

A Study of Dropouts and Implications
for Dropout Prevention in a Rural High School

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ABSTRACT

This study of a rural high school in southeast Georgia was intended to address the issues of low graduation rates and not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The study looked at intrinsic and extrinsic factors seen as obstacles for four subgroups of students, those who had already dropped out and those who were at-risk of doing so. These subgroups included nonminority and minority students, male and female.

The research methods employed included a mixed-methods study designed to separately gather and analyze data from the archival drop-out group and the at-risk focus group at Coffee High School, categorize and analyze the quantitative data using chi squares, then merge qualitative data using triangulation, to see if the at-risk sample imitated the dropout sample's apparent factors in leaving school. The at-risk focus group was interviewed in two sessions to give voice to their feelings and factors, enhancing the findings of the quantitative portions of the study.

Major findings of this study have been students mostly adhered to similar studies in indicating intrinsic and extrinsic factors which caused failure in school. In terms of ethnicity and student motivation, there was a marginal statistical significance between the two for leaving school prior to graduation. In regard to gender and ethnicity, results were more clearly significant between the two for leaving school prior to graduation. Finally, among at-risk students, although most spoke more of intrinsic factors that caused them problems at school, all subgroups: nonminority, minority, male and female, determined that it would be the extrinsic factors that would ultimately make them want to leave school before graduation.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loved ones past, present, and future.

Past: To my father, Harvey Ellis, who always believed I could be, do, or have anything I wanted, always encouraged me in any way he could, and was always proud of anything I accomplished and to my mother, Verna Moyer Ellis, who always believed a wife's place was at home. Sometimes a woman's course veers off-track, Mom. To the best mother-in-law a woman could ever have, Lucille Wooten. You believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

Present: To my rock, my husband, Quitman Wooten, my daughters, Cheyenne and Amy, and son-in-law, Dan, who sacrificed precious time with me that I might fly as high as I could go. Now our lives begin again!

Future: To my precious grandchildren, Addison, Haydan, Reeanna, and Zade, to whom I hope in years ahead, that I've been an inspiration. I love you, my angels!

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The legislative legacy of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on our school systems across America and their impact on curriculum, test scores, and graduation rates will not be known for years to come. There have been both social and economic impacts from the 1.3 million students or 31% of the nation's youth who have dropped out of high school each year ("Broader Horizons," 2009). As shown by the Center for Labor Market Studies ("*Left Behind*," 2009), those impacts include lower wages, taxes, and consumer spending, higher financial assistance, healthcare costs, and crime-related costs. One of ten young male dropouts is incarcerated on any given day ("*Left Behind*," 2009). Major employers such as AT&T and smaller, independently-owned companies such as Knauf Insulation in Shelbyville, Indiana lament the lack of skilled workers (Forsyth, 2008; Thornburgh, 2006). Data offered by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) indicate a lack of fundamental competencies such as reading, writing, computing, and technological skills that are sorely needed in today's workers. Numerical findings help clarify the national picture. The composite graduation rate across America for the graduating class of 2006 is 69.2% ("Broader Horizons"). The report also presents a breakdown by racial groups. These percentages are shown in Table 1. In the same report females are shown to graduate at a higher rate than males, 72.2% compared to 64.9% ("Broader Horizons").

Table 1

National Graduation Rate for Class of 2006 by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Percent
Asians	78.9
Whites	76.1
Latinos	55
Blacks	51.2
Native Americans	50

Gates Foundation researchers (“School to College”, 2008) and Heckman, LaFontaine, Roy, and Mishel (2008) disagree about theories regarding the proper calculation of graduation rates. According to Heckman et al., the main problem with the Gates Foundation’s graduation rate calculations is the assumption that the number of students enrolled in 9th grade is the same number of students who enter high school. They claim this assumption artificially lowers estimates of current graduation rates. Minorities are most likely to be retained. Additionally, they argue (Heckman et al.) that this measure artificially reduces the growth of the graduation rate over time because grade retention has grown, especially among minorities (Heckman et al).

Adding to this claimed inaccuracy involving the use of the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) is the variety of reporting formulas (leaver, cohort, composite, and persistence rates) used by different states (“School to College”, 2008). Most methods are ineffective in reporting true data and present difficulties in comparing state-to-state

graduation rates (“School to College”). Table 2 shows discrepancies for the last four years using the CPI compared to Georgia’s leaver rate.

Table 2

Discrepancies in Graduation Rates for All Georgia Students by Year

Graduation year	GA’s grad rate per <i>Diplomas Count</i>	GA’s grad rate per GA DOE	Total % difference
2005	58.1	69.4	11.3
2006	55.9	70.8	14.9
2007	56.1	72.3	16.2
2008	58.1	74.4	16.3

Although the graduation rate varies according to sources, the U.S. Department of Education (US DOE, 2009a) verified that the rate has remained about the same for the last three decades. Conversely, the price tag for education has risen significantly (Dynarski et al., 2008).

According to *Education Week (2010)*, Georgia ranks 46th of 51 (the District of Columbia is 47th) in graduation rates across the U.S (“Graduation by Numbers”, 2010). In another report, Georgia is ranked 49th in the nation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Along with 31 other states, Georgia uses the leaver rate for reporting graduation rates, “a method that tends to produce inflated results because it relies heavily on undercounted dropout data” (“School to College,” 2008, p. 7). Statistics available from

Education Week (“Graduation by the Numbers”) report that Georgia had a graduation rate of 55.9% for the class of 2006. The Georgia Department of Education website shows a 70.8% rate for the class of 2006 (GA DOE, 2009a).

The comparison of graduation rates among Georgia’s racial subgroups is lower than the national rate in all cases except one, as shown in Table 3. While .9% fewer Asians graduated in the U.S. than in Georgia in 2006, all other subgroups graduated at a higher rate nationally than in Georgia (“Broader Horizons,” 2009). Additionally, the racial subgroups graduated in the same ranked order percentage-wise nationally as in Georgia, except that Latinos graduate more than Blacks nationally (“Broader Horizons”).

Table 3

Discrepancies in 2006 Georgia Graduation Rates by Ethnicity

Racial subgroup	<i>Ed Week</i>	Georgia DOE.	Total % diff
Asians	79.8	84.3	-4.5
Whites	65.1	76.4	-11.3
Latinos	40.8	55.7	-14.9
Blacks	45.6	63.6	-18.0
Native Americans	37.9	62.0	-24.1

Education Week, in its 2009 edition of Diplomas Count (“Broader Horizons,” 2009), reports differences ranging from -4.5% to -24.1% lower using the CPI method of calculation, in comparison to Georgia’s calculations using the leaver rate. The 2006 Georgia graduation rates by gender reported by *Education Week* (“Broader Horizons,” 2009) are 51.5% for males and 61.9% for females, respectively. These findings differ

somewhat from data reported by the GA DOE in which 67.0% of males and 75.5% of females graduate from high school (2009a) reports a difference: males-67.0% and females-74.5%.

This study was conducted to determine if the national and state graduation trends were also true for ethnic and gender subgroups at Coffee High School in Douglas, Georgia. In addition, a theory exists that there are typically intrinsic, and/or extrinsic factors that cause these subgroups to drop out of school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). These factors include academic and disciplinary issues over which schools have control and familial and social issues over which schools have no control. A more in-depth discussion of these issues follows. This researcher wanted to explore which mixtures of these factors were present within these subgroups at Coffee High.

Definition of Terms

Terms used in this study are listed in context for clarification. Each time the term is used, it can be understood that the meaning is the same.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: High School Graduation Rate, NCLB is a federal act in which four pillars involve stronger accountability for schools using best teaching practices. The law gives more governing freedom to states and more school choice to parents. The act was written into law in 2001 under President George W. Bush as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This is a measurement used by the federal government to determine how well public schools and school districts are doing academically. AYP also measures student progress and improvement using standardized

test scores and other secondary factors. Georgia and other states are mandated to oversee AYP measurements and administer corrective action when benchmarks are not met in order to receive funds provided by the federal government (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

Dropout Rate. As defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2007), there are two kinds of dropout rates used to determine the rate at which students are leaving high school without diplomas. The *event dropout rate* calculates the proportion of students who left private or public high schools between the commencement of school one year and the next without receiving a diploma or a general education diploma equivalent (GED). The *status dropout rate* counts the percentage of students within a certain age range who left school without obtaining a diploma or GED, regardless of when they left.

Graduation Rate. The “uniform and accurate definition of graduation rate” sought by NCLB is the total number of high school students who attended four years of high school and left with a diploma divided by the total number of students who originally enrolled in that high school with the class (NCLB).

At-Risk Students. The National Center for Educational Statics (Confronting the Odds, 2007) defines at-risk students as those students who are prone to fail school by displaying such characteristics as low achievement test performance, dropping out of school, or academic failures.

Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI). This calculation method estimates the high school graduation rate by determining how many freshmen will graduate four years later with a regular diploma (“An Essential Guide,” 2006). Using the four-stage process

students follow, passing three grades then graduating, graduation is calculated as a process instead of an event (“An Essential Guide”).

Leaver Rate. As defined by SchoolDataDirect (2009), the leaver rate calculates the graduation rate by determining how many left school by graduation, rather than leaving school by some other means. The term “dropout” sometimes has different meanings among states, resulting in the occasional misrepresentation or failure on the part of the appropriate state educational authorities to report how many students actually leave. NCLB requires that states accurately report their graduation rates, but gives states freedom in choosing which method they use to calculate those rates (SchoolDataDirect).

Intrinsic Factors. Stearns and Glennie (2006) use the term “push effects” for those factors that come from within school that negatively affect a student’s connection to the school and to education. An example they give for “push effects” is large schools that fail to engage students on a meaningful level.

Extrinsic Factors. Also called “pull effects,” are those factors over which the school has no control. These factors serve to draw students away from education and include pregnancies or obtaining jobs to survive financially (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). In addition, Stearns and Glennie cite varying reasons why students of different ethnicities and gender might drop out of school.

Operational Definitions for the Current Study

Pertaining to Coffee High dropouts, the variables identified for inclusion in this study were grade level, gender, ethnicity, age, official reason left, absences in high school, number of discipline referrals, learning problems, transfer from another state or another school system, and Criterion-Referenced Competency Test scores.

Coffee High District Pulse. The internal database the school system used, by subscription, during the time of this study.

Gender. Refers to male and female subgroups.

Ethnicity or Race. Attributes a student's ethnic background or race. For this study, ethnicities employed were nonminority and minority. The number of Asian students was extremely low at Coffee High; Native Americans were nonexistent. Therefore, the minority subgroup named in the study consisted only of Black and Latino students.

Discipline referrals. Number of times students were sent to an administrator for behavior problems other than tardiness or dress code violations.

Learning Problems. Problems students were assumed to have, or for which they had been tested, because of retentions, special education classes noted, teacher comments, or administrative placements written on student records.

Transfer. Transfer in from another state or school system was noted on student records when they entered Coffee High. Since Coffee High was the only public high school in the Coffee County School System, there were no transfers from any other such school. There were two private schools which served grades K-12 in Coffee County.

Student CRCT scores. Those scores recorded from the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test given in eighth grade. Only the reading and math scores were used in this study. Passing CRCT scores were 300 for both the reading and math portions when these students took the test (Coffee High *District Pulse*, 2009).

5-A High School. For sports and school organization purposes, the Georgia High School Association (GHSA) determined its schools' classifications by size in each

region. Schools with 1850 or more students were placed in the 5-A category. Schools with populations of up to 525 students were classified as single A or 1-A schools. The other three classification levels distributed the remainder of the schools equally among them according to their population sizes (GHSA, 2010).

Importance of the Study

In studying students at risk of dropping out of school because of internal and external barriers they faced at Coffee High School, it was hoped that this study would reveal some of those barriers or factors over which the school had control. Hopefully, this study will be the basis of a more concrete proactive plan dealing with potential dropouts and the barriers they encounter that keep them from graduating. Certainly, when the dropout rate is addressed by identifying and removing barriers to student success, so is AYP.

Statement of the Problem

This study focused on a specific school in rural southeast Georgia. Coffee High School was a 5-A public school situated in agricultural Coffee County. During Phase I of this study, which occurred during the 2005-06 school year, the school housed grades 9-12 with a total school population of 2042. The racial composition of the population included 20 Asian students (1%), 1123 White students (55%), 163 Latino students (8%), 715 Black students (35%), and 20 multi-racial students (1%), with no reportable number of Native American students. The graduation rates of each of these ethnic groups during this year were Asians-90.0%, White-66.8%, Latinos-66.7%, and Blacks-48.3%. During Phase II (the 2009-10 school year), the school housed grades 10-12 with a student population of 1,352 (Coffee High *District Pulse*, 2009).

According to the Georgia DOE, Coffee High's graduation rate is the second indicator of AYP. The rate is calculated by using the leaver rate, which had been 60% and 61% respectively for the last two years. The first indicators were test participation and academic performance. Academic performance did increase in 2009, when the number of students passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHS GT) increased as much as 25% in some categories. These results showed gains that impressed even the Georgia Department of Education, who called to ask what the school was doing to net such gains. In addition, the graduation rate increased 7.2 points to 68.8%. Nevertheless, the graduation rate remained the reason Coffee High School did not meet AYP. The school has remained in the "Needs Improvement" category since AYP's six-year existence (GA DOE, 2009b).

The financial and social impact of Coffee High's dropouts on Douglas and Coffee County is costly. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) estimated that the state of Georgia would have earned \$16 billion in total lifetime additional income had its dropouts chosen to finish school. Douglas is located in Region 11 of the state. Based on Coffee County data, additional income for Douglas and Coffee County would have totaled \$1.0 billion (Isley & Hill, 2007). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) reported that the unemployment rate for those with a high school diploma was 9.2%, compared to 14.4% for those without a high school diploma. The difference in median yearly earnings for those with a high school diploma was \$8580 more than for those without a high school diploma. In addition to the loss in earnings, high school dropouts impact the Douglas-Coffee County area with higher health costs, more frequent health issues, and a decrease in the ability to pay for health care due to their reduced earning

capacity (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Other problems are higher criminal justice system costs, and higher public services costs due to higher teen pregnancy, and single parenting (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Socially, the county experiences less community involvement through reduced voting and volunteering turnout (Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2006). The school must take corrective action.

One of the potential steps in corrective action might be a closer inspection of the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that play a significant role in keeping students from feeling connected to their school community. As students feel compelled to leave school because of factors originating from within the school or drawn out by external factors, they somehow lose the connection or engagement they might have felt with the school community in earlier grades (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The Dropout Prevention Committee at Coffee High School was a team serving a term of five years and consisting of members of the guidance office, the academic, vocational, and special education departments, and the graduation coach. This team was committed to finding ways to increase the graduation rate at the school primarily among students with disabilities, but certainly including those without disabilities. The committee had been trained in various aspects of improving the graduation rate through more rigorous teaching methods, identifying at-risk students, and using available programs to alter the way students feel about school.

Research Questions

This researcher sought to help the committee find answers to improving Coffee High's dropout rate among the entire high school population, including the following

questions important to this study:

1. Is there a relationship between ethnicity and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?
2. Is there a relationship between gender and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?
3. What factors do at-risk students identify as influential to their decision to leave school prior to graduation?

Procedures and Methodology

This mixed methods study involved high school dropouts and the reasons why they dropped out of school. The population used for the quantitative portion of this study was the Class of 2005-06. This group's data were still available in the high school's records office and were the latest data available to compare with national studies. Of these 224 students, 172 records were available for tallying purposes. Coffee High's losses by grade level percentages were 9th grade-41%, 10th grade-25%, 11th grade-24%, and 12th grade-10% ("Broader Horizons," 2009).

The second phase of the study was qualitative. This phase involved selecting a focus group consisting of twenty randomly-selected members of a pool of at-risk students who attended Coffee High at the time of the study. The pool included males and females of varying races/ethnicities, grade levels, and at-risk factors. The school's graduation coach and the researcher sat down with two small groups of these students in a 30 to 60 minute period. They allowed them to freely discuss their perspectives of their experiences at Coffee High.

Limitations of the Study

The study of Coffee High's 2006 dropouts and at-risk students during the 2009-10 school year was limited by virtue of the fact that it captured a snapshot of only two classes in Coffee High's long existence. In order to create a comprehensive portrait of the many intricacies involved in the education students receive at Coffee High, a random selection and extensive evaluation of a range of several years of dropouts would have been necessary. A more longitudinal study would make a better determination of how to support students like these in completing their educations.

In addition, more in-depth interviews and evaluations of these students would have been helpful in deciding how to better equip students to succeed. Logistically, time and effort limitations were placed on this study. A mixed-methods study reflected the scope of the participants involved, and interviews procured in the focus group were welcomed as insightful, if limited, gifts.

Overview of the Study

The remaining chapters of this study include a literature review of the trends of dropouts by subgroups, factors influencing high school dropouts, and the theory of "push-out" versus "pull-out" factors, as stated primarily by Stearns and Glennie (2006). Also included is how the intrinsic and extrinsic factors for rural school dropouts differ from urban or suburban school dropouts. Other topics are methods and solutions to solve the dropout problem, the role of the federal, state, and local government in regulating the graduation rate, and which agencies have been created to aid students in graduating at improved rates. In Chapter 3, a methodology of the research design used in the study is explained. Chapter 4 includes a summary of the results, breaking down participant

information by subgroups, along with the data found for each of the three research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses an overview of the findings for each research question, along with any additional findings, a discussion of the implications for practice, and recommendations for future research, including conclusions, references, and appendices.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Framework

This chapter gives a brief historic overview of the dropout trends, factors, and theories by subgroups and subgroup factors by rural, suburban, and urban locations are discussed. In addition, the roles of the various levels of government and the development of organizations in improving the graduation rates are reviewed.

National Dropout Trends

In addressing who is dropping out, one may look at national trends to determine whether the trends hold on a smaller, local scale. “Broader Horizons” (2009) identified the national graduation percentage for the Class of 2006 as 69.2%. The national graduation rate was further broken down by ethnic and gender subgroups (refer again to Table 1 for ethnicity). Findings from the data indicated that a lower percentage of males graduated across all ethnic groups. Asians and Whites graduated higher percentages than other ethnic subgroups (“Broader Horizons”; NCES, 2008). Only during two years during the late 1960s were the percentage rates of dropouts higher for females than for males (NCES).

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) began keeping status dropout records in 1960. According to this organization, national status dropout rates have steadily declined over the course of 47 years from 27.2 in 1960 for all races to 8.7 in

2007. In 1960, the numbers were not disaggregated according to ethnicity or race. Even then, male dropouts outnumbered females by 1.1%. By 1967, dropout rates were kept according to race (White and Black, but not Latino, Asian, or Native American) as well as gender. Black males had a greater tendency to drop out than White males, White females, or Black females. The dropout rates in the nation from 1980 through 2007 have continually shown that Whites dropped out less frequently than Blacks, who dropped out less frequently than Latino students (NCES).

Georgia and Coffee County Dropout Trends

Records from the GA DOE (2009a) showed the same trend for Georgia as the national rates indicated from 2003-2009. The gaps between White and Black students and Black students and Latino students have narrowed considerably (GA DOE).

The GA DOE (2009b) reports that in Coffee County, with the exception of 2004, more Latino students graduated than Black students. Latinos graduated at a higher percentage than Blacks with differences ranging from 8 to 18.5 percentage points from 2003 to 2009. Whites graduated more frequently than both of these other groups. The Asian and Native American groups were very small in Coffee County, and their graduation rates were rarely reported. Therefore, these two ethnic subgroups were not included at the county level (See Table 4). Females tended to graduate at a slightly higher rate than did males (NCES, 2008). These statistics reflected dropout subgroup trends across the nation, Georgia, and Coffee County, but the causes and remedies were also important.

Table 4

*Coffee High's Graduation Rate Percentage by Ethnicity, 2003-09**

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Whites	60.1	60.1	68	66.8	66.1	66.6	74.3
Latinos	45	45	65.4	66.7	60	61.3	69.8
Blacks	47.8	47.8	46.9	48.3	49.4	52.8	58

*GA DOE (2009b)

Dropout Trends by Subgroups

Many studies dealt with dropout trends (NCES, 2008; “Broader Horizons,” 2009; Georgia DOE, 2009a), why those subgroups were dropping out (“How does the EPE Research Center...,” 2009; Search Institute, 2008), and methods for dropout prevention (Swanson, 2004). The national trends differed from local trends (“Broader Horizons,” 2009). Reasons for dropping out in Washington State or Washington, D.C. differed from reasons in Coffee County, Georgia (“Broader Horizons,” Thompson, 2008). These trends put Coffee High’s graduation rate in perspective for those seeking school improvements. A review of the literature lends more focus.

Factors Influencing High School Dropouts

What did research show about the reasons students dropped out of high school? Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) emphasized, “There is no single reason why students drop out of high school” (p. iii). Universal risk factors included low academic achievement (including learning disabilities and mental health problems), school

attendance, socioeconomic factors, teen pregnancies, lack of motivation, and a feeling of disconnection at school (Azzam, 2008; Bartholomew, 2008; Bridgeland, et.al; Gewertz, 2006; Thompson, 2008). Gewertz identified being overwhelmed by external situations and feeling unchallenged as two major factors causing students to drop out. Wells' (1990) extensive list of factors was grouped in four categories: school-related, student-related, community-related, and family-related. The factors described as school-related included conflict, culture, counseling, curriculum, and "lack of language instruction," (p 13). Student-related factors were attitude, attendance, peer relationships, and having friends who dropped out. Two additional categories are discussed later in this chapter.

Philosophical Educational Structure

Skinner (2008) faulted the entire philosophical structure of America's educational system for the lack of success of its schools. Modernist theory has driven schools since their inception. Skinner defined the Modernist theory as one built on compliance, safety, and limits, where questions have one answer. No one tries anything new. She claimed that schools have become stale, static organizations. Educators and administrators do not change the status quo or take risks (Skinner). Her recommendations for incorporating a Postmodernist theoretical framework for schools can be found in the section entitled, "Methods and Solutions to Solve the Dropout Problem."

Academic Ability

Freeman, Gum, and Blackburn (1999) found academic ability was a dominant factor in determining success in completing high school. According to the US DOE (2007), 23% of graduating seniors had trouble reading. Not only were there academic gaps between socioeconomic and racial subgroups of students, but there was also an

academic gap between U.S. students and students from other parts of the world (Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2003). Dynarski, et al., (2008) added that inadequate academic ability played a role in making students feel disconnected from school. Haycock (2001) posited that one of the causes of low academic ability is that students are not sufficiently challenged in the classroom. Effective teachers and strong curriculum can remedy this problem.

The Ninth Grade “Bulge”

Allensworth and Easton (2007) looked at factors contributing to high dropout rates in large urban school districts such as Chicago and New York City. In these settings many students failed to acquire sufficient credits in ninth grade to graduate in four years. The researchers contended that in New York City and nationally, data showed the same dilemma. Academic performance in high school was an important factor leading to graduation, even more so than academic performance leading to high school, or student background. They listed additional issues such as ninth-grade Grade Point Averages (GPAs), course failures in all subject areas, and absences. Barton (2006) corroborated the problems with ninth-grade repeaters, describing the situation as the “9th grade bulge.” According to Barton, this predicament existed in several states and, moreover, dropping out has become the norm at younger ages. He identified three main indicators in determining whether or not students made it through ninth grade to finish school. Barton’s identified indicators included the level of socioeconomic conditions for the ninth-grade repeating students, whether this group of students came from either one- or two-parent families, and the frequency with which families moved from school to school. Lower socioeconomic conditions, one-parent families, and higher mobility rates

contributed to favorable conditions for producing dropouts. In his study, Barton compared these three factors with each state's completion rate and found an explanation for the nearly 60% difference in state completion rates. He held as examples for further study states doing extremely well with graduation rates and those that were not (Barton).

Making Connections

Gewertz (2007) also did considerable work observing ninth graders in the Pittsburgh school district and found that ninth graders lacked a bond or connection to high school. She described a week-long ninth grade orientation that surpassed the "get to know the school floor plan" orientation that generally takes place (p. 45). Instead, these freshmen talked about a novel that all had been required to read over the summer, did aerobics to hip-hop, went on a scavenger hunt, had discussions about showing up for class and having academic success, and other outdoor bonding activities. She maintained that a very necessary factor of success for new high school students was making students feel that they had a place in the school. She felt that too many schools were missing that component. For many immigrant or English language learners (ELL), that connection was missing because of language barriers (Gewertz). York (2008) suggested making these students welcome in school, celebrating their culture, giving lots of support, encouraging them to read, and helping them to feel that connection. She warned against stereotyping ELL students and guarding against bias.

Attendance

Another factor affecting graduation rates was student attendance (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Smink & Heilbrunn, 2006). Stearns and Glennie (2006) believed that just as graduation rate reporting methods, curriculum standards, and achievement assessments

varied from state to state, so, too, did compulsory attendance laws. They claimed that in addition to the state attendance framework, schools and school districts had their own attendance policies. Stearns and Glennie cited several states that required students to stay in school until graduation age. Many states, Georgia included, required attendance until age 16 (Stearns & Glennie; GA Dept of Driver Services, 2009). For the first time in America's educational history, NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: High School Graduation Rate, 2008) required schools to report attendance rates. According to Kennelly and Monrad, several causes contributed to poor student attendance. For some students, it was disengagement because of factors created by the school. Some students missed school frequently because of boredom, academic failures, or not feeling connected in some way. For other students, extrinsic factors were a major cause. Parents' work schedules hampered their abilities to monitor their children's attendance. Lower socioeconomic families moved frequently to find work or better housing, sometimes causing sporadic student attendance. Kennelly and Monrad also argued that mobility could sometimes enhance a student's education, depending on the reasons why students moved and at what point in their school careers they moved. For example, younger students whose families moved for career advancement and who had access to enriching experiences at home were more likely to succeed in school than high school students whose families had moved for similar reasons. The one certainty indicated by research was that students who missed school missed academic learning time, and results were detrimental (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2006).

Behavioral Issues

Behavior was another red flag in identifying students who dropped out. Kennelly and Monrad (2007) gave evidence that students with behavior records moving into transitional years had tendencies to fail courses and, in time, to drop out. They maintained that there was a point at which students could be reached when they were beginning to make poor grades, but before they became behavior problems. These authors listed behavior as one of three factors in research “that influence the likelihood that students will significantly improve their achievement...” (p. 9). Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) listed inappropriate behavior as one of four early indicators of dropping out of high school. They stated that poor behavior may be a sign of emotional or social problems, but they could also be signs of boredom or frustration. Martin, Tobin, and Sugai (2002) also discussed behavior as a sign of academic failure and disconnection with school. They called attention to the repercussions of trying to correct behavior and truancy problems among students with suspensions, expulsions, or home-bound placements, and hailed recent school efforts to correct behavior in ways other than removing students from the place they most needed to be.

Teacher Expectations

The EdSource report (2006) noted that teacher beliefs and expectations also determined to a large degree how students performed in school and impacted whether or not students reached graduation. The report stated that “setting clear, high, and measurable expectations for student achievement has a positive effect” (p. 6). Survey results from the same report showed that when teachers and schools had high expectations for students, their test scores were higher than those students from schools

with lower expectations (EdSource). Freeman, Gum, and Blackburn's (1999) study of at-risk students listed teacher beliefs as one factor leading to student success in determining whether to retain or promote students in academic trouble. Tkatchov and Pollnow (2008) also claimed that whether intentional or not, teacher behavior toward students was influenced by what they believed students were capable of learning and that absence of high expectations usually indicated a lack of achievement in those classrooms. When high expectations were articulated, student achievement rose (Tkatchov & Pollnow).

Bridgeland, et al. (2006) reiterated students' feelings of low teacher expectations and students' higher expectations for themselves. Many dropouts felt that if they had been pushed harder in school and made to feel they had support, they would have worked harder to finish. In the same report, conflicting statements given by dropouts claimed that schools made it too difficult to pass. They felt that even if they had tried, they could not have met all of the demands to graduate (Bridgeland, et al). Thompson (2008) argued that "almost all children are eager to learn when they first start school" (p. 50). She believed that teachers were largely responsible for squelching this eagerness through bias and lack of understanding. Students from racial minority groups wanted to learn just as much as did nonminority children. She stated that students from racial minority groups needed to be encouraged and informed about the importance of finishing school and about college options (Thompson). Bartholomew (2008) defended teachers by stating that "few teachers have been trained in the skills of motivation" (p. 55) and that the motivation needed in education was long-term and involved multiple skills. First, a relationship of

trust must be built between teachers and students. This relationship between teachers and students will be discussed.

Rigor and Relevance

Studies also showed that students succeeded when rigor and relevance are incorporated into the curriculum. Stanley and Plucker (2008) cited the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which showed that 32% of students felt schoolwork was not demanding and two out of three students became bored with some component of their classes at least once a day. Deye (2006) also reported that rigorous curriculum increased student achievement. The Indiana DOE (2009) showed that Indiana made its math and English classes more demanding, using advice from businesses and colleges. Indiana called its curriculum the “Core 40 Program.” The curriculum was initially voluntary, but was later adopted statewide. The program incorporated rigorous standards in all subject areas. These steps, along with increasing the dropout age to 18, increased the state’s graduation rate from about 70% in 2005 to 78% in 2009. Similarly, attendance was at 95.9% (IN DOE).

Jerald (2006) argued that past research was erroneous in indicating that individual or family factors were driving forces for so many dropouts. He declared that research trends have taken a different path. Lee and Burkham (2000) agreed, citing two studies done by the University of Michigan which indicated that schools that incorporated rigor and relevance in their curriculum succeeded in keeping more students who had previously experienced high absenteeism, low academic achievement, and bad behavior in school (Lee & Burkham). Jerald also pointed out that although teachers thought students’ personal aspirations were low, that they were actually higher than ever, largely

because the students realized that people with high school diplomas had more wage-earning power. The one stipulation in this theory was that high rigor must be accompanied by high support. One powerful statement Jerald made was that “high schools that have highly supportive teachers cut the probability of dropping out in half” (p. 4).

Jerald (2006) continued with arguments for relevance. Students wanted to know that what they were studying was useful to them in the “real” world. In *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, et al., 2006), four out of five students saw school lacking learning opportunities and a relevant connection with what was happening in the real world. Stanley and Plucker (2008) referred to the SREB’s study of nine high schools who had all improved their graduation rates. All nine had incorporated into their programs an emphasis on connections between high school and higher education as well as high school and real-life careers. They discussed programs in which vocational and career teachers began team-teaching with academic teachers to provide students with learning objectives that proved useful to them in their future jobs (Stanley & Plucker). Slaughter (2009) cited similar objectives in a study on urban students. She pointed to the apathy these students showed in schoolwork. Slaughter suggested incorporating technological innovations that would bring students into the 21st century with necessary skills for the workplace. She would engage students in a way that lecturing pedagogy lacked. She claimed that integrating technology made for a rigorous and appealing curriculum (Slaughter). Young (2008) reported that the state of Alabama was incorporating similar strategies in their dropout intervention program, Preparing Alabama’s Students for

Success (PASS). This program also emphasized rigor and relevance, adding a third component, relationships, to counter boredom and disconnection (Young).

Relationships

Student relationships among teachers, administrators, or counselors are important for graduation. According to Stanley and Plucker (2008), HSSSE reported that 78% of the students taking the survey felt that there was a caring adult in their school building to whom they could relate. In comparison, “Broader Horizons” (2008) showed that of dropouts surveyed, only 56% felt they had a connection to an adult in the school. Fewer felt they could share personal problems with school personnel. Lee and Burkham (2000) noted that social organization within schools needed to be conducive to stronger associations between teacher and student to increase graduation rates in schools. Again, school size had an impact on these relationships. Stronger relationships, however, had little bearing on dropout rates in large schools of more than 1500 students. Lee and Burkham’s study demonstrated that at-risk students who disconnected from school felt they did not have moral or academic support from teachers, even after they asked for help. Conversely, the study found that when students received social support from teachers and were pressed to perform better academically, they were more likely to rise to the occasion. The findings of Lee and Burkham’s report showed that even considering student behavior and socioeconomic status, when controlling social organization, along with structure, academic organization could improve dropout rates at medium-sized schools.

Early Disconnection

Harpaz (2009) posited that at-risk students who left school before graduating came from poor and wealthy homes alike. Intervention for at-risk students displaying such characteristics as previously discussed could have been employed as early as fourth grade. She contended that educators often ignored warning signals indicating student disconnection. At-risk students may also have exhibited tendencies to attempt suicide, become pregnant, or display eating disorders (Harpaz).

Dropping Out Is a Progression, Not a One-Time Event

In addition, Harpaz (2009) pointed out that students who dropped out generally did not arrive at their decision in a sudden or arbitrary manner. Frequently, there was a progression of events that occurred over an extended length of time, which eventually resulted in leaving school. The authors of *The Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, et al., 2006) agreed that dropping out was not something that happened all at once, and that lack of attendance was a red flag that could have been monitored in this process. They said that other warning signs were disengagement in class, skipping class, and noninvolvement in school activities. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) determined that students who moved often began to feel that school was not important. These students did not feel a connection or a belonging. The study by Lee and Burkam (2000), examined in more depth later, also indicated that mobility was an overlooked characteristic of dropouts. Barton (2006) noted this factor as one of three major factors that deter students from graduating. In addition, a cursory glance at Coffee High's records (2009) seemed to corroborate the multiple-factor theory.

Other Reasons for Dropping Out

In other studies on characteristics of students at risk of dropping out, Azzam (2008) distinguished three telling indicators that determined whether or not students dropped out: being on track for graduation, GPA, and number of course failures, which directly affected attendance. Bridgeland, et al. (2006) showed a disparity in the GPA indicator, with 88% of students surveyed saying they had passing grades and with the majority earning above-failing grades. This report indicated that three characteristics of dropouts were high absenteeism, lack of parental restrictions placed on them, and low parental involvement. Dropouts conveyed regret for having made the decision to drop out and would even have counseled other potential dropouts not to leave school before graduation (Bridgeland, et al).

Azzam (2007) cited boredom, too many absences, peer pressure, not enough adult guidance, and class failures as reasons students left school. Students needed to see worth in assignments, caring adults in the building, and more engaging learning like debate, group work, role-play, and hands-on activities. In *An Essential Guide* (2006), additional reasons for dropping out were lack of challenges; the need for employment, and becoming parents or caregivers. Students lacked a connection to the school community, and were poorly prepared for high school by their previous schools (“*An Essential Guide*”). In comparison, Gewertz (2006) indicated literacy problems as a major dropout factor. Addressing literacy would alleviate the root of the dropout problem in many cases. Other studies she introduced indicated that at-risk students felt a need for more discipline and structure in school (Gewertz).

Socioeconomic Causes

Barton and Coley (2007) noted that two-parent families were now becoming a minority due to divorce and because 44% of the births in America were to single mothers who were not yet 30. The percentage of Black children who had both parents at home was lower than that of other races. Barton and Coley stated that characteristics of these families included lower literacy and school completion rates, with little reading material at home and fewer academic expectations. This report showed that students who lived in fatherless homes scored lower on achievement tests and had more behavioral, psychological, and social problems. They had a greater tendency to get into trouble. They had fewer adequate places to study at home, and made it to school less often (Barton & Coley).

Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that many students who dropped out had very little parental involvement in their school careers or that involvement came too late. Children with single-parent families tended to move around more to find better jobs and housing. All of these factors put children of single-parent families at greater risk of not graduating. Disciplinary issues were the instigating factors that brought many parents to school at a time when disengaging issues had already taken place. Lee and Burkam (2000) added that students from larger families, single-parent families, or step-families tended to move more and often placed less importance on attending school. According to Wells (1990), community-related factors involved lack of support, services, and criminal activities. Lastly, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC, 2009), family-related factors involved dysfunctions, level of parental involvement and expectations, mobility, and language barriers.

School Structure a Problem

Lee and Burkam (2000) did not blame individual student factors and failures, but placed blame on the way schools were organized and run. Their study showed a much different picture of the dropout situation. The study included mostly medium-sized schools (601-1500 students) because these schools and their dropout populations were so ubiquitous. Lee and Burkham contended that there were more factors over which schools had more control that directly affected potential dropouts. They reasoned that schools should quit trying to reduce dropout rates based on what students should do better or how socioeconomic factors and family situations have to improve. Instead, they needed to discuss what schools could improve for students. Schools should reduce the factors and policies that push out students of particular characteristics. The pair named structure, academic organization, and social organization as three elements that could be manipulated to make a difference (Lee & Burkham).

Structure in Lee and Burkham's (2000) report dealt with coursework offered at school. They claimed that "schools that offer fewer mathematics courses below the level of Algebra I or offer Calculus have lower dropout rates" (p. 22). Specifically, schools that taught what they called a "compressed" instructional math program, mostly academic courses, and few low-level courses were more likely to have fewer dropouts than schools that did not. Lee and Burkham explained that students apparently learned more and the learning was more balanced with rigorous academic curriculum. In regard to academic organization, medium-sized schools had lower dropout rates than larger schools. Surprisingly, medium schools also had lower dropout rates than did small schools. One reason for lower dropout rates in medium-sized schools was that teachers held themselves

and their students more accountable for learning. Other structural factors involved staffing excellent teachers and smaller student/teacher ratios (Lee & Burkham).

The “Push-out vs. Pull-out” Theory

Stearns and Glennie (2006) conducted studies of dropouts in North Carolina that showed in which grades students were more likely to drop out and—based on gender and ethnic groups—the reasons why they dropped out. By using a state database, the researchers were able to include all students in North Carolina’s public schools in their study. The data were thorough enough to allow Stearns and Glennie to categorize by subgroups. They examined the reasons for dropping out among these subgroups, across age and grade level (Stearns & Glennie).

Stearns and Glennie’s studies found that males tended to have more learning disabilities, increasing their risk of dropping out of school. Furthermore, Black and Latino students tended to have more learning disabilities than other subgroups. They also determined that more ninth graders dropped out than at any other grade level. More boys dropped out than girls. Males dropped out in larger numbers in 9th grade. Then the numbers decreased. Females dropped out more consistently in grades 9, 10, and 11. Then the numbers fell off sharply in 12th grade. Males were more likely to drop out in 9th grade due to disciplinary reasons than older male dropouts. Junior or senior males were more likely to do so because they were off track or had to work. White males dropped out more often to work, because they were more likely to be hired than minority males. Females and minority students tended to drop out more often to take care of family members such as siblings and older family members. The role of caregiver over that of student was especially true for Black and Latino females (Stearns & Glennie).

Intrinsic Dropout Factors

Stearns and Glennie (2006) then began distinguishing intrinsic or what they termed “push-out,” and extrinsic, or “pull-out” factors that affected whether or not students stayed in school. Numerous factors within a school could influence a student to drop out including suspension and expulsion, thus forcing students to disconnect with school. During this time, students were trying to form identities. School factors helped or hindered the formation of those identities. Students of color had difficulties trying to form such identities, having to conform to what was viewed as a “primarily White” organization. Subsequently, the school environment may more likely have been viewed as a push-out factor by minority students whereas such may not have been the case for the nonminority students (Stearns & Glennie).

Stearns and Glennie (2006) stated that for all students in the last decade, regardless of race or ethnicity, schools established “zero tolerance” rules for problems like drugs, alcohol, and weapons. Schools had lower tolerance for students who caused major disruptions and pushed harder (especially before AYP) to make those students leave through suspension or expulsion. According to Stearns and Glennie, these zero tolerance policies had a large impact on students keeping or losing a connection with their schools. In recent years, schools were a little more tolerant in finding alternative solutions for students with behavior problems, while trying to achieve AYP. Besides academic and behavioral problems, another intrinsic reason for dropping out was lack of attendance, which will now be explored (Stearns & Glennie).

Extrinsic Dropout Factors

According to Stearns and Glennie (2006), extrinsic factors may have been tied to the autonomy students gained as they got older. In a separate analysis of Georgia, similar to Stearns and Glennie's North Carolina study, students were able to begin work at 14 (GA DOL, 2009). Two years later, they began driving (GA DOMS, 2009). Unlike North Carolina, where the age of consent for marriage was 16 (Georgia Statutes, 2009), Georgians could marry at age 15 with parental consent and marry at 16 without parental consent if they became pregnant (Georgia Statutes). Students in both states became free of all parental dependence at age 18, which also gave them freedom to decide whether or not to stay at school. Other extrinsic reasons were incarceration, moving, and employment (Stearns & Glennie).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Statistics

Stearns and Glennie's (2006) North Carolina study showed a breakdown of dropouts by push-out (academic and disciplinary), pull-out (employment and family), and other dropout reasons (moving and attendance) for ethnicity, race, and gender. This information is presented in Table 5. Subgroups are shown with percentages in the categories for which they ranked highest in leaving school before graduation.

Table 5

North Carolina Freshman Dropout Factors by Subgroups

	Black males	White males	Latino males	Latino females
Academic		1.53%		
Disciplinary	8.68%			
Employment		14.49%		
Family			8.54%	
Moving			21.05%	
Attendance				68.62%

Do these same results hold for these subgroups in the higher grades? According to the Stearns and Glennie study (2006), in 10th grade results were the same, with slightly different percentages with the same reasons. There were some changes in habit in the eleventh and twelfth grades for these subgroups. See Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6

North Carolina Eleventh Grade Dropout Factors by Subgroups

	Black males	White males	Latino males	Latina females
Academic				19.35%
Disciplinary	11.11%			
Employment		20.05%		
Family				12.90%
Moving			11.11%	
Attendance	63.08%			

Table 7

North Carolina Twelfth Grade Dropout Factors by Subgroups

	Black males	White males	Latino males	Latina females
Academic		14.31%		
Disciplinary				14.29%
Employment		16.67%	16.67%	
Family				14.29%
Moving				14.29%

According to Lockwood and Secada, (1999) the dropout rate nationally for Latino females was 30%, Black females-12.9%, and White females-8.2%. The authors remarked that Latino boyfriends and fiancés pressured their Latino girlfriends to discontinue school and discouraged them from attending college because they did not want them to be too educated or too “White” in their achievements. The study recommended that schools learn to incorporate Latinas’ family values and talents in the classroom, encouraging them to continue their studies. Lockwood and Secada found that of immigrants from other countries, 43% of Latino students dropped out of school in comparison with 8% of students of other nationalities. They maintained that even if Latinos were of the same income level as other citizens (affluent Whites, for example), Latinos still had twice the tendency to drop out of school. The researchers attributed leaving school to social and physical conditions where Latinos lived and went to school, social bias, and personal prejudice (Lockwood & Secada). Stearns and Glennie (2006) stated that White females became the dominant senior subgroup to drop out of school for attendance reasons

(60.73%). While certain reasons remained dominant for some subgroups, reasons for other subgroups peaked in seemingly surprising places during their spotty high school careers (Stearns & Glennie).

Stearns and Glennie's (2006) study showed that reasons for dropping out fluctuated in importance from grade to grade. They stated that disciplinary problems were more likely to be associated with dropping out of school for ninth graders than for twelfth graders. Conversely, academic and employment reasons caused more students to drop out in twelfth grade than in ninth. Family issues, moving, and attendance reasons for dropping out remained fairly steady throughout high school for students in North Carolina. Keith and Scharter's research (1995) found that parental involvement and expectations had much to do with Latino students staying in school or dropping out. Their study with Latino eighth-grade students indicated that when parents were involved in academics and maintained high expectations for their children, those students tended to stay in school longer. According to Keith and Scharter, Latino parents were more involved in their female children's educations, and females did better in school. Males tended to stay in school longer. When parents were immigrants rather than natural-born U.S. citizens, students tended to perform better and stay in school longer. Dropping out varied across grade levels according to ethnicity and gender (Keith & Scharter).

Probing Deeper to Find Causal Factors

Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) believed that examining the reasons why students dropped out of school was only skimming the surface. According to them, schools must dig deeper to find causal factors to address the real problems of academic, familial, or social problems at the root of dropping out. Teenage parents were expected more often to

drop out of school, but a recent study done by Hotz, McElroy, and Sanders (1997) indicated “a small negative but statistically insignificant effect of childbearing” on female students who became parents while remaining in school to obtain their diplomas (p. 85). They theorized that students who worked after school were less likely to finish school. However, research showed that working small numbers of hours may actually have had a positive effect on students choosing to graduate. They cited often-overlooked factors that influenced staying in school or dropping out, such as familial inclinations and attitudes towards school attendance as well as the importance of education in today’s global society (Hotz, McElroy & Sanders).

Rural School Dropouts Factors vs. Urban or Suburban Factors

How did intrinsic and extrinsic factors for rural school dropouts differ from urban or suburban school dropouts? According to Provasnik, et al. (2007), one-third of all public schools were rural schools which taught one-fifth of all American students. These rural students were predominantly White and American/Alaska Native. There were lower percentages of minority students in these schools. The majority of these rural public schools existed in the South and Midwest. Provasnik, et al. stated that the dropout rate for rural high school students was higher than suburban high schools, but lower than urban high schools. Rural school students followed the same patterns as urban and suburban students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunches, enrollment in college, and averaged wage earnings. Provasnik, et al. maintained that fewer rural school students did as well academically as suburban school students, but rural school students fared better than urban school students. The authors claimed that although there were fewer limited

English proficient (LEP) students in these rural schools, the number of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) was about the same as in suburban and urban schools. As many rural high schools offered dual credit courses as the other two locales, but fewer rural schools offered Advanced Placement (AP) classes and International Baccalaureate than suburban and urban schools (Provasnik, et al.). Both the student-teacher ratio and the student-counselor/special education instructional aide were smaller in rural schools (Provasnik, et al.).

Provasnik, et al. (2007) also reported that rural teachers had more job satisfaction and more experience than the teachers in other locales, although they were less racially diverse and earned less. Rural teachers reported fewer behavioral problems than teachers in public schools in all other areas of the United States. The authors had teachers from across the country weigh and rank eight potential problems that deterred students from learning. The problems, according to Provasnik, et al., were (a) students coming to class unprepared to learn, (b) lack of parental involvement, (c) poverty, (d) student tardiness, (e) student class cutting, (f) students dropping out, and (g) student pregnancies. In each category, rural school teachers ranked these problems in exactly the same order, but reported fewer instances of each problem than the national percentages. In addition, rural school teachers reported fewer episodes of fighting, disrespect, and disorder than teachers did nationally (Provasnik, et al.). What did other studies say about rural student dropout factors?

A study by Everett, Bass, Steele, and McWilliams (1997) on rural school dropouts hypothesized that socioeconomic factors would have more impact on students dropping out than would retention. There would be differences according to gender and race. They

predicted that retention would have the next greatest impact, followed by excessive absences. Academic achievement was believed to be a reason for students to stay in school. The results of the study showed, however, that academic achievement was a bigger determinant for students not to drop out than were socioeconomic reasons. These results were found to differ according to race, but not according to gender. Socially, students who participated in clubs and sports were more likely to stay in school than those not participating in extracurricular activities (Everett, et al.). Following is a brief discussion about general parental education and perceptions in rural areas.

According to Provasnik, et al. (2007), students attending rural schools had a higher percentage of parents who obtained only high school diplomas. Parents in urban and suburban areas were more likely to obtain higher degrees. Regarding parental expectations, Provasnik, et al. stated that just as many rural parents shared the expectation that their children would earn a bachelor's degree as did their suburban and urban counterparts. However, larger numbers of rural parents in the research population had lower postsecondary expectations of their children. In relation to economic factors, "Males in rural areas had higher median earnings than males in towns and cities, regardless of their educational attainment" (Provasnik, et al., p. 74). The unemployment rate was lower in rural areas than in other places. Alternatively, the poverty rate for rural areas was higher than suburban areas, but lower than urban areas. More rural parents attended school events and volunteered or sat on committees than parents of urban students, but not to the same extent as suburban parents. Rural parents were also more likely to take their children to athletic events, but less likely to take their children to

cultural and educational events such as museums, concerts, libraries, and zoos than parents in any other locale (Provasnik, et al.).

A look at surrounding rural schools of similar size may also help with perspective. Four rural high schools in Coffee High's Georgia High School Association (GHS) division were Camden County High, Colquitt County High, Lowndes County High, and Tift County High ("Broader Horizons," 2009). They were chosen because of their proximity to Coffee High and their size. How did these schools' graduation rates compare with Coffee High? Table 8 ranks Coffee High lowest of all five schools in graduation rate, using the CPE method of calculation.

Table 8

Comparison of Graduation Rates for Surrounding Counties of Like Size

	Graduation rate
Camden	63.40%
Coffee	43.40%
Colquitt	47.60%
Lowndes	65.30%
Tift	53.90%

In which grades were each losing their students? Table 9 shows in which grades students were dropping out at Coffee High in comparison to the other four schools, according to "Broader Horizons" (2009). Although this snapshot could not accurately identify a problem by examining one year, it was telling to note that Coffee High's ninth grade dropout percentage far exceeded the rates in the other four schools. Tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade dropout percentages all decreased incrementally as grade

levels increased. This trend was not true for any of the other high schools (“Broader Horizons”). Coffee High sought to address this problem with ninth graders by creating a separate freshmen campus at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year. The impact of this move has yet to be determined (Coffee High *District Pulse*, 2009).

Table 9

*Comparison of Student Loss by Grade Level in Surrounding Counties**

County	9th	10th	11th	12th
Camden	16.9	28.3	30.9	23.9
Coffee	40.4	25.1	24	10.4
Colquitt	28.6	29	27.6	14.8
Lowndes	34	6.5	35	24.5
Tift	19.9	37.7	11.3	31

* “Broader Horizons,” 2009

Methods and Solutions to Solve the Dropout Problem

As many prescriptions existed on how to fix the dropout problem, as there were theories about why the problem existed. Dynarski et al., (2008) proposed that because there were multiple factors involved in why students dropped out, multiple solutions must be employed to address the problem. Skinner (2008) believed that a whole paradigm shift had to occur in school theory in order to make major improvements in improving graduation rates. She said that schools needed to change with the population, open up borders, try new things, and lead from broader perspectives. She charged school leaders to “consider all options in order to best serve students” (p. 3). Skinner also believed that leaders had to look past school walls to the community and to the family for support and

resources. She thought that it was unrealistic to believe that all students could learn at the same level and rate and that one knowledge base fit all. Neither did she believe that education should be based on business practices, but rather that schooling should be more “humanized” (Skinner).

Skinner (2008) had nine recommendations which she believed would free schools to make improvements in dropout rate. She recommended doing away with state testing as a vehicle for high-stakes assessment of students for graduation and she called for schools to face the reality that all high school graduates would not go on to higher education. Those who would not attend college needed skills appropriate for making them productive members of society. Another proposal she made was conducting more thorough searches to find educators who excelled in individuality, creativity, morals and values and who really connected with children. Skinner had two final recommendations that had a direct impact on student success. Students should be given adequate support and encouraged to make connections by participating in extracurricular activities and becoming a part of something bigger than themselves. Many of Skinner’s recommendations had merit, but required substantial change in thinking and restructuring school systems. Other solutions dealt with more immediate actions that could be taken (Skinner).

Kennelly and Monrad (2007) stressed that the most effective dropout prevention measures began at least by sixth grade. Lee and Burkam (2000) claimed that once certain variables such as student characteristics were accounted for, uncontrollable factors such as school population had very little to do with the school’s dropout rate. Instead, the level of challenging courses, shared purposes, and positive relationships between students and

teachers offered leverage in keeping students in school until graduation. Bridgeland et al., (2006) concurred that more rigorous curriculum and more positive relationships were needed. Dynarski et al. (2008) agreed that enrichment and rigor, as well as academic and adult support were absolutely necessary.

Add Interest and Relevance

Bridgeland et al. (2006) said that educators could make their classes more interesting and more relevant to students by emphasizing the skills they needed in the workforce. Teachers needed to improve the instruction and academic support they gave to students who were having difficulties, as well as help to open the communication lines between school and home. Gewertz (2006) agreed that students needed “real-world learning,” highly-skilled teachers, smaller classes, an open communication line between school and home. Parents needed to see that their children went to school regularly. Schools needed to supervise students better. The Southern Regional Education Board ([SREB], 2005) stated that schools needed to give students opportunities to make up lost credits in order to help them graduate. They suggested ways that connecting or feeder schools could help students make the transition from middle or ninth grades to high school more smoothly. Two other suggestions the SREB made were aiding students to gear up for tougher courses and determining their goals and plans for the future.

Hold High Expectations

Reglin (1994) offered suggestions for increasing the graduation rate of Black male students. Some of these measures were holding high, but attainable, expectations for these students, increasing parental involvement and developing parent centers. Further, schools should work on increasing student self-esteem, providing male role models, and

improving classroom climate acclimated to the Black male. Lockwood and Secada (1999) advocated using some different tactics for dealing with at-risk Latino students. They believed faculties and staffs must be quick and insistent in indentifying early warning signs of disengagement. Programs must be adapted to Latinos' needs. All curricula should be revised so that everyone receives rigorous, demanding standards using supplemental support when necessary. Existing successful programs should be used. Programs should be carefully monitored and coordinated (Lockwood & Secada).

The Importance of Diagnosis

A more thorough study was made by Dynarski, et al. (2008), entitled *Dropout Prevention*. Many best practices have been narrowed down to six recommendations. Their recommendations were rated according to the amount of research that supported each. The initial recommendation was the one with the lowest rating, but in which the authors believed very strongly. This step was diagnostic in nature and involved getting as accurate a picture as possible of the number and causes of dropouts and at-risk students in one's school. Dynarski, et al. showed that maintaining accurate data about students was paramount to serving these students. In order for the data to be useful, the numbers of graduates and dropouts must be accurately kept over the course of years. In addition, all incoming students should be examined and identified for at-risk characteristics academically, socially, and behaviorally. Their records should be noted, especially at important transitional periods (such as the transition to high school, the high school graduation test). Dynarski, et al. made other suggestions for record-keeping, including scrutinizing student interactions in school activities and keeping precise exit records to account for every student.

Support

Other recommendations by Dynarski, et al. (2008) dealt directly with students diagnosed at-risk of dropping out. They included assigning a caring adult in the building to each student and supporting and enhancing the student's learning by providing time and resources for extra academic help. Their last three recommendations dealt with making changes within the school that supported these and all students. Dynarski, et al. believed that programs should be incorporated that encouraged improvements in classroom behavior and social skills. Processes should be built in to make students feel that they are connected to the school with smaller classes and learning communities, extended learning time, and promoted participation in extracurricular activities (Dynarski, et al.). Freeman, et al. (1999) concurred that support should be put in place with such measures as constructing grade level teams and block scheduling to give teachers and students time to build relationships. Schools should look at past retentions to see if those retentions actually aided students in being more successful. Dynarski, et al made a sixth recommendation involving gearing up coursework to make it more rigorous and relevant to students to alleviate the feelings and complaints of boredom and irrelevance (Dynarski, et al.).

Model High Schools

Barton (2006) gave four examples of model high schools currently addressing the dropout problem. These four programs used methods ranging from small learning communities to professional development and employer advisory boards. They employed community agencies, individual case management and counseling, strenuous summer courses, and training with academic, life, and family skills. These model high

schools were run by research centers in universities and by the states. They were funded by entities such as the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Department of Labor. Each of the four programs had numerous high schools throughout several states. Miller (2006) described New England educators who had worked with dropout students and how those educators were luring them back to school. She recounted work that dedicated educators did in meeting with these former dropouts at least half an hour every day to give advice on helping them form and reach short- and long-term goals. She related that calling students by name was important, as was just generally touching base, to let them know someone cared (Miller).

Other School-Initiated Interventions

Martin, Toban, and Sugai (2002) provided a substantial list of other universal intervention recommendations including student advisory programs that monitored student academic success and social growth. They recommended connecting students with adult mentors. Involvement with mentors allowed students to learn coping and social skills, as well as critical-thinking skills necessary for life after high school. Another intervention was extracurricular activities. A fourth recommendation concerned system-level changes, in which the authors mentioned collaborative teamwork among schools, families, and communities. Other intervention ideas mentioned provided for personal growth classes and school-within-a-school approaches that allowed for smaller school communities, where students received more support (Martin, et. al.).

School-to-Home Connection

The strength or weakness of school to home connections appeared often in literature dealing with dropout prevention. Leuchovius (2006) declared that “family

involvement is one of the most important contributors to school completion and success” and looked to parental involvement as “the most accurate predictor of a student’s school achievement” (p. 2). Family involvement aided in increasing students’ GPAs, assessment scores, attendance, promotions and credits, challenging academic programs and chances of graduating. Leuchovius also pointed out that when there was a lack of parental or familial involvement from home, a connection with a caring adult at school was more crucial. Another suggestion to encourage connection between the school and home was gaining popularity at the university level. To increase freshmen retention at the University of Alabama, the university created a Facebook page that offered a wealth of information to parents and families on everything pertaining to university procedures and culture (“Alabama creates..., 2006).

Student Responsibility

Most of the solutions and recommendations have dealt with what parents can do, what teachers can do, and what schools can do to increase the graduation rate. Should the student take some responsibility to work hard to graduate? There were many suggestions about diagnosis through student records, improvement through teaching techniques for rigor and relevance, and change of class size and content. When teacher expectations rose, so did student response (Azzam, 2007; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Harpaz, 2008). Understandably, parents and teachers are the adults with expectations of learning and getting students to school. One of the few pieces of literature found on the topic of student responsibility was published by North Carolina State Governor, James B. Hunt (2002), who advocated service learning as a way to increase student engagement, relinquish responsibility to students for their own learning, and give them relevant

activities that apply real-world contexts. Hunt contended that test scores, GPAs, and graduation rates increased with the introduction of service learning. Student-to-school connections were improved. In contrast, inappropriate behavior decreased. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Wulsin (2008) added that the largest gap between service-learning opportunities and those students who would benefit most by them existed for minority students. Their report showed that specifically employing service learning to increase student engagement addressed some of the primary dropout issues in schools.

Service Learning

Martin and Halperin (2006) asserted that “any sensible school reform effort must embrace both dropout prevention and recovery” (p. 1). They believed that service learning was an important part of the effort to help students finish school. They talked about working with youth who had already dropped out, offering them a second chance to be successful. Some of their ideas for getting students back on track included having at students’ disposal multiple services for nutrition, abuse treatment, language, childcare, and vigorous methods for learning reading, math, and communication skills. Also needed are skills for parenting, work-force, college, and personal development. None of the programs they investigated would work without dedicated elected officials, teachers, and mentors who cared immensely about these youth, and who used a different set of vocabulary to talk about their work and these “potentially motivated young adults and students of promise” (p. 3). Martin and Halperin also argued that public schools should employ these methods and that enough of these organizations and experiences existed to turn around the dropouts who could turn around their lives.

Preparing for Careers

Danley and Waters (2002) recommended incorporating an intensive application of career education to improve student-to-school connection and the relevance of learning. Johnston, Cooch, and Pollard (2004) advocated more nontraditional forms of education, such as alternative schools, that allowed students to learn at their own paces, have smaller classes and more flexible demands, as well as friendlier and safer environments. Guthrie (1990) added another dimension to nontraditional education with school-within-a-school programs such as health and media academies in California. Because of smaller class sizes, more individualized attention, and the expectations of college plans for each student, student outlooks and senses of worth increased. Guthrie stated that these kinds of supplemental programs were the only reports found that addressed student responsibility for learning and graduating. Research in this area is scant, and more investigation may be required.

Regulation Roles of Federal, State, and Local Governments

What has been the role of the federal government in regulating the graduation rate in America's schools? Formal regulation began with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) endorsed in 1965 by Francis Keppel, then Commissioner of Education, and signed into law three months later by President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had just launched his "War on Poverty" (Public Law Handbook, 2010). In accordance with the US DOE, the act largely determined the federal government's role in attempting to increase the country's graduation rates for the first time. The U.S. Government had been trying to pass such a law since the previous century (Public Law Handbook). To avoid conflict between church and state, the ESEA was aimed at aiding poor children

rather than the schools (parochial or public) that taught them. To avoid conflict over the issue of Federalism, the billion dollars allotted for funding the act went through the state boards of education, who distributed the funds to the schools where those children attended, rather than directly from the federal government (Public Law Handbook).

This act remained as written (with the addition of one amendment in 1968—the Bilingual Act), until President George W. Bush signed into law a reauthorization of ESEA into the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, or NCLB. At this time, the aid allotted to education increased to \$42.2 billion and the legislation’s mandate increased to include standards-based education reform and the establishment of measurable goals for the schools receiving funding (NCLB, 2001). Weinstein (2009) reported that President Barack Obama promised to update the education act through its reauthorization by increasing the funding and resources needed, then mandating more comprehensive assessments that evaluate much needed 21st century skills such as critical thinking and technological skills. In addition, he hoped to revamp accountability by offering incentives, rather than punishments, for those schools whose graduation rates needed improving (Weinstein).

According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: High School Graduation Rate (2008), the role of state governments in regulating graduation rates under ESEA was to receive and distribute federal grants for dropout prevention to schools whose dropout rates were above the state dropout rates and to state educational agencies targeting dropout rates in schools needing to improve. State education departments were also to report accurate graduation and dropout data and to remain accountable to the federal government for dropout prevention. Part H of NCLB (NCLB) charged that states were

required to authorize appropriations, participate in national dropout prevention activities, and continue selecting those schools and educational agencies that would receive grants. Further, states would provide accurate graduation rates, conduct spending audits, and make local school systems accountable for attaining AYP although the act did give considerable authority to the local boards of education (NCLB).

Other national and state legislation mentioned by Kennelly and Monrad (2007) under way at the time of this study were The Graduation Promise Act of 2007, a national bill which pledged \$2.5 billion to aid the dropout problem, and a state-mandated bill in Indiana called the Dropout Prevention Act of 2006, in which Indiana schools were directed to report all failing ninth graders who became off-track for promotion to tenth grade. Those students were then provided support and courses to help them get back on track for promotion to the next grade (Kennelly & Monrad). According to Martin et al. (2002), the Oregon Department of Education had taken four steps to increase that state's graduation rate: they interviewed their dropouts to determine their causes for leaving, reported all dropout rate information over the Internet, provided practical strategies to their schools, and recognized and subsidized dropout prevention initiatives.

Agencies Created to Aid Students in Graduating

Since graduation rates and dropout prevention became critical issues in the United States, organizations and entities were created to offer solutions. The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC/N, 2009) at Clemson University was one of those organizations. The NDPC was founded in 1986 as a clearinghouse for information on increasing graduation rates. At the time of this writing, the center was in its 23rd year and had developed active research projects, its own line of publications, and professional

development for educators. The center also developed a list of 15 strategies that increase graduation rates (NDPC).

Another agency created for “attendance, attachment, and achievement” was the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE, 2009) in Denver, Colorado. This center was established and supported by educational research and provided resources, research, technical assistance and evaluation to any organization that would benefit from its materials (NCSE). Another entity created to review a wealth of information on keeping students in school was the What Works Clearinghouse or the WWC (Dropout Prevention, 2009). According to WWC, dropout prevention programs and local initiatives had to be based in the United States and highlight dropout prevention based on sound research. The eleven dropout prevention programs highlighted by this clearinghouse, backed by appropriate research, were Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS, already mentioned), Career Academies, Check & Connect, Financial Incentives for Teen Parents to Stay in School, High School Redirection, Middle College High School, Project GRAD, Quantum Opportunity Program, Talent Development High Schools, Talent Search, and Twelve Together (Dropout Prevention).

According to Hunt (2002), many national and state organizations such as the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, the US DOE, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation were designed for education in general, but had also developed agencies that dealt specifically with the graduation/dropout issue. Other organizations stemming from legislative action or lobbyists on education came together to deal with the dropout prevention issue. Some special topics organizations named by Hunt included *The 2008 Leaders Emerging Issues Program*, pulled together by both parties of legislative

leaders in North Carolina and *The American Diploma Project*, a coalition of 33 states working to align common curriculum standards, state assessments, and graduation requirements. Hunt said the mission of many of these organizations and special issues entities was to align and put in place common standards, assessments, and requirements for schools across America, that were rigorous, relevant, and accurate (Hunt).

The Data Quality Campaign (2009) states that accuracy is crucial in keeping student records to give a true picture of a school's at-risk students so that the school may put in place effective supports that enable them to graduate. In addition, accurate student data show a true picture of graduation rates for each school and enables school personnel to determine what has happened to each student. One such endeavor came from The Data Quality Campaign, a unit of the National Center for Educational Accountability, which created a list of elements or objectives designed to ensure accuracy of student records. According to the Data Quality Campaign, those elements included the design and implementation of a "unique statewide student identifier." The identifier would be useful in tracking a student from school to school, to trace the student to graduation or to withdrawal from school. It would be a way to match each student's test records and show what his or her academic growth has been (Data Quality Campaign). The Data Quality Campaign stated that a system for identifying those students who leave the public school system could also follow them when they enroll in college or tech school. Four states put such a data system in place, using all 10 of these requirements. Florida was the first of these states to have the data system in place. They have been able to track their students all the way into the work force, where they were able to determine what it costs the state for a student who dropped out of school. They also had teacher identifiers to match with

the students they taught, which allowed them to follow that teacher's students to determine the effectiveness of that teacher's instruction (Data Quality Campaign).

Summary

With many ideas, theories, laws, and organizations that were at work administering a prescription for the high dropout rate in America, there were as many solutions as there were theories about the cause. Perhaps the most helpful items of research to date addressed the need for numerous ongoing treatments to remedy the dropout problem, the need for individual students to have an identifying code that followed them throughout school and into college and the labor force, and the importance of determining concise and accurate graduation rates, readings, and results toward resolving the dropout problem. Chapter 3 gives an overview of the methodology for this study, the design to be used, limitations and delimitations, a description of participants, instrumentation, variables, data collection and analysis, and finally a summary of this mixed methods study.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Students who drop out of school or contemplate doing so may have had academic failures, feelings of disconnection, or discipline issues (including zero tolerance) that discouraged them from continuing their pursuit of an education. In many cases, outside forces add to their frustrations (Harpaz, 2009). Numerous combinations of these factors exist, and some factors can be attributed repeatedly to specific subgroups (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). This study attempted to determine if the same factor patterns held for students at Coffee High. The purpose of this study was to determine if intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for those who had already dropped out could be categorically attached to certain subgroups, testing the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between ethnicity and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?
2. Is there a relationship between gender and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?

In looking at the national and state problems and trends of graduation and dropping out, the researcher hoped that analyzing Coffee High's own problems and trends would offer some viable solutions.

In addition, this study attempted to determine what students at risk of dropping out perceived to be the difficulties driving them to be unsuccessful and if those

difficulties reflected intrinsic or extrinsic reasons. The research question that addressed this group was

3. What factors do at-risk students identify as influential to their decision to leave school prior to graduation?

Finally, these two samples were scrutinized to determine if the focus group's factors added validity to the findings for reasons the dropout group left school. This chapter details the methods and procedures used in the study. Further, the chapter explains the design and instrumentation utilized, the setting and participants involved, and how data collection and analysis were employed.

Research Design

The purpose of this two-phase, sequential mixed methods study was to acquire quantitative results from an archival sample and follow up with a few individuals in a focus group to explore these results in more depth. In Phase I, quantitative data yielded a comparison of intrinsic and extrinsic variables on dropouts at Coffee High School by race and gender. In Phase II, qualitative focus group answers were used to investigate in more detail the significant factors indicated by dropout records (Creswell, 2004). The quantitative data from Phase I were the basis for establishing statistical relationships between the variables. The qualitative data were used to strengthen the internal validity of the quantitative findings of dropout causes on race and gender. While causes were inferred from archival records as accurately as possible, adding student voices to the findings allowed another vantage point and a vehicle for validation. The data were also used to examine possible solutions for deterring at-risk students from dropping out.

This two-phase mixed-methods design afforded a more comprehensive view of dropouts and the complex contributing factors that pushed or drew them from school than a quantitative or qualitative study alone could show. Incorporating both phases in the study strengthened external validity by confirming that the factors causing students in the archival group to drop out were many of the same factors that caused the focus group students to think about dropping out of high school. These findings could then be generalized to larger dropout groups.

Setting

The setting for this study was Coffee High School, a rural 5-A high school in southeastern Georgia. During Phase I, in which archival records from 2005-06 were analyzed, Coffee High housed 9-12 grades with a total school population of 2042. The racial composition of this population included Asian-1%, White-55%, Latino students-8%, Black students-35%, and multi-racial students-1%, with no reportable number of Native American students (GA DOE, 2009). There were 350 twelfth graders (309 of whom graduated), 448 eleventh graders, 558 tenth graders, and 686 ninth graders enrolled in the first semester. Forty-seven students or 2.3% in grades 9-12 were enrolled in remedial classes and 59% of the school population was eligible for free or reduced lunches. The dropout rates of each of these ethnic groups during this year were Asians-.05%, White-15.4%, Latinos-13.6%, and Blacks-13.2%. Dropouts by gender included 9.3% males and 5.6% females. (GA DOE, 2009).

For Phase II of the study, which included a focus group from the 2009-10 school year, Coffee High housed grades 10-12 with a student population of 1,353. According to Coffee High's *District Pulse* (2009), there were 380 twelfth graders (363 of whom

graduated), 409 eleventh graders, 513 tenth graders, and 51 ninth graders. These 51 ninth graders were second time or multiple repeaters. First-time ninth graders were housed on the freshmen campus across town. The ethnic and racial make-up of the entire school population for this year was Asians-.67%, White-56.8%, Latinos-1.1%, Blacks-32.6%. According to school records for this year (these numbers were not reported to the state at the time of this study), American Indian or Alaska Natives numbered 6.7%. The researcher found this last percentage surprising, since the state's previous numbers for this ethnic group had not been reported as this high. Also included in the school's records for this year were 2.1% of students claiming two more races. Special education programs served 184 students during the year. The total number of at-risk students (defined as those in danger of dropping out because of grade retention or failure to pass any portion of the graduation test) was 473. Fifty-seven percent of the student population were eligible for free or reduced lunches. The dropout rates of each of these ethnic groups during this year were Asians-none, White-25.1%, Latinos-27.5%, and Blacks-28.7% (Coffee High Records, 2009).

Phase I: Quantitative Study

Participants

The sample chosen for the quantitative portion of this study involved the dropouts from the 2005-06 school year. This sample's records were still located at the high school at the time. Their statistics were the latest available on the GA DOE website and nationally through *Education Week's* annual report, *Diplomas Count* ("Broader Horizons", 2009). Of 224 dropouts from this school year, 172 student records were available. This sample comprised 108 males, 64 females, 96 Whites, 62 Blacks, and 14

Latinos. Their grade levels are indicated in Table 10. Data obtained from these records included gender, race, age, official reason for dropping out, attendance, retentions, discipline referrals, transfers to and from other school districts, and Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores. During this school year, 2042 total students were housed in grades 9 through 12. Special education programs served 234 (11.5%) students, English to Speakers of Other Languages services were provided for 20 (1.0%) students, and remedial services were provided for 47 (2.3%) students.

Ethical Considerations

Potential risks to participants were minimal, due to anonymity of transcripts and forms. The researcher and the graduation coach were both acutely aware of the necessity of discretion when dealing with minors and with student records. No discussions of the findings were shared with anyone during the time of the study, except the graduation coach, the researcher's dissertation committee, and the Institutional Review Board (IRB). See IRB approval in Appendix B. Any information reported in the dissertation was published after the fact, with no student names and no identifying factors. These students were 18-21 years of age at the time of this study. The recording form (Appendix A) listed students by number, not by name.

Instrumentation

The data-recording form for use with the dropout cohort from 2005-06 is shown in Appendix D. The data collected on this form consisted of gender, age, race, official reason for dropping out, number of absences, retentions, discipline referrals, school transfers, and CRCT reading and math scores. There was also a comments column for the researcher to note any information from the records pertinent to the student's dropping

out. The exit survey used by Coffee High consisted of no other information than the code used for the official reason for exiting school and the date at the time of exit.

Procedures and Analysis

Archival data were collected over a period of three weeks from files in the records office of the Coffee High Career Center using the recording form designed for this purpose. These variables were then categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic factors of leaving school.

Intrinsic and extrinsic factors were determined using Stearns and Glennie's (2006) report. Intrinsic factors were those issues that discouraged students inside the school, causing them to be unsuccessful. Intrinsic factors included academic problems, discipline problems such as suspension and expulsion, and two categories added by the researcher, attendance in high school and no apparent reason for dropping out. According to the report, academic problems should be addressed by the school to help make the student successful. Stearns and Glennie's report indicated that discipline problems such as suspension and expulsion stemmed from institution of the policy for zero tolerance for weapons, alcohol, and drugs. The third indicator, high school absences, took into account minimal absences in the lower grades with a high increase in absences in high school.

Extrinsic factors were those situations or conditions outside the school environment that hindered students from completing school. They included leaving school because of marriage, pregnancy, taking care of family members, employment, and moving (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). This study added a final extrinsic factor: high absences from kindergarten through middle school. At this early age, parents were responsible for getting their children to school. Research has long proved that when

students were frequently absent from school there were adverse effects on learning in school and on life after high school (Garry, 1996; Naylor, 1987; Robins & Ratcliff, 1978). This study noted any trends of causes for leaving in relation to gender or ethnicity.

Study Variables

Using Glennie and Stearns' (2006) guidelines on intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing high school students to drop out, the researcher determined which variables were under the control of the school and which variables were beyond the school's control. Intrinsic factors such as expulsion, suspension, discipline referrals, and academic problems (including low CRCT scores and course failures) were factors the school could address with alternative punishment or with more highly-intensive academic supports. Factors beyond the school's control were grouped and categorized into influences by family or other outside distractions. The researcher established categories such as school transfers because of frequent family moves, early attendance patterns established or allowed by parents, and pregnancies. Finally, separate chi square procedures were conducted to address research questions one and two. Data variables are defined below.

Grade level. Defined as the grade in which a student was enrolled at the time he or she left school or was withdrawn by the school. The code for grade level was GL in this study.

Gender. Referred to male and female subgroups. These subgroups were identified as M or F.

Race/Ethnicity. Attributed a student's ethnic background. In relation to this study, race codes employed were W = White, L = Latino, and B = Black. There was only one Asian classified as a dropout in this study. At this point, Latino and Black ethnicities

were grouped as minority, and White students were categorized as nonminority, outnumbering all other ethnicities at Coffee High.

Age. Depicted how old a student was upon dropping out of school. Average age was denoted by AG.

Absences. Referred to the average number of absences in grades K-8, the formative years that determined the importance of education for most students. Many students transferred in without attendance records from other schools, especially in the lower grades. Absences were shown by AB.

Learning problems. Problems students were assumed to have or for which they were tested because of retentions in grades prior to high school, receipt of special education services, learning problems noted, teacher comments, or administrative placements written on student records. Students with language problems due to coming from another country in early childhood were also included in this category. The code used for learning problems was LP.

Transfers. Coffee High was the only public high school in the Coffee County School System, so there were no transfers from any other high school within the system. However, on rare occasions a student transferred in and out of the private school located in town. Transfer in from another state or school system, from one elementary school to another within the system, or from the high school to the alternative school at any time during a student's educational career was noted on student records when they entered Coffee High. The number of students who transferred at least one time (some students transferred as many as five times) during their educational careers was shown as TR.

Student CRCT scores. Those scores recorded from the Criteria Referenced Competency Test given in eighth grade (Coffee High, 2009). Only the reading and math scores were used in this study. Passing CRCT scores for the reading portion and the math portion at the time that these students dropped out of school in 2006 (taken at least one year prior to 2006) were both 300. Reading and math scores below this level were used to help determine learning problems for these students. Other indicators used were special education classes, retentions, administrative placements, and other academic services in place for at-risk students.

Discipline referrals. Students who were sent to an administrator for behavior problems during their high school careers. These referrals exclude tardy and dress code violations. Discipline referrals are referred to as DR in this study.

No school connections. Students who had no academic, discipline, or absence problems, no apparent external problems such as early absences or multiple transfers, yet still dropped out prior to graduation, were identified as NC. These students apparently disconnected from school in some way, whether because of boredom or no strong ties within the school community.

The archival records contained much useful information from the years over which student information was documented. Sometimes this useful information was missing or prior school records were scant. In identifying intrinsic and extrinsic factors detrimental to graduating, the variables became retentions, course failures, discipline referrals, absences, transfers, and low CRCT scores. These factors were analyzed by gender and ethnicity using a two-way classification chi square for determining

differences in the observed and expected outcomes of the responses between the two classifications of subgroups (Key, 1997).

Limitations/Delimitations

The study was also limited to the variables included on the students' exit records. The characteristics of rural communities involved a larger percentage of lower socioeconomic groups, more contact with outdoor activities, and fewer cultural opportunities (Dynarski, et al., 2008). In addition, the absence of 51 student records may have skewed the results of the findings. There were also parts of student records that were missing, which left room for unintended assumptions.

A major weakness in the study was the lack of information gathered from students at the time they exited school without graduating. One of the quantitative pieces of data included reasons given for dropping out on exit forms for students during the 2005-06 school year. The only information included on these exit surveys was the official reason for dropping out, coded as "R" = attendance, "O" = leaving to obtain a GED, "T" = transfer to another school, or "H" = student leaving to be home schooled. Some exit forms were marked "SW" indicating the student was not in attendance for the new school year. The code "E" was given if students were expelled permanently from school because of a dangerous behavior such as using or distributing drugs, chronic fighting, or bringing weapons to school. To establish reliability, the researcher had to search further in student records to look for patterns in absences and school transfers, deficiencies in academic achievement, and similar circumstances.

Phase II: Qualitative Study

Participants

For the qualitative portion of the study, the total population of students at Coffee High School during the 2009-10 school year was 1352. Special education programs served 184 students during the year. The total number of at-risk students in danger of dropping out because of grade retention or failure to pass any portion of the graduation test was 473. Categorized by grade level, this is 294 in 9th and 10th grades, 142 in 11th grade, and 37 in 12th. A random sample of 20 at-risk students from this population was contacted to participate in a focus group. The number 20 was selected by the researcher, dissertation, and research chair as a manageable and intimate number of students who would provide the depth needed in the focus group conversations. These students were chosen from a casework list by the graduation coach to represent all five of the original subgroups. Eighteen of the 20 students actually participated in the discussions. After securing permission from students and their parents, these 18 participants were asked to meet with the researcher and the graduation coach over lunch, in a casual atmosphere in the isolated technology recording room. There they were asked to openly and freely answer the questions. This sample discussed what drew them to Coffee High and what *would* draw them to the school, as well as other questions listed in Appendix G.

Ethical Considerations

The focus group students were called to the graduation coach's office individually to have the focus group's purpose and procedures explained. They then were asked if they would like to participate in the group since participation was strictly voluntary. The Voluntary Participation statement was included on the consent forms shown in

Appendices D and E and discussed with students. If students agreed to join the focus group, they were given a packet in a plain brown envelope which included a letter to parents explaining the procedures (Appendix A), parental permission, adult student forms (Appendices D and E), and a one-page survey asking for demographic information (Appendix H) Students' names were not written on the surveys. All students who participated in the survey and their parents were fluent in English, so there were no known language barriers. The only compensation for participants in this study was pizza and soft drinks, purchased and served by the researcher for the students during the meeting. The focus group was divided into two groups who met during two separate thirty-minute sessions over lunch to avoid using academic learning time.

Instrumentation

Prior to meeting as a group, students completed a 13-item questionnaire that solicited the same demographic information collected from the archived student records. The questionnaire is included in Appendix H. These questions included items of gender, grade, and ethnicity, number of retentions, school transfers, discipline referrals, and learning disabilities. The demographic results of this questionnaire are shown in Table 14 in the next chapter.

Procedures and Analysis

Focus group demographic survey answers were analyzed for trends that could be separated into intrinsic and extrinsic factors hindering student success. During the focus group interviews which were recorded while the groups met in a soundproof booth in the technology lab, students were asked six mostly open-ended questions. These questions asked what did and did not draw them to Coffee High, and how their parents and teachers

felt about their graduating from school. They were also asked what teachers could do to help them be more successful in school and what administrators could do to help improve student learning experiences at Coffee High.

The focus interview answers were then transcribed from tape-recordings of the sessions. The researcher coded student answers anonymously by gender and race or ethnicity as transcriptions were done, enabling her to categorize intrinsic and extrinsic factors using these demographics. Coding the answers either intrinsic or extrinsic allowed the researcher to quantify students' perceptions into categories that allowed for results that could be compared with the archival data. The form used is shown in Appendix G. Student answers are discussed in the next chapter. The data from these answers were analyzed by using an intra-case analysis (Berkowitz, 1996), first using data reduction to minimize the volumes of notes from the recording transcript into manageable data to be included for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The final step in analyzing these qualitative data gathered from conversations with the at-risk focus groups was drawing conclusions and verifying patterns, possible biases, and comparisons represented by these matrices, noting the gender and ethnicity of the respondents. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended revisiting the data often to verify that what has been said was actually what was reported.

Triangulation was then employed as a way of merging, validating, and expanding the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Creswell (2004) stated that using triangulation as a means of validating quantitative results with qualitative results "provide[s] the researcher with interesting quotes that can be used to validate and embellish the quantitative results..." (p. 65).

Limitations/Delimitations

The focus group sample consisted of a small number of students. There were more Latino female answers represented within the sample than White or Black students. Based on the composition of this sample, biases may be present in the researcher's interpretation of these student responses. Underrepresentation of some subgroups may also have occurred.

Summary

This chapter specified the process used in collecting and examining the data from the archival records and from a student focus group at Coffee High School. The results of the findings of intrinsic and extrinsic factors from both groups of this study were compared and analyzed to discover any patterns and similarities between the ethnic groups and between males and females. The kinds of data used and the questions asked can be found in Appendices F, G, and H. Quantitative data from student records were analyzed and qualitative data from student answers were categorized by theme to determine if current at-risk students validated reasons that students dropped out of school four years before.

Chapter 4 contains the results of these findings as they apply to each of the three research questions. Chapter 5 will include an overview of the study and discussion of these results and any additional findings concerning the research questions. Discussion of implications for practice, including what can Coffee High School do to help alleviate these detrimental factors, thereby increasing the graduation rate, and how these findings may relate to other rural high schools are addressed. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

In helping to address the dropout problem at Coffee High School and similar rural schools of its size in southeast Georgia, thereby also indirectly addressing the challenge of making AYP, this study set out to answer three research questions. These questions were framed by the theory set forth by Stearns and Glennie (2006) that students are pushed out by intrinsic factors within the school's environment or drawn out by extrinsic factors in the student's world outside the control of the school system. Chapters One through Three presented the problem, correlated the literature, research questions and methods involved in the study. This chapter details the manner of data analysis and results. Results are presented in two phases, quantitative and qualitative, as they pertain to the three research questions.

Phase I

Research Questions One and Two

A sequential exploratory design was used to organize this study. For the quantitative data collection, a group of dropout students whose records were available from the 2005-06 school year was targeted for analysis at Coffee High School. Of the 224 students who left the school during the 2005-06 school year, records were available for 172 in 9th through 12th grades. The archival records of this group were studied in depth for intrinsic and extrinsic factors causing their failure to complete school. Fifty-two

student records were unaccounted for, whether through re-entry in the school system, records transferred out, or some other reason, yielding a 76.8% inclusion rate for this student sample. Shown in Table 10 is the total loss of these 224 students by grade level, according to Coffee High's *District Pulse* (2009), during the school year 2005-06.

Table 10

Coffee High's Loss of Students by Grade for 2005-06

	No. of students lost	% of students lost
9 th	80	3.9%
10 th	63	3%
11 th	48	2.35%
12 th	33	1.6%

The first two research questions involved quantitative data from the 2005-06 archival sample records. 1. *Is there a relationship between ethnicity and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?* 2. *Is there a relationship between gender and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?* The same data were included from the focus group for validation of the findings.

Participants

The demographic make-up for the sample of 172 students whose records were studied is illustrated in Table 11. This group constituted Phase I of the study.

Table 11

*Data table for dropouts from 2005-06 by grade level, gender, ethnicity, & mean age**

GL	n	M	F	B	W	H	AGE
9 th	61	41	20	19	38	4	16.2
10 th	54	29	25	18	32	4	17.3
11 th	35	22	13	18	13	4	18
12 th	22	13	10	7	13	2	17.8
Totals	172	108	64	62	96	14	17.3

*Coffee High District Pulse Records, 2009

Quantitative Findings. Of the 172 dropouts with available records from the 2005-06 school year at Coffee High, 73 (42%) had apparent intrinsic reasons for dropping out of school. These indicators were one or more grade retentions, low grades in several courses, five or more discipline referrals in middle school through high school, and service received in special education classes. Other indicators were attendance in summer school and credit recovery courses. Indicators also included scores lower than 300 on both the reading and math portions of the 8th grade CRCT, or failure to pass any portion of the Georgia High School Graduation Test. These intrinsic reasons were considered as such because Stearns and Glennie's study (2006) determined these factors within the school's power or influence to aid students.

Ninety-nine (57.6%) of the 172 dropouts' records indicated such extrinsic factors as 10 or more absences in two or more given years in kindergarten through 8th grade, parental failure to get their children to school regularly, three or more transfers from schools outside Coffee County schools, or unstable family lives. Unstable family lives

were determined by a combination of numerous absences and transfers, in addition to changes in guardianship, such as a move in with an aunt or grandmother. One female student's record showed evidence of the student's pregnancy before dropping out. All of these extrinsic factors were considered by Stearns and Glennie (2006) to be beyond the school's control.

A cross tabulation with a Pearson Chi-Square was performed for ethnicity. Frequencies and percentages of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for dropping out by ethnicity are shown in Table 12. Research question one, *Is there a relationship between ethnicity and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?* was answered in this way: The majority of nonminority students (62.5%) indicated more extrinsic factors for dropping out, with only 37.5% dropping out because of intrinsic factors. For minorities, slightly more seemed inclined to drop out for intrinsic reasons (54%), than for extrinsic reasons (46%). Results of the chi-square analysis indicated a marginal statistical significance ($X(1, N = 172) = 3.96, p = .046, \Phi = .15$).

Table 12

Archived Sample Intrinsic and Extrinsic Dropout Factors by Ethnicity

	Intrinsic		Extrinsic	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Nonminority	45	37.5	75	62.5
Minority	28	54	24	46

With respect to gender, exactly half the males in the archival group displayed intrinsic factors in their school records for dropping out of school; the other half displayed extrinsic factors. Frequencies and percentages of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for dropping out by gender are shown in Table 13. Research question two: *Is there a relationship between gender and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?* was answered in this way: Males were evenly distributed in displaying both intrinsic and extrinsic factors for dropping out. Fewer females exhibited intrinsic factors (30%), while the majority of females (70%) had extrinsic indications for leaving school without graduating. Results of the chi-square analysis in this case were more clearly statistically significant but Phi was still small ($X(1, N = 172) = 6.78, p = .009, \Phi = .20$). Implications of findings for both subgroups will be discussed fully in Chapter Five.

Table 13

Archived Sample Intrinsic and Extrinsic Dropout Factors by Gender

	Intrinsic		Extrinsic	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Male	54	50	54	50
Female	19	30	45	70

Phase II

Research Question 3

The third question, qualitative in nature, was *What factors do at-risk students identify as influential to their decision to leave school prior to graduation?* The dropout

population from the 2005-06 school year left without verbalizing what influenced them to drop out of school. Their records showed that by ethnicity, more nonminorities showed extrinsic factors for dropping out, while minorities indicated slightly more intrinsic reasons for dropping out. By gender, males were divided equally between intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for dropping out while a stronger majority of females exhibited extrinsic reasons for dropping out. To further support the findings of the first two questions, a focus group of current at-risk students during the 2009-10 school year was created.

Participant Information

This group was a randomly-chosen sample of 18 at-risk students attending Coffee High during the 2009-10 school year, representing 1% of the school's total population for that year. Twenty students were invited to participate in the focus group. All 20 returned their forms to participate. Two students, for unknown reasons, did not attend the sessions. The term "at-risk" at Coffee High was applied to students who were credit-deficient or failed to pass one or more portions of the Georgia High School Graduation Test and were perilously susceptible to leaving school without a diploma. In fact, one Black male who had participated in the focus group discussion did leave school two months later as a result of failing his last opportunity on the test.

This group, male and female, ranged in age from 15 to 19, and represented the three predominant racial groups in the school population (White, Black, and Latino). They were experiencing course failures, excessive absences and discipline referrals, or other academic or non-school issues that kept them from being successful in the school environment. One Latino girl had already dropped out of school and returned. The demographics for the focus group sample are shown in Table 14. The headings for the

subgroups in the table are male, female, Black, White, and Latino. The last column gives the average age of the sample by grade level.

Table 14

Data Table-2010 At-Risk Focus Group by Grade Level, Gender, Ethnicity, & Mean Age

GL	#	M	F	B	W	H	Age
9 th	1	0	1	1	0	0	15
10 th	3	1	2	1	0	2	15.6
11 th	6	2	4	2	1	3	16.8
12 th	7	3	4	2	3	1	18
Totals	17	6	11	7	4	6	16.4

Qualitative Findings. In an attempt to identify solutions, this researcher asked what drew students to the school and what would draw them. In addition, they were asked if they felt that the factors that kept them from succeeding in school were internal or external ones. Finally, they were asked what their parents' and teachers' feelings about their completing school were and what teachers and administrators at Coffee High could do to improve their high school experiences.

Of the eighteen at-risk students who responded to the researcher's invitation to join the focus group, one nonminority student (20%) indicated intrinsic factors might cause him or her to drop out, while four nonminority students (80%) showed signs of extrinsic factors as a basis of possibly dropping out. Four minority students (31%) designated intrinsic factors as potential reasons for dropping out, while the greater part of

these students, 9 (69%), designated extrinsic factors that might draw them out of school. A detailed discussion of the results follows.

In respect to gender, only 31% of males indicated intrinsic factors possible in dropping out, while 66% indicated extrinsic factors. For females, only 27% designated intrinsic reasons for possibly dropping out, while the majority (73%) indicated that if they dropped out of school, extrinsic factors would be to blame.

Comparison of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Comparing these findings with the archival group, the majority of nonminority students in both groups dropped out or would drop out because of extrinsic factors. While more minority students dropped out due to intrinsic factors in the archival group, more minority students in the focus group claimed they would drop out due to extrinsic factors. With regard to gender, while males were divided in half between intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the archival group, only a third of the focus group males indicated intrinsic factors, while two-thirds of the males indicated extrinsic factors would be more likely to cause them to drop out. Females in both groups overwhelmingly indicated that external factors did or would cause them to drop out before graduation.

Information obtained from focus group surveys

The answers transcribed from conversations with the focus groups are discussed in the following sections. The 18 focus group students met over two lunch periods. For clarity, their answers have been merged. The students were very candid and relaxed when answering the six questions. Still, not all students answered every question. Some students did not answer any questions, while some students tended to dominate the conversation. Many times they came to a consensus about their answers. Sometimes one

or two students would venture answers that differed completely from the group's answers. The implications of these answers and how they relate to the intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing the five subgroups represented in the archival sample in the quantitative portion of this study will be discussed in Chapter 5. In addition, the findings from the focus group will be compared to the findings from the research discussed in Chapter 2, the literature review.

Responses to Focus Group Questions One and Two: Factors Drawing Students to School

The first and second open-ended questions asked students to focus initially on the positive factors that made them want to come to school each day and then address the changes they would like to see the school incorporate that would make them want to come to school more each day. Factors that drew Latino females were the teachers and administration. These females stated that the teachers were great, they "paid more attention to you," and that the administration made them feel safe because everyone was made to wear their identification badges during the school day. One White male confessed that he "actually learned from some teachers." This same male indicated that other teachers needed to be replaced with "better teachers." A Black female student agreed, saying that sometimes teachers got off-track by talking about subjects that had nothing to do with class work. One Black male pointed out students sometimes blamed teachers and other students, when it was laziness on the parts of students themselves that caused their own failures.

After students identified factors that they believed did and did not draw them to regular attendance at school, the researcher asked students when they believed their problems began. Most were successful in their middle school years. Problems seemed to

begin in eighth through eleventh grades. One Latino female admitted dropping out in the tenth grade because she had a child and needed to support herself and her child by working. Reality forced her to admit she needed an education if she was really going to support her child and herself. She returned to school and was now on track to graduate. Her boss became her mentor, encouraging her to return and offering to speak to students about dropping out from an employer's perspective.

Students talked in depth about how the physical size of the school inhibited their learning. They were hampered by changing classes in such crowded conditions, bumping into people in the halls while en route to their next classes, and having to travel long distances (for example, from the gym to a distant wing) to get to their next classes. They indicated frustration at large class sizes that made it difficult to receive individual attention from teachers and to pay attention in class due to distractions. A Black male expressed irritation in having to "wait in line" for the teacher's attention, while a Latino female felt frustration at her lack of concentration because of crowded conditions. Another Latino female stated that she had no choice but to block everyone else out and focus solely on herself and her own learning.

Responses to Focus Group Question Three: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors

Both a Black female and a White male said that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors kept them from being successful at school. A Black male admitted that many problems began at home and continued at school because students brought their attitudes from home with them. A White male agreed that he tended to bring that attitude to school and "take it out on everybody else." Two Latino females stated that problems at home and in their relationships affected their performance at school. One of those females told how

the graduation coach encouraged her to separate the two, focusing only on schoolwork while at school and only on her personal life while at home. The other Latino female who expressed extrinsic problems spoke about how childcare and financial problems kept her from being at school or concentrating at school. A third Latino female stated that getting a job was crucial for her.

When the graduation coach asked a Black female in the group which factors hindered her, she thought that both intrinsic and extrinsic problems plagued her, but admitted that there were more outside factors involved. At one point in a session, the researcher asked for a show of hands about which factors influenced their inability to be successful at school. Nine out of twelve students felt that their problems were coming from outside the school walls.

Conversely, a Black male expressed consternation about his intrinsic burden, not passing the graduation test. He had obtained senior status with credits and said, "I ask myself, why am I still here, 'cause I only have one more time to try to pass the graduation test. I mean, why still come if I haven't passed the test?" In fact, this same student took his last chance at passing the test this spring and failed. His mother convinced him that it would be more fruitful for him to quit school, get a job, and help her support them. He did just that. Similarly, a White male stated that he still had not been able to pass the language arts portion of the GHSGT. This failure frustrated him, because he had passed the writing portion and other parts of the test. In spite of this revelation, he admits that if he were to quit school, it would be to help his mother financially by getting a job. In contrast, a Black male stated that if he quit school, it was because he was bored and there were not any high expectations at school.

Responses to Focus Group Questions Four and Five: Parental and Teacher Perceptions

Of the students who answered the question regarding their parents' feelings about their completion of school, eight said that their parents wanted them to graduate; three stated that they had no support at home for completing school. All Latino students who answered the question (all females) indicated that their parents wanted them to graduate and even encouraged them to, but did not pressure them about it. One Black female stated that her mother wanted her to graduate. Of the two White males who responded, both said that their parents encouraged them to graduate. While one reported that he was put on restrictions if he did poorly on his report card, the other student said that his dad left the decision to finish to him. Conversely, one White female, one Black female and one Black male did not have support at home to finish school. A White female claimed that her parents wanted her to quit school to get a job to support herself and her child. A Black female said she had no support at home. Her aunt did encourage her, however, to finish school. A Black male had no support whatsoever from his family to graduate, so that made him more determined to finish and prove to them that he could.

Students were more animated about teachers supporting their graduation. They seemed to have the expectation that all teachers should support them to graduate, even when their parents did not. One White male believed that some teachers supported student efforts to graduate. Some did not. He related an incident in which he engaged a Black teacher in verbal confrontation because she made derogatory remarks about his family, himself, and White people in general. She then told his class that no one in the class was worthy of graduation. As one Latino female stated, "The truth is...I agree with

some teachers, because I haven't had any bad teachers...some students exaggerate a little, because they get in trouble, but I think that's wrong."

Two Latino females thought that their teachers supported their graduation. Two Latino females felt that they did not have their teachers' support. One Black female and one Black male had favorable opinions of their teachers' support. One Black male was negative and another ambivalent about teacher support. The Black male who had favorable opinions about his teachers' support related his experiences with two teachers. They frequently sought him out at school to check on his progress and he sometimes hid from them so he would not have to respond to their inquiries. One Black female captured the essence of everyone's answers to this question by stating, "There are those teachers who care whether you pass or not, but there are those...that do not care at all. So you have to get what you can out of the situation, learn the best that you can."

Responses to Focus Group Questions Six: Teacher/Administrator Improvements

One can see a delicate bond between at-risk students and their educators. When asked what teachers and administrators could do to help improve school, students were extremely verbal and specific in their recommendations. They proposed expelling students who could not behave and got in the way of others' education and a list of suggestions for making the classroom more conducive to learning. These ideas included teaching all the time, not just when under observation, making tests easier to understand, supporting students better, and providing better help. Students recounted situations where negative interactions occurred with teachers. They were especially bothered about visitors observing classrooms. They were disturbed at how teachers changed their normal practice of teaching when outsiders were present.

In defense of teachers, one Latino female student was adamant that “I really think it’s not the teachers; it’s the students that just don’t try.” She commented that in middle school students had subjects year-round, but that in high school subjects were “crammed” into one semester. Teachers had to hurry through material because it was to be covered on high-stakes tests. Students gave fewer suggestions for administrators. One student (gender and ethnicity undeterminable in recording) thought that teachers should be interviewed and screened more carefully so that better quality teachers were chosen. At the end of one of the sessions one student volunteered that students should be given more opportunities like this focus group session to voice their opinions and express their frustrations, because it felt productive to do so.

Summary

The researcher analyzed the data by first organizing data sequentially in two phases, separately gathering and analyzing data from two populations at Coffee High, an archival sample and a focus group sample of current at-risk students. In Phase I, the researcher performed a cross tabulation with a Pearson Chi-Square for ethnicity and gender for the archival group. The frequency of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons was weighted before running the cross tabulations in each case. The researcher found that nonminority students were more likely to leave school before graduation because of extrinsic factors, while minority students were slightly more likely to leave due to intrinsic factors. Males were divided equally between intrinsic and extrinsic factors, while the majority of females were influenced by extrinsic dropout factors. Results were determined marginally significant in the case of ethnicity, and more clearly significant, but still small regarding gender.

In Phase II, the researcher used a matrix chart to analyze the responses to six open-ended questions asked of the focus group. These answers were used to determine relationships of intrinsic and extrinsic factors for the focus group. Within the open-ended portion of the survey, students indicated that the school could provide smaller classes, higher expectations, and more helpful teaching methods more often to help students be more successful in school. There were more extrinsic factors causing them to be unsuccessful in school than there were intrinsic factors. While some of the qualitative results confirmed the results of the quantitative portion of the study, others did not. Findings from both portions of this study will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In a state where high stakes testing and AYP determine so much of a school's and a student's success, one has to wonder how much bearing those stressful issues have or if other external issues are contributing factors to students leaving high school before graduation. Not only are dropouts detrimental to school status and to their own educations, once they leave school they may become dependent on social programs, which can result in lower income and contributions, higher welfare and healthcare payouts ("Left Behind"). So many elements—both internal and external—factor into the complex lives of students, including those at large rural high schools in southeast Georgia such as Coffee High School. Internal factors are more easily controlled than external ones. Because the school has never made AYP since its six-year-old implementation, every possible effort is made to bring about student success, regardless of gender and ethnicity. Will these efforts be enough?

Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to scrutinize student records to determine whether students were leaving Coffee High before graduating because of their failures from inside or if external situations were pulling them beyond school walls. This study was conducted in two phases using two samples of the school population. The first phase consisted of a close examination of the records of 172 of the 224 dropouts during the

2005-06 school year. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors were tallied and categorized, then analyzed through cross tabulation with chi squares. Phase II consisted of interviewing 18 students in a focus group to determine if their perceptions of their failures were internal or external, thereby enhancing the findings of Phase I.

In Phase I, student records from the archival group were gathered from the records clerk's office in the career center. A form was created and used to tally information about retentions, absences in grades kindergarten through eight, discipline referrals, special services received, and transfers from school to school (see Appendix F). Data were recorded, coded, and analyzed. Codes included internal factors that determined academic failure such as retentions, discipline referrals, and special services. External factors that determined academic failures were frequent absences in grades kindergarten through eight (indicating parental responsibility), numerous school transfers, or other gauges of unstable family life. Some of these factors were change of guardianship and teen pregnancy. The researcher used these internal and external factors to categorize the archival group by ethnicity and gender into two groups. Analysis included running the totals for both ethnicity and gender in PSAW Statistics 18 (predictive analytics software and solutions by SPSS), by cross tabulation and by chi square to determine if the results were by chance.

In Phase II, a random focus group of 20 current students was formed by the graduation coach. Eighteen of the 20 actually participated. After obtaining permissions from their parents and their consent, these 18 students were invited to talk during two sessions at lunch while answering six open-ended questions about their educational

experiences at Coffee High School. The answers to these focus group questions from both sessions were combined in a transcript and coded by ethnicity and gender. They were then analyzed for emergent themes. These findings were then compared to results from Phase I quantitative findings and in conjunction with the literature to determine if the findings added strength to internal and external factors by ethnicity and gender. Recommendations were developed according to these findings.

Summary of Findings

This study was centered on three key research questions. The first two questions examined the percentages of students in the archival group according to their ethnicity and gender left school because of intrinsic or extrinsic factors. The third question focused on the perceptions of the focus group about why they were not having success in school. This third question was used to help strengthen the findings of the first two questions.

Research Question 1: Is there a relationship between ethnicity and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation?

For the archival group, the records of 37.5% of nonminority students indicated internal factors that weighed heavily on their decisions to leave school before graduation. The majority, 62.5%, showed indications of external factors drawing them from school. Reiterating the observation of Bridgeland, et al. (2006), “There is no single reason why students drop out of high school” (p. iii). However, extrinsic factors were overwhelmingly evident in their early departures. As indicated in Chapter 2, Stearns and Glennie (2006) believed that more nonminority males left school before graduation to work and that they were more likely to be hired than minority males. Also according to their study, while failure in academics played a slightly significant role early in high

school, as they progressed, nonminority males showed a greater tendency in each grade to leave school to find employment.

In the archival group for this study, 54% of the minorities' records indicated intrinsic factors for dropping out. Forty-six percent of records indicated extrinsic factors. Stearns and Glennie (2006) reported that minority dropouts had more learning disabilities, were more affected by social bias and personal prejudice, were less likely to be hired, and tended to drop out more to take care of various family members. The first two factors were intrinsic; the last two were extrinsic. Stearns and Glennie also determined that Latino females often had boyfriends who did not want their girlfriends to be "too educated" or "too White." Along those lines, Blacks perceived schools as being "White organizational structures" with which they had to comply (Stearns & Glennie).

Research Question 2: Is there a relationship between gender and student motivation for leaving school prior to graduation? For the archival group, males were divided equally between intrinsic and extrinsic factors (50% each). Females indicated fewer intrinsic factors (30%) and more than double the extrinsic factors (70%) for dropping out. Stearns and Glennie's (2006) findings on gender indicated that boys tended to have more learning disabilities than girls. Therefore, one would expect that more males would show more intrinsic indicators of being unsuccessful at school. This theory appears to be true when comparing the males and females in the archival group. To include another dimension to these comparisons, a third question needed to be asked, and a focus group was the second component added to the study.

Research Question 3: What factors do at-risk students identify as influential to their decision to leave school prior to graduation? When asked about factors that drew

students to Coffee High and those that would draw them, the focus groups discussed several of them. Some liked attending school because of their friends who attended. More gave answers that had to do with varied curriculum and teachers. The answers that were most compelling, however, were those that came from explaining what *would* draw them to the school. Students wanted smaller classes, fewer demanding courses and graduation tests, better teachers, with more hands-on activities included in their learning.

Minority students were particularly helpful in voicing specific changes in intrinsic factors. Several minority students thought improvements should be made in hiring procedures for teachers. They felt that stringency should be exercised in choosing more qualified teachers. They also felt that teachers should do a better job at staying on subject while teaching. One nonminority student complained about a teacher exercising racism, while minority students did not experience racism in working with teachers. Instead, Black students were inclined to be bored in class and felt teachers had very low expectations for students. A Latino student felt that students in school had too many groups or cliques. Too much drama happened among students. Responses to question five dealing with teachers' expectations about students graduating seemed to be weighted equally. White, Black and Latino students all felt that some teachers cared, even "too much." One White and one Latino student each had negative experiences with teachers' graduation expectations. Focus group answers about intrinsic factors indicated a positive correlation with their records, but not necessarily with the archival group's data, according to ethnicity.

In regard to extrinsic factors and ethnicity, both nonminority students and minority students indicated "household drama," (e.g., fighting at home and family

problems) that many times thwarted their success at school. A few Black students admitted they had “played around too much” in school, getting them off-track for graduation. Latino students spoke about having to take care of children, while only one spoke of having parents who encouraged her to drop out. All Latino students spoke of parents who supported their decisions to stay in school or who encouraged them to drop out, but who did not pressure them to stay or scold them to do better. These events were listed in Glennie and Stearns’ study (2006) as extrinsic factors. A nonminority male indicated the only reason he might drop out was to get a job, which once more emphasized a theme in Glennie and Stearns’ study. A major cause for nonminority male dropouts was finding employment. In general, ethnic focus group answers about extrinsic factors were as varied as the quantitative results in Phase I of the study.

Within gender categories, males and females alike in the focus group complained about intrinsic factors such as poor teaching, a need for more applied classroom activities, and some negative experiences with teachers. Females were quicker to hold themselves more accountable for learning and took it upon themselves to focus more in the classroom. Males were more inclined to place blame on teachers and the curriculum, rather than with themselves.

Finally, according to gender, extrinsic factors were different for males than for females. Some females had children they were raising. While focus group students’ parents were generally encouraging these students to finish school to create better lives for themselves and their children, one female reported that her parents wanted her to drop out to make a living right then for herself and her child. On the other hand, males commonly had parental support. One male did report being on his own at home and felt a

need to graduate to prove to his parents that he could. Even though their records and their opinions indicated more extrinsic factors hindering their graduation, several males spoke of having difficulties passing the graduation test. Their conversations focused more on the intrinsic factors that were causing them problems in school.

A final question that the researcher asked that was not on the list of questions was the advice that these at-risk students would give to younger brothers or sisters about getting through high school. Their answers ranged from giving encouragement to finish, to not hanging with the wrong crowds or paying attention to high school drama in general. Some admitted they had “played around” in middle school and in ninth grade, causing much of the difficulties they had now. Others felt that the middle school and ninth grade campus did not prepare them for high school. They also stated that teachers did not cater to students in high school the way they did in the lower grades. High school teachers’ expectations were that students take more responsibility for their own learning. The Latino female who came from the vantage point of having dropped out expressed a sincere desire for students to realize earlier on the seriousness of getting their educations. She said she advocated more dedication and more studying not only to her younger brother and sister, but to anyone she knew who would listen.

Additional Findings. The records of the archival sample showed a need for a more-detailed exit form for dropouts. The one piece of paper in student files allocated for exiting school showed only an official code as a cause for leaving school. Students were not interviewed nor were they asked to list their beliefs about why they wanted to leave school or what factors contributed to this decision. In looking at the websites of various

schools in this country, the researcher found more detailed exit forms that helped guide schools to learn about areas of improvement.

Student records also showed a need for more-detailed examination and placement of students transferring into the school system from other systems. Transfers from school to school were frequently noted in these records. Generally, when records were obtained from previous schools, much of the attendance and testing information was missing. The school could place a hold on student registration until those records are received in order to accommodate students in the best classroom placement for their abilities and for the problems they bring with them. These practices would help ensure that they are not set up for failure before they begin their Coffee High experiences.

Discussion of Implications for Practice

The findings of this study reflected many of the same results as those of Stearns and Glennie (2006). Intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for dropping out or being unsuccessful in large rural high schools are often repeated according to ethnicity and gender. For White students, extrinsic reasons tend to draw them out of school just as much as or more than intrinsic ones. Females, especially minority females, tend to be pulled out before graduation by extrinsic factors such as raising children and dealing with other domestic situations beyond their power. While high schools cannot control extrinsic factors for their students, they can offer more support and perhaps, offer alternate suggestions to students for these problems.

For males, intrinsic factors are bigger hurdles than extrinsic ones. This finding is especially true for minority males. Schools like Coffee High can make sure that highly-qualified teachers are hired who care about their students, have high expectations,

demand excellent work from them, and adhere to the school curriculum as frequently as possible. Several students in the focus group spoke about teachers who strayed from the curriculum to other topics. Others talked about how some teachers only referred to Georgia Performance Standards or to essential questions when guests visited their classrooms. In addition, Coffee High must be willing to demonstrate true concern and guidance for its students. Students enjoyed the experience of meeting in the focus group so that they could air their frustrations and voice their opinions. They asked that they be allowed the opportunity to have more sessions similar to these. Focus group students also voiced concerns about more supports being put in place for helping students pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test and for making classes smaller so that students can get the individual support they so desperately need. Several felt lost in large classrooms.

Conclusions

What can Coffee High School do to help alleviate these dropout problems, thereby increasing the graduation rate? The school is already engaging in strategies to try to keep up with the academic progress of its 1352 students. With economic pressures and burgeoning classroom sizes, the school cannot produce miracles. However, Coffee High needs to be able to pinpoint the problems of its students more exactly from the time they arrive until the time they leave school. Monitoring students through careful collection of previous data and careful collection of exiting data can shed light on the problems of individual students. According to both Dynarski, et al. (2008) and the state of Oregon, who invoked a law requiring schools to interview their dropouts upon exiting (Oregon House Bill 3142 of 2007), this diagnostic information is key to improving student learning. Coffee High can make a concerted effort to not only follow the progress of its

students, but to learn specifically what their weaknesses and problem areas are. They must work at more fully addressing these problems, academic and behavioral, putting in place multiple supports that keep students from feeling lost in a big school. In addition, quality teachers who show genuine concern for and who push students to excel in rigorous classroom curriculum must be hired. Recalling Jerald's (2006) findings in Chapter 2, "high schools that have highly supportive teachers cut the probability of dropping out in half" (p. 3).

Recommendations for Future Research

More studies are needed on maintaining consistent and precise student records and the effects of monitoring this data on student success. More studies on the scale of the one carried out by Stearns and Glennie (2006). They focused on intrinsic and extrinsic factors which influenced students to drop out of North Carolina public schools to strengthen theories about dropping out. Studies such as this one particularly need to be done according to ethnicity and gender, in order to address problems in these areas and target particular students.

As a final point, more research and tracking need to follow at much earlier ages in student educational careers to determine just how detrimental primary and elementary school absences and transfers are to students during their high school experiences. The numbers of absences and transfers indicated in student records at Coffee High appear to have extreme bearings on student success or failure at graduation.

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Appendix A

Letter of Invitation to Focus Group Students

3096 Brooks Rd.
Broxton, GA 31519
June 12, 2009

Coffee High Student
159 Trojan Way
Douglas, GA 31533

Dear Parents and Student,

I am an English teacher with Coffee High School, and am currently working on my doctorate in Educational Leadership with Valdosta State University. To fulfill the requirements for my dissertation, I chose to do a study on rural schools and why students have problems, sometimes deciding to leave school before graduating. With Dr. Tanner's permission, I have been going through student records from a previous school year to see what the statistics are for those leaving before graduation in ninth through twelfth grade, so I could determine if there is a pattern of reasons why those students left.

I believe that the student records will only give me part of the picture, however. I would really like to speak with your child and a group of his or her peers to get their points of view about high school and what the high school could do to help them stay in school. I think that what your child has to say is important and by listening to what your child has to say, I can help the school to learn what they can do to better help students in the future.

If your child will agree to meet me to answer some questions about his or her time at Coffee High, I will meet with them as a group on Friday, November 20, 2009, and serve them pizza and a soft drink for lunch. Our graduation coach, Mrs. Tara Spates, will also be present. Your child's name will not be included in the information I am gathering, he or she does not have to answer any question that makes him or her feel uncomfortable, and he or she may choose to leave the focus group at any time. If your child is under eighteen, I will need to have parental permission as well. That form is attached, as well as a brief survey I will need for demographic purposes, and the list of questions I would like to ask the focus group. If you agree to your child participating, please sign the attached permission form and have your child return it to me in Room B527 by

Your child's name will never be used in any way in the study, he or she cannot be held accountable for grade or discipline reasons for anything said, and all information will be kept confidential. I believe what I learn will be very valuable to your child, to the school, and to future students of Coffee High. I will explain the study and the procedure for the focus group to your child more fully when we meet. You may contact me at (912) 359-3429 during evenings or email me at peachteach16@gmail.com with any questions.

I eagerly await your reply,

Debbie Wooten, Coffee High

Appendix B

Valdosta State University IRB Approval

Appendix C

Parent/Guardian Permission Letter

Parent/Guardian Permission for Child's/Ward's Participation in Research

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Parent/Guardian Permission for Child's/Ward's Participation in Research

You are being asked to allow your child (or ward) to participate in a research project entitled "A Study of Dropouts and Implications for Dropout Prevention in a Rural High School." This research project is being conducted by *Debbie Wooten, a student of Educational Leadership* at Valdosta State University. The researcher has explained to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks to your child (or ward). You may ask the researcher any questions you have to help you understand this study and your child's (or ward's) possible participation in it. A basic explanation of the research is given below. From this point on in this form, the term "child" is used for either a child or a ward. Please read the remainder of this form carefully and ask the researcher any questions you may have. The University asks that you give your signed permission if you will allow your child to participate in this research project.

Purpose of the Research: This study involves research. The purpose of the study is to help find answers to improving Coffee High's graduation rate, including *are students discouraged from finishing school because of inside factors at school or drawn out from outside factors beyond the school's walls? Or both?* Most importantly: *What can Coffee High School do to alleviate these problems?*

Procedures: Your child will be asked, in one or two 30- minute focus group session(s), to answer the attached questions, which will be tape-recorded and written into a transcript, to be placed into the final report. There are no alternatives to the experimental procedures in this study. The only alternative is to choose for your child not to participate at all.

When your child's participation is over, the study will be explained to you in full detail, and all of your questions will be answered, if you request these details. At that time, you can decide whether or not you want your child's information to be used in the study. Pseudonyms will be used in the study to keep your child's identification private.

Possible Risks or Discomfort: Although there are no known risks to your child associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks. By granting permission for your child to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you or your child may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from

negligence of the University or its researchers.

Potential Benefits: Although your child may not benefit directly from this research, his/her participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of why students have difficulties or drop out of rural schools such as Coffee High.

Costs and Compensation: There are no costs to you or your child and there is no compensation (no money, gifts, or services) for your child's participation in this research project. Your child will however, be served pizza and a soft drink, since his or her lunch period will be used for the focus group.

Assurance of Confidentiality: Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your child's information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your child's confidential information.

Your child's private information obtained by the researcher will be protected by keeping all records, papers, and audiotapes locked in a drawer in her office. Only the researcher, the principal, director of the career center and members of the dissertation committee at Valdosta State University will have access to your child's interview answers, and this information will be generic or will not use real names. All of this information will be kept for three years after the study, then papers will be shredded and audiotapes will be smashed.

To further protect your child's identity, the researcher will code that identity with a number, keeping the student list with names and code numbers locked away in the same drawer until the three-year period ends.

Representatives of Coffee High, which school is providing records for this research, may also be given access to the collective results from the study, such as reasons for not doing well in school, enabling the high school to help other students who might also be at risk of quitting, but information will be generic.

Voluntary Participation: Your decision to allow your child to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to allow your child to participate and you change your mind later, you are free to withdraw your child from the study at that time. Even if you give your permission and want your child to be part of the study, your child may decide not to participate at all, or he/she may leave the study at any time. By not allowing your child to participate in this study or by withdrawing him/her from the study before the research is complete, you are not giving up any rights that you or your child have or any services to which you or your child are otherwise entitled to from Coffee High School or from Valdosta State University. Likewise, if your child decides on his/her own not to participate or to drop out of the study later on, he/she is not giving up any rights, including rights to services from Valdosta State University to which he/she is otherwise entitled.

Your child may skip any questions that he/she does not want to answer.
Should you decide to withdraw your child from the study after data collection is complete, the child's information will be deleted from the database and will not be included in research results.

Information Contacts:

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Debbie Wooten at (912) 359-3429 or peachteach16@gmail.com. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-333-7837 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Agreement to Participate: The research project and my child's (or ward's) role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I grant permission for my child to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am either the custodial parent or legal guardian of the child. I have received a copy of this permission form.

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Mailing Address:

e-mail Address: _____

**This research project has been approved by the
Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board
for the Protection of Human Research Participants
through the date noted below:**

Printed Name of Child/Ward

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Parent/Guardian Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

Appendix D
Letter of Consent

Consent to Participate in Research

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled

“A Study of Dropouts and Implications for Dropout Prevention in a Rural High School.”

This research project is being conducted by *Debbie Wooten*, a *student in Educational Leadership* at Valdosta State University. The researcher has explained to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask the researcher any questions you have to help you understand this project and your possible participation in it. A basic explanation of the research is given below. Please read this carefully and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. The University asks that you give your signed agreement if you wish to participate in this research project.

Purpose of the Research: This study involves research. The purpose of the study is to help find answers to improving Coffee High’s dropout rate, including *Which subgroups are dropping out? Why are they dropping out?* More specifically and perhaps, more telling, *are students being pushed out from inside factors at school or pulled out from outside factors beyond the school’s walls?* Most importantly: *What can Coffee High School do to alleviate these problems?*

Procedures: Debbie Wooten will put together a focus group of several students having problems with their classes, during lunch on Friday, February 5, 2010 to interview. She will provide the group with pizza and drinks. The school’s graduation coach will also be in attendance. She has asked you by letter to be included in that interview. The interview questions that she would like to ask you are attached. She is asking you to cooperate in the study to help others who may be having difficulties in school or in the process of dropping out. There are no alternatives to the experimental procedures in this study. The only alternative is to choose not to participate at all. *You will be asked to meet Mrs. Wooten in her classroom and speak with her for thirty minutes during lunch on the above date.*

Possible Risks or Discomfort: Although there are no known risks associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating

in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks.

By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers.

Potential Benefits: *Although you will not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of why students are dropping out at Coffee High School before graduating.*

Costs and Compensation: *There are no costs to you and the only compensation for your participation in this research project is that a pizza lunch will be provided.*

Assurance of Confidentiality: Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your confidential information.

Your information and other participants' information will be coded with a number, rather than your name(s) when gathered from your records. The gathered information and the list of students' names used to code the information, along with the audio tape of your interview will be kept in a locked drawer in Mrs. Wooten's office for three years. After that time, all paper information gathered for this study will be shredded and tapes will be destroyed by smashing them.

All focus group conversation will be tape-recorded. Information recorded during your interview will be recorded without the use of your name and other personally-identifying information. A transcript will be made from the interview and used to compare and determine any patterns among yourself and others in the small focus group. Again, any written or recorded information will be kept in a locked drawer and destroyed after three years.

Voluntary Participation: Your decision to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to participate and change your mind later, you are free to leave the study. Your decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future will not have any effect on any rights you have or any services you are otherwise entitled to from Valdosta State University.

You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer.

Should you decide to withdraw after data collection is complete, your information will also be deleted from the database and will not be included in research results.

You have opportunity at any time during the study to decide whether to allow your data to be used in the study after your participation is over and the research has been fully explained.

Information Contacts:

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to *Debbie Wooten* at (912) 359-3429 or debbie.wooten@coffee.k12.ga.us. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-333-7837 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Agreement to Participate: The research project and my role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am 18 years of age or older. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study:

_____ *Yes* _____ *No*

Mailing Address:

e-mail Address: _____

**This research project has been approved by the
Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board
for the Protection of Human Research Participants
through the date noted below:**

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix E
Data Collection Form

Appendix F

Interview Questions for At-Risk Focus Group

Interview Questions for At-Risk Focus Group Students

1. What draws you to Coffee High as a student?
2. What would draw you to Coffee High?
3. Do you feel that there are situations within the school, like people, learning problems, discipline, that keep you from doing well in school, or do you feel that there are situations outside of school, like friends, family, or jobs that keep you from doing well in school? Or a combination of these issues?

(Check list for researcher's use)

Within school

Outside of school

People

Friends

Learning problems

Family issues

Discipline issues

Jobs

4. What are your parents' feelings about your graduation?
5. What are your teachers' feelings about your graduation?
6. What can Coffee High and its teachers and administrators do to help you and future students to want to graduate?

Appendix G

Focus Group Survey

Focus Group Survey

Please answer the questions on this survey anonymously (do not put your name on it anywhere), and bring this survey with you completed, when you join the focus group on (date, time).

1. What is your age? 14 15 16 17 18 19
2. What is your gender? M F
3. What is your ethnicity? African American Caucasian Latino Oriental Mixed
4. What grade are you in this semester? 9 10 11 12
5. What are your current grades in each of your four classes? Please write your grade in each class.
6. 1st block: 2nd block: 3rd block: 4th block:
7. How many times have you been retained or held back?
8. None 1 2 3 more than 3
9. This year, how many discipline referrals/misconduct forms (OTHER THAN TARDIES) have you had from teachers or administrators?
10. How many credits have you earned so far in high school?
11. How many times have you and/or your family moved, that have affected which school you went to?
- None 1 2 3 4 5 6 or more
12. How many schools have you attended in your educational career?
- Primary school _____ Elementary school _____ Middle school _____
- Freshmen campus _____ High school _____

What learning disabilities have you had or do you currently have?

