* is currently being employed in an urban school district in Texas, and it uses a great deal of manpower; nonetheless, it does yield any specific statistical or effectiveness results.

In the first portion of this research, the objective was to determine whether targeted students returned, completed and/or graduated after the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk. The research data was obtained from an urban school district in Texas with approximately 45,000 students. The school district's student demographics were as follows: Hispanic (49.2%), African American (33.8%), Asian/Pacific Islander (12.7%), White (3.8%), and Native American (0.5%). From the 45,000 students, a data base containing approximately 600 students were analyzed. This particular database was then downsized to 251 students through the use of a convenience sample. Then, from the 251 students in the convenience sample, 114 students returned and 43 of those students graduated. Therefore, 37.71% of the students that dropped out of school returned and graduated out of the total 251 students targeted after the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk. It can be concluded, therefore, that 37.71% of those targeted from a convenience sample of 251 students do actually return, complete, or graduate after this annual walk.

Yes, it feels good to walk the streets looking for former students; yet, having the students return and graduate is a more productive, outcome-based result.

Secondly, for those students who did return and graduate, this study examined which factors influenced them to dropout and, subsequently, to remain in school a second time as adult students, even despite the many risk factors they many have endured. Studies have shown that the more risk factors a student has, the more difficult it may be for him or her to graduate from high school (Ryak, 2007; Cassel, 2003; Lamm, 2005). Of the 251 student targeted and used for the convenience sample, 114 of those students returned, and 43 eventually graduated. Therefore, 37.71% of the students that returned did, in fact, graduate. In addition, of the 37.71% of students who returned and graduated, seven were randomly selected to participate in a focus group interview. This qualitative, or “lived”, experience research analyzed the reasons behind the statistics. In particular, poor parenting was determined to be a reason students dropped out of school. Their parents were reported as acting more like friends than parents. Many of these parents lacked education and did not graduate from school themselves. Hence, students in households of parents that do not graduate from high school are at greater risk (Ryak, 2007). In this particular study, the majority of the students interviewed were products of single parent households with no positive male influence. Additionally, they worked to support the family (Bates & Cassidy, 2005). The students did not feel supported by their parents, and often felt the parents viewed them as competitors, which often led to students leaving their home environments. Again, in such cases, the students became independent, and they were eventually led toward finding a social refuge in friends and close peers.

Next, negative peers were also noted as a primary reason why students did not continue attending high school. Those interviewed in the focus groups acknowledged skipping school, hanging out, and having adult sexual relationships with their peers. The male students also acknowledged becoming a gang member, which led to incarceration for some. All but one of the female students was also a single mother. In each of the above situations, their peers did not encourage them to attend school and, when compounded with their exposure to negative parenting, the students admitted that they simply stopped attending school.

The risk factors noted within the research literature were likewise noted by the students as reasons they dropped out of school. This proved the notion that the more risk factors a student must endure, the greater the probability he or she will drop out of school.

Nevertheless, each of the seven students interviewed were slated for graduation. Thus, a critical question remained: What factors or influences caused them to remain in school after returning? All of the students want to have a better life and realize that a high school education is vital in making that dream come true. Moreover, since they have worked and lived independently, they understand the need to find better employment. It is also critical to note that having had a child has also influenced the students' resilience to remain in school and eventually graduate. These students stated a desire to be better parents than their parents were, and to give their children a "better life" than they had had. Additionally, the male students who acknowledged being parents expressed a desire for their sons not to become gang members; whereas, the female students each wanted to be good mothers, and not to compete with their children.

The students interviewed also stated that educators had made a big difference in their lives. In each individual case, there was a teacher, principal, or counselor that had reached out to them beyond the walk event and encouraged them to succeed. This made the students feel they could succeed. The specialized classes and daycare provided by the district were incentives for the students to continue with their education. The district partnership with Houston Community College also gave the students a reason to continue with their education. Those students with children looked forward to the daycare that would be provided if they attended Houston Community College. These educators instilled a sense of hope in the students, and assisted to be successful in their social interactions. All of the students thanked an educator.

Positive peers were reported as a reason the students remained. In particular, the students interviewed stated that they had befriended other students with high expectations. Now, the students were a part of a positive “gang”. And, for the first time in their lives, education was the central focus, and the students enjoyed not being in trouble. In addition, church or religion also became a factor in the students’ lives, which not only gave them inspiration, but also a new set of positive peers.

Yes, students with several risk factors are at greater risk of not completing high school; yet, if educators that work with these students, if they make it their charge to develop relationships, and if they understand the reasoning behind the students’ decisions, then change can occur. The researcher felt that the Superintendent of Special Populations stated it best through her philosophy, which holds that “it does not matter where you come from; it matters where you are headed and end up, that you are going in the right direction and that you are not stagnant. The person I am today is not the person

I was. I have become this person because of mentors, positive role models, teachers, and people that have pushed and pushed and pushed. That is what I expect our teachers to do. So it is important to connect with the community.” She ended by saying, “Our district, with this low income, non-traditional, none English speaking kids, has been recognized and met AYP for the past two years. We stand as high as the districts with all of the money and family support. Poor little Alief stands up against the Goliaths.”

Implications

The research displayed in this research study demonstrates that the annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk is successful. Knocking on the doors, greeting the students, and welcoming them to school are only the first steps in the process; nonetheless, these actions open the door to education, and allow students to feel comfortable enough to enter in. The researcher learned that the annual walk is a target date, but the accountability department continues to welcome students back to school based on their cohort. For this reason, the students feel they are being “hounded” by the teachers. It would be nice if each of the 251 students targeted would have returned, completed, and graduated, but having 43 students graduate out of the 114 that returned is still an accomplishment. Walking through the neighborhood also allowed educators to better understand the communities in which their students dwell while meeting more students and touching more lives. Additionally, it is important to note how much the parents in the neighborhood appreciated knowing someone “cared” about their child. This initiative started as a result of Expectation Graduation within the Houston A+ Challenge, in 2004, under the leadership of former Mayor Bill White, and it was later adopted throughout the Houston area. Thus, it can be confidently said that this initiative has had a far reaching

impact on the residents and educators across a wide span. It is not just a walk done every year on the same weekend of the month in September; rather, it is now an expectation that should be continued to assist students in achieving graduation.

Suggestions

Education should be focused on the learner or student and not the test and learner center, especially in communities with a large number of “at-risk” students. Studies have shown that “teaching to the test” does not enhance student learning. In addition, students labeled as “at-risk” should be placed in specific classes that will better serve their academic needs (Cassel, 2003). Many of the students not performing well on standardized test may have one or more of the risk factors indicated in these studies (i.e., low income, race, family status, parental education and or language) (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Therefore, the educational process should be learner-focused. Many students are developmentally prepared to progress; yet, they lack the proper academic skills needed to perform successfully in subsequent grades. Ezarik (2003) also suggests the use of multiple measures in order to determine promotion (or placement) and social promotion, which is the act of placing a student in the next grade based on their age. He also suggests that this approach should not be viewed as a form of intervention.

Therefore, educators should make an effort to design individual educational plans for all students. The “one size fits all” model developed during the industrial revolution is no longer working, and teachers need the necessary skills to be successful within this new realm. Ezarik (2003) is in favor of progressive and relevant professional development as a potential method to achieve such an aim. In particular, professional development should be learner-centered if it is deemed to be effective, and if it is going

to be useful for teachers. More educational systems should follow the Response To Intervention (RTI) approach as a model for addressing the needs of all students through a continuum of services which provide the following: (a) High-quality instruction and scientific, researched-based, tiered intervention strategies aligned with individual student need; (b) frequent monitoring of student progress to make results-based academic or behavioral decisions; (c) data-based school improvement; and, (d) the application of student response data to important educational decisions (such as those regarding placement, intervention, curriculum, and instructional goals and methodologies). Such approaches would assist with not being so quick to label students as “at-risk”. The practice of labeling a student “at-risk” charges educators with the task of monitoring students closely throughout their educational career (Abrams & Haney, 2004). It is also important to remember that the ultimate goal is for all students to experience academic success.

Educators are simply an initial layer in the beginning of the process to assist our students to remain in school. Additionally, legislation aides in laying a firm foundation for our students to be successful, but it truly takes a village to raise a child. Wyatt (2009) and Greene (2003) both noted the need to keep more male students in schools. The community needs to look at how schools are being managed to see if they are truly meeting the needs of our male students. Cassidy and Bates (2005) also believe that a school established on “caring” fosters leadership and grows students. Payne (2002) noted that respecting and being sensitive to those in or transitioning from these classes is of the utmost importance, particularly if one is to move a school forward and, therefore, change a school’s culture. Payne (2002) also advocates respecting and being sensitive to cultural

differences as it relates to classes. Schools are generally based on a “passive” model of learning; yet, males need more kinesthetic or “hands-on” learning. How can we enhance education for our male students? In all demographic areas, males do not graduate at the same rate as their female counterparts. In this particular research, 114 students returned, but only 29 of these students were males. Therefore, only 25% of the students that returned were males. Male retention needs to be addressed by looking at the way males are educated. Having male students in smaller classes, or classes with only males, may assist with retention. Studies determined that smaller classes had a very positive effect on students and – instead of the thirty-to-one ratio – classrooms were more effective and engaging when reduced to a fifteen-to-one ratio. In addition, an atmosphere of care was implemented throughout the school, and the staff actively built an atmosphere of family. Like the school environment in Chicago mentioned earlier, when the males had a reason to belong to the school community they progressed (Wyatt, 2009).

Additionally, poor parenting should be addressed if educators hope to improve retention and graduation rates in our nation’s schools. More specifically, parents need to view school as a vital part of their child’s lifelong success. Schools must also find ways to bring more parents into the school and allow them to feel a part of the overall learning process. Educators need to understand the culture of poverty in order to better meet the needs of the parents being served (Payne). Teachers are urged to conference not only with their students, but also with the students’ parents. Ultimately, understanding a student’s background can help to improve their overall relationship with the student.

The issue of poor parenting can be addressed only if educators join together with the community in order to better assist those parents that have fallen between the cracks.

Covey (2008) believed that making a truly learner-centered school environment would improve student achievement, enhance self-esteem and confidence in the students, decrease discipline problems, increase educator job satisfaction, improve school culture, and increase positive engagement among parents, and foster better relationships with community leaders and businesses. In other words, creating a truly learner-centered school experience supports the development of the total child, which would also help educators in changing the culture within communities and turn the tide on negative peers.

The children will not have to learn social behavior from their peers if the parents are taught parenting skills. With such skills, parents may teach young men to take responsibility for their children; parents can become positive role models in helping their children to navigate through life; and, parents can guide young women in accepting motherhood as a gift. Strong parents – whether single or married – may not deter negative peers; yet, they may give their children another frame of reference through which they can view their lives and their education. Ultimately, a stronger community creates stronger educational institutions and, subsequently, it develops stronger and more academic students. Stronger academic students also enhance a school's overall student excellence, which, in turn, enhances student retention.

Schools should be designed to meet the students' needs, not the school's needs. Therefore, such a change would entail cultural shifts in both local school centers and/or districts, which can generally take from three-to-five years. It would also entail parental and community involvement and the possible restructuring of schools in order to meet each individual students' needs.

The era in which a high school dropout could earn a living or make a decent wage

has ended in the United States. Subsequently, dropouts significantly diminish their chances of securing a good job, as well as attaining a promising future. Not only do these individuals not meet the requirements of an education, they are also responsible for substantial financial and social costs to their communities, states, and the country as a whole. Gone are the days when a high school education was a sufficient end to achieve the American dream. Also, gone are the days in which the traditional U.S. educational system can adequately fulfill the needs of students in obtaining the American dream and being employable in this global 21st century.

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