

A Basic Interpretative Study of the Lived Experiences of Secondary School Leaders in Georgia Who Have Used Online Credit Recovery to Assist At-Risk Students Graduate

A Dissertation submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Educational Leadership

in the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development
of the Dewar College of Education and Human Services

June 2023

Deidrienne N. Gross

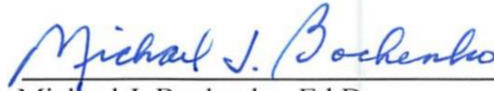
Ed.S. Lincoln Memorial University, 2006
M.Ed., Troy State University, 2004
BS, Clark Atlanta University, 1998

© Copyright 2023 Deidrienne N. Gross

All Rights Reserved

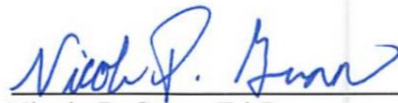
This dissertation, "A Qualitative Study of the Lived Experiences of Secondary School Leaders in Georgia Who Have Used Online Credit Recovery to Assist At-Risk Students," by Deidrienne N. Gross, is approved by:

**Dissertation
Committee
Chair**



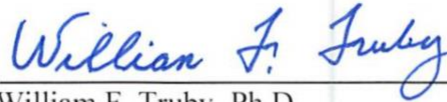
Michael J. Bochenko, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development

**Dissertation
Research Member**



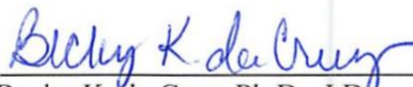
Nicole P. Gunn, Ed.D.
Instructor
Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development

**Committee
Member**



William F. Truby, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development

**Associate Provost for
Graduate Studies &
Research**



Becky K. da Cruz, Ph.D., J.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice

Defense Date:

July 6, 2023

FAIR USE

This dissertation is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, revised in 1976). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgment. Use of the material for financial gain without the author's expressed written permission is not allowed.

DUPLICATION

I authorize the Head of Interlibrary Loan or the Head of Archives at the Odum Library at Valdosta State University to arrange for duplication of this dissertation for educational or scholarly purposes when so requested by a library user. The duplication shall be at the user's expense.

Signature 

I refuse permission for this dissertation to be duplicated in whole or in part.

Signature _____

ABSTRACT

Increasing and sustaining student achievement is the hallmark of the U.S. educational system. The school principal must keep the mission and vision of student achievement at the forefront and devise methods to increase high school graduation rates. Online credit recovery is an efficient means to assist secondary students, including at-risk populations, who lack credits due to course failure. This basic interpretive study examined the lived experiences of five secondary leaders in Georgia whose graduation rates increased annually. The purpose of the project was to comprehend the meaning these five leaders made from their experiences utilizing online credit recovery software. Understanding the participants' lived experiences may provide strategies for stakeholders working with secondary at-risk students. The data were collected through observations, semi-structured interviews, and historical data reviews. Strategies to support students enrolled in online credit recovery programs included providing multiple opportunities for online classes and staffing online credit recovery courses with certified teachers. Teachers' perceptions of non-traditional means of recovering credits after course failure were a barrier. Although the principal is the instructional leader responsible for increasing and sustaining student achievement, helping students, particularly at-risk students, graduate with their cohort requires many staff members. The findings indicate students who are credit deficient require the assistance of compassionate and dedicated staff well-informed of the needs of the at-risk learner. Creating authentic relationships with a caring adult may increase student engagement and familiarity with their school. Forming solid and meaningful connections to school through clubs, homerooms, and viable post-secondary career opportunities may help increase student achievement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I. INTRODUCTION 1

 Overview..... 1

 Problem Statement 4

 Purpose Statement..... 5

 Research Questions 6

 Significance of the Study 7

 Conceptual Framework..... 7

 Summary of the Methodology 9

 Research Design..... 10

 Research Assumptions 11

 Limitations 11

 Delimitations..... 12

 Definitions of Key Terms 13

 Summary..... 14

Chapter II. LITERATURE REVIEW17

 Student Achievement 17

 School Reform’s Impact on Student Achievement..... 19

 School Accountability and Student Achievement 23

 Statistics on Student Achievement..... 25

 Instructional Leadership as a Critical Factor to Graduation Rates 26

 Role of the Instructional Leader 28

 The Decline in Student Achievement 29

 Impact of Failing Courses..... 30

 Achievement Gaps 31

School.....	35
Family.....	37
Individual.....	39
At-Risk Students.....	41
Potential Outcomes in School.....	44
Graduation Rate Calculation.....	49
Online Credit Recovery.....	60
Conceptual Framework.....	72
Finn Participation and Identification Model.....	72
Implications for School Leaders.....	76
Role of the School Principal.....	76
Summary.....	83
Chapter III. METHODOLOGY.....	86
Research Questions.....	86
Research Design.....	87
Research and Design Rationale.....	88
Setting.....	90
Role of the Researcher.....	92
Methodology.....	93
Instrumentation.....	94
Participants.....	97
Data Collection.....	98
Data Analysis.....	103
Miles and Huberman Analytical Method.....	105
Validity.....	108

Issues of Trustworthiness.....	109
Ethical Procedures	110
Summary	112
Chapter IV. FINDINGS	115
Location of Research/Setting	116
Data Collection	119
Participants.....	120
Summary	163
Chapter V. OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	165
Themes	166
Relationship Building	167
Student Engagement (Finn Participation Model)	180
Access to Nontraditional Educational Formats.....	185
Online Credit Recovery	192
Experience Working with At-Risk Students.....	204
Instructional Leadership.....	213
Data.....	217
Graduation Coach or Similar Personnel	219
Adults as Barriers to Success	223
Finn’s Identification and Participation Model	227
Participation	230
Summary	231
Chapter VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	234
Methods and Procedures	238
Interpretation of Findings	239

Research Question 1	241
Research Question 2	242
Multiple Opportunities to Recover Lost Credits	245
Research Question 3	250
Implications of the Study	252
Homeroom	252
Relationship Building	253
Graduation Coach	255
Online Credit Recovery Courses	255
Limitations of the Study.....	257
Recommendations for Future Research	258
Conclusion	259
REFERENCES	265
APPENDIX A Research Questions, Interview Questions, and Conceptual Framework	301
APPENDIX B IRB Protocol Exemption Reports	307

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Georgia Graduation Rates 2012-2022 3

Table 2. Georgia Graduation Rates, 2012–2019..... 25

Table 3. Dropouts by Gender and Race 60

Table 4. Participant School and District 98

Table 5. Open Coding Symbols and Descriptions 105

Table 6. Restoration High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2013-2017 128

Table 7. Henry Ford High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2017-2021 139

Table 8. Langley High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2018-2020 148

Table 9. Option B Curriculum 155

Table 10. Warrior High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2018-2020..... 156

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Finn Participation Identification Model of School Engagement.....	10
Figure 2. Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for Black, Hispanic, and White Students From 2010-11 to 2015-16.....	26
Figure 3. Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) of Public High School Students by State: 2016-2017	50
Figure 4. Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) of Public High School Students, by Race/Ethnicity: 2016-2017.....	52
Figure 5. Relationship Building Theme	107
Figure 6. Data Display Example for Theme Emergence	
Figure 7. Finn Participation-Identification Model	240

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the school leaders who were willing to take part in my research study. I appreciate your contribution to this body of knowledge.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have come before me and those who have assisted me through this laborious journey of enlightenment and self-awareness. I am thankful for having the love and support of my mother, the late Brenda Gail Williams for 35 years. Without her example of motherhood, strength, and perseverance, I would not have applied to the program. My father, Roosevelt Childs Jr. has always been a source of reassurance, love, and support to my son and me. I thank him for always being the constant force of reason in my life. My son Jaylen has been my “WHY” from the moment I found out I was pregnant, everything I have done has been for him. I did not drop out of this program because he needed to see an example of academic achievement. Thank you, Jaylen, for being the best child a mother could ask for. To my late grandparents: Albert & Nancy Williams, and Roosevelt & Viola Childs, thank you for your prayers, love, devotion, and support throughout my formative years. To Mrs. Dianne Hollins, thank you for your prayers and consistent reminders, “to keep the faith.” Thank you, Dr. Christopher Gaiters, for your mentorship, support, and encouragement. To Dee Harvey, Tanya Jones, Velma Bell, Albert Williams Jr., and Dr. Melanie Mitchell, thank you for holding me accountable throughout this expedition to academic achievement.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

I have a career connection to the topic of online credit recovery and graduation rates based on my prior experiences as a graduation coach and online credit recovery instructor. The greatest joy of my career was supporting students in earning the mandatory credits toward graduation. In the two years in which I served as a graduation coach in a northwest Georgia high school, the most common method of assisting students who lacked credits towards graduation was the use of online credit recovery software called e2020. Students completed missed credits towards graduation in a self-paced online setting. The students endeavored to complete their credits before, during, and after school. The online credit recovery model was in the infancy stages of implementation during my tenure as a graduation coach.

Through this experience, I learned that there are both challenges and benefits involved in using an online model. The roles of the school leader, graduation coach, and counselor are pivotal in the overall success of the program. Online credit recovery can be an arduous process for both instructors and students. It is not easy for students to retake a course online when there are academic deficits that lead to the initial failure of the course.

Overview

The path toward the acquisition of a high school diploma begins on the first day of kindergarten. Completing high school is a milestone in the lives of many teens. However, for some, attaining a high school diploma is more challenging. The reasons

students may exit high school before earning high school diplomas are dependent upon sundry factors. Doll et al. (2013) suggest the reason a student drops out of school may be defined as the “antecedent of dropout;” this event could have begun many years before the event of dropping out.

In any case, the act of dropping out of high school may have a long-lasting impact on the student and community, as well as the economy. Students who exit high school before earning a high school diploma have a lower earning potential in comparison to their peers. The median lifetime earnings of a high school dropout are \$973,000 (Carnevale et al., 2011). The life of a high school dropout may be plagued by insurmountable challenges. Rumberger and Lim (2008) suggest high school dropouts in comparison to high school graduates are more likely to have declining health, higher death and unemployment rates, be more likely to participate in criminal activity, and be imprisoned.

Under mandates by the federal government to increase graduation rates, schools have implemented strategies to increase graduation rates. One such strategy is to use an online credit recovery program to assist students who are credit deficient. The methodology for increasing student achievement or graduation rates may be a complex undertaking for some school leaders. There are numerous variables to consider when invoking long-term change, and local districts must choose from a wide variety of methods to address the needs of learners under their tutelage.

Nevertheless, the graduation rate in Georgia increased by 14.4% from 2012 to 2022 (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). The statewide average recorded in 2022 was 84.1% (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). The U.S. average adjusted cohort

rate for American public high schools was 87% during the academic school year of 2019-2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The graduation rate in Georgia is still lower than the national average. Therefore, it is important to prioritize identifying ways to increase graduation rates statewide. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in more students dropping out during the 2020-2021 academic year. (Barnum, Belsha, & Wilburn, 2022). In the face of challenges, it's crucial for schools and districts to stay dedicated to supporting students in their journey toward graduation.

Table 1

Georgia Graduation Rates 2012-2022

Year	Graduation Rate
2012	69.7%
2013	71.8%
2014	72.6%
2015	79.0%
2016	79.4%
2017	80.6%
2018	81.6%
2019	82.0%
2020	83.8% – Covid semester
2021	83.7% – Covid year
2022	84.1% – Covid year

Note: Georgia Department of Education (2023). *Covid semester* refers to March 13, 2020, to May 31, 2020.

Using online credit recovery software can be a means to minimize credit deficiencies in secondary schools. Students' ability to obtain credits is directly linked to promotion and, ultimately, to graduation. Therefore, schools use various tools to aid students in recovering credits due to course failure. In particular, secondary schools throughout the nation use online credit recovery software to support students in the completion of high school within a four-year cohort. In a summary of findings from *The*

National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (HSS) conducted by the U.S Department of Education, in the academic school year 2014-2015, 89% of high schools throughout America offered at least one credit recovery course to students in need and 15% of high school students enrolled in some form of credit recovery (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Building and district-level administrators, as well as teachers, graduation coaches, and guidance counselors, work to identify students who are at risk of not completing high school within a four-year range. The identification process may vary from school to school and district to district. However, the result is the same: schools need to locate students who may not graduate on time. Examples of the types of tools used to identify learners at risk of not graduating include attendance and discipline records, grades, test scores, and previous retentions, to name a few. The early identification of potential dropouts could serve as a guide for administrators to allocate resources to potentially enable students to complete their high school education.

Problem Statement

The decline in student achievement is a problem that plagues American schools. From 1983's "A Nation at Risk" to the recent "Race to the Top," national reports and incentives have not stemmed the tide of at-risk students continuing to drop out of high school. Despite the minimal increase in graduation rates from 2012-2017, more than eighty thousand Georgia students dropped out of school during the 2012-2016 academic school years (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

When students exit high school without receiving a high school diploma, there may be severe ramifications. Dropping out of high school has adverse consequences,

including diminished opportunities for employment, long-term earnings, and health (Lee-St. John et al., 2018). High school dropouts have a dismal long-range economic outlook in comparison to high school graduates. When comparing high school dropouts to high school graduates, dropouts are less likely to become gainfully employed and are more likely to have adverse health outcomes (Rumberger, 2011). Students who do not complete high school may earn lower wages and have fewer options for affordable healthcare. Wiss (2014) suggested that high school graduates reported fewer serious health conditions in comparison to high school dropouts. Because high school graduates, on average, have better-paying jobs than dropouts, graduates may have more access to quality healthcare.

High rates of high school dropout may also impact the economy and communities due to the increased likelihood that dropouts may become incarcerated. Dropping out of school does not necessarily mean a student will commit a crime. However, many inmates are high school dropouts. Data from the Coalition for Juvenile Justice indicates dropouts have a higher probability of being arrested and serving time in jail or prison than high school graduates (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2013). The cost of incarceration of dropouts in the nation is in the billions yearly.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to determine the strategies and practices used to implement an online credit recovery program at an identified Georgia high school that significantly reduced the number of dropouts and increased the school's graduation rates for five consecutive years. Although there are other studies regarding online credit recovery and student achievement, there is not much information about the state of

Georgia. Georgia has had a steady increase in high school graduation rates over the past few years. The research from this study is aimed at examining the lived experiences, as well as the organizational and management practices, of school leaders who effectively implemented an online credit recovery program. The results from the research study may provide insight into potential strategies for implementing future online credit recovery programs from the perspective of a school leader. The strategies examined in this research study may assist school leaders and administrators in more successfully engaging students at risk of dropping out, and thus, lead to increased graduation rates.

Research Questions

Examining the lived experiences of school leaders who have implemented online credit recovery programs that produced an increase in graduation rates over five consecutive years using online software to remedy credit deficiencies could provide insight into the implementation of more successful strategies to assist credit deficit students in obtaining a high school diploma.

The following three research questions will guide this study:

RQ1: What are the life and career experiences of school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program and significantly decreasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit and increasing the school's graduation rate using the online credit recovery software?

RQ2: What organizational practices and strategies were used by school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program, significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credits at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rates?

RQ3: What were some of the barriers encountered by school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program, significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rate?

Significance of the Study

The decline in student achievement is a problem that plagues American schools. From 1983's *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) to the more recent *Race to the Top* (U.S. Department of Education, 2009-a), national reports and incentives have not stemmed the tide of students continuing to drop out of high school. This study aims to examine the strategies and practices used to implement online credit recovery programs at Georgia high schools, which significantly reduced the number of dropouts for five consecutive years. Results and analysis from this study may assist curriculum directors, system and building-level administrators, and online credit recovery instructors with insight into the implementation process of online credit recovery programs. Data collected from this study may also provide information regarding any potential challenges associated with the implementation of online credit recovery programs and how to overcome them. Ultimately, this study may help students reach an important and necessary milestone: high school graduation.

Conceptual Framework

The role of the school leader is fluid and ever-evolving. The primary conceptual framework for this study is the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model. The building-level administrator of today must be able to function as a manager of people and resources, as well as guide instructional practices. Hallinger and Heck (1998) pinpointed three distant

areas of impact of a school leader, defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting the climate of the school. Emphasizing the instructional programs that are targeted toward at-risk populations is a fundamental aspect of increasing student achievement. The focal point of this study is the lived experiences of school leaders who helped increase student achievement. The researcher seeks to understand what instructional leadership practices these school leaders implemented to help at-risk learners complete high school.

Hallinger and Murphy (1985) found effective schools with varying socioeconomic statuses had a well-defined mission, focus on student achievement, high expectations, and functional curriculum, and the emphasis of the school leader was instruction. The researcher seeks to understand the role of instructional leadership in student achievement.

To complete high school, students must first pass the required courses and any other state-specific requirements. Students must have some degree of intrinsic motivation to the requirements for graduation and must participate actively in their learning. Research findings indicate that students who feel a sense of connection and engagement in school are more successful than students who do not have a connection to the school (Finn,1989). One such study, the Finn Participation Identification Model of School Engagement, provides the conceptual framework for this research. According to Archambault et al. (2009), Finn's model is directly focused on the engagement of students in school. In this model, the authors define engagement as identification and participation in school. Identification refers to a sense of belongingness and the perceived worth of schooling. Finn (1989) concluded that students who are engaged and connected to the

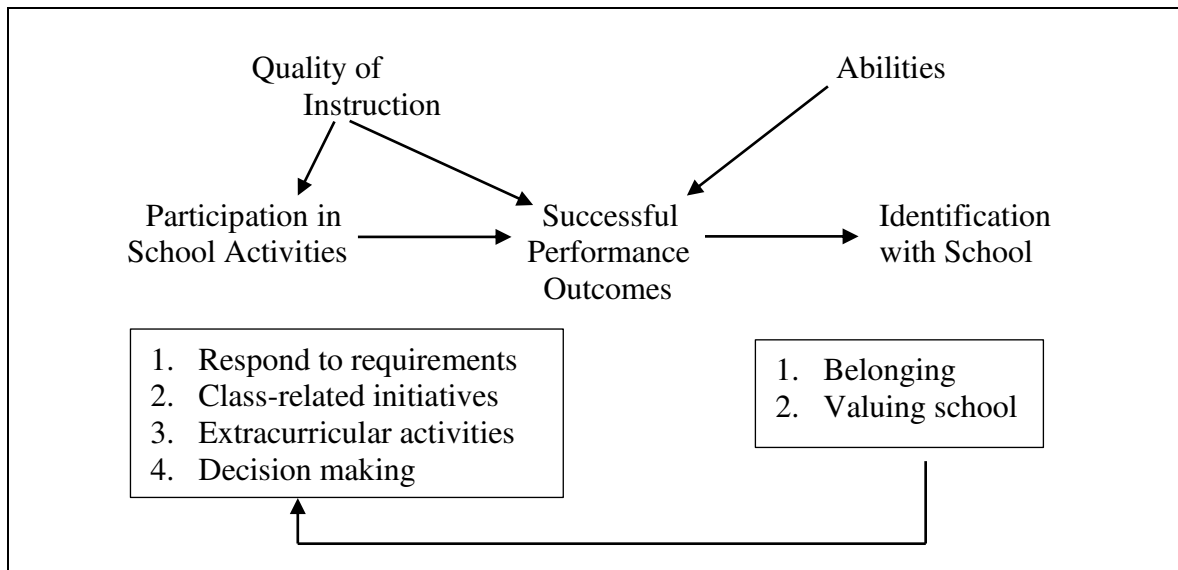
school take a greater interest in school. Teachers and school leaders have a responsibility to facilitate school engagement. Students who are connected, engaged, and identify with the school have a feeling of belonging to the school environment (Finn, 1989). In another study, Finn and Cox (1992) noted active participation in the classroom and school, starting in the primary grades, may also be important in reducing the likelihood of school-related difficulties including truancy or dropping out. Figure 1 illustrates the Finn Participation Identification Model of School Engagement that will serve as part of the current study's conceptual framework.

Summary of the Methodology

This study is designed using a basic interpretive qualitative research approach. The researcher sought to investigate the perceptions of numerous school administrators who successfully used online credit recovery software to understand the practices and strategies that were most effective in increasing the school's graduation rates. The researcher used purposeful sampling to identify school administrators within the state of Georgia and gathered information via interviews and archival data to identify best practices that led to increased high school graduation rates.

Figure 1

The Finn Participation Identification Model of School Engagement



Finn, 1989.

Research Design

Based on the nature of the research questions, the researcher used the basic interpretive qualitative research approach for this study. As noted by Merriam (2002), a basic interpretive and descriptive study method is appropriate when “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon; this meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive,” (p. XX). The researcher selected this qualitative research method because the study aims to understand the experience of administrators in Georgia high schools whose use of online credit recovery software-assisted credit deficient students to achieve high school completion. Purposeful sampling was used to select Georgia secondary school administrators whose high school achieved

an increase in graduation rates over consecutive years while using online credit recovery software to assist credit-deficient students.

Research Assumptions

The researcher conducted this study under the assumption that the participants in this study participated voluntarily and were not pressured to take part in any way in the study by higher-ups within their school district. Similarly, the researcher assumed that each participant provided honest and accurate reflections of their lived experience. The researcher did not knowingly misinterpret any information during the interview process and all information has been represented in the manner intended by the participants to the best of the researcher's ability.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the location, sample selection, and the use of online credit recovery software to assist at-risk students. Participants for this study can only be secondary school leaders in Georgia whose schools have had an increase in graduation rates annually, therefore the sample selection was purposeful. The school leaders also had to be certified by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. The researcher sought to comprehend the meaning made from the lived experiences of this targeted population.

The location of the study was specific to schools that are located a minimum of thirty-five miles outside of the city limits of Atlanta, Georgia. Districts within this study had to be in areas with populations lower than 250,000 people. Most studies involving increasing student achievement are within urban settings; therefore, the researcher selected schools that are in suburban and rural areas. This study only focuses on

secondary school leaders within the state of Georgia. Georgia was selected for this study for use of its continuous increase in graduation rates and because the researcher is an educator within the state.

Many school districts spend thousands annually on online credit recovery software to assist credit-deficient students to graduate with their cohort. The researcher can only focus on the credit recovery software used by the secondary school selected for this study because the purpose of the study involves secondary graduation rates. The researcher was a former graduation coach and building-level administrator who used online credit recovery software within the state of Georgia. The researcher has a positive bias towards the utilization of online credit recovery software as a tool to increase graduation rates.

Delimitations

The location of the study was school districts within Georgia with populations of fewer than 250,000 people and at least thirty-five miles outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The researcher selected a purposeful sample of school leaders based on pre-established criteria. The criteria included certified secondary Georgia School leaders from high schools with at least three years of consistent increases in graduation rates that also used online credit recovery software to assist at-risk students to recover credits lost due to course failure. The self-reporting component of the study was also an additional limitation. In addition, the results/outcomes of the study are not generalizable to all high school administrators in the state of Georgia. The pertinent experiences of the administrators, online instructors, or the researcher could not be controlled in this study.

Definitions of Key Terms

Adjusted cohort: The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class (Georgia Department of Education, 2012).

At-risk students: As defined by the U.S. Department of Education, students at risk of educational failure otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools (as defined in the Race to the Top application), who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities or who are English learners (Powell, Roberts, & Patrick, 2015; Watson & Germin, 2008).

Credit recovery: Refers to a student's passing and receiving credit for a course that the student previously attempted but was unsuccessful in earning academic credit (Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Effective schools: For this study, an effective school is defined by the researcher as a well-defined mission and vision, focused on student achievement, high expectations, functional curriculum, and the emphasis of the school leader was instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Graduation rate calculation (GA): Number of cohort members who earn a regular high school diploma (# of starting cohort members + students who transfer in - students who transfer out, emigrate, or die (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.).

High school diploma: Students receiving a high school diploma have satisfied attendance requirements and academic unit requirements, as designated by the Georgia Department of Education (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, n.d.).

Instructional leadership: The leading of learning communities in which staff members meet regularly to discuss their work, collaborate to solve problems, reflect on their jobs, and take responsibility for student learning (Jenkins, 2009).

Over age, under-credited youth (OU): Students not having the appropriate number for their age and intended grade (Watson & Germin, 2018)

Student behavioral engagement: Includes students observing community norms, and participating in activities (Fredericks et al., 2004).

Student cognitive engagement: Relates to student motivation involves students' desire and ability to engage in a variety of strategies to self-directed learning (Fredericks et al., 2004).

Successful school: Concerning this study, a successful school is a school whose graduation rate continuously increased yearly, while using online credit recovery software to assist students at risk of dropping out of school.

Summary

Obtaining a high school diploma is a milestone for American high school students. The implications of crossing the stage on graduation night can be life-altering. Students who earn a high school diploma statistically outperform their peers who do not finish high school in all aspects of life from wealth attainment to healthier living. Graduation rate increases and meeting the needs of at-risk youth have been a part of American school reform for the past few decades. Different states implement different

interventions and/or programs to prevent at-risk students from dropping out of school. Many school districts use online credit recovery software to help students who lack credits to graduate and finish high school on time. Georgia graduation rates have been on an upward trend over the past few years.

Furthermore, the role of the high school administrator has become more demanding in the aftermath of decades of school reform. The school leader of today is charged with establishing and maintaining a positive learning environment for students that is engaging and supportive. The school leader must oversee the academic performance and progression of all students under their tutelage. Therefore, the role of the school leader is not only multifaceted, but it should also encapsulate the needs of all students. Research suggests that schools that have missions and visions that are well defined are focused on gains, and in which the leader is focused on instruction are more effective (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

In this study, the researcher seeks to comprehend how school leaders made meaning out of their experiences using online credit recovery software to help at-risk learners obtain lost credits due to previous course failures, while the graduation rates at the school increased. The researcher has experience as a graduation coach and a school administrator in Georgia. The limitations of this study were related to the selection of the sample, population, and location. The identifiable researcher biases are related to the previous jobs of the researcher. The researcher has used online credit recovery software in the past to assist a population of at-risk students who completed high school with their cohort while working as a graduation coach in Northwestern Georgia. The researcher has been a lower grade building level administrator and is aware of the pressures and

demands placed on school leaders to increase student achievement. The researcher has not served as a secondary school leader.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviewed the current literature on online credit recovery. The current status of student credit deficiency was appraised, including consideration of the historical patterns and trends of subgroups and the achievement gap. Successful reform efforts were evaluated, including landmark studies on raising high school graduation rates and reducing poor academic performance in secondary education. A focus on national and state efforts to enhance student engagement and connections was researched, along with the efforts involved in enhancing the quality and accessibility of online credit learning. Factors at the state level that were seemingly related to the characteristics of at-risk students and the focus on credit recovery as a successful intervention strategy were analyzed.

Student Achievement

Crow and Crow (1956) first defined academic achievement as a result of the strength of instruction; therefore, quality instruction leads to the acquisition of academic knowledge needed to perform well on assessments of learning. Achievement data is gathered by states in the form of standardized testing. Schools determine student achievement through formal and informal means such as state test performance, grades, and benchmark assessments as well as classroom assessments. Student achievement is directly linked to content mastery. Schools should address the consequences of students failing to achieve the goals associated with standardized assessments. According to Cox

(2018), the association of standardized test scores with student achievement minimizes the contributions students' characteristics and attributes make toward their academic success.

Student achievement in the United States is directly linked to student performance on standardized tests. Academic achievement also indicates knowledge attained and skills developed in the school subject, generally designated by test scores (Bhat & Mehraj, 2013). Scores from state standardized tests determine whether students are achieving state standards.

Numerous factors influence student achievement. School attendance, grades, school, and class participation are integral factors in students' ability to perform well in school. Academic markings in school are a powerful indicator of whether the student will complete high school (Ritter, 2015).

Factors that have an impact on student performance include student engagement and a connection to the school environment. The roles of the family, school, and community in student achievement are also connected to students' academic success.

In the state of Georgia, high school graduation rates are linked to student achievement under the College and Career Readiness Preparatory Index (CCPRI). Students are no longer required to take and pass a high school exit exam to graduate from high school. High school students in Georgia take a state standardized test known as the Georgia Milestones End of Course Assessment (EOC). Students are tested in selected math, language arts, science, and social studies classes at the end of the course; these tests serve as the final assessment for academic achievement. Results from the EOC test count 20% toward students' final grade in grade source. The Georgia Milestones Assessment

System was created to give stakeholders relevant information regarding student mastery of the state curriculum (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). School reform has forced schools to make student achievement a major area of focus. Schools risk losing funding when students do not make continuous academic gains across all subgroups.

School Reform's Impact on Student Achievement

Various school reforms were introduced over time to improve student achievement in American classrooms. Reforms over the past decades aimed to make American students more competitive in the global economy. *A Nation at Risk*, the landmark report of a nationwide investigation into the quality of American education, called for more rigorous performance measurements, including nationwide standardized testing, among other changes deemed to improve student achievement (Deming & Figlio, 2016). *A Nation at Risk*, on August 26, 1981, under the direction of then-Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, the U.S. Department of Education created the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The purpose of the Commission was to examine the quality of education in the United States. The NCE was created due to the pervasive public opinion that something was extremely defective in the American educational system and was charged with researching the state of education in the United States. The result of the 18-month investigation was a final report titled, *A Nation at Risk*. The report contained discoveries from both K–12 and collegiate schools across the nation. The highlight of the report cited a loss of the fundamental basis of schools and high expectations from both society and educational intuitions. *A Nation at Risk* pointed out the inability of students to become gainfully employed and aid in the progression of society as a fundamental risk of underprepared students and outlined the extent of the risk

based on a long-standing national promise: The NCE demanded an overhaul of the educational system from elementary school to college. The call for reform in the educational system continues today. *A Nation at Risk* did not address the achievement gap between students with disabilities, minorities, and students in poverty. No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) was a school reform model established under the George W. Bush Administration to address student achievement of all learners. No Child Left Behind was a collaborative undertaking between civil rights organizations, the business sector, the bipartisan legislature, and the Bush administration (Klein, 2015).

No Child Left Behind

No Child Left Behind (2002) was established to make America more competitive globally and decrease the academic lags amongst minority and poor students in comparison to their high-achieving classmates (Klein, 2015). One of the many mandates placed on public schools was to increase secondary graduation rates and student achievement. The nation's graduation rate is an important factor in determining who is eligible to enter the workforce based on skills and education. There has been a fluctuation in the 17-year-old graduation rate since the 1970s (Laird et.al, 2007). In the 1970s, the 17-year-old graduation rate was slightly above 75%, and in 1990 it was slightly above 70% (Laird et.al, 2007). Heckman and Fontaine (2010) propose that the “upward trend in secondary education fueled economic growth... [yet] the real wages of high school dropouts have declined since the early 1970s, while those of more skilled workers have increased rapidly” (p. 244).

With a graduation rate consistently below 80-90% over decades, high graduation has become for many, a measurement of both student achievement and instructional

solidarity. Under NCLB, Klein (2015) noted states were under pressure to increase all students to a proficient level on state tests by the 2013–2014 school year. It was up to each state to determine the definition of proficiency for its students. Meeting the 2013–2014 deadline was a difficult proposition and as of 2015, no state had reached 100% proficiency (Klein, 2015). By 2010, it was clear many schools were not going to meet NCLB’s achievement targets. Most American schools were in jeopardy of being labeled, “failing” under their definition of proficiency. States that needed more time and funding for stroke increases student achievement (McMurrer & Yoshioka, 2013). The U.S. Secretary of Education during the Obama Administration, Arne Duncan, provided accountability waivers of mandates listed under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA) to 10 states that were amended by No Child Left Behind on February 9, 2012. These waivers were designed to give states more time to reach the recommended achievement levels outlined by NCLB.

Race to the Top

To modify perceived failures, President Obama presented an education policy called Race to the Top. Initially, on February 17, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), with the intent of implementing incentives to bolster the economy long-term. (Deming & Figlio, 2016) If states agreed to the implementation of key terms and conditions, one of which was to connect teacher evaluations and student test performance, the Obama administration would relieve NCLB mandates starting in 2011. Race to the Top was a grant in which school districts had to compete for funding (Miller & Hanna, 2014). Race to the Top is a grant program that requires states to increase student performance, prepare students for careers and decrease

gaps in student achievement. States have to compete with one another for a portion of the \$4.35 billion in grant money. The mission of the Obama Administration was for schools to take targeted action toward school reform. From its inception, Obama saw Race to the Top as a means to influence states educational outcomes regarding career readiness, teacher effectiveness, and the invention of new systems to track student data (Howell, 2015). The majority of states sought funding under the new program. Throughout multiple phases, 45 states and the District of Columbia submitted applications for funding under Race to The Top (Miller & Hanna, 2014). To take part in the Race to the Top (RT3) program, each state applied to receive federal dollars. The Race to the Top reform model address four key priority areas:

1. Designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments by encouraging states to work together toward a system of common academic standards that are benchmarked to international standards.
2. Attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders by expanding support to educators, improving teacher preparation, revising evaluation and compensation policies to encourage effectiveness, and helping ensure that our most talented educators are placed in the schools and subjects where they are needed most.
3. Supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction by fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system and making data more accessible to key stakeholders.
4. Using innovation and effective approaches to turn around low-performing schools (Boser, 2012).

The research in this study is specific to the state of Georgia. The state of Georgia is a recipient of the RT3 grant. Information retrieved from the Georgia Department of Education website (Georgia Department of Education, 2017) indicates the state was awarded \$4 million to implement the RTT model, and oversight of the program was granted to the Georgia State Board of Education. An analysis of the connection between how reform affects both school accountability and student achievement is necessary.

School Accountability and Student Achievement

School accountability is defined as the process of evaluating school performance based on student performance measures and is increasingly prevalent around the world (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011). Increasing student outcomes was a major focus of NCLB. To accomplish this task, schools had to meet predetermined indicators of achievement (Jimenez & Sargrad, 2017). School rankings under NCLB were ranked pass/fail to determine whether schools met performance targets for test scores and graduation rates yearly. Under Title I of NCLB schools, districts, and states had to prove that all students made the academic progression from year to year, this was known as adequate yearly progress (AYP).

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), high school graduation rates were a gauge of a school's ability to make students academically viable globally and in the US. Georgia schools are mandated to increase graduation rates yearly (NCLB, 2002). No Child Left Behind was launched on January 8, 2002, by President George H.W. Bush as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1994 (Rebora, 2004). Graduation rates under NCLB had a direct impact on whether a high school made AYP.

If the graduation rates decreased or remained the same year this directly threatened whether a school was on target for student achievement.

Today, schools no longer use NLCB or AYP. On December 10, 2015, Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) was signed by President Obama. ESSA replaced the 2001 No Child Left Behind or NCLB, as the nation's primary K-12 education law to retain the law's spotlight on amplifying the quality of public education (Jimenez & Sargrad, 2017). One fundamental variation between NCLB and ESSA is how states hold schools responsible for increasing student achievement. NCLB placed the focus on the achievement of all students at the forefront of all states, districts, and schools. Regardless of race, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status of the student, the school was responsible for ensuring the acquisition of quality education for every child. The original Elementary and Secondary Schools Act dates back to President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

School districts in Georgia use The College and Career Ready Performance Index, which is also known, as CCRPI as a tool to measure student performance, school improvement, and preparation for post-secondary endeavors. Accountability is measured under ESSA. Each of the five focal points of CCRPI is measured on a scale of 0-100. The five focal areas are Achievement, Progress, Closing Gaps, College and Career Readiness, and graduation rates. A school's graduation rate can therefore increase or decrease the overall CCRPI score.

American school districts have sought to put in place preventative measures to decrease high school drop-out rates of at-risk learners (Noble et al., 2017). The use of online credit recovery programs (OCR) is a means used to lessen student departure due

to lack of credits. No Child Left Behind and Every Child Succeeds Act demands schools to increase graduation rates yearly, the use of ONCRPs is a low-cost intervention to help at-risk students complete high school (Noble et al., 2017). School leaders, counselors, graduation coaches, and teachers work to increase the number of students who graduate high school. Online credit recovery is one of many tools used by educators to assist in high school completion.

Statistics on Student Achievement

The graduation rate in the state of Georgia is on the rise in the state of Georgia as well as in the nation. The graduation rate for American high schools soared to 84.1% in 2016 (DePaoli et al., 2018). According to data collected by the Georgia Department of Education (2019), Georgia is making gains in graduation rates. The 2019 graduation rates were 82.0%, while the 2016 rates were 79.4%, reflecting a steady increase in graduation rates over the past four years (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The graduation rate was calculated using the adjusted cohort formula, as mandated by the federal government. Graduation rates for the state of Georgia from 2012 to 2019 are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

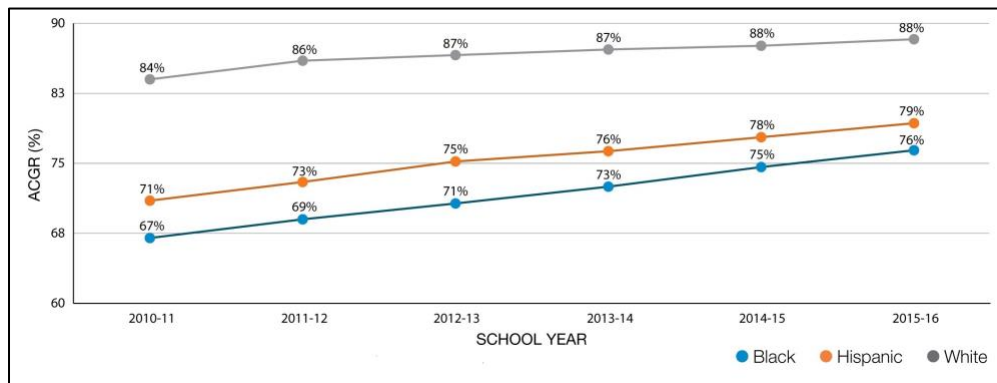
Georgia Graduation Rates, 2012–2019

Year	Graduation rate (%)
2012	69.7
2013	71.8
2014	72.6
2015	79.0
2016	79.4
2017	80.6
2018	81.6
2019	82.0

Across the nation, graduation rates have steadily increased from 2011 to the present. At the release of the inaugural federal adjusted cohort graduation rates in 2011, no state reported a 90% graduation rate, although some states were close (DePaoli et al., 2018). In 2016, there were only two states that triumphed above 90% graduation rates, yet 26 states had rates between 85 and 89.9% (DePaoli et al., 2018). Student achievement gains can be attributed to the dedication of staff, targeted interventions, rigorous curriculum, and student motivation and commitment to learning, Graduation rates for students in specific cohorts also increased as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for Black, Hispanic, and White Students From 2010-11 to 2015-16



Note. U.S. Department of Education, 2017.

Instructional Leadership as a Critical Factor to Graduation Rates

The relationship between instructional leadership and graduation rates is mutualistic (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2006; Gates et al., 2014; Ohlson, 2009). Thus, consistent, effective instructional leadership remains a key area of focus for educational researchers due to the increased demands for school leaders to increase student achievement (Gurley, Anast-May, O’Neal, & Dozier, 2016). The school leader is directly

linked to student outcomes. School leaders are tasked with providing resources for students, making decisions based on data and school safety, just to name a few. The Hallinger and Murphy (1985) framework of instructional leadership was a pioneer in categorizing significant behaviors of school principals as a way of defining an instructional leader (Gurley et al., 2016). Instructional leadership was defined by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) as defining school goals, managing teaching programs, and promoting the school learning climate (Ismail et al., 2018).

School and district-level leaders are held accountable for student achievement. Many factors contribute to the success of schools that meet goals and whose students flourish. There is not one single thing that creates student achievement. However, the decisions, mission, and vision of the leaders have an impact on student achievement. Student achievement must be a paramount area of focus in schools each day. The employees within the organization should be aware of the expectations of the leader about student achievement goals.

Hallinger, Bickman, and Davis (1996) conducted a study of 87 elementary schools to determine the scope and impact of the principal's effect on reading achievement. Findings from the study denote that in the presence of a well-defined school mission from a school leader, there is an impact on teacher expectations of student performance. The impact of the school leader had a positive effect on student success in reading (Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003).

The function of the principal as an instructional leader can be traced to the 1980s when researchers identified that successful schools have leaders who underscore the need for principals to be instructional leaders (Kimball, 1984). School leaders must be able to

serve in numerous capacities. The role of the instructional leader is to provide educational resources to aid in student growth and overall achievement. School leaders are faced with being managers of people, property, and budgets. The school leader of today has to fine-tune and prioritize how to manage their school resources and capital. School leaders are accountable under federal mandates to ensure students are taught academic standards and students complete high school. Instructional leadership is the actions of the school leader that seek to increase student achievement (Flath, 1989).

Role of the Instructional Leader

The creation of gains in education and school success is dependent upon the principal being an instructional leader (Ismail et al, 2018). A critical consideration is the role of the instructional leader in student achievement. The instructional leader must be equipped with certain skills to facilitate change within the organization. The skills that are required of a successful school leader are conducting teacher evaluations and observations, research, preparation, and skills to interact with others (Lashway, 2002).

The planning aspect of the instructional leader is the identification of a mission and vision of the school, as well as a resource provider. (Davis et al., 2007). Increasingly school principals are demanded to emphasize instructional leadership through the interaction with curriculum and instruction, assessments, and teacher development (Tooley, 2017). The role of the instructional leader is to provide ongoing support and guidance for teachers. The principal is in charge of steering teachers toward current educational trends and strategies, technology, and valuable instructional tools (Ismail et al., 2018). As the instructional leader in the building, the principal must keep student achievement at the forefront of the organization. This can be accomplished by

incorporating student achievement into the mission and vision of the school. The creation and transmission of a well-defined vision regarding the path of the school is a vital undertaking of an instructional leader (Brolund, 2016). The mission and vision serve as statements of where significant to the organization. Instructional leaders elaborate and publicize a vision and goals for their school with the expectation of gains in student growth (Brolund, 2016).

The Decline in Student Achievement

One main role of the instructional leader is to provide students with opportunities for success through the allocation of resources and teacher development. School reform models have been designed to promote student achievement. The academic success of students is linked to their ability to graduate from high school.

Academic failure is defined as a student's decision to stop trying to reach academic goals because of a belief they cannot succeed (Al-Zoubi & Bani Younes, 2015). Multiple factors contribute to poor academic performance or academic failure. According to Al-Zoubi and Bani Younes (2015), there are six main reasons for academic failure: (a) lack of a clear plan, (b) medical and psychological reasons, (c) reasons related to the learner, (d) parental and educational reasons, (e) exam anxiety, and (f) lack of motivation for success (p. 2264).

The ninth-grade year is critical to a student's academic success. Since freshman year of high school is the first opportunity students have to begin earning credits towards graduation, success within this year is crucial to keeping students on track (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016). Students who enter high school with low reading or math abilities may continue to fall behind in school without assistance. The ninth-grade year establishes

a student's high school learning foundation. Therefore, a decline in student achievement during grade nine can cause credit deficiency, which can lead to not graduating on time. Grades earned are related to students' likelihood of successfully graduating from high school (Ritter, 2015).

Impact of Failing Courses

When students do not earn credits, they become credit deficient. When a student lacks academic credits, they are at risk of not graduating on time. A student who fails an academic class may not be considered an at-risk student for dropping out. For example, a student may fail one or two academic courses for various reasons and not be disconnected and/or disengaged from school. Other factors such as lack of attendance, school failure, poverty, and lack of parental involvement may be indicators of being at-risk. While enrolled in school, students receive grades on assignments and take standardized tests.

Allensworth and Easton (2007) noted students who are on the PTO for promotion after their freshman year were four times more likely to graduate in comparison to students who were not on a path for promotion to Grade 10.

Through the usage of online credit recovery software, schools have created ways to help students retrieve lost credits due to course failure. In 2014-15, 71% of all high schools in the U.S. provided online-only credit recovery courses, and 43% provided blended-model) OCRPs (Noble et al., 2017). One method of academic assistance to get students eligible for pending graduation is online credit recovery. Online credit recovery may be offered as a part of a student's class schedule or before/after school. The option of obtaining a credit missed through previous course failure has mixed opinions in the educational arena. One main benefit of online credit recovery is to provide students with

a second chance to graduate on time. There are drawbacks to the use of online credit recovery programs also. One such drawback is students who have previously failed a class are now placed in front of a computer to redo coursework with minimal adult assistance. Opponents of OCRPs do not think the courses are academically solid and do not provide adequate training for post-secondary undertakings (Noble et al., 2017).

Many students are not able to graduate because they lack a few credits towards completion. Those who do not meet course requirements are at risk of failing and not earning academic credit. Academic achievement is a predictor of student success and completion of high school. Data from a literature review from Rumberger and Lim (2008) indicated that students who scored higher on tests had a decreased risk of dropping out, while students who students with lower test scores had a greater risk of dropping out. Academic achievement is statically linked to student success in school and graduation. A major forecaster of dropping out is failing the academic course. When compared to standardized test scores, grades are a better predictor of dropping out (Rumberger and Lim, 2008). In recent years, there has been an emphasis on both instruction and leadership in terms of eliminating and/or narrowing achievement gaps.

Achievement Gaps

The role of the instructional leader is to increase student achievement among all learners. Schools have to make an academic difference in the lives of all students regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, or disability. Graduation rates vary by race, socioeconomic status, and among students who are enrolled in special education. School leaders and teachers dive into ways to reach the needs of these students daily. For some students, the barrier to receiving a high school diploma begins before enrolling in

school. It is the strategic goal of government and international and academic research agencies to pinpoint ways to constantly advance student achievement (Maxwell et al., 2017).

The term “achievement gap” is often defined as the difference between the test scores of minorities and /or low-income students and the test scores of their White and Asian peers (Ansell, 2004). The purpose of school reform was to help low-performing students meet the targeted goals of state and federal benchmarks. The graduation rates of minority students are lower than their white classmates. The national Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for White public high school students (89%) was 11 percentage points greater than the national average ACGR for Black Students (78%) in 2016-2017 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018).

Closing the achievement gap and reducing high school dropouts have numerous benefits for students and communities. Students who complete high school can contribute to the economy more than dropouts. According to researchers, the achievement gap in education in America corresponds to that of an ongoing national economic recession (McKinsey & Company 2009). Achievement gaps, while apparent in lower and middle grades, began to significantly impact a student’s ability to succeed once they enter secondary school.

Impact of Credit Deficiency and High School Completion

Frequently achievement gaps are physically manifested by a student’s inability to matriculate. The state of Georgia removed the barrier of passing a high school exit exam as a requirement for graduation. However, passing courses and accumulating high school credits is a requirement for all students. There are times during a student’s academic

career when he or she may need additional assistance to complete high school courses. When a student is not performing academically, there may be a need for an academic intervention.

The school and/or district-level administration are charged with the selection of a credit recovery software format that is suitable to the needs of their organization. The school leaders are accountable for the review of credit recovery programs, as well as other forms of online learning to increase the likelihood of student success and resource management (Pettyjohn & LaFrance, 2014). Students who are enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school and taking online coursework to recover lost credits due to previous course failure are enrolled in supplemental online credit recovery courses.

Numerous online credit recovery companies offer their product in Georgia High School. Ultimately, the school and/or district determine the selection of the online product. The three widely utilized online credit recovery products in Georgia schools are Apex, Odysseyware, and Edgenuity. Edgenuity began in 1998 as e2020. Edgenuity, Apex, and Odysseyware are accredited by AdvancedED. Odysseyware was created by curriculum developers and writers in 1977, under the name Glynlyon (Odysseyware, 2018).

Information retrieved from the Odysseyware (2018) website describes the credit recovery format in two modes. The modes are Credit Recovery (CRx) and Flex CRx. The CRx mode is for credit recovery enrollment. Students who are in the CRx Mode must first take a pre-test before beginning a unit. The purpose of the pre-test is to determine prior student knowledge (Odysseyware, 2022). If a student meets the pre-determined score for mastery, the student is abscon the entire unit and move on to the next unit of

study (Odysseyware, 2022). The purpose of a student being able to skip over previously mastered content is the use of credit recovery is to remediate gaps in learning so the student can pass the course.

While in the CRx Mode, if a student fails the pre-test the student will have to complete the entire unit and pass a post-test to move forwards to the next unit, (Odysseyware, 2022). The Flex CRx Mode is based on the mastery of concepts and students can fail the pre-test, yet demonstrate mastery in some concepts (Odysseyware, 2022). The software will customize the lessons needed for each student based on pre-test performance when a student is in the Flex CRx Mode. The type of credit recovery mode the student uses for Odysseyware is determined by the online credit recovery instructor.

Students who are taking credit recovery usually follow the same online format. The student is given a pre-test. The score for the pre-test was set to a certain passing range. If the student's score is within a passing range, the student is moved to another topic or unit within the software. When the student encounters a failing pre-test, the student has to review the content for that unit and pass an assessment as proof of content mastery. There are also options to customize the instruction for a learner. For example, if a student failed a biology course and is taking the course in online credit recovery, the teacher may assign the units that the student failed in class and omit the units the student mastered during the initial course enrollment.

Possible Causes of Poor Academic Performance in School

Students do not meet pre-prescribed academic standards for numerous reasons. Students with disabilities may face more academic challenges in comparison to other students. For students with gaps in content knowledge moving on to more rigorous and

robust standards will create a further academic disconnect. Poor academic performance in school can lead to a student dropping out.

School. For this study, the researcher will focus on the student's connection to school in the form of student engagement. Students may become disconnected from school for formal reasons. Student engagement has been defined as "participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes" (Kuh, 2007). The lack of a connection to school whether it be through sports, a mentor, or a sense of belonging is a risk factor for dropping out.

Coates (2007) describes engagement as "a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience" (p. 122) comprising the following:

- active and collaborative learning;
- participation in challenging academic activities;
- formative communication with academic staff;
- involvement in enriching educational experiences;
- feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities

Student disengagement at the classroom level can be detrimental to student achievement. The teacher-student interaction can be dependent upon the relationship between teacher and student. Students have teacher-specific behaviors that impact their interactions within the classroom. The teacher may have a different instructional style or class management in comparison to other teachers in the building. Based on the literary review, research trends compellingly imply that the relationship between the student and teacher is paramount for fostering student engagement (Groves et al., 2015). Student

disengagement at the classroom level can stem from a lack of connection to content and/or the teacher-student relationship to create student engagement, teachers must present content in multiple ways to engage the student based on how they learn best.

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) referenced that teacher-student collaboration is the most fundamental influence in promoting student learning and challenges teachers to place their interactions with students as a top priority. As students matriculate through school the need for support and connections from key adults at school remain paramount to the overall growth and achievement of the student. Schools have created mentor programs amongst teachers and faculty with students in the hopes of creating a connection to the school.

The climate of the school can determine whether a student is connected or disengaged. The climate of the school is the most prominent element in describing how students learn and thrive (Maxwell et al., 2017). There are sundry definitions of school climate, however, the overall meaning of school climate is based on experience.

The overall climate of a school is based upon numerous factors relating to students' parents, school employees, and their interactions with the school, climate also incorporates school norms, goals and values, instructional practices, and running of the overall organization (National School Climate Council [NSCC], n.d.). The impact of school climate on student achievement is vast. School climate is linked to student achievement through the students' perception of school. Students need to feel safe, valued, and connected to the school in some form. An example of student connection is student involvement in school-related activities and the formation of meaningful relationships with teachers and peers. The climate of a school is the primary forecast of a

student's emotional and behavioral consequences (Reynolds et al, 2017). A positive school climate determines the level at which the student is willing to connect to the school. Students are more willing to associate with the school if their interactions are meaningful, due to this interaction the student is likely to embrace the norms, and values of the school as well as concentrate on learning and success (Maxwell et al., 2017).

There are abundant theories that have attempted to draw a correlation between student achievement and the climate of their school. The social cognitive theory is a widely referenced theoretical explanation for school climate-related to student achievement in terms of the adult-student interaction (Bandura, 1993, 1997). For students to perform well in school they need an environment that is nurturing. Students must believe in their abilities to complete coursework and must be intrinsically motivated to take part in their educational outcomes. Teachers have to believe in their ability to carry out the academic content to create a classroom setting that establishes the tone for learning outcomes. The belief of school personnel in their ability to make contributions of meaning as a whole to their student body has a major impact on student performance outcomes (Bandura, 1993).

Family. A child's first teacher is their parent. A child will spend nearly 5 to 6 years with their parent before enrolling in school. The family unit is very influential on the child's connection to the school. The family unit establishes academic expectations for the student. The family has a major impact on a child's learning behaviors and

academic triumphs because the family is the central and most influential environment for the student (Peguero et al., 2016).

According to the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966), schools have a common impact on student performance outcomes when the socio-economic status of the student is taken into consideration. The lack of an early parent-child interaction may create an achievement gap for children if the parent does not read to or orally engage the child. It is proposed that by the age of 3, children of parents who are recipients of government aid hear fewer than a third of the words that their more affluent peers hear (Egalite, 2016). Children who have not been read to lack an advanced vocabulary and speech when they enter school, which places them behind their counterparts and create a lag in learning.

The educational attainment of parents may influence the educational expectations of the student. If a parent did not complete high school and is struggling, the student may choose not to drop out of high school to assist the parent financially. If the parent has reaped the benefits of academic completion, the student may aspire towards the same goal. The child may be directly or indirectly impacted by the educational decisions of the parent. Research findings indicate that parental educational attainment is the most profound connection to a student's academic success, in terms of the length of school attendance and future success (Egalite, 2016). Students may not be able to partake in extracurricular activities or cultural enhancing trips due to limited resources. Parents with more economic resources can provide more educational opportunities for their students in the form of exposure through trips and life experiences. Zhijun, Zeyun, and Baicai (2015) cited findings from a Longitudinal Survey of Families and Children in Gansu Province

that elementary level students benefited tremendously academically, based on their parent's socioeconomic status, and school quality, and educational levels of parents.

The most significant family elements are family income, family structures (De Witte, Cabus, Thyssen, Groot, & van den Brink, 2013) and parental values regarding academic performance (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & McNeely, 2008) have been related to not completing school. The socio-economic status of a student is not the only reason a student may not complete high school. Variations within the family unit also account for students dropping out of school. Examples of change of life events are divorce or separation of parents, teen pregnancy, and, death or prolonged illness of a family member. An extensive change in the family unit can be devastating to students (Pegeuro et al, 2016).

Individual. Not every student who dropouts of school are an at-risk student. Some at-risk students will complete high school and some students do not have any indicators of dropping out who will not complete high school. The individual reason for a student dropping out could range from teen pregnancy to lack of engagement to school engagement ends dropouts vary widely. The sole act of dropping out is a culminating event that is the byproduct of other events (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013).

The causes for a student dropping out of school are categorized by the framework of push, pull, and falling out (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994).

The purpose of the framework is to identify the causes of students' dropout. According to the framework, some influences push and/or pull students out of school. A student is pushed out when negative events or consequences occur in the school setting

that causes the student to drop out (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013). An example of push-out can be a student who has extensive suppositions from school cannot keep up with class content and begins to fail classes and dropout out. The student may find the school to be an unsafe or hostile place and no longer desire to engage. There is an abundance of elements that are ingrained at the school and district levels that may cause a student to drop out. Examples include behavioral consequences, standardized testing policies related to attendance, and student discipline (Doll et al., 2013). Factors that push students out of school are factors that are controlled and /or created at the school and district levels.

Students are pulled out of school due to factors that cannot be controlled by the student. Examples of push factors are related to financial burdens, jobs, family demands, or life events, such as teen pregnancy or marriage (Doll et al., 2013). When a student is pulled out of school, there is a need or demand that the student must address in their lives that is often related to meeting targeted needs. The push-out factors are within the control of the school.

Disengagement is one of the causes of a student's falling out of school. Student engagement is associated with students completing high school. Students who are disengaged from school may disconnect from school over some time. Watt and Roessingh (1994) added an element known as, falling out, falling out is caused by low academic performance, disappointment, or unconcern for completing high school.

Rumberger and Larson's (1998) model of engagement has categorized engagement into two types, social and academic. Examples of social engagement include behaviors of the students such as being present at school, school-related behaviors and

participating in extracurricular activities. Academic engagement is described as the student's feelings regarding school and school work as well as the student being able of completing daily academic duties and demands.

At-Risk Students

The definition of an at-risk student is related to a student failing to achieve basic proficiency in academic subjects or exhibiting behaviors that can lead to failure and/ or dropping out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). An at-risk student may have a history of school retention, high absenteeism, history of course failures or behavioral issues, enrolled in special education, or experienced a life-altering event. Just because a student needs credit recovery doesn't mean the student is at-risk, however, some at-risk students will not need recovery (Powell et al., 2015)

For instance, a student who is struggling in a math class is not necessarily at risk of dropping out of school. That student may be at risk of course failure. Students who are at risk of not completing high school usually experience numerous course failures or the student may experience other factors that make them at risk of dropping out. An example is a student who has high absenteeism, is poor, attends an inner-city school and pregnant may be at risk of dropping out of school. An at-risk student is often described as one who is more than likely not going to pass academic courses and drop out of school (Kaufman & Bradbury, 1992).

The term, "at-risk" was coined in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). There are a multitude of terms used to define the concept of an "at-risk student." However, the overarching meaning of the term references a student who is in danger of not completing high school.

Characteristics of At-Risk Students

There is not a single descriptor of a student at risk for dropping out of high school. A high school dropout can be of any race, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status. The act of dropping out usually occurs over many years. Often there is no isolated event that causes dropping out. Minority students have to overcome obstacles to complete high school, this includes overzealous disciplinary actions, language barriers, and access to higher-level academic courses to prepare them for post-secondary opportunities (DePaoli et al., 2017).

Race is not the sole factor for dropping out, however, dropout rates are higher for non-white students. According to data collected in a special report by the Civic Enterprises and Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University, the graduation rate gains for Blacks and Hispanics topple the national average, yet the overall graduation rate for both groups remain below 80% (Balfanz et al., 2014). Although the graduation rates are climbing for these groups of students, they remain below their white peers. The graduation rates for African American and Latino/Hispanic students are on the rise due to the decline of high schools with low graduation rates, also known as “drop-out factories” (Balfanz et al., 2014).

Experimental research regarding the topic of dropouts has pinpointed several elements within students’ family units, institutions of learning, friendship groups, and communities that forecast dropping out (Fortin et al., 2013). Students become disconnected from school for many reasons, the lack of a connection to school whether it is through sports, a mentor, or a sense of belonging is a risk factor for dropping out. There have been numerous studies conducted over the past several decades that have

attempted to identify common risk factors for dropping out of high school. It is widely known there is no single predictor of who will drop out of high school.

In their research, Balfanz et al. (2006) sought to isolate traits of student disengagement and assess their effect on being at risk in middle school for possibly dropping out of school. The setting of the study is an urban district in Philadelphia. The purpose of the study was to illustrate that large numbers of urban students have indicators of disengagement from school during middle school. Middle school is a critical transition period between elementary and high school. This is also the time when puberty begins. If a student can be placed on the track toward graduation at the onset of disengagement, through interventions, the student may be able to remain in school.

The four variables reviewed in the study were attendance, academic performance, misbehavior, and student status variables such as being enrolled in special education, English as a Second Language status, and one or more years overage for a grade. Researchers noted the negative impacts of out-of-school suspensions, low or failing grades in sixth grade, placement in ESOL or, special education as indicators of a student potentially not completing high school (Balfanz et al., 2006). The researchers made a correlation between poor academic performance in math and language arts and unsatisfactory behavior (Balfanz et al., 2006). Students have to be present at school to learn. Students who attended school in sixth grade less than 90% were at greater risk of dropping out (Balfanz, et al., 2006). States place a high emphasis on standardized testing outcomes. However, failing academic courses is a greater predictor of dropping out than performance on tests (Balfanz, et al., 2006). Researchers have identified four primary domains of elements connected to students dropping out, the domains are individual,

family, school, and community factors (Hawkins et al., 1992; Rumberger, 2011). Three of the four factors for dropping out are not related to the school directly.

Potential Outcomes in School

Students who are at risk of dropping out may have experienced an abundance of course failures or, some may have only failed one or two courses. When students fail numerous courses, they are retained. These students then become over-age and under-credit. Over-age and under-credited is defined as not having an adequate number of credits for their age and intended grade (Powell et al., 2015). Over-age students and under-credit are at-risk of dropping out of school. These students may become disengaged from school. There is a difference between over-age and under-credit and at-risk. An over-age and under-credit student is considered at risk of not completing high school. However, all at-risk students are not over-age and under-credit. The concept of being over-age and under-credited is used to differentiate a group of students who are a part of America's dropout epidemic (Fortin et al., 2013).

Impact of the Lack of Connection to the School

The Centers for Disease Control defined school connectedness as students believing that are valued as an individual and their academic progression is important to adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Students spend an enormous amount of time at school interacting with school personnel and peers. The creation of bonds between students and stakeholders should be the mission of all adults within the school. The development of a single definition of school connectedness does not exist. There is a multitude of terms that are used throughout literature reviews that delineate the

relationship between school climate, belonging, bond formation, and acclimation to the school (Archambault et al., 2009; Libbey, 2004).

A research analysis of 46 studies identified that profound teacher-student connections were associated with ongoing gains in school engagement, attendance, fewer suspensions, and dropout rates (Sparks, 2019). If a student does not identify with any aspect of their schools such as school staff, activities peers, and academics, the student may become disengaged. Having one caring adult who the student can connect with may help foster engagement. The school leader is in charge of creating and sustaining an environment that promotes student connections to the school. When students are connected to school, there is a decrease in students dropping out. Students can form a bond with the school through the formation of meaningful relationships with faculty and staff. The desire to increase student bonding has resulted in the creation of student mentoring programs among faculty, staff, and students.

Citing Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory for a person to have superior intrinsic motivation there are a set of psychological requirements that must be met in the following areas, relatedness, competence, and autonomy. A student can relate to school when they feel that they belong to the school setting based on how the student interacts with peers and adults in the building. Students need to have a sense of self-efficacy regarding content mastery. Students must also believe that they have choices in their learning. An example of a student having choices in learning could be a teacher providing choices for a student to complete an assignment.

Engagement and Connection to the School

It is well known that those students who do not engage with the school run the risk of dropping out. The historical emphasis on student engagement has targeted areas of high student performance, feeling connected to school, and positive student interactions that are needed to help students remain in school (Ciric & Jovanovic, 2016). There is more than one way a student can disconnect from school. Students disengage from school through the lack of attendance, attention in class, and the formation of meaningful bonds between adults and peers.

Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) cite three forms of student engagement. The three forms of student engagement are behavioral, affective, and cognitive. Student engagement can be described as the level of focus, inquiry, concentration, enthusiasm, and devotion a student demonstrates during instruction that expands their level of determination to learn and participate in their academic progression (Student Engagement, 2016). Educators are always in search of innovative means to connect students with instructional practices and an effective curriculum.

The behavioral aspect of student engagement is directly related to participation (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Participation refers to the student being immersed in their learning outcome. An example of a student who is engaged behaviorally would be a student who asks questions in class, takes notes, attempts to complete assignments, and participates in classroom discussions and activities. Therefore, a student can be considered engaged from a behavioral perspective, if the student can conform behaviorally and does not display deleterious and disorderly conduct (De Vito, 2016).

The affective dimension of student engagement is implied to directly relate to dedication, signifying that education requires emotional engagement in the form of emotions, values, and beliefs (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). The emotional well-being of students is impacted by their sense of belonging and academic performance. Emotional engagement is correlated to a student having an emotional affinity to the school and classroom setting (Fredericks et al., 2004). The cognitive dimension of student engagement relates to a student's intrinsic motivation concerning their learning. Cognitive engagement is related to a student's desire, self-discipline, a willingness to participate in their own learning (Fredericks et al., 2004). Learning is a process that requires the learner to actively engage in the receipt of knowledge, the student has to want to interact in the learning process. When a student cognitively disconnects from the learning process, the student may encounter gaps in content knowledge. When a learner is disengaged or has gaps in content knowledge, the student may experience academic failure and eventually drop out of high school.

High School Graduation and Dropout

A student's social and academic determination to excel in school determines the student's ability to meet the academic rigor of high school. Connection to school is defined by various factors. When a student fails to meet the state and district requirements for graduation, they are at risk of dropping out of school. There has been a continuous upswing in high school graduation rates in Georgia.

Requirements for Georgia

For this study, only regular education diploma criteria will be listed. Students in Georgia are no longer required to pass an exit exam to complete high school as of 2007.

Students in Georgia take an End of Course test known as the Georgia Milestones End of Course Test (EOC). The EOC is not a graduation exam. The results from the EOC are calculated into a student's final exam grade valued at 20%, per state law. The purpose of the EOC is to provide schools with feedback regarding content mastery of state-adopted standards in ten classes (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-b).

The following are courses within the Georgia Department of Education (n.d.-b) curriculum that have an EOC test:

- Literature & Composition (9th grade)
- American Literature and Composition
- Algebra I or Coordinate Algebra
- Analytic Geometry or Geometry
- Biology
- Physical Science
- U.S. History
- Economics/Business/Free Enterprise

Although the EOC is not a requirement for graduation, it is a requirement for certain courses. If a student does not pass the EOC, depending on their current average, a student could fail the course. Course failure leads to credit deficiency. Credit deficiency can lead to a student not graduating or needing online credit recovery.

Students in Georgia must have a minimum of 23 course credits to qualify to graduate high school. A unit of credit is proof of enrollment and minimum grade attainment of 70 or greater on a numerical scale of 100 or pre-determined competency-based course credits (Georgia Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Graduation Rate Calculation

Graduation rates throughout the nation are calculated using an adjusted cohort. The inaugural publication of the Adjusted cohort graduation rates (ACGR) was during the 2010-2011 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Each state has a different set of graduation requirements. Before the inception of the Georgia Milestones Exam, students were required to meet course credit requirements, as well as pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT). Georgia begins administering the GHSGT to first-time freshmen from July 1, 1991, to June 30, 2011 (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The ACGR is submitted to the EDFacts system from the federal level after it is calculated at the state level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

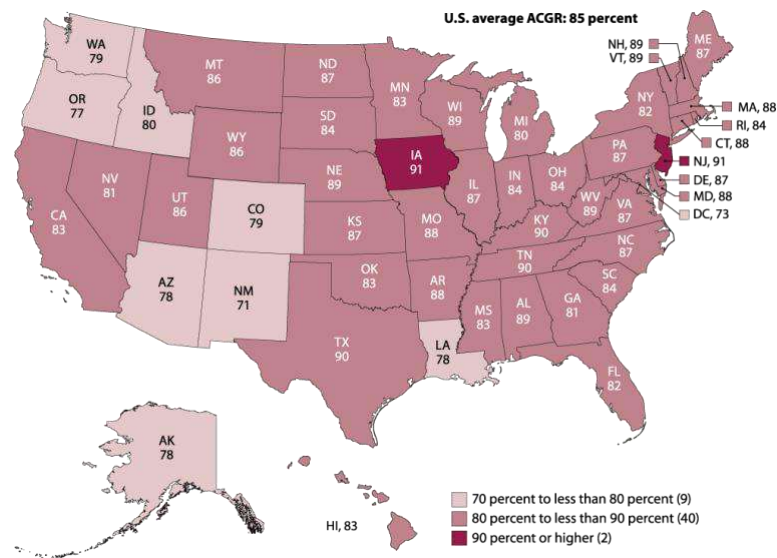
The Graduation test as a requirement for graduation in Georgia ended on March 30, 2015. The governor signed House Bill 91 into law. The graduation rate increase in the state could be due to the lack of students having to pass the graduation test to earn a high school diploma. Graduation rates for the state of Georgia are calculated based on an adjusted cohort model. The four-year high school graduation rate is defined by the number of first-time freshmen in a cohort, the calculation is based on how many of those first-time freshmen graduate within four years (Georgia Department of Education, 2016).

The new graduation rate is reported each year by the Georgia Department of Education. If a student graduates in the summer of their senior or before the spring of their senior, this is counted towards the cohort's graduation rate. If a student does not graduate within the summer of their senior year, it does not count towards graduation. The student is not considered a dropout, according to the state of Georgia.

The rationale for utilizing the ACGR is to ensure there is no misrepresentation of identical students within the ninth-grade cohort. If a student is in ninth grade and is retained, that student could be recounted in the next cohort, this will result in a misrepresentation of the actual students within the cohort. The purpose of the ACGR is to make sure the same student is not counted multiple times, in multiple cohorts (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Figure 3

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) of Public High School Students by State: 2016- 2017



Note. National Center for Education Statistics, 2018.

The Equation for the Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate

The definition of a 4-year graduation rate, according to the Georgia Department of Education, is based upon the number of students who graduate within four years with a non-special education high school diploma divided by the number of students from the adjusted cohort for the graduating class (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Schools must maintain accurate records of students who enroll and exit the school to provide an accurate account of the adjusted cohort. The adjusted cohort is fluid and ever-changing. An adjusted cohort is the number of true first-time freshmen adjusted time over time the addition and subtraction of students based upon transfers or new enrollments, the AG must consider the number of transfers to prison or juvenile facilities or death (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates provided a more uniform national platform for school districts to track student progress within a four-years. Before the creation of the ACGR, there were many ways to calculate graduation rates there was not a uniform system in place from state to state. Therefore, there was no true litmus for reports graduation data. The implementation of a national definition provided allowances for student data comparisons and breakdowns amongst states and student subgroups, providing states and the federal government with a more precise view of student achievement and barriers to graduation (Depaoli et al., 2018). The data sources used to calculate graduation rates were numerous until the implementation of the ACGR.

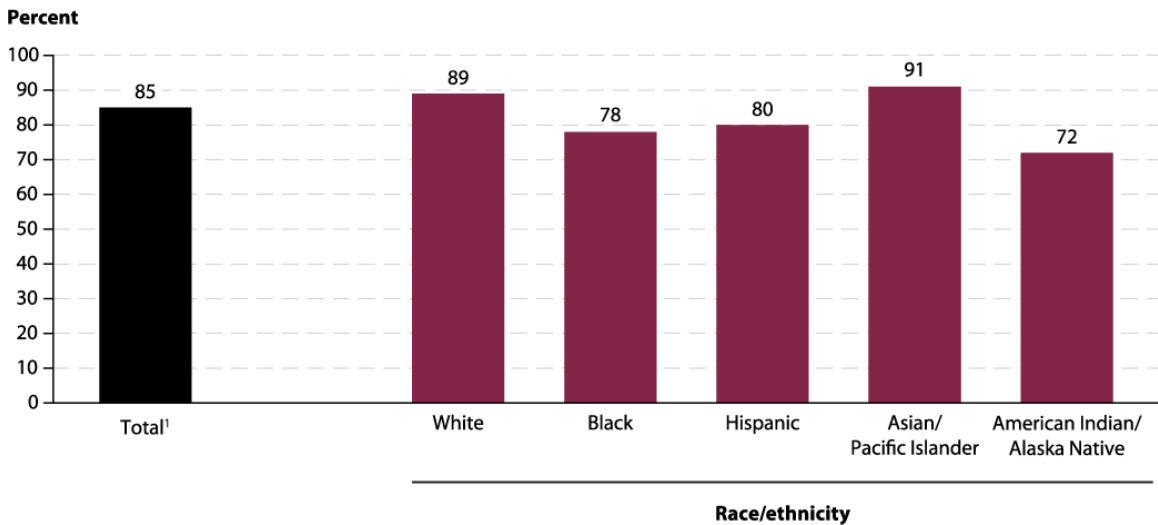
If students do not graduate from high school within four years and one summer, the student is considered to be a high school dropout. High school dropouts count against the school's indicator for graduation rates This indicator is a measure of student achievement under the College Career Readiness Predatory Index (CCRPI). For example, the 2017 4-year Cohort Graduation Rate Equation is: the number of 2017 cohort members who graduated with a regular education diploma in 2017 (diploma type = general) # of first-time ninth graders in 2014 + transfers in – transfers out, emigrate, or die in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 (Georgia Department of Education, 2017).

Graduation Rates From 2012 to Present

Georgia high schools have experienced a tremendous increase in graduation rates. School reforms and accountability measures have forced schools to create ways to increase student achievement. According to data released by the Georgia Department of Education, there has been an increase in graduation rates for the past few years. The graduation rate for the 2018 school year was 81.6 %. The graduation rate statewide was 71.8% in 2013 (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). For many school districts, the use of online credit recovery programs and other interventions have helped students to graduate with their cohort, hence increasing graduation rates.

Figure 4

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) of Public High School Students, by Race/Ethnicity: 2016-2017



Note. From National Center for Education Statistics, 2018.

Graduation Rates and School Accountability

The College Career Readiness Preparatory Index is the accountability tool used to measure student achievement in Georgia. CCRPI is rated from 0- to 100 points. There are

several indicators of school achievement on the CCRPI index. High school graduation rates are one of the indicators of student achievement. CCPRI data is submitted in June by the district superintendents to the state.

The graduation rate for the state of Georgia is calculated under CCRPI to include both four-year adjusted cohort and five-year adjusted cohort rates. The formula used by the state is a 4-year cohort graduation rate x (66.67%) + a 5-year cohort graduation rate x (33.33%) (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Although students who graduate within a 5-year cohort are still counted towards the CCRPI score, there is a significant decrease in the percentage points given to those students who remain after year 5. Students who graduate within the 4-year cohort are allotted the maximum number of percentage points, 66.67% in the equation.

Graduation rates account for 15% of the overall high school CCPRI score. The CCPRI score calculations include the following indicators: Content Mastery 30%, Progress 30%, Closing Gaps 10% Readiness 15%, and Graduation Rate 15% (2018 CCRPI High School Calculation Guide, 2018). Schools with low graduation rates will have a low graduation rate indicator under CCPRI. Therefore, school and district level administration have the task of providing resources to aid students in the completion of high school. One such resource offered by many school districts is the use of online credit recovery software as a means to assist students who lack the credits for high school graduation. The online software may also be used as a tool to assist students in the preparation for the EOC assessments.

Dropouts

The definition of a dropout is withdrawing from an educational instruction without the acquisition of basic credentials, most likely a high school diploma (De Witte et al., 2013). Dropping out of high school is often preceded by years of disconnection and disengagement. Numerous scholars have described leaving high school before attaining a high school diploma as a process, not an event. Researchers such as Bridgeland et al. (2006) and Hayes et al. (2002) identified that lack of student engagement is due to unwelcoming feelings toward school.

Multiple theories attempt to explain why students drop out of school. The paradigm of student engagement can be associated with the Social Control Theory (Hirshi, 1969), which emphasizes personal sentiment regarding bonds and fitting into social environments. The aims of the student and as well as their dedication to their education are two traits of Tinto's model. In Tinto's (1975) mediation model, school dropout represents a long-term and evolving event. Finn's (1989) participation-identification model of school withdrawal also contemplates the theory of student engagement. Finn's model serves as the conceptual framework for this study. Wehlage et al. (1989) introduce concepts of school engagement and school enrollment as transitional phases which add to individual and social development in school. When a student is engaged in the academic process the student will put forth an effort to interact in the learning setting and is motivated to increase their academic performance. In Rumberger and Larson's (1988) model, engagement is differentiated by two factors, social and academic, which contribute to school adjustment.

The definition of a high school dropout for this study is a learner who has not succeeded in the completion of school or college coursework (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Dropping out of high school is a progression that may begin well before high school and learners display significant red flags at least one to three years before they drop out (Fortin et al., 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2014; Rumberger & Palady, 2005). Students, who leave high school before the end of their cohort, have some risk factors for dropping out before dropping out of high school. Some personal elements forecast whether students drop out or graduate from high school (Berg & Nelson, 2016). The factor that will be the major area of focus for this study is academic achievement. Academic achievement was selected over attitudes, behaviors, and background because this study will examine the effectiveness of online credit recovery software and graduation rates. For students to qualify for credit recovery, they have to be credit deficient. Therefore, the researcher will hone in on students who lack credits towards graduating in four years. One of the most widely studied predictors of high school dropout and graduation is academic achievement.

Risk Factors for Dropping Out

There are numerous factors, which can cause a student to exit high school before earning a high school diploma. Factors for students dropping out can be home-based, school-based, community-based, or student-based. This study will examine two potential factors for students leaving school before obtaining a high school diploma. The school and individual perspectives of dropping out will be examined for this study. The researcher is examining student perceptions of online credit recovery and stakeholder perceptions of online credit recovery. This study will not attempt to examine the

influence of the community concerning students remaining in high school and earning credits towards graduation.

Many researchers have identified poor academic performance as a strong predictor of dropping out of school (Berg & Nelson, 2016; Fortin et al., 2013; Fulk, 2003; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). The lack of student engagement is more of an indicator of dropping out when compared to academic performance and student demographics (Rumberger, 2011). There are four related to dropping out of school: individual, family, school, and community factors. There are no isolated risk factors that can be used to accurately determine who is at risk of dropping out (Hammond et al., 2007). For this study, only two factors that will be described related to dropping out are school and individual factors. The school has limited control over the community. The school also is unable to affect long-reaching changes within each family of the students enrolled in their districts. According to Rumberger (2011), family involvement is the most influential element concerning positive student outcomes in school.

The circumstances of the family are most commonly associated with the most pivotal reason for academic success (Henderson & Berla, 1994). The scope of influence of the school on family beliefs, dynamics, and other factors is limited and lacks consistency from family to family. Therefore, for this study, the focus factors for dropping out of high school are focused on the school-based leadership and student engagement with the school. The personal dynamics that influence learners leaving secondary school before completion are: (a) student background; (b) early adult obligations; (c) social attitudes, values, and behaviors; (d) academic performance; (e) school engagement; and (f) school behavior (Hammond et al., 2007).

School climate is a school-level risk factor that can hinder a student academically. If a student does not view the atmosphere of the school as affirmative, the student may drop out due to fear of violence or bullying. Providing safe settings for learning, along with violence prevention proposals will help increase positive social mindsets and actual personal skills of the student body (Duckenfield & Reynolds, 2013). When students believe the adults in the school will take care of them, they can focus on academics. The climate and policies of schools have an impact on the depth of connection the student has to the school. If the school has teachers or leaders who are deemed negative or non-supportive, the student may disengage from school.

In 2018 the ACGR for students with disabilities was 67% (Bustamante, 2019). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 is a federal law that oversees and defines special education. IDEA provides free and appropriate public education to eligible students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Students who have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) are enrolled in special education. Special education students graduate at lower rates than their peers enrolled in regular education classes. In 2017 36% of students with disabilities dropped out of high school (Bustamante, 2019). Students who have a cane remain in high school until 21 years of age. Some students who have an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) may experience learning in a manner different from their peers. However, many students who have an IEP are exposed to the same state standards as their peers in regular education classes and are expected to meet the same standards. These students may have extra supports in place to help them achieve success in the form of accommodations and modifications. From

2011 to 2017, the graduation rate for students with disabilities increased from 59% to 67.1% (Civic Enterprises, 2019), which was lower than other subgroups.

Many students encounter barriers in their lives, which may hinder their completion of high school. These circumstances can have an impact on their overall performance and progression in school. Some of the barriers faced by students are unique to their home lives. Other barriers to student achievement may be school or family-based. One barrier to high school completion is credit deficiency. A student who has not earned academic credit in a course due to a failing grade is at risk of becoming credit defiant. Research related to dropout -risk suggests that compounding numerous risk factors (e.g. single-parent household and failing grades) is more indicative of dropping out than solitary factors when presented in isolation (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013).

Impact of Dropping Out

Dropping out of high school is correlated with adverse personal and social aftermaths (Dupéré et al., 2017). The determination to leave high school before completion may have a lifelong impact of struggle and a bleak economic forecast. Students who complete high school increase the revenue of their communities and states. According to The Graduation Effect graduation rate impact calculation tool, if the graduation rate for the metro Atlanta area were 90%, there could be an additional 750 new jobs and an increase of over 25 million dollars in federal tax revenue (Jacobsen, 2018).

The low-income status of high school dropouts could mean it is difficult for them to contribute economically to their communities. Rumberger (2011) compared to high school graduates, dropouts are less likely to locate employment and earn a sustainable

wage, and more likely to be improvised and adverse afflictions. High school students may have to take on employment due to decreased income at home. There was a needs assessment conducted by the Urban Institute in Washington D.C. in a Latino Promise Neighborhood. The rates of detached youth were similar to national averages, but nearly 40% of youth between the ages of 16 and 19 were employed and not in school (Scott, Zhange, & Koball, 2015). U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015) reports the rate of employed young people who have graduated high school (67%) was higher than the employment rate for those who drop out of high school (51%) in 2015. The lower rates of able-bodied workers mean many available jobs go unfilled. Young males of color make up an unequally high percentage of America's dropout population (Addis & Withington, 2016).

In the present labor market, high school education qualifications are paramount for individuals to access steady employment and earn viable wages, and for elevating communities' general living standards (Autor, 2014; Goldin & Katz, 2009). Students who do not complete high school are at greater risk of earning lower wages in comparison to those who complete high school.

Statistics on Dropping Out

In 2012, the national high school graduation rate bypassed the 80% mark (Balfanz et al., 2014). The national high school graduation rate in 2019 was 84.6% (Bustamante, 2019). For some students, the lack of a high school diploma may propel their chances of being incarcerated. Males have a sustainable probability of being incarnated if they do not complete high school. High school dropouts are disproportionately represented in the

prison system. On a national level, 68% of all incarcerated males do not hold a high school diploma (Hanson & Stipek, 2014).

With gender, there is not a major difference between male and female dropouts. Slightly more females dropped out of high school in comparison to their male classmates. Although all races and socioeconomic backgrounds drop out of high school, Black and Hispanic males make up an ample portion of dropouts. The dropout rates for blacks have decreased since 1992. The dropout rate for Hispanics was more than double that of Blacks in 1992. The number of all Hispanic dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24 in 1992 was 30%, compared to 8.6% in 2017 (Bustamante, 2019). In comparison to their white classmates, blacks and Hispanics have a higher dropout rate.

Table 3

Dropouts by Gender and Race

Characteristic	Year	Dropout %
Gender		
Males 16-24 years old	2017	5.4%
Females 16-24 years old	2017	5.9%
Race		
Black	1992	13%
	2017	6%
Hispanic	1992	30%
	2017	8.6%
White	1992	7%
	2017	5%

Online Credit Recovery

Since No Child Left Behind became law, states are increasingly utilizing alternative programs and “credit recovery” courses to bolster graduation rates (Bustamante, 2019). Online and virtual learning is becoming a more popular educational trend for recovery credits in secondary school. The growth in online learning generally,

including blended learning has fueled the proliferation of computer-based credit-recovery programs (Carr, 2014). It is predicted within the next decade, there will be an increase in the number of students receiving educational instruction via an online format. The quality of education in American schools is dictated by the location of the school. Through the online learning format, the barriers that hinder a quality education for students could be diminished.

The online learning format is different from the traditional school setting because the mode of educational delivery is not based solely upon the teacher as the giver of knowledge. Online learning refers to a form of distance education, the major factor is the separation of the teacher and student for an extensive amount of time during instruction (Verduin & Clark, 1991). There remains no formal definition of the term, “credit recovery” from the U.S. Department of Education. For this study, the term credit recovery refers to, an organized method for students to earn lost course credits to graduate from high school (Trotter, 2008).

The mode of credit recovery differs from district to district. For this study, credit recovery will refer to fully online courses using Odysseyware, Apex, or Edgenuity. Credit recovery is one of many academic interventions used by districts to increase the number of students completing high school. However, the claim cannot be made that graduation rates increased solely based on the use of online credit recovery software. Figures relating to the credit-recovery industry are inadequate and evolving, of all kinds too ubiquitous in K-12 education, to postulate a positive connection between the spread of online courses and increased graduation rates (Carr, 2014).

History of Online Credit Learning

The use of distance from the educator and the student to deliver educational content is not a new concept in the field of education. Historically, the first recorded use of distance learning in American education K-12 was the use of an educational related film dating back to 1910 (Saettler, 2004). The road was paved for the birth of distance learning in the 1920s at the University of Nebraska. In the 1920s The Independent Study High School initiated by the University of Nebraska was a guide for distance and online learning programs in years to come (Clark & Barbour, 2015). Students were able to access educational information via radio transmission. Instructional-based radio broadcasts dating back to 1921 at the Ohio School of the Air (Saettler, 2004). The transmission of educational-based programming via television followed radio transmission. In 1933 at the University of Iowa, educational transmission via television begin (Kurtz, 1959). The use of educational programming for a large portion of the population would soon follow. In the 1950s educational television programs were started after the reservation of channels by the Federal Communication Commission (1952) for the sole purpose of educational program transmission.

There has been an expansive assortment of technologies related to K-12 distance education in America from the 1930s to the establishment of an internet-based education in 1991. The creation of the internet allowed greater access and transmission of instructional practices over large distances to more populations. The inaugural K-12 online learning program in the United States began in 1991 at a private school known as the Laurel Springs School (Barbour, 2011). Three years after the inception of online learning at Laurel Springs School, the first public school to use online learning was Utah

Electronic High School. Utah Electronic High first began offering limited online courses in their online format, the majority of its courses were offered in a correspondence format (Clark, 2003).

In 1997, Florida Virtual School (FLVS) opened with a limited staff of seven members (Florida Virtual School, n.d.). FLVS is a prototype for other internet-based learning proposals. All Florida students can access courses through FLVS. Primary examples of online learning were supplemental, students were enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school and enrolled in one or more online courses to enhance their face-to-face classwork (Barbour, 2017). The history of virtual learning in the state of Georgia began in 2005. Former Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue signed the Georgia Virtual School bill O.C.G.A. 20-2,31 into law launching the state's first virtual school (Georgia Virtual School, n.d.). Georgia Virtual School (GAVS) provides academic options in AP, elective courses, and SAT preparation along with 281-course alternatives (Georgia Virtual School, n.d.). For this study, students are not enrolled in the Georgia Virtual School. The information provided regarding GAVS is for historical purposes only.

How Online Learning Is Revolutionizing K-12 Education and Benefiting Students

In the past when a student failed classes, the student would have to enroll in summer or night school to make up the missed credits. The creation of online credit recovery software has provided opportunities to earn lost credits during, before, or after school at their own pace. The concept of credit recovery is not new. The nuance is the delivery format, the work setting of the student, and the use of technology as a primary mode of instructional delivery. Districts can purchase credit recovery software from different vendors. There are often teachers available on campus to help students if

needed. In some districts the students must complete their coursework on campus, others may allow students to work from home or a combination of both formats.

Also, some programs can tailor their software to the needs or learning styles of each student. Online schools/programs can be comprehensive or supplementary, depending upon the need. Teachers can work with students via multiple platforms. The teachers can instruct the course in real-time with students or students may work at their own pace. In both formats, the teacher is responsible for rating the performance of the student in the relation to content mastery. Some online learning platforms allow students to learn in the comfort of their home, while other online learning formats allow students to learn at school or a combination of both.

When a student enrolls in online credit recovery classes, depending on the policies set forth by the district, the student is given a pre-test. The purpose of the pretest is to determine what skills the student has mastered. Just because a student has failed a course does not mean the student is lacking content knowledge of the entire course. After taking the pre-test, the student may receive instruction that is tailored to the gaps in content acquisition. The student will receive instruction based upon content gaps and receive tests and quizzes. When the student passes the quizzes, the student can move forward in the software.

The online format that will be discussed in this study is an online, internet-based, software that is used by students in a traditional school setting (brick and mortar) to complete supplemental coursework. Students in this study have previously enrolled in a traditional, face-to-face class and received a failing grade. The sole purpose of the students being enrolled in the online course is to retake a class previously failed in a face-

to-face setting for academic credit towards earning a high school diploma. There are different vendors of online credit recovery software. School and/or district level administrators select the online credit recovery software that is the best fit for their organizational needs. *Over 82%* of high schools in Georgia have operational credit recovery programs, the national average for credit recovery programs is 68.6% (Tyner, & Munyan-Penney, 2018). High schools that utilize credit recovery do not have large enrollments. Of Georgia high schools with operational CR programs, only 3.5% enroll more than 20% of their students, which is fewer than the national average of 9.1%, and there are no schools that have an enrollment greater than 40% (Tyner & Munyan-Penney, 2018). Georgia attempts to maintain low enrollment in CR programs.

Using Online Learning to Support At-Risk Learners

Powell et al. (2015) characterized three dynamics for students being at-risk of dropping out of high school. The first factor is related to academics. A student may become at-risk academically by becoming credit deficient, not being eligible for promotion due to credit deficiency, reading below grade level, or not meeting requirements for graduation (Powell et al., 2015). The second dynamic is related to non-academic indicators. Instances of non-academic indicators include teen parenthood, use of drugs or alcohol, poverty, one-parent household, an older sibling dropping out, transferring schools more than twice, and retention, (Powell et al., 2015). The third dynamic for being at-risk is being disengaged with learning. Students who are disengaged with learning lack quality relationships with their school. These students may be tardy, truant, skip classes, and lack significant attentiveness in their classes (Powell et al., 2015).

The typical learner enrolled in an online setting may struggle due to the setup of the online learning format. Online learning requires certain student characteristics. An online learner will have to possess some degree of self-motivation to be successful. Students who are enrolled in an online credit recovery course, in some instances, are expected to report before or after school to complete assignments. Some students, who are taking classes for online credit recovery during the school day, may have the class added to their course schedule.

Students who are enrolled in online credit recovery courses may need more support in comparison to their peers who have not experienced course failure. The blended model may better serve students who have gaps in content knowledge that cannot be met after the student has completed pre-selected modules. The blended model affords learners counseling, instructional help, along with support services in the form of personal teacher interactions, who offer content-based assistance and guidance with study skills (Powell et al., 2015).

Students who are enrolled in online credit recovery courses receive continuous feedback regarding their academic performance. Student progression through the course modules should be frequently monitored by the instructor. If the student is struggling to move from lesson to lesson, the student may need additional support or tutoring. The student may not be an advocate for their learning by asking for help regarding their struggles. Therefore, the instructor needs to be aware of what is going on with the student and may need to probe the student.

Researchers investigating the effectiveness of online credit recovery courses in 18 Milwaukee high schools observed large facilitator-to-student ratios in classrooms mainly

filled with students who have behavioral issues (De La Rosa, 2019). When a credit recovery course is filled with misbehaving students, it is difficult for the instructor to provide quality feedback, monitoring, and classroom management. Therefore, the credit recovery courses should not have overflowing classrooms and rules need to be established with the students enrolled. Teacher expectations for pupil success must be elevated (De La Rosa, 2019.) Researchers observed differences in teachers' engagement in the class, as well as their mindsets and expectancy, high student enrollment, and exertions to help students with IEPs or those who are English Language Learners (ESOL). Some credit recovery programs have certified teachers in special education who can assist students who have IEPs. Inviting ESOL and special education teachers to assist in the course planning and instructional delivery, is fundamental to the overall success of the non-regular education student in an online credit recovery class.

The use of online credit recovery software is a means to decrease credit deficiencies in secondary schools. The obtainment of credits is directly linked to promotion to the next grade level. Therefore, schools use different tools to aid students in recovering credits due to course failure. There are numerous school systems in the state that use various credit recovery software to aid students in the completion of high school within a four-year cohort. An increase in the demand for online learning including blended learning has served as a stimulus for a large number of computer-based credit recovery programs (Carr, 2014).

Online and virtual learning is becoming a new educational trend. It is predicted within the next decade, there will be an increase in the number of students receiving educational instruction via an online format. The quality of education in American

schools is dictated by the location of the school. For some schools, academic outcomes can be predicted based on zip code. Students who are in rural or poverty-stricken areas may experience greater challenges accessing a quality education. Key findings from a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, sponsored by the National Survey on High School Strategies Designed to Help At-Risk Students Graduate (HSS) provided information on the types of schools using online credit recovery programs and how these schools implemented the programs.

Through the online learning format, some barriers that hinder a quality education for students have been removed. Students can pace themselves, as well as have an opportunity to access the content outside of school, depending on the district. The online learning format is different from the traditional school setting because the mode of educational delivery is not based solely upon the teacher as the main delivery of knowledge. Data obtained from the HSS study indicate, that high schools used multiple means to provide credit recovery chances for their students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Also, some programs can tailor their software to the needs or learning styles of each student. Online schools/programs can be comprehensive or supplementary, depending on the need. Teachers can interact with students via multiple platforms. The teachers can instruct the course in real time or students may work at their own pace. In both formats, the teacher is responsible for rating the performance of the student in relation to content mastery. Some online learning platforms allow students to learn in the comfort of their homes, while other online learning formats allow students to learn at school. Online credit recovery courses were the most popular enrollment option for

students (71%), a blended model with face-to-face instruction and online support (46%), and lastly, in-person in a traditional format (42%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Challenges of online learning. Students who have failed a course in a traditional setting and have to make up the lost credit toward graduation are faced with a myriad amount of challenges. These learners will have to make up the failed course, mainly while currently enrolled in other courses. Most students enrolled in online credit recovery course may fall into two categories. Category one is a student who has taken a course in a traditional class and failed the course. Depending upon the design of the course, students may have to retake the entire class or only the parts of the course in which they performed poorly. For example, a student may have a failed biology because they did not perform well on certain standards. In some instances, students may retake the standards they failed and not the entire course.

The second is a student taking a course for the first time for credit towards high school completion. Often students in category two will take an elective course for initial credit. Students who are enrolled in online credit recovery courses must be able to work independently and be self-motivated. The learner will have to listen to a lecture, take notes and prepare for assessments on their own. According to research data, learners who perform well in online learning settings are most often independent learners who are self-motivated, with excellent reading and time management skills and well versed in technology (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Online courses in a high school setting may have more stringent demands on the student, in comparison to traditional courses. The online model is an adult learning model.

Self-efficacy may be low for students enrolled in online credit recovery courses. These students have experienced academic failure at least once. Some students may experience anxiety from the demands of online credit recovery in addition to their current workload. Self-efficacy is paramount to the completion of any academic undertaking. Students who have a diminished sense of efficacy to handle academic challenges are significantly susceptible to attainment anxiety (Bandura, 1993). The lack of self-efficacy may be the reason why a student failed courses and require online credit recovery.

When students are enrolled in online credit recovery courses, they are responsible for continuous content engagement and consistent attendance. Not all credit recovery programs take place during regular school hours. Participants may have to report before school, after school and/or weekends. Students being able to self-regulate is essential for optimal performance in the credit recovery courses. Self-management skills will not help if students do not force themselves to persevere in the face adversity and distractions (Bandura, 1993). The students must be willing to apply themselves to the end of the course. Concrete certainty one's self-management skills supplies the staying power (Bandura, 1993). Findings from a North Carolina Virtual Schools 2007 mixed methods study involving teachers and students noted teachers reporting the need for students to possess academic and self-regulation skills in order to perform well in online settings (Oliver, Osborne, Patel, & Kleiman, 2009). The results of this study indicate that students who take part in online learning must have a prerequisite skillset in technology in order to be successful in online learning. Teachers in the study also indicated the need for students to have sufficient technical skills to take part in online credit recovery courses and additional screenings for technical proficiencies might be required (Oliver et al., 2009).

Students enrolled in online credit recovery courses may also have gaps in content mastery, which could have led, the initial course failure. Students must be able to read and comprehend the information that is provided in the lectures and notes in the online format. If a student's struggles with rudimentary reading, they may encounter challenges in the online format. In a face-to face setting students are able to get assistance from their teachers during class. Therefore, the student must be able to navigate the curriculum independent of the additional support offered in a traditional class.

Online Credit Recovery as an Intervention

Across the nation, a projected 15% of students enrolled in a credit recovery course in in the 2015-2016 school year (De La Rosa, 2019). Credit recovery allows students to retake portions of courses they failed, depending upon the district policy. Individualized online instruction can be particularly beneficial for credit recovery because it makes one-on-one instruction feasible for the student (Aurora, 2019). Schools with a higher population of black students are more likely to offer credit recovery. Although the use of credit recovery programs not customarily linked to school poverty levels, schools with higher numbers of minority students are slightly more likely to have viable CR programs (Petrilli & Northern, 2018). Enrollment in credit recovery can differ based upon the location and socioeconomic status of the school. Elevated enrollment in credit recovery is more widespread in sizeable and urban schools, charter schools and schools with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged and minority students (Petrilli & Northern, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

The Finn Participation–Identification Model was selected for this study because of its connection student engagement in school. Students have to have a high level of engagement in the online credit recovery coursework order for them to participate and complete the courses. On the flip side, the student’s lack of engagement could be the cause of the initial course failure (Finn, 1993). Students have to feel as though they belong to the school in order to be engaged. As an instructional leader, the principal must establish a school climate that is safe, nurturing and welcoming to students. Student achievement should be deeply ingrained in the day-to-day operations of the school. Reconnection to school is essential for students who have fallen behind in academically. The implementation of online credit recovery programs provides a means of reconnection and reengagement to school. The school leader serves as the bridge between students being connected to school and being an effective instructional leader. As an instructional leader, the principal has to keep the mission and vision of the school as a roadmap for students and teachers. The school’s mission should be focused on leading learners towards academic success.

Finn Participation and Identification Model

Jeremy D. Finn published a 117-page evaluative report entitled, “School Engagement & Student at Risk” in August 1993. Finn investigated a nationwide sample of eighth grade students from the 1988 U.S. Department of Education National Education Longitudinal NELS: 88 study survey (Finn, 1993). The Participation Identification Model is applicable to this study because it addresses student engagement and identification within the confines of school, although the initial study involved middle grade students.

The participation-identification model places an emphasis on students' "involvement in schooling," pertaining to behavioral and emotional concepts (Finn, 1989). Students who are engaged to the school are more likely to participate in their learning and have a sense of connection to school. Students who are connected to school participate during classroom instruction. When a student identifies with school, he or she is connected to the school and forms connections to the school. Students who do not feel connected to school may be a greater risk for dropping out. An example of identifying with the school could be the student joining the football team or band. The student feels a sense of belonging and wants to identify with the school through participation.

The Finn Participation-Identification Model (Finn, 1989) has three major identifying elements. The first element is participation. Classroom participation is essential since young children have yet to create meaningful connections or disconnections to school and may be "cooperative participants" (Finn, 1993, p. 31). Participation in school, along with teacher student interactions begins when students enroll in school. The participation –identification model highlights the developmental structure that forms with classroom level participation in the elementary grades (Finn, 1993).

For some students, interactions with adults in the school, teachers and classroom lessons helps to foster a sense of belonging and engagement/connection to school. Finn (1993) some students may enter school lacking the will or desire to contribute to classroom collaborations. When students lack initial connections to school a pattern of disengagement may follow suit and the student may disconnect from school and begin to fail courses. These students may be unfocussed, disconnected, or take part in disruptive

behavior that is counterproductive to successful coursework (Finn, 1993). These disconnects from school can lead to premature departure from secondary school.

The second feature of the Finn Model is identification. When a student identifies with school, there is a sense of connection or belonging to the school. The identification process ensues when students accept the conviction that they are a part of the environment and the school is an integral part of their experience as a learner (Finn, 1993). How students view their school-based accomplishments is also a form of identification. Identification also relates to a student's placing value on their school associated accomplishments (Finn, 1993). Identification can refer to the bonds or fondness that may be fostered between an individual and an institution, an example of this is the connection to school (Stickl Haugen et al., 2019). Students who feel a sense of belonging to school may be involved in school related events, interact with peers and teachers and take an active role in their learning. Belongingness is an internal feeling that one is an important aspect of the school setting and the school is an important authority in one's personal attachment (Van Ryzin et al., 2009).

The Finn Participation and Identification Model is related to student engagement. Students who exit school before receiving a high school diploma may have lacked sense of long-term connection to school during their academic career. Instructional leaders are responsible for providing students with an academically challenging, nurturing, and safe environment. School leaders are mandated to increase student achievement, keeping students in school is one such way. School leaders, teachers, and counselors attempt to reengage at-risk students to school in order for them to graduate. One way of reengaging students to school is through the use of online credit recovery. Online credit recovery

may help students feel a sense of success and control over their academic outcomes and future endeavors. Dropping out of school can be regarded as an outcome of reduced participation and identification, with a lack participation triggering school failures, which can lead to non-identification and finally to the extreme in non-participation (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005).

Relationship to Student Engagement

The lack of student engagement is a risk factor associated with dropping out of high school. A portion of student engagement relates to how the student interacts or formulates connections to the school environment. Student engagement can be used a means to decrease students dropping out. Student engagement is a primary aspect of this study because online credit recovery requires students to be self-motivated and the lack of motivation could have been a significant factor in the initial course failure. A students' willingness to engage academically determines a great amount their learning and involvement in the instructional process (Bomia et al., 1997). Research findings indicate there is a connection between student engagement and dropping out of school. Evidence suggests academic competence is comparable to a students' level of engagement, the cycle of low academic performance can be the catalyst for a lack of motivation and self-efficacy, which results in inferior academic outcomes leading to dropping out (Bomia et al., 1997).

In online credit recovery, a student who has not experienced success in a traditional setting and failed a course is now responsible for mastering the missed academic concepts in front of a computer. Teacher assistance is available in most formats of online credit recovery, when needed. The student has to display engagement in the

process of acquiring the previously failed content. The climate, culture and policies of the school have an impact on the connection the student will have towards the school.

Participation varies in four distinct modules that range from minimum to maximum engagement. These are responsiveness to requirements, participation in class-related initiatives and extracurricular activities, and decision-making.

Implications for School Leaders

As a reply to the elevated demands placing principals responsible for establishing and raising levels of student progress, instructional leadership remains a vital area of focus among educational researchers (Gurley et al., 2016). School leaders are responsible for maintaining safety, school climate and culture, as well as helping to increase student achievement. The role and demands of the school leader have changed over the past years. Hallinger and Heck (2010) conducted quantitative research regarding the efficacy of school principals. The research findings indicated blended direct and indirect effects of school leadership on student outcomes are educationally important (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

The academic success of a student is not solely based upon classroom performance or school level interactions. The connection to the school is key to the student feeling that they matter to their peers, and adults in the school. Students become connected to the school through the formation of meaningful encounters with staff, peers and positive school experiences.

Role of the School Principal

The role of the principal as an instructional leader is different from the obligations of principals from decades past. The principal is a provider of resources as well as a

supporter of classroom teachers. Principals are responsible for increasing student achievement. In order to increase student achievement, quality learning has to take place in an intentional, engaging environment (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). In an intentional learning environment, the mission and vision of student achievement is always the beacon that directs the actions of stakeholders. Leadership follows classroom instruction among all school connected dynamics that influence what students learn (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001).

Principals and assistant principals are rated in Georgia under the Leader Keys Effectiveness System (LKES). Georgia created the Leader Keys Effectiveness System to give leaders advice and guidance to help reach the targets raising successful teaching habits of educators and elevating content learning and success for all students (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). There are eight performance standards under the LKES system. Standard 1, Instructional Leadership declares, (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The principal promotes the attainment of all learners by aiding in the creation, communication and enactment and evaluation of a mutual vision of teaching and learning that advances towards school improvement. Standard 1 under LKES directly to the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale created by Hallinger.

Defining the School's Mission

Operating without a mission statement has been compared to planning a trip without a well-defined way of getting there. The mission statement provides guidance and direction for the school. The purpose of the mission statement is to provide a direct area of focus. The mission statement is similar to a map used to guide administration, teachers, students and parents. The mission statement guides in the formation of work

boundaries, identity, and propels the organization towards fulfilling the mission (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; McClees, 2016). The mission of any secondary school should be high school completion, preparation for future employment or enrollment, and academic rigor.

The mission is the fundamental aim of a person, an intuition, or an organization's existence is often referred to as purpose (Kustigian, 2013). The vision and mission of a school serve as a steering mechanism towards organizational objectives. The use of mission statements helps clarify purpose and goals for both the members of an organization and those in which the organization serves (McClees, 2016). In an attempt to increase student achievement, the role of the school leader should be to keep the mission and vision of the school in the forefront of the organization. Under Standard 1 of LKES the leader, states a vision and works in unison with staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders to create a mission and programs in alignment with the districts' strategic plan (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The mission and the school vision are closely connected. The mission focuses on the objectives of the organization, while the vision is describing a desired outcome for the organization. The mission statement is the trail to an evident, meaningful vision (Kurland et al., 2010; McClees, 2016). All stakeholders within an organization have a responsibility to help work towards the mission and vision. These statements cannot be mere words, yet these are action statements that require all involved to be committed.

Managing the Instructional Program

The role of the building-based administrator is broad and ambiguous. In times past, the school leader was a manager of resources and people. The principal of the twenty-first century has to be able to move between diversified roles. Principals need to

be occupied in curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy in modes that are recognizable to the public (Hoerr, 2015). Student achievement should be evident to all. In the era of school improvement, the school leader has to place in emphasis on the use and understanding of school data. Teacher and school leaders can use data to determine what variations are needed instructionally and school-wide and the changes can be applied (Schildkamp et al., 2019).

The instructional leader does more than concentrate on instructional techniques and lesson plans, they are also focused on student outcomes. The term instructional leader is difficult to define. Leithwood et al. (1999) attempt to define instructional leadership by relating to the placement of attention of leaders towards teachers' instructional techniques used to impact student progress first hand.

In managing the instructional program, the school leader has to be aware of student achievement data, attendance, student behavior, and student barriers to success. The leader should not focus merely on academic failures but gains as well. The leader has to be abreast of resource allocations are fruitful and which ones are not.

In managing the instructional program, the school leader is responsible for observing and evaluating teacher performance. Supervising instructional practices and student comprehension should offer insight into the accomplishments and challenges that need to be addressed through targeted professional development (Leiva et al., 2017). When the principal provides constructive evaluation feedback and provides the teacher with resources, support and chances for growth, students benefit. Effective principals pair teachers with peers for classroom observations and collaborative planning. (Leiva et al.,

2017). Peer classroom observations are effective when teachers are able to evaluate the instructional practices and student progress of their colleagues.

The creation and ongoing fostering of positive relationships with teachers and students is fundamental to keeping students engaged in school. Many scholars have described leaving high school before attaining a high school diploma as a process, not an event that occurs in isolation of other events. Throughout the years, theorists have attempted to make the connection between the lack of student engagement and dropping out. Theorist and researchers emphasize that early school withdrawal should be comprehended as a process which causes students to disconnect from school (Sparapani, 2013).

There are four domains related to dropping out of school: individual, family, school and community factors. For the purpose of this study, only two factors will be discussed. School and individual factors will be described according to a leading researcher in the field of dropout prevention, Dr, Rumberger. Rumberger's (2011) empirical literary review has investigated many of factors attempting to predict why students drop out such as school performance, families, schools, communities, student attitudes, and behaviors.

The school has limited, if any control over the community. The school also is unable to make far-reaching changes within each family of the students enrolled in their districts. However, as noted by Rumberger (2011), the role of the family is the most influential contextual factor in a student's academic success. The family is able to set high academic expectations. The school's loci of control is based upon instructional leadership, climate, safety, and teacher practices.

Developing the School Learning Climate

The atmosphere of a school is related to the school climate. When a student attends school they have to feel valued. When students enter the building each day their day-to-day encounters with others determine how the student feels about the school's climate. The students face a lack of support, hostility, and/ or apathy by adults, just to name a few, the student will no view the school as a positive environment for learning and may wanted to disengaged from school.

School climate in Georgia is related to the social and meaningful interactions of staff and school leaders (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). The climate, culture and polices of the school have an impact on the connection the student will have towards the school. The lack of student engagement has an impact on the success of the student. As addressed in the book, *From Dropping Out* (Rumberger, 2011), instructional traits affect dropout behavior indirectly through the creation of unfavorable school conditions that cause student disengagement. Many students encounter barriers in their lives, which may hinder their completion of high school. These circumstances can have an impact on their overall performance and progression in school. Some of the barriers faced by students are unique to their home lives. Other barriers to student achievement may be school or family based. One barrier to high school completion is credit deficiency.

School climate impacts everyone in the learning community (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). The climate and policies of schools have an impact on the depth of connection the student has to the school. If the school has teachers or leaders who are deemed negative or non-supportive, the student may disengage from school. Learners who are subjected to harassment and bullying are not connected to the school. There are a

multitude of school level factors that prevent students from remaining in school. The vital elements of an affirmative school climate are also major facilitators for learning; empowerment, authentic, engagement, self-efficacy, and motivation (Hughes & Pickeral, 2013).

Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale

During the 1980s, educational policymakers in the US, where enthusiastic to amend school practices, began to view school principals as major representatives in the reform of schools and classrooms (Hallinger, 2008). The days of principals serving solely as mid-level managers of teachers, staff and students are obsolete. The role of the school principal has evolved over the years from manager of people and resources to instructional leader. School leaders are held accountable to increase student achievement every year.

The 1980s was a major turning point in American education due to the publishing of *A Nation at Risk*. School reform continues to be in the forefront of American schools from *A Nation at Risk* to No Child Left Behind, lasting to present day. The early 1980s beheld the introduction of an era of educational reform in the United States that established long-term continuation (Hallinger, 2008). Trends in educational leadership have varied over the years from instructional from the early 1990's to the early 2000s.

In 1983, Hallinger developed the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), which is a survey instrument that rated principal performance levels on 10 instructional leadership job duties related to principal leadership in successful schools. The purpose of the PIMRS model is for school leaders to self-reflect in regards to their actions as an instructional leader. Teachers and supervisors of school principals also

provide feedback on the principal as an instructional leader. The PIMRS is divided into 10 subscales: (a) framing the school's goals, (b) communicating the school's goals, (c) supervising and evaluating instruction, (d) coordinating the curriculum, (e) monitoring student progress, (f) protecting instructional time, (g) maintaining high visibility, (h) providing incentives for teachers, (i) promoting professional development, and (j) providing incentives for learning (Hallinger, 2008).

The Hallinger and Murphy (1985) framework of instructional leadership was among the earliest to recognize disaffiliating, critical behaviors performed by principals in an effort to more precisely define the construct of instructional leadership. Hallinger and Heck (1998) described the effect of leadership in relation to classifications of defining school mission, managing the instructional programs, and promoting the school climate. This supports a wider perception of instructional leadership in which instructional leaders signify a combination of supervision, staff development and curriculum and development. The definition of instructional leadership according to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) is “leading learning communities in which staff members meet on a regular basis to discuss their work, collaborate to solve problems, reflect on their jobs and take responsibility for what students learn.”

Summary

Decades of federal mandates and reforms have placed the burden of student achievement in the laps of school leaders. When students fail to meet student achievement requirements school leaders have to provide interventions in order to help students reach the ultimate goal of graduating. The creation of online credit recovery

software has helped many students obtain a diploma who may have dropped out due to a lack of credits.

The cost of dropping out of high school is an expensive undertaking for the student, economy, and community. Dropping out has a long-lasting economic impact on potential earnings. The act of dropping out often occurs after numerous events, such as low grades, low attendance, and disconnection from school. Students who fail courses are at-risk for not completing high school.

Through the creation of online credit recovery software students have a second chance at earning a high school diploma. Enrolling in online credit recovery requires a commitment from the student. The student may need the support of caring adults to help them remain motivated and to help overcome gaps in content knowledge.

The demands of the modern-day school leader are at an all-time high. The principal must meet state accountability measures and promote student achievement. The role of the principal as an instructional leader is paramount to keeping students in school. Major attributes of an instructional leader are to monitor teacher progression, keep the organization focused on student achievement and allocate resources for teachers and students. The leader has to maintain a positive climate and manage the daily operations of the school.

The secondary level instructional leader who is able to maintain the focus of his/her staff towards student achievement may have an increase in students who complete high school on time. There may be many challenges towards helping students acquire a high school diploma due to lack of engagement from the student and/or course failure. The commitment and connection to students may be the determining factor in helping at-

risk learners navigate online credit recovery after experiencing academic failure. The strategies, structures, policies, and supports that have been put into place by school leaders may determine where a student is successful in completing an online credit recovery course.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

The decline in student achievement is a problem that plagues American schools. From 1983's *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) to the recent *Race to the Top* (U.S. Department of Education, 2009-a), national reports and incentives have not stemmed the tide of at-risk students continuing to drop out of high school. More than 80,000 students in Georgia dropped out of school between the 2012 to 2016 academic school years. This study aims to determine the strategies and practices used to implement an online credit recovery program at two Georgia high schools that significantly reduced the number of dropouts and increased the school's graduation rates for five consecutive years. This chapter will discuss research methodology, design and methods, procedures, and data analysis.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study.

RQ1: What are the life and career experiences of school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program and significantly decreasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit and increasing the school's graduation rate using the online credit recovery software?

RQ2: What organizational practices and strategies are used by school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program,

significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rate?

RQ3: What were some of the barriers encountered by school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program, significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rate?

Research Design

The research approach for this study was a basic interpretive qualitative design. Qualitative research analyzes participants in their natural environment. Qualitative researchers seek to understand socially constructed meanings and interpretations of research participants concerning their environment (Merriam, 2002). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is an “emergent and fluctuating” field of inquiry. Qualitative researchers collect, analyze, and explain events and observable data to obtain an understanding of the phenomenon in question (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). An identifying trait of a qualitative study is thick descriptions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The term, thick descriptions, dates back to ethnographer Clifford Geertz (1973). Thick descriptions are in-depth descriptions of the research settings, participants, and experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In a basic interpretative study, the researcher seeks to comprehend and discover how study participants made meaning of a phenomenon, process, and/or perception (Merriam, 2002). The researcher intends to examine the lived experiences of numerous current and/or former secondary administrators at multiple public high schools that have utilized online credit recovery software and increased graduation rates yearly. The key

descriptors of a basic interpretative design are the researcher is the research instrument, who gathers data through inductive means and provides plush depictions of the outcome (Merriam, 2002). I conducted all aspects of this study from data collection, data sorting, and data analyses.

Chapter III is an overview of the methodology for this research study. It includes a description of the research design and its rationale, an overview of the study setting, the method, and instrumentation. My role as observer, interviewer, data collector, and document reviewer, are described in this section, followed by a detailed description of the recruitment, participation, and data collection procedures. The data analysis plan, which involves recording and transcribing interviews, reading and analyzing transcripts to identify codes and themes, and concluding was shared. A description of the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability measures to establish the credibility of this study was shared. Following a discussion of ethical procedures, the chapter concludes with a summary and transitions to Chapter IV.

Research and Design Rationale

The phenomenon under investigation was online credit recovery programs to assist at-risk learners in making up lost credits and graduating high school. Qualitative methodology is appropriate when a researcher seeks to uncover the lived experiences and perceptions of one or more participants who have familiarity with a common phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). A qualitative researcher supports the idea of people socially constructing meaning from their life experiences. The fundamental trait of qualitative research lies in the reality created by participants and their interactions with the social world (Merriam, 2002).

The basic interpretative design was selected to explore how participants made meaning out of their experience using online credit recovery software at high schools with consecutive annual graduation rates. Findings from uncovering participants' experiences and perceptions may help administrators at other schools wishing to address low graduation rates among at-risk students. In the basic interpretative qualitative study, "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-43).

By understanding how the participants made meaning of their experiences as instructional leaders implementing systemic changes within a school to increase graduation rates, I may provide deeper insight into strategies or best practices applicable to other school leaders of at-risk students. Data was collected using interviews, observations from the participants' research in their natural environments, and follow-up questions for clarification (Daniel, 2016). According to Merriam (2002), researchers gather data from interviews, observations, and document analysis in a basic interpretative study. Individuals do not experience an event in the same way; each has unique perceptions, perspectives, and reactions that affect their reality of the phenomenon.

A basic interpretive qualitative approach was the appropriate design to explore Georgia high school administrators' lived experiences utilizing an online credit recovery program for at-risk students to improve graduation rates. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews served as a means for participants to share their strategies and outcomes. The basic interpretive qualitative design was also appropriate to obtain the administrators' perceptions of whether online credit recovery programs help at-risk students graduate with their cohort. Coding and thematic analysis allow the researcher to present well-

supported findings and recommendations for both practice and further research. When utilizing the basic interpretative approach, thick descriptions of the findings should be provided, that include information from the literature review (Merriam, 2002).

Setting

The locations of this study were selected purposefully. The high school locations selected for this study had to be at least 35 miles outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The school district locations had to be in an area with a population of fewer than 250,000 people. There was a total of three districts sampled for this research study. The number of districts was limited to three because many districts that met the study criteria did not respond to the researcher's numerous requests to participate in the study. It should be noted, that at the time of the request to participate in the study, COVID-19 cases were high and many districts were following strict COVID-19 protocols. The location of the study was relevant because previous research regarding online credit recovery perceptions has been in suburban and urban areas. Rural school districts such as the two in this study receive little attention in either policy or academia (Lavalley, 2018).

The three participating districts vary greatly based on industry. Two of the three districts have access to more industries than the other. The district that lacks industries, in comparison to the other two districts, is located far from the interstate; the other two districts are easily accessible to the interstate. Access to the interstate may be a reason for the lower number of industries in the other school district.

Three of the five interviews took place in an area with a population of fewer than 10,000 people. These interviews took place in a quaint, "downhome" Georgia town located less than 100 miles outside of Atlanta. The school district is one of the smaller

districts within the state. It boasts of a consistent above-state average graduation rate. The four-year graduation rate is 90.7%, which is higher than over 50% of districts in the state (Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). The school district for this paper will be referred to as Roosevelt School District. There are around 8,000 students enrolled in the Roosevelt School District. The district does not have any schools with failing grades from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2021). Roosevelt School District is the school district with fewer industries in comparison to the other two districts. The location of the meetings was determined by each participant. Interviews with participants from the Roosevelt School District took place at the district office and the school sites of the participants. The Roosevelt School District is located in Roosevelt County, Georgia. According to the United States Census Bureau (2022) the population of Roosevelt County, Georgia, is roughly 68,500 residents. The Roosevelt School District is the least racially diverse in this study. As reported by the United States Census Bureau (2022), the racial makeup is White 92.7%, Black 4.4%, and Hispanic 2.2%.

The second school district to participate in the research study was the Franklin School District. Franklin School District has a distinctive demographic in comparison to the other schools in this research study. Langley High School has an enormous population of transient Hispanic students. According to the school principal, Mrs. Norwood, the students primarily transfer within the district due to parental employment relocation. Franklin School District is located approximately two hours outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The Franklin School District is regionally located where manufacturing and agriculture industries employ many Hispanic workers. The population of Franklin

County, Georgia is roughly 103, 000 residents, based on data from the census (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The racial composition of Franklin County, Georgia, is White 90.6%, Black 4.4%, and Hispanic 36.3%. The location of the interviews for Franklin County School District was the office of the school leader.

The third school district for this research study is located in a suburban area outside of Atlanta. King County, Georgia is positioned south of Metro Atlanta in an up-and-coming county with a population of under 150,000 residents. For this research study, Warrior High School is located in King County, Georgia. Warrior High School is a part of the largest district in this study. Students who attend King County Schools are the most racially diverse in comparison to the other schools in this research study. Warrior is located in a part of the state that is rich in manufacturing jobs. There are several plants in the districts where students who leave high school with a high school diploma can gain employment and make a livable wage. The population of the town where Warrior High School is located is under 5,000 residents. Warrior is located in an area where one turn can lead you to the small general store. The town is a combination of a nostalgic time and current-day shops. As of July 21, 2021, the racial makeup of King County, Georgia, is 76.8% White, Black 18.4%, 2.2% Asian, and 7.3% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The interviews took place via Zoom and telephone.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in a qualitative study is that of a data collection instrument (Merriam, 2002). In order to assemble information, I composed purposeful interview questions, conducted semi-structured interviews, made observations, and

reviewed documents. My other duties included reading and coding transcripts to identify emerging themes. From this information, findings were compiled and reported.

I am currently employed as a teacher in one of the researched school districts. In this role, I had a prior working relationship with the first participant, who moved on from the principal role to a leadership position at the district level. I worked as a graduation coach and assistant principal over seven years ago in the other school district in this research study. I do not currently work in a supervisory role with either participant, there are no power relationships or conflicts of interest.

Methodology

The sample under investigation were K-12 school leaders certified through the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. Participants were current or former secondary administrators who worked at schools participating in online credit recovery programs to help at-risk students graduate in the state of Georgia. Study participants, secondary schools' graduation rates had to increase annually while using online credit recovery software.

Further participation criteria include utilizing online credit recovery software to help at-risk students acquire credits lost due to prior course failure. Selected participants were also from school districts outside the metropolitan Atlanta area. Participant selection occurred through purposeful sampling to reach information-rich cases (Benoot et al., 2016). Purposeful sampling is appropriate when the researcher seeks to recruit participants who meet specific criteria and experience a shared phenomenon (Merriam, 2002).

Purposefully selected individuals were contacted with a written invitation to participate. The written invitation included information about the problem and the criteria for participation. In a follow-up telephone call, a full description regarding the nature of the study and questions were addressed.

Participants who chose to participate in the study were scheduled with one-on-one in-person interviews at a time and place convenient to each school administrator. Some potential participants did not respond to the numerous correspondence. Their names were eliminated as potential participants after three contact attempts. It is worth noting that at the time of interview scheduling, many districts within the state were on enforcing strict COVID -19 protocols. The enforcement of COVID-19 protocols could have been a deterrent for many potential leaders.

Unlike quantitative research, there is no required number of participants in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2002). Instead, qualitative researchers use data saturation to guide sample size (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Data saturation is when interviewing additional participants reveals no new themes, the study is replicable, and another coding is unnecessary (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Instrumentation

Three face-to-face semi-structured interview protocols were utilized on school leaders who meet the purposeful sampling criteria. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore a specific topic of inquiry while using an interview guide (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The primary benefit of using an individual interview as a means of data collection is this method provides an opportunity to capture the perspective of an event or experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The core of detailed interviewing is

comprehending the meaning made from the lived experiences of the interviewee (Seidman, 2006).

I asked for a copy of district COVID-19 procedures and rules via email, when the information was not located on the district's websites. Due to COVID-19, I did not seek permission to observe students in their online setting. Data collection instruments for the study included a document review, observations, and an interview protocol.

Document review serves as a source of primary data collection in qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The purpose of documentation review in qualitative research is to serve as another source of detailed information relating to the phenomenon in question. Documents will include hand-scribed records, visual images, artifacts, as well as archival data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Additional archival data sources include longitudinal study findings regarding graduation rates and student enrollment in online recovery courses. Documentation review for this study was from the Georgia Department of Education, school and district websites, The Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, and any archival data study participants have concerning the nature of the study.

In-depth interviews are the major source of data collection in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2015). The interview process allows the researcher to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon that is under investigation. Through interviews, researchers can ask questions that provide information-laced details about the setting, participants, and the meanings they made from their encounters. The research method allows the researcher to seek clarifications and probe for additional information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I aimed to obtain insight into the interactions between the participants and their natural

environment. Therefore, I requested to conduct the interviews at the schools of the participants. Four of the five participants were school leaders and have access to a personal office or conference room space. Some of the interviews took place at high schools. Mr. Andrew's interviews took place at my place of employment and in a conference room at the county office. Mr. Watkin's interviews occurred via Zoom. Mr. Watkins is more than 3 hours away and we decided to meet via Zoom due to conflicts in schedules.

Qualitative researchers use observations to explain and discover complex social interactions in natural environments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Observations for this study included observing participant interactions in their workplace environment and watching students interact with adults, one another, and the school leader. I also searched school websites and social media accounts to locate interactions between the school leaders and students. The researcher does not solely rely upon the participants' accounts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Observations permitted me to witness how the participants intermingled with students, staff, and the morale of their school and provided an overall firsthand account of the culture and climate of the organization.

To maintain and organize the information collected through observations and document review, I created document and observation templates to log information. The template included dates, times, artifacts, and the significance or purpose of the document review. The templates will not disclose the identities of any of the study participants (see Appendix A).

An interview protocol was created (see Appendix A) to guide semi-structured interviews with participants. The interview protocol included a minimum of 10

researcher-produced open-ended questions and topics of discussion, with room for follow-up inquiries or probing, as appropriate. The interview guide addressed the research questions and theoretical frameworks of this study. The questions in the research guide were extensive, open-ended, non-emotional, invoking, open to interpretations of the respondents' experiences, and give an information-rich description of the topic under investigation (Charmaz, 2014).

The interview questions were crafted following a thorough literature review, incorporating personal knowledge and understanding of the online credit recovery software. The interview questions should elicit sufficient information to develop themes and answer the three research questions. To ensure content validity, a colleague familiar with online credit recovery software reviewed the interview protocol before administration, making suggestions for changes, when needed. The purpose of an interview protocol is to ensure the researcher remains on topic, asking the same basic questions of each participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Participants

A pseudonym is a fictitious name used to preserve anonymity (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Pseudonyms were used to identify each study participant, their district, and their respective school. The pseudonyms used for this study are listed in Table 3. Specific pseudonyms were used to identify respondents. Each participant was asked what they wanted their pseudonyms to be, all left the decision to me. The pseudonyms were assigned to participants randomly in some instances. Mrs. Patrick mentioned cars during our interview and she was assigned the pseudonym of Danica Patrick at Henry Ford High School. Mr. Watkins referenced being the “head of the school” and he was assigned to

Warrior High School because I associated the term “head of school” with a warrior. I gave him the pseudonym, Mr. Watkins because Watkins and Warrior start with W. Mrs. Norwood was named after my 5th-grade teacher and Langley was randomly selected for the school’s name. Mrs. Aldrin referenced space exploration during our conversation, hence the name Aldrin and Propel. Mr. Andrews’ name was randomly selected. I chose Restoration as the pseudonym for his school because Mr. Andrews had the attributes of a youth pastor. The district names were chosen to reflect Franklin D. Roosevelt who had a home in Warm Springs, Georgia, and Martin Luther King Jr. from Atlanta, Georgia.

Each participant was assigned an alias to identify the individual on recordings, transcripts, notes, and other study-related material. Neither participant’s school district will appear in any records, nor will the school's specific location.

Table 4

Participant School and District

Participant	School	District
Mr. Andrews	Restoration High School	Roosevelt
Mrs. Patrick	Henry Ford High School	Roosevelt
Mrs. Norwood	Langley High School	Franklin
Mr. Watkins	Warrior High School	King
Mrs. Aldrin	Propel Academy	Roosevelt

Data Collection

Purposefully selected individuals received written invitations to participate in the research study. Included in the invitation were additional study details, including interview scheduling and process, assurance of confidentiality, ethical considerations, and the right to withdraw participation at any time without penalty. Upon confirmation of participation, the initial interview was scheduled.

The purpose of data gathering in qualitative research is to provide evidence for the experience under investigation (Polkinghorne, 2005). Before conducting interviews, I reviewed historical data from school records, The Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, and the Georgia Department of Education. Primary data came from semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each participant. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Audio-recording each interview using the iPhone application iRecord and a digital voice recorder ensured accurate capture of participants' words, with subsequent transcription by Otter.ai, an online transcription service. I shared the transcripts in person with the respondents to review for intended meaning and accurate representation, a process also known as member checking before the second interview (Harvey, 2015).

During the initial interview, I attempted to establish a rapport with the participants by discussing their high school experiences. The purpose of interview one was to put the experience of the participant in context with the topic. Rapport was achieved by having the participant provide descriptive information about themselves concerning the context of the topic to the present (Seidman, 2006). The conversation began with, "High school was an important time in our lives. How would you rate your high school experience?" Establishing a comfortable interview setting was helpful in establishing trust. I thanked the participants for taking part in the study. A pre-written script was read before asking the interview questions. I utilized the script to reiterate the nature of the research and advise the participants that I will record the interview. Transcripts from each interview were sent to the participants via email no later than 72 hours after each session.

After reading the introductory script, I began the interview process using the interview protocol. The nature of the interview questions related directly to research question one. Question one pertains to the life and career experiences of the participants. I sought to understand the experience of the participants and how they made meaning of these experiences. Interview questions related to question one were focused on what experiences, whether life and/or career, helped shaped the school leader. How did these experiences help prepare them to help at-risk students? After the first interview, the second interview's date, time, and location were confirmed. Any documentation directly related to research question one after the interview requested for analysis. All documents were logged and reviewed into the document template. Before and after the three interviews, I journaled any information or thoughts from the interview process or related to the interview process. According to Strauss (1987), memoing involves note-taking and recording critical events or statements. Before the interview began, I memoed about the atmosphere of the school and any events leading up to the researcher entering the research setting with respondents. Memoing can trigger how the researcher thinks and the researcher's thoughts during the research (Strauss, 1987).

During the second interview, I provided the participants with transcripts from the previous interview for their appraisal. Clarifying and follow-up questions were asked during interviews. Observations of the school setting were noted. The second interview focused on the organizational practices and strategies used by the school leader. I continued to establish a rapport with research participants by easing into the interview questions.

The interview began by discussing the impact of the school leader on student achievement. The interview protocol was utilized during the second interview. This interview focused on student achievement issues and the role of the school leader as an instructional leader. I attempted to understand what specific tactics were used to assist at-risk students. The nature of the second interview was to have the research participant reconstruct the details of their experience as it transpired (Seidman, 2006). Questions were asked about the decision-making process of school leaders to increase graduation rates. After interview two, I confirmed the date, time, and location of interview three.

A copy of the interview transcripts from interview two was provided to participants via email no later than 48 hours after interview two. During interview number three, follow-up or clarifying questions were asked pertaining to interview two. The third interview is more reflective for the participants; this is a time for them to reflect on the meaning of their experience and what the experience means to them (Seidman, 2006). The focus of the third interview was research question three. The third research question addressed any barriers the leader faces in assisting online learners attempting to graduate high school. I asked the participants questions about their emotional or intellectual connections to get data to answer research question three (Seidman, 2006). I tried to gain awareness of any possible challenges in increasing student achievement, graduation rates, and enrollment in online credit recovery courses. My opening statement was, "Explain the barriers associated with increasing graduation rates year after year." After the third interview, I confirmed a date, time, and location for the transcript review. All participants received a written letter of thanks for their participation in this study.

There was an assessment of online credit recovery documents with participants for clarification after interview number three. Document assessments were managed before and during the interview process. An appraisal of each school's website was conducted to determine if there was information related to student achievement, graduation rates, graduation requirements, and online credit recovery enrollment. Participants were asked during the interview process for documentation related to the school's mission and vision, student achievement, online credit recovery enrollment data, and any information related to strategies used to increase graduation rates. I logged observation data into the observation template. The researcher will make notes regarding the school's climate upon entering the school and any other interactions between students, parents, administration, and staff.

Interview audio and transcripts were reviewed various times in an attempt to derive a connection with the study participants and their experiences. Fischer (2009) stated the important aspects of bracketing are having the researcher engage with data numerous times and employing purposeful wording to present study findings. During the transcript review process, I attempted to obtain insight into each participant's interview by reading the transcripts line for line as the audio of the interview played simultaneously. This allowed me an opportunity to relate the context of the text with vocal inflections. Giorgi (1975) explained the importance of the researcher becoming fully immersed in the interview transcripts after bracketing and before the start of data analysis.

All interviews were recorded using web-based Otter.ai transcription software and a backup digital recording device. The web-based Otter.ai software both recorded and

transcribed the interviews. Study participants received a copy of the interview transcripts via email no later than 72 hours after transcription release from Otter.ai for their review. Before returning the interview transcript, I reviewed each transcript for software errors. There were instances in which Otter.ai transcribed an incorrect word or word phrase. For example, words such as “high school” with “hospital” were replaced several times. The Otter.ai software misinterpreted many of the research participants’ Southern accents. Participants were asked follow-up questions for clarification from each interview when needed.

Data Analysis

Otter.ai software provided repetitive themes by listing words that frequently emerged in the interview at the top of each interview transcript as, “summary keywords.” Each word was highlighted in the “summary keyword” section within the transcript. There was a review of the theme suggestions from Otter.ai by reviewing the context in which the word or phrases were mentioned in the interview. I listened to the specific portion of the interview in which the word or word phrase was stated to determine the contextual meaning. Some of the patterns Otter.ai suggested emerged as themes that were invalid and later disregarded. Patterns were selected for discard if they included repetitive words or phrases used in random contexts. For instance, if I asked a question and the participant repeated the question and /or restated the question, Otter.ai software identified this as a repetitive theme, when in fact it was a participant repeating the word or phrase in a non-contextual manner for clarification purposes. I then reread all transcripts without referring to the “summary keywords” Otter.ai provided to determine whether keywords or phrases omitted by the software could form potential patterns. Relying solely upon the

software in the identification of emerging themes minimizes the researcher's ability to comprehend the conceptual connections within the data (Foss, 2015). By reviewing the interviews of each participant in the absence of software recommendations, I was able to connect with each participant on an individual basis and immerse herself in their experiences. During the coding process, I was reflective of each study participant and how they made meaning of their experiences. In the field of qualitative research, a code can be a word or phrase that is symbolic in assigning meaning, content, or essence, to the ascribed section of the language or data (Saldaña, 2009). Otter.ai audio recordings were played as I reexamined transcripts for meaning.

Different colored highlighters were used to code words that either Otter.ai or I identified as repetitive within each interview. If the word was part of a theme or pattern, I then assigned that word a highlight color identifying the word as a potential theme. A comparison of highlighted words from each interview participant was made to determine whether the repetitive words or phrases were isolated to the interview or whether the words or phrases appeared throughout multiple interviews with other research participants. Open code symbols were assigned to words or phrases that appeared throughout the interview multiple times (listed in Table 5). Identified repetitive words were listed in the margins of the transcripts, and I drew arrows connecting the words to the direct quotes for further reference.

Table 5

Open Coding Symbols and Descriptions

Code	Description
RB	Relationship Building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homerooms
SEFM	Student Engagement (Finn Participation Mode) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clubs- overcoming barriers for students to participate • Club Creation • Celebrations of student success, birthdays, and recognition
ANTE	Access to Non- traditional Educational Formats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propel • Online credit recovery • Look at the programs (Henry Ford, Langley, & Warrior) • Ombudsman
EWAR	Experience working with at-risk students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years in education • Hardships faced or situations that caused to help at-risk students
F	Flexibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult advocates • Caring Adults- Restoration gives a damn about hiring the right people
IL	Instructional leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping the mission and vision in the forefront
ONCE	Online Credit Recovery
DR	Data Review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing student data and maintaining accurate records
SGR	Staffing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online credit recovery – staffing with highly qualified staff and Graduation coach
AB	Adults as Barriers to Success

Miles and Huberman Analytical Method

Thematic data analysis was employed to code data for this research study.

Thematic data method involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data to gain insights and understand the underlying meaning (Braun

& Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis should be utilized in studies that seek to discern using interpretations of data (Ibrahim, 2012). The nature of this study was to comprehend the lived experiences of secondary school leaders in Georgia. Therefore, through the review of interview transcripts, school and district data, and historical data, themes were identified amongst research participants. The Miles and Huberman (1994) model for thematic data analysis was appropriate for this research study of the display format in step one. Displaying data in the hand-crafted network of nodes provided a visualization of interview statements and details. The display method helped in the justification process of theme addition.

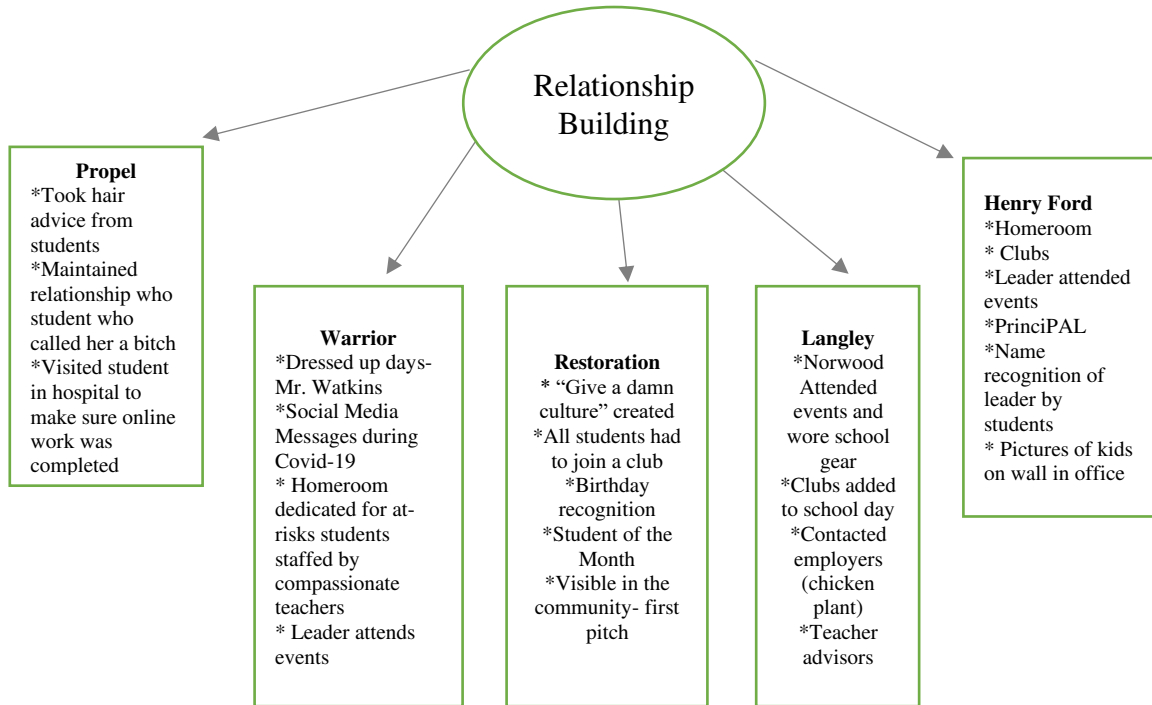
Data collection, data display, and data reduction are the three main components of the Miles and Huberman (1994) model.

1. Data Collection – The data collection process for this research study entailed semi-structured interviews, evaluation of historical data, online credit recovery document analysis, and school and district website examinations.
2. Data display- Data for the study was displayed using the network model. A network is collection of nodes attached to links that highlight the actions, events, and processes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). The nodes were hand drawn for this research study in order to make connections between multiple participants and their experiences. A data hand crafted display was used to help determine what relationship building techniques were utilized by study participants before making it a theme. The word phrase, “relationship building” was classified by Otter.ai as a recurring pattern. However, the way each participant fostered relationships was unique to the participant.

Displaying the potential theme of relationship building in a network format was beneficial in the identification of specific instances of relationship building at each secondary school.

Figure 5

Relationship Building Theme



3. Data reduction – The data reduction process was eliminated to discard non-pertinent information. The initial round of transcript reviewing using Otter.ai yielded false themes. The software recognized repetitive word phrases that were not actual themes as possible patterns. These false themes were discarded, prompting second theme identification in isolation of the software. When reading the transcripts without suggestions from Otter.ai, possible themes emerged. Under further investigation, some of the repeated word

phases where not themes based on the context in which the words were stated, prompting another discard.

Validity

The meaning of validity relates to whether the research reflects the world described in the research study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In qualitative research, the validity of the research refers to how accurately the research tools measure the phenomenon under investigation in the study (Punch, 1998). Researcher bias may be a significant threat to my research. Johnson (1997) has identified researcher bias as the researcher being selective in how they collect, record data, or interpret data based on the perceptions of the person conducting the research.

I used the following methods to minimize researcher bias and increase validity: develop a researcher journal for reflectivity, use respondent validation, and triangulation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), respondent validation may help allow the researcher a chance to reexamine their explanations of the findings.

Researchers use data triangulation to address the trustworthiness of a qualitative study by using a system to cross-reference information and findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Triangulation is a methodological approach that contributes to the validity of research results using multiple methods, sources, theories, and/or investigators (Farmer, Robinson, Elliot, & Eyles, 2006). Three data sources were triangulated: five study participants, observations, document reviews, and semi-structured interviews. Triangulation helps the investigator reduce bias and cross-examine the integrity of participants' responses (Anney, 2014).

Issues of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness depends on credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and research reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Trochim, 2006). Credibility establishes whether the research findings correct information drawn from participants' original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another strategy is member checking, which involves participants reviewing transcripts of their interviews to interpret (Harvey, 2015). I attempted to increase transferability with thick descriptions, a process that entails keeping detailed and descriptive notes throughout the study (Anney, 2014). I will also enhance transferability through the use of purposeful sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Purposeful sampling and thick descriptions depict a comprehensive illustration of the contextual details that aid the reader in understanding the factors, participants, and experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Qualitative findings have dependability if another researcher following the same process with a different sample arrives at similar results (Trochim, 2006). Two means of establishing dependability are audit trails and triangulation (Trochim, 2006). A reflective journal was maintained throughout the study process, documenting all steps, processes, perceptions, and findings to provide an audit trail for a future researcher to follow. Maintaining all study documents, including raw data, observation notes, interview transcripts, district-provided statistics, and previous literature, will also help in this regard. Using prior research and statistical data, the researcher is practicing triangulation, another dependability component (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability in qualitative research means the researcher's interpretations and findings came from the data; establishing confirmability requires a researcher to clearly

illustrate the means of arriving at conclusions (Tobin & Begley, 2004). A study has confirmability if another researcher follows the same procedures with the same sample and comes at similar results (Trochim, 2006). In this research study, I practiced reflexivity to improve confirmability. Reflexivity is the critical self-reflection about oneself as a researcher (e.g., biases, preferences, preconceptions) and the research relationship (e.g., relation to the respondent) and how it affects participants' answers to questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I journal preconceived biases before and directly after the interview process as a reflective means. Being consistently thoughtful throughout the research process ensures a detailed review of the engagement of the researcher in the research and their influence on the process and outcomes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Identifying predetermined outcomes and statements before the interview helped me to become open to ideas, experiences, strategies, and viewpoints different from the researcher's experience.

Previous employment as a graduation coach, school administrator, and online credit recovery instructor was disclosed to respondents at the start of the study. It was expressed to the participants that I in no way viewed my experiences as a school leader, graduation coach, or credit recovery instructor as a role of expertise.

Ethical Procedures

Before recruiting participants for this study, I submitted the proposal to the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. In the United States, university researchers must submit any projects in which they intend to use human subjects to an IRB for review (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The IRB serves to protect

individuals from unethical research practices. The IRB approval number for this study was 04212-2021.

Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the research before engaging them in the study. The principle of informed consent stresses the researcher's responsibility to educate participants on different research aspects (Sanjari et al., 2014). The informed consent form (see Appendix A) provides in-depth information regarding the project, including purpose, procedures, participation criteria, potential risks and benefits, participant protection and confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time (Shahnazarian, Hagemann, Aburto, & Rose, 2017). In signing the informed consent form, participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study (Shahnazarian et al., n.d.).

It is the researcher's job to protect participants from harm or any negative consequences. Each interview occurred in a private location chosen by the interviewee, thus safeguarding participant identity and maintaining confidentiality. A copy of the Model Consent Form from Valdosta State University is stored in a secure location by the researcher, away from any interview transcripts or identifying documentation. I used the Model Consent Form for participants due to their ages. Each participant was given copies of the form for their records. Parental consent is not required for this study because all participants are of age to consent.

Specific pseudonyms were used to identify respondents. Each participant was asked what they wanted their pseudonyms to be, all left the decision to me. The pseudonyms were assigned to participants randomly in some instances. Mrs. Patrick mentioned cars during our interview and she was assigned the pseudonym of Danica Patrick at Henry Ford. Mr. Watkins mentioned referenced being the "head" of the school

and he was assigned to Warrior High School. I gave him the pseudonym, Mr. Watkins because Watkins and Warrior start with W. Mrs. Norwood was named after my 5th-grade teacher and Langley was randomly selected for the school's name. Mrs. Aldrin referenced space exploration during our conversation, hence the name Aldrin and Propel. Mr. Andrews' name was randomly selected. I chose Restoration as the pseudonym for his school because he seemed like a youth pastor. Each participant was assigned an alias to identify the individual on recordings, transcripts, notes, and other study-related material. Neither participant's school district will appear in any records, nor will the school's specific location.

After each interview, I transferred the recording to a personal, password-protected computer and deleted the smartphone's digital file. Returned transcripts were be password-protected. The names of the participants were altered in Otter.ai.

Summary

The basic interpretive research design was employed to determine the strategies and practices used to implement an online credit recovery program at five Georgia high schools that significantly reduced dropouts and increased graduation rates for five consecutive years. I wanted to comprehend Georgia high school administrators' lived experiences in utilizing an online credit recovery program for at-risk students to improve graduation rates. Three research questions and two theoretical frameworks guided this study.

A basic interpretive qualitative approach was the appropriate design to explore four purposefully selected participants' lived experiences. One research participant was recommended to participate in the study through a process known as, the snowball effect.

By understanding the varied experiences in instructional leadership, the researcher attempted to provide deeper insight into strategies that may be useful to other school leaders. Five schools from three districts in Georgia were examined in this study.

Information was gathered through semi-structured interviews, historical document reviews, and observations. I utilized a self-created interview protocol to conduct three one-on-one semi-structured 90-minute interviews with open-ended questions. My former work involvement has produced familiarity with online credit recovery software and two school districts; however, there are no supervisory relationships or conflicts of interest.

Otter.ai software was employed to transcribe all interviews for this research study. The interviews were recorded using multiple devices. Otter.ai was the only software used to record and transcribe interview data. Otter.ai generates themes based on word repetitiveness. Meaningless theme suggestions from Otter.ai were discarded before the coding process. After discarding irrelevant data suggested by Otter.ai, I was prompted to reexamine transcripts to determine potential themes manually. Themes were select by Otter.ai and extensive transcript review.

Issues of trustworthiness addressed in this study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Creditability was addressed through the review of transcripts numerous times and not relying solely on suggestions from Otter.ai. I also asked additional follow up questions when needed to clarify respondent statements. I did not want to interject my thoughts or beliefs into the meaning made by participants. Transferability was addressed by maintaining detailed notes and providing rich descriptions of how data was collected and analyzed for this study. I was reflective

during this research undertaking by using journaling. Through the journaling process, I was able to uncover past emotions regarding my role as a graduation coach.

Following Valdosta State University IRB approval (see Appendix B), the researcher will distribute informed consent letters to participants detailing the study's purpose and procedures. The forms will specify participants' rights, confidentiality, safeguards from harm, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The school leader is an integral component of schoolwide success, responsible for keeping the school district's mission and vision at the forefront. The principal's role as the instructional leader is also a vital component of school and student success. Chapter IV will present the study results, including an overview of participant interviews, themes, and relevance.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

Over the past decades, the push to upsurge student achievement in American schools has placed pressure on teachers and school leaders to pinpoint solutions to help all students accomplish the ultimate recompense of attending school, a high school diploma. School reform measures have changed names as the leaders of the nation have changed. However, what has remained unremitting is the demand to increase high school graduation rates for all students in the nation. To increase high school graduation rates, school leaders and districts had to devise non-traditional learning opportunities for students who were at risk of dropping out of high school.

The purpose of this research study was to understand how Georgia school leaders whose high school graduation rates increased consistently while using online credit recovery software to assist at-risk students made meaning of their experiences. In Chapter I, I described my experiences working with at-risk students as a Graduation Coach and school administrator. My work with at-risk and disconnected students led me to this research undertaking. Finn's Identification and Participation Model (1989) is one of the frameworks for this study. Finn's model provides a connection between the role of student engagement and student achievement (1989). I strived to understand the ways school leaders attempted to connect or reconnect at-risk learners to high school. Research from Finn (1989) indicated schools must connect and engage learners. The schools selected for this research study all had an increase in graduation rates, therefore,

I sought to recognize what approaches, if any, were utilized to connect at-risk populations to school. All of the leaders in this study worked directly with at-risk students who experienced course failure. Failing a course could cause a student to become disconnected from school. All of the leaders in this study have experience utilizing online credit recovery as a means to recover lost credits and increase graduation rates.

The research design was a basic interpretive qualitative study. School leaders were purposefully sampled for this study. Study participants were Georgia-certified secondary school leaders from non-urban school districts. The high school location had to be at least 35 miles outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The school district's location had to be in an area with a population of fewer than 250,000 people. The school had to use online credit recovery software to assist students at risk of dropping out to earn credits for graduation.

In this chapter, I will detail participant interview responses and describe historical data analysis results. Based on these findings, my analyses of the data are in alignment with the research questions that guided this study and are entrenched in this chapter. The nature of this research study was to understand how secondary school leaders in Georgia whose schools increased graduation rates annually and used online credit recovery software to prevent at-risk students from dropping out made meaning of their experiences. Chapter IV delivers a portrayal of each school leader who joined the study.

Location of Research/Setting

The locations of this study were selected purposefully. The high school locations selected for this study had to be at least 35 miles outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The school district locations had to be in an area with a population of fewer than 250,000 people.

There was a total of three districts sampled for this research study. The number of districts was limited to three because many districts that met the study criteria did not respond to the researcher's numerous requests to participate in the study. It should be noted, that at the time of the request to participate in the study, COVID-19 cases were high and many districts were following strict COVID-19 protocols.

The three participating districts vary greatly based on industry. Two of the three districts have access to more industries than the other. The district that lacks industries, in comparison to the other two districts, is located far from the interstate; the other two districts are easily accessible to the interstate. Access to the interstate may be a reason for the lower number of industries in the other school district.

Three of the five interviews took place in an area with a population of fewer than 10,000 people. These interviews took place in a quaint, "downhome" Georgia town located less than 100 miles outside of Atlanta. The school district is one of the smaller districts within the state. It boasts of a consistent above-state average graduation rate. The four-year graduation rate is 90.7%, which is higher than over 50% of districts in the state (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). The school district for this paper will be referred to as Roosevelt School District. There are around 8,000 students enrolled in the Roosevelt School District. The district does not have any schools with failing grades from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). Roosevelt School District is the school district with fewer industries in comparison to the other two districts. The location of the meetings was determined by each participant. Interviews with participants from the Roosevelt School District took place at the district office and the school sites of the participants. The

Roosevelt School District is located in Roosevelt County, Georgia. According to the United States Census Bureau (2022) the population of Roosevelt County, GA is roughly 68,500 residents. The Roosevelt School District is the least racially diverse in this study. As reported by the United States Census Bureau (2022), the racial makeup is White 92.7%, Black 4.4%, and Hispanic 2.2%.

The second school district to participate in the research study was the Franklin School District. Franklin School District has a distinctive demographic in comparison to the other schools in this research study. Langley High School has an enormous population of transient Hispanic students. According to the school principal, Mrs. Norwood, the students primarily transfer within the district due to parental employment relocation. Franklin School District is located approximately two hours outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The Franklin School District is regionally located where manufacturing and agriculture industries employ many Hispanic workers. The population of Franklin County, Georgia is roughly 103, 000 residents, based on data from the census (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The racial composition of Franklin County, GA is White 90.6%, Black 4.4%, and Hispanic 36.3%. The location of the interviews for Franklin County School District was the office of the school leader.

The third school district for this research study is located in a suburban area outside of Atlanta. King County, Georgia is positioned south of Metro Atlanta in an up-and-coming county with a population of under 150,000 residents. For this research study, Warrior High School is located in King County, GA. Warrior High School is a part of the largest district in this study. Students who attend King County Schools are the most racially diverse in comparison to the other schools in this research study. Warrior is

located in a part of the state that is rich in manufacturing jobs. There are several plants in the districts where students who leave high school with a high school diploma can gain employment and make a livable wage. The population of the town where Warrior High School is located is under 5,000 residents. Warrior is located in an area where one turn can lead you to the small general store. The town is a combination of a nostalgic time and current-day shops. As of July 21, 2021, the racial makeup of King County, GA is 76.8% White, Black 18.4%, 2.2% Asian, and 7.3% Hispanic (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The interviews took place via Zoom and telephone.

Data Collection

Data collected for this research study included individual interviews, a review of school documents, a review of district and school websites, and a review of state graduation rate data. Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom. Upon reviewing state data from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, I selected potential school leaders to interview. Each participant was initially contacted via email with an invitation to participate. Most interviews took place after school, one interview took place during summer break. To collect data, I traveled to meet with the principals and former school leaders. The interview locations were selected by the participants. One participant was interviewed through Zoom due to distance and conflicting schedules. I confirmed each meeting via email or phone before the interview date. Several interviews had to be rescheduled throughout the interview process for varying reasons ranging from the illness of the researcher to scheduling conflicts of both parties. All study participants received a pseudonym to preserve their identity. A pseudonym is a fictitious name used to preserve anonymity (Thomas & Hodges, 2010). Pseudonyms were used to identify

each study participant and their respective school. The pseudonyms used for this study are listed in Table 1.

Participants

The purpose of this study is to determine the strategies and practices used to supervise an online credit recovery program at an identified Georgia high school that significantly reduced the number of dropouts and increased the school's graduation rates annually. The researcher sought to understand the lived experiences of the school leaders whose schools were involved in the research study. The recruitment process for the study took about three months. The researcher reviewed school data related to graduation rates using data from the Georgia Department of Education, district and school websites, and the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement. I identified districts that met the distance criteria of 35 miles outside of the Atlanta, Georgia area as an initial indicator for potential participation. After districts were selected, graduation rate data was reviewed using the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement website to determine whether there was a consistent increase in graduation rates.

If schools met the criteria for graduation rate increases, the researcher viewed the school's/district's website for the utilization of online credit recovery software. If the school/district website did not indicate the use of online credit recovery software, the schools were contacted directly. I gained audience with a school counselor and asked what if any credit recovery was utilized at their school for credit-deficient students. During the calls to the schools, I disguised myself as an anxious parent of a credit-deficient student possibly relocating to the district. The schools represented in this study included students from varying socioeconomic statuses and racial makeups. This research

study included one former and four current secondary school leaders whose schools' graduation rates increased consistently and who used credit recovery software as an intervention to increase the graduation rate of their high schools.

Participants were asked to take part in the study after permission was received from the district office to contact participants directly (see Appendix C). Emails were sent to study participants requesting their participation in the study. Correspondence between participants and myself took place via email and telephone conversations. If potential participants did not respond to the invitation to participate in the research study within 48 hours, correspondence was made to potential participants via phone and left voice messages. The final participant selection was based solely on those who expressed a willingness to participate in the study.

Through interviewing two school leaders within the Roosevelt School District, another research participant was nominated based on linear snowball sampling. In linear snowball sampling, a study participant provides the name of one referral who is later recruited into the research study (Simkus, 2022). School leaders in Roosevelt referred the leader of Propel Academy to participate in the study because the leader of Propel Academy directly increases the graduation rates of the base high schools and uses online credit recovery software to assist at-risk students' recovery of lost and initial credits. The following sections will describe each participant in more detail.

Mr. Andrews: "Students will not fail from a lack of support."

Mr. Andrews of Restoration High School is a calm-natured, enthusiastic, and very spiritual man. His faith enters the room with him. He has served as a part-time youth minister. Mr. Andrews has a certain sense of peace and gentleness that anchors his

personality. For our initial interview, I met with Mr. Andrews in a classroom on a technical college campus. Due to convenience for both, the meeting location was mutually selected by the researcher and the participant. Mr. Andrews sat at a table adjacent to me. Upon entering the interview location, Mr. Andrews' smile is the first thing anyone notices. Although he was a secondary school leader, he has a cheerful, elementary school principal demeanor. However, Mr. Andrews is no longer a secondary leader. He has since been promoted to a district-level administrative role.

Our conversation began with a discussion of his background in the field of education. Mr. Andrews is a former STAR Teacher, Teacher of the Year, and County Level Teacher of The Year. The Student-Teacher Achievement Recognition (STAR) is a program that rewards high-achieving Georgia seniors on the SAT and the teachers who supported them. STAR Teachers is a Georgia recognition program that was created by the Georgia Chamber of Commerce in 1958 (Decatur Rotary Club, 2022). The STAR Teacher has to be selected by a STAR Student. His career began in a suburban Atlanta school district as a history teacher. He also has experience teaching employment skills, US History, current events, economics, AP classes, and psychology. In his career, he has worked with at-risk and gifted learners. His experience working with at-risk student populations was as a classroom teacher in South Georgia. He taught several classes that students were retaking for initial credit because they previously failed the course.

During his tenure in this school district, Mr. Andrews was able to work under various leadership styles that would carry him throughout his career. Later, he would move to a South Georgia school district and teach social studies. His time in South Georgia helped sculpt him into the leader he is today. Mr. Andrews lived and taught in

Michigan for about one year. He would later return to Georgia to teach in a neighboring district for two years before settling into an assistant principal position in his present school system. Mr. Andrews served as an assistant principal on the high school level for four years and was offered a position as a middle school principal. After one year as a middle school principal, Andrews became a principal at the feeder high school for the 2012-2013 academic year.

Before becoming a building-level administrator, Mr. Andrews had exposure to numerous leadership styles throughout his career. He cites an experience working in a Georgia school district that by most would be deemed, “out of control” as insightful to the importance of leaders in the establishment of building culture and climate. The school underwent an administrative overhaul. Through this experience, Mr. Andrews realized, “how potent and impactful a leader is in setting the culture of a building.” According to Mr. Andrews, under the new administration, expectations and accountability were established, and “what was expected was measured.” The school’s culture quickly turned around for the better.

My interview with Mr. Andrews was centered around his time as a secondary leader and the graduation rate increases at his school. Mr. Andrews remained the principal at Restoration High School for four years. He was then promoted to his current leadership role as a district-level administrator. The interview atmosphere was laid back and what I would describe as, “easy, casual, and comfortable.” Mr. Andrew has been in education for over two decades, although his boyish appearance says otherwise. He has vast experience from having worked in more than one district and worked with sundry demographics. He is vehement and empathic towards the needs of teachers, students, and

stakeholders. Mr. Andrews is a resource allocator and a solution-driven leader. His motto is, “Students will not fail due to a lack of support.” The most accurate depiction of Mr. Andrews as a leader is one who is full of integrity, fearful of abusing power, a collaborative team player, and a chief delegator. Mr. Andrews is not from the school district in which he is presently employed.

Mr. Andrews often referenced the importance of making connections with students and parents throughout our conversation. When he was a classroom teacher, he communicated daily with parents regarding student progress by having the student take home a sheet that included a list of important dates, current, and future assignments. The form required teacher and parent signatures. Mr. Andrews also made connections with students by displaying, “strategic visibility.” An example of strategic visibility was throwing out the first pitch at a home with both his daughters on the field. This allowed parents, students, and members of the community to view him through a different lens. They were able to see him as a family man, with similar wants and needs as theirs. Also, during each new assignment as principal, Mr. Andrews arranged to meet with every member of the staff over the summer to get to know them.

The mission and vision of the high school remain as they were when Andrews was in charge. The mission and vision are centered around students’ long-term success after graduation. The mission and vision of the school are the mission and vision of the district, they are the same. The idea of a universal mission and vision was the brainchild of the then-incoming superintendent. A universal mission and mission statement meant all schools within the Roosevelt School District were aware of their initial focal points regarding student achievement and long-range student outcomes. The district’s mission

statement is, “It is the vision of the Roosevelt County School District to guarantee all students who graduate are prepared to enter post-secondary schools or employment.” The district’s mission and vision were easy to locate on the school’s website. There was a dedicated tab for mission and vision on the school’s homepage. The mission of the school district has been paraphrased without altering the meaning to obscure the identity of the study participants:

Roosevelt County School District will be identified as a prestigious school system in Georgia. There will be a tradition of achievement and transparency, high expectations, and standards-based classrooms. Our community will display hope and assurance in our schools, and well we will establish a gratified sense of belief in the Roosevelt County School System.

Mr. Andrews was purposefully selected for this research study because of the increase in graduation rates at Restoration High School in the Roosevelt District that he took over. When Mr. Andrews became the leader of Restoration High School the school was operating using a federally funded school reform grant known as a School Improvement Grant 1003(g) (SIG). The SIG was awarded over multiple academic years to Priority Schools. Compensation was provided to teachers whose students demonstrated academic gains under SIG. Attendance was one compensation component, under the grant they could earn \$1,000 for perfect attendance. Another financial incentive under the grant was for teachers based on performance of students who were in their class for 60% of the academic period.

During year one, Mr. Andrews implemented school-wide changes that placed the needs of the students at the forefront, as opposed to strategies used by some teachers to

increase their students' academic achievement. Mr. Andrews noticed some teachers were requesting schedule changes to have students who could diminish their SIG compensation. These students were removed from their classes and placed in other teachers' classes. Hence, the teacher who removed students who were considered "problems" had created the "perfect" roster and could show an increase in student achievement. To combat this situation, Mr. Andrews developed a system with the guidance department and student schedules could not be changed based solely on the request of the classroom teacher. Mr. Andrews let his expectations of students' needs coming first be the driving force for change within the school. He made his expectations clear to members of the staff. There was a large turn in a teaching position after his first year of principal, due largely to the grant-funded positions. When the grant money ran out, the positions were dissolved. According to Mr. Andrews, "he moved their cheese because they were not student-focused" and some teachers left for this reason. He believes that students deserved a teacher who was there for them, "I need somebody in this classroom serving them. These kids deserve somebody who's here for them." It is important to note, that the SIG grant compensation was not linked to graduation rates, but individual classroom teacher-student achievement gains.

During the second year of his principalship, Mr. Andrews made changes to the credit recovery program at Restoration High School. Before the changes, Restoration High School's version of credit recovery consisted of the use of Odysseyware and teacher-created remediation packets. Under the former credit recovery program, students were retaking an entire class when they may have only needed to redo a unit. Retaking a unit or section of a course instead of the entire course was advantageous to students who

need to recover more than one credit. Also, once a student completed their required coursework, other students could enroll in online credit recovery. Year two was a streamlined process for credit recovery. Students no longer had to take an entire course if their overall average fell within a certain range. Students who scored 60% or above were able to retake the units they failed, as opposed to taking the entire course. Students who scored below 60% would have to retake the entire course.

In discussing his role as an instructional leader, Mr. Andrews was a proponent of professional development for his staff. He provided opportunities for teachers to collaborate, review student data, lead peer professional developments, and plan for instruction. Teachers met twice per month. The first professional development meeting was led by the academic coach, while the second meeting was a “teacher-driven instructional” meeting. Mr. Andrews demonstrated instructional leadership through the creation of other instructional leaders within his building. He allowed department heads, assistant principals, and academic coaches to help strengthen student achievement. He was not the “keeper of knowledge.” Allowing others to assist in the execution of the mission and vision of an organization is paramount to success. Mr. Andrews provided professional development opportunities for teachers through multiple school leaders. Making provisions for teachers in the form of delivering aid and creating a pathway towards the goal is associated with strong instructional leadership practices (du Plessis, 2013). Instructional leaders may offer support to their staff in the form of access to professional development opportunities, support from other teachers, providing resources, and the principal being empowered as an instructional leader (Brolund, 2016).

Mr. Andrews is a significant leader to interview for this study even though he is no longer a secondary leader, due to promotion, because the graduation rate to Restoration increased by 22.9% while he was principal. The school’s graduation rate was below the state average in 2013 and surpassed the state’s average within three school years. The graduation rate at Restoration High School, under the governance of Mr. Andrews, increased from 67.9% to 90.8% (see Table 6). Mr. Andrews attributes multiple factors to the increase in graduation rates. During his first year as principal, the establishment of a culture of, “giving a damn” about students was important to Mr. Andrews. Members of his staff had to desire success for Restoration students. Decisions that were made had to be in the best interest of the student. Some teachers did not return to Restoration because the SIG grant ended. Other teachers left for varying reasons. However, Mr. Andrews made it clear to his staff that they had to care about the students. Support and resources were provided to assist learners at Restoration High School in the form of a Data Interventionist. The role of the Data Interventionist was similar to that of a graduation coach, they offer support to help students graduate. Students were also able to enroll in online credit recovery courses to retake failed units or courses, depending upon the need.

Table 6

Restoration High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2013-2017

Year	Restoration High School’s graduation rate	Georgia’s graduation rate
2013	67.9%	71.8%
2014	69.5%	72.6%
2015	79.9%	79%
2016	85%	79.4%
2017	90.8%	80.6%

Note. From Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2021.

Furthermore, Mr. Andrews and key stakeholders conducted a “tough love dialogue” with seniors who were in danger of not graduating in May. Mr. Andrews provided students with several options for the path toward graduation. The students were given a printout of their transcript and current grades. They were advised of what was needed to complete high school and walk with their class in May, this was known as, “option A.” If students did not make the necessary academic progress and were unable to graduate in May, they were given, “option B.” Under “option B,” students would receive remediation and make up the missed credits and graduate in a special graduation ceremony held at the district office in August. Under “option C,” students would return for a fifth year, complete their credits and walk in December. “Option D” gave students an additional year to complete high school. Faced with an additional year of high school and not walking with their cohort in May served as an encouragement for many students to make speedy academic modifications. Students were advised to, “take advantage of all of these teachers that are here to support you.”

Relationship building was an important factor in staff knowing students and making long-term connections. The homeroom structure was redesigned and students remained with the same teacher throughout their high school matriculation. Also, special education students remained with the same case manager for four years. Teachers were encouraged to take an interest in their students and get to know them. Mr. Andrews attended school-related events and formed connections with students and their families. Being visible at events allowed students to interact with him in a setting outside of the “brick and mortar” school; these interactions brought a human approach.

Additionally, Mr. Andrews used student data to make informed decisions regarding the needs assessment of the overall school and students. His staff not only reviewed student data but discussed their findings with the students. This made the data more meaningful because they were not just a set of numbers. There was a student and a story attached as well. The student data reviewed included grades, attendance, and student growth. Students were provided emotional support and resource allocation through referrals to data interventionists, counselors, and social workers.

Mrs. Patrick: "I knew every kid by name. I knew every story. I knew every background. I knew every parent, and I think I made a difference."

Henry Ford High School is nestled in a small, picturesque Georgia town two hours outside Atlanta, with an approximated population of 7,495 residents. The graduation rate at Henry Ford has steadily risen from 80.5% in 2017 to 90.2% in 2021. The leader of Henry Ford High School is a fervent trailblazer with many years of proficiency in education.

The interview with Mrs. Patrick took place after school in the middle of the week. The researcher arrived during dismissal. It was noted that special needs students at Henry Ford High School are cherished deeply by school staff. The day was pretty cold and windy, yet dry. Special needs students were waiting in the security and warmth of the foyer of the school for the arrival of their buses. The students were with their teachers and paraprofessionals. The foyer is connected to the front office. The secretary in the front office held conversations with some of the students who choose to sit in the office, rather than stand in the foyer. The students chatted spontaneously amongst themselves and with the secretary. The students were comfortable interacting with one another and

they all appeared to be friends. The secretary encouraged the students to attend a play at the school the next day and she also listened to the stories they told about their adventures on their awaiting school buses. It was obvious that she had a relationship with these students. The students felt comfortable interacting with their teachers, the secretary, and the researcher.

The atmosphere of the school was inviting. In the conference room where our interview took place, Mrs. Patrick had pictures posted on the wall and at the entrance to her office of herself interacting with students in various situations. The pictures displayed happy moments between Mrs. Patrick and the students. She also had a blanket on display in the office during her first year as principal of the school. The blanket was a showcase of loving interactions with her students. Mrs. Lassiter attends school and community events. By the number of pictures she has with students, it is obvious she is not the type of leader who remains in her office all day. The pictures painted an image that Henry Ford High School is a haven for students, like a “home away from home” type of place.

Mrs. Patrick is affectionally known as, “the PrinciPAL” of the school, instead of the principal. In the word PrinciPAL, PAL is in all capital letters. This is an indication of the type of relationship she strives to have with her students. In the parking lot in front of the school, her parking space is labeled, “PrinciPAL.” When she does the ROBO calls to families, she affectionately states, “This is your PrinciPAL.” On the school’s website, she describes herself as the, “#1loudest FAN.” During our interviews, she discussed the importance of attending school events as a tool to connect with students and build relationships.

There was also a video of Mrs. Patrick on the website's homepage detailing the school's vision. The YouTube video described the academics, and extracurricular activities offered to the student body, as well as the vision of the school. According to one of the students in the video, "Attending Henry Ford High School helped me to be a caring student." Mrs. Patrick described the vision of her school known as, "The Three E's." The Three E's are **E**nrollment in college, **E**nlistment in the military, or **E**mployment.

The establishment of meaningful relationships with students in her school is of great significance. Mrs. Patrick is kindhearted and tranquil. One would say she is, "down to Earth." I felt extremely inspired by her presence. She is a fearless and independent leader. She leads from the heart. I would coin her leadership style as, "Mama Bear Leadership." She cares for the students, yet she does not cuddle them. She wants every one of them to succeed. Mrs. Patrick is not a native of the town. As she stated in our interview, "she married a hometown boy." Though she is not connected to the community through birthright, she is connected through her commitment to student achievement, love for students, and community affiliations. Mrs. Patrick is involved in several community organizations. Her involvement within the community has helped her establish connections and relationships. Relationships with the families connected to Henry Ford High School are important to her. She attends community-based functions, and school events, and is out and about providing needed support. She is genuinely a staple of her school and community.

Mrs. Patrick has over 28 years of educational experience in the classroom and various leadership positions. Her entire career has been with the Roosevelt County

School District. She began her career as a special education teacher in a competency-based education setting known as CBE. Mrs. Patrick describes her experience as a first-year teacher working in special education as, “instrumental.” It was during this time she, “Developed her vision for why she was in education and that was to make a difference.” Relating to students has always been paramount to Mrs. Patrick. After ten years in the classroom teaching science and social studies at the middle grades level, Mrs. Patrick decided it was time to become a building-level administrator. Once she obtained her Master’s degree, Mrs. Patrick hesitantly pursued a leadership career. She was hesitant to leave the classroom because she was committed to, “growing kids and building relationships.” During an interview for an assistant principal position, Mrs. Patrick was earmarked by the superintendent and director of curriculum as having something remarkable to contribute. They took a vested interest in Mrs. Patrick and helped develop her during the first year out of the classroom.

Throughout her first year away from the classroom, Mrs. Patrick worked in risk management at the district office. Time spent in the role allowed her to see the “big picture” of leadership. When one is confined to the classroom, their focus is to hone in on their students. Being a leader gives a view beyond the classroom’s scope. After working at the district office in risk management, Mrs. Patrick obtained an assistant principal position at the local middle school. Mrs. Patrick was housed at the middle school location for a few years, but there was a location change. She moved from the middle school to an off-campus academy located in the downtown area for 6th-grade students only. Her work entailed building relationships and making connections amongst the feeder school

students who were now enrolled in the sixth-grade academy. It was Mrs. Patrick's duty to create a cohesive bond amongst rivaling feeder elementary schools.

The next destination in her leadership journey led Mrs. Patrick to the role of graduation coach. The state of Georgia created positions in all middle and high schools in 2007 under then-Governor Sony Purdue (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). The role of the graduation coach was to identify students who were at risk of dropping out of high school and target interventions to help them graduate with their cohort. Her tenure as a graduation coach led her to the implementation of a year one targeted intervention to assist a group of 20 students from two high schools in passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHS GT). Ten students from each high school in the district were selected to participate in the intense intervention that involved remediation for failed portions of the graduation test.

Students in Georgia had to earn credits towards graduation, as well as pass four exit exams in the areas of science, math, language arts, and social studies. If a student earned all of their required credits towards graduation and did not pass the GHS GT, they could not earn a high school diploma if all parts of the graduation test were not passed. Georgia students no longer have to take and pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test to earn a high school diploma as of March 30, 2015. Then-Governor of Georgia, Nathan Deal, signed House Bill 91 which no longer required the administration of a high school graduation test.

Being a graduation coach allowed Mrs. Patrick to work with at-risk students on an individual basis. She was able to pinpoint interventions to meet their needs towards the obtainment of a high school diploma, whether through traditional or non-traditional

means. Some of the students who were unable to pass the graduation exams required by the state of Georgia were able to unenroll from Henry Ford High or the other high school in District A and enroll in a non-traditional school called Ombudsman. Enrollment in Ombudsman allowed students to receive a high school diploma without passing the graduation exam. The high school diploma was not Georgia-issued. Students who received a diploma from the Ombudsman diploma were issued from the state of Illinois.

According to information obtained from the Ombudsman website, the program is accredited by AdvancED and the curriculum coincides with Common Core (Ombudsman Educational Services, 2022). Ombudsman is an educational service that dates back to 1975. The website references that through the use of the Ombudsman, over 200,000 at-risk students have obtained a high school diploma. Ombudsman is a non-traditional, educational alternative to dropping out of school for at-risk middle and high school students. Students have the flexibility of attending online classes during the morning, afternoon, or maybe nighttime classes, depending upon location.

As a graduation coach, Mrs. Patrick gained knowledge and experience working with online credit recovery software. The first online credit recovery software she had experience using was APEX. As she explained, “The initial year of APEX was huge because our students were able to get back credits that they have lost, you know, you know, you can only offer four (credits) in the fall and four in the spring (credits).” District A is on Block scheduling. Using the APEX software in her first year as graduation coach helped students who were credit deficient earn credits towards graduation.

There was a pivotal dialogue amongst central stakeholders that the effort to increase the graduation rate within the Roosevelt School District could not rest solely upon the shoulders of the graduation coach. After year one as a graduation coach, Roosevelt School District hired a forward-thinking, progressive superintendent. Although the state had done away with the role of the graduation coach, the new superintendent in Roosevelt School District created a similar expanded version of the graduation coach known as data interventionists. The role of the data interventionist is to ensure students remain in school, receive support towards graduation, and have a caring, supportive adult who advocates for their needs and attempts to prevent them from dropping out of high school. The data interventionist's position is not a commonly funded positioning in the state of Georgia. It was specifically created for the Roosevelt District to mimic the graduation coach position and assist with graduation rates after the position was abated by the state. Throughout our discussion, Mrs. Patrick referenced the tireless work of the data interventionist in the district. Mrs. Patrick attributed a great deal of relationship building, graduation rate increases, credit recovery enrollments, and overall student triumphs to the establishment of the data interventionist position

After serving at the district office, as a graduation coach, and as assistant principal on the middle and high school levels, Mrs. Patrick became a high school level principal. She was appointed at the same high school she served as assistant principal and graduation coach. This appointment was vital to her strategic relationship building because she was already familiar with the community, staff, stakeholders, students, and, parents. Through her years of working in the school district, she had made solid connections and formulated meaningful bonds. Her guiding light remains one of student

achievement. She has not become complacent about her school's increased graduation rates. She mentioned during our interview the importance of the quality of life her students have after graduation. It is important to her that these students are competitive in the collegiate or workplace setting. Preparing students for life is her mission and passion. It's her "why."

Henry Ford is an automotive-themed high school. The school's mascot is the mustang car. The school has a NASCAR theme of a pit crew. The role of the pit crew as described by Mrs. Patrick is to serve as a "village." The pit crew creates a family unit for the next four years. According to Mrs. Patrick,

It takes a village to raise a child. The kid isn't always going to come to the village, sometimes the village has to go to the child. And meeting the needs of our students is going to increase the graduation rate this year.

The "Huddle Squad" replaces the homeroom concept. In a traditional homeroom setup, students are assigned to the same adult for the duration of their matriculation in high school. Students report to homeroom daily for attendance and announcements. The day-to-day check-ins allow a consistent adult to build a relationship with the student throughout their high school enrollment. Each student has a Huddle Squad leader who remains with approximately twenty students from the 9th to 12th grade. The Huddle Squad leader is with the students from the first day of 9th grade until the moment they walk across the stage on graduation night. The Huddle Squad leader sits on the graduation field with the students in their Huddle Squad during the graduation ceremony. This unwavering adult in the lives of students provides a reference point for resource allocation, advocacy, and long-term support. With tears flowing freely from both of us,

Mrs. Patrick recalls the symbolism associated with the annual graduation ritual at Henry Ford:

It is an honor that I do not take lightly and it is something I look forward to every year because as kids walk across and I see their faces, I mentally go through the struggles we've had or the difficulties they've had to overcome and we just smile because I know that we've made this together.

During our time together, her commitment to her students, community, staff, and, stakeholders was always at the forefront and never diminished. She was proud of her accomplishments over the years, yet she did not rest on her laurels. She was well aware of the work that needed to be done to make Henry Ford an even greater school and she has a plan to achieve this goal. Her instructional leadership style encompasses all stakeholders. Mrs. Patrick does not lead in isolation. She acknowledges the need for others to take part in the decision-making processes related to student outcomes. The overall success of students is not at the hands of an individual, yet many minds working together are needed to help students achieve. During the interview, the critical role of the data interventionist emerged often.

Roosevelt County Schools has a Graduation Task Force to help students graduate. The Graduation Task Force is specific to each secondary school. Members of the Task Force include the building level admin, counselors, Data interventionists, the school social worker, and teachers. The role of the Task Force is to review student data and determine areas of improvement for the upcoming school year. The Graduation Task Force also helps students remain in school. For example, if a student is not coming to school or dropping out because of a lack of resources, the Graduation Task Force will

meet to try to help the student overcome barriers to graduation and remain in school. The social worker and the counselor may make home visits to speak with the student and their parents about the importance of remaining connected to the school. The social worker may offer to aid the family if needed.

The graduation rate for Henry Ford High School steadily increased from 2017 to 2021. There was a .4% increase from 2018 to 2019, this was the smallest increase over the past five academic school years. Henry Ford’s graduation rate surpassed the state’s graduation rate in 2018. The graduation rate remains above state average to date (see Table 7).

Table 7

Henry Ford High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2017-2021

Year	Henry Ford High School’s graduation rate	Georgia’s graduation rate
2017	80.5%	80.6%
2018	84.5%	81.6%
2019	84.9%	82%
2020	88.8%	83.8%
2021	90.2%	83.7%

Note. From Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement, 2021.

The increase in graduation rates at Henry Ford was attributed to numerous factors, including students being able to connect to a caring adult, whether through Huddle Squad, or forming other relationships with caring adults in the building such as counselors, social workers, administration, staff, or data interventionists. Relationship building and getting to know and meet the needs of students were paramount at Henry Ford. Mrs. Patrick also attributed the increase in her school’s graduation rate to keeping track of students who entered the school and who withdrew. Making sure students are

coded correctly in the state's data system is one way to increase graduation rates because if a student leaves school to attend another district or school, or is homeschooled, incorrect coding may wrongly identify the student as having dropped out. Placing students in flexible learning environments was also identified as a way to increase graduation rates. Some students may benefit from learning in a non-traditional setting. For instance, a student with a child may benefit from attending online classes. Also, a student who failed a class with a score below 70%, but above 60% may benefit from the unit recovery option, while a student who failed a course with a score below 59% may benefit from credit recovery. Having various options to support students who were unsuccessful in courses was important to increasing the graduation rate.

Mrs. Norwood: "It takes a village. It takes everybody for kids who are at risk. It takes parents, friends, teachers, coaches, it takes everybody." Langley High School has a distinctive demographic in comparison to the other schools in this research study. Langley high school has an enormous population of transient Hispanic students. According to the school principal, Mrs. Norwood, the students primarily transfer within the district due to parental employment relocation. Langley is located two hours outside of Atlanta. Langley High School is regionally located where manufacturing and agriculture industries attract Hispanic workers. In the 2020-2021 school year, Langley High School had a 66% Hispanic enrollment. In the same school year, 58% of students qualified for free/reduced lunch. The graduation rate for Langley High School increased from 84.8% in 2018 to 92% by the 2020 school year. The population of the city where Langley High School is located in roughly 34,000 residents (United States Census Bureau, 2022).

My arrival at Langley High School was always directly at dismissal. I was always met by polite students. Mrs. Norwood is very attentive toward her students. Although it was a dismissal, I was able to sit in my vehicle and observe her at a distance interacting with her students. She appeared to hold lengthy conversations with a few of them while smiling. She and other staff members appeared approachable and were approached by students. During my initial visit, a kind young man guided me toward the main entrance. I noted the extreme kindness of the students towards one another and myself. Students who were boarding buses for departure did so in an orderly, respectful manner. They were not horse playing or misbehaving. Upon entering the building, the main office is directly in view. I was greeted by the school secretary. Everyone was extremely kind, from the students to the adults. From the moment I exited my vehicle, I was met with nothing but benevolence and warmth. One can only imagine how students have been treated here on a daily basis. I noted there is correspondence in the main office for students in English and Spanish.

Meeting Mrs. Norwood, the principal of Langley High School, was nothing short of a pleasure. I felt as though I had already known her through months of coordinated correspondence via email. Mrs. Norwood was extremely fascinating and eager to share the happenings at Langley High. Interacting with her felt very familiar, it felt like I had known her for many years. If I had to describe Mrs. Norwood the first word that word comes to mind is innovative. She is an out-of-the-box thinker and willing to change course if needed. She often mentioned the importance of being a flexible leader.

Mrs. Norwood has worked in the Franklin County School District for over 26 years, she taught for 3 years in a neighboring district and returned to Franklin County

Schools. She has 29 years of experience in the field of education. Mrs. Norwood has taught science at the middle and high school levels. She was also an instructional coach for about two to three years. A brief description of the instructional coach's role is to assist teachers and school leaders in reviewing achievement data, classroom support, as well as ways to increase school-wide student achievement. After serving as an instructional coach, Mrs. Norwood was promoted to the role of assistant principal of an elementary school for a few years. She later became an assistant principal at the high school is she currently the principal of the Franklin School System.

Mrs. Norwood is a product of the Franklin County School System. She is a graduate of the high school she now leads. She has been a teacher, assistant principal, and principal of her alma mater. Being a graduate of the school district where she is a leader means she has pre-existing relationships and community connections that most outsiders would have to take years to formulate. She has prior knowledge of the community, traditions, and demographics like no other as well. There is no question that Mrs. Norwood is devoted to the success of her students, community, and school. She is vested in their future. Mrs. Norwood was reflective regarding her days as a student growing up in the community and what the Franklin School District means to her, both personally and professionally. It was evident in her tone and facial expressions of bliss that being educated in the same district where she is responsible for educational outcomes is a source of great pride.

Franklin County School District has a graduation coach. This position was created within the Franklin County District within the past five years. There is a graduation coach solely dedicated to the students of Langley High School. Franklin County School added

the Graduation Coach position at the request of the secondary leaders in the school district. The position has been a staple in Franklin for the past four years. The role of the graduation coach is in alignment with the original position before it was taken away statewide. The graduation coach has a website linked to the school's webpage. The webpage is information-rich. Students and parents can obtain insight into the role of the graduation coach. The graduation coach at Langley specifically monitors students' progression to meeting requirements for graduation, provides alternative options for students to finish high school course requirements, mentors, and, assists with post-high school planning. There are also links to the guidance office home page with important dates and information for graduating seniors.

Langley High School students use online credit recovery software to make up missed credits in classes they have previously failed. There is a full-time online instructor for the Edgenuity classes that are offered during the regular school day at Langley High School. If a student is unable to take an online credit recovery class during the school day, they can take classes at an off-campus location in the district, known as the Renaissance Academy. By providing many options for credit recovery or online learning possibilities beyond regular school hours, students can attend at times better suited for their circumstances.

Renaissance Academy is a small, flexible school created to assist severely credit deficient students or student who needs credit repair. Students are given an individualized graduation plan that is created by school leaders and the guidance department upon enrollment. Student performance, attendance, and behavior are monitored as a part of the graduation plan at the Renaissance Academy. Students who are enrolled in any secondary

school in Franklin County School District can apply for admission. Students who are enrolled in credit recovery at Langley High School can seek the assistance of a certified teacher if they are having difficulty. Supports are available to assist students who struggle with their online learning coursework.

There is a homeroom setting established at Langley High School known as advisement. Students can formulate meaningful connections with a consistent adult for the duration of their matriculation through high school. Students meet once per week in advisement. There are also clubs and extra-curricular activities available at Langley High School. A dedicated tab on the school's website outlines each club. The school's website is an information-dense tool for parents, students, stakeholders, and community members to determine what is taking place on campus. Mrs. Norwood discussed the importance of having students participate in clubs and extra-curricular activities at the school. Langley offers club meetings during the academic day so students do not have to remain after school to participate. The purpose of offering club meetings during the school day is to allow more students the chance to connect with peers and other adults. Students who have solid connections with teachers and staff members are more likely to establish measurable goals, commit to learning, and work hard (SPARK, 2018).

Mrs. Norwood revealed there was a student who tried out for the soccer team but, unfortunately, did not make the team. Not making the team is often a heart-breaking experience for any student. Although the student did not make the soccer team during tryouts, the student was allowed to work with the team as a manager. Being able to remain connected to the soccer team allowed the student the opportunity to maintain a connected social aspect of school through relationships with peers and the coach. The

coach and the student were able to form a strong bond and the student had an adult advocate in the coach. For many students, a connection to a caring adult helps keep the student connected to the school. Findings from research conducted by SPARK in 2018 suggest high school students are less likely to experience meaningful connections with teachers and staff, compared to when they were in middle school. Forming meaningful connections with adults during the high school years helps students during a difficult phase in their lives, the transition into adulthood.

Listed on the school's user-friendly website was the mission and vision of the school, under a dedicated tab. The mission is dedicated to increasing student learning. The vision of the district is centralized around students and the community. Underneath the mission was a section concentrated on the five core beliefs of the school. There was also a legal statement regarding non-discrimination citing laws from the state. After visiting the school's website, any stakeholder would know the core values of the school.

Mrs. Norwood, the graduation coach, and members of her staff attended a dropout prevention conference a few years ago. Information obtained at the conference would change the trajectory of student outcomes at Langley High School. The conference was hosted by The National Dropout Prevention Center, founded in 1986 to maintain a database of model programs and strategies designed to prevent students from dropping out of school (Cawthon, 2016). The National Dropout Prevention Center hosts annual conferences to help school leaders reduce student dropouts. Ester Ferguson served as a chair for the New City National Dropout Prevention Fund and approached Clemson University with the idea of a national center to study dropout prevention (Cawthon, 2016). Mrs. Norwood described attending the conference:

We took away things from that conference, and we brought it back and started and kind of tweaked it to meet our needs. And it put us on a path to increase our graduation rate, which was our goal in the beginning.

One strategy taken from the conference was the formation of a committee to tackle student dropouts at Langley High School. Similar to the Graduation Task Force at Henry Ford, Langley has what is known as a Graduation First Committee. The purpose of the Graduation First Committee at Langley is to inhibit students from dropping out and to help them overcome obstacles to graduation. The first year of the Graduation First Committee's inspection was intended to address seniors who were in danger of not graduating with their cohort. The committee included the principal, graduation coach, and teachers who taught 12th grade students. The mission of the Graduation First Committee in year one was to assist twenty seniors graduating. The committee met once per month to discuss behavior, attendance, academic progression, possible mentors for students in need, and to meet whatever needs the students may have had. Members of the committee were familiar with the twenty students because they had those students in class. Having a previous relationship with the student meant some teachers were aware of the students' needs and ways to help the students in school. In year two the committee added grade levels to cover all students school-wide.

Another role of the Graduation First Committee is to target interventions specifically towards students who are close to passing and being on track towards graduation. The committee meets and creates an action plan to help them graduate on time. The committee meets with the student as well. For example, the committee will review the student's transcript to determine which credit recovery course the student may

need. The committee consists of the student, admin, counselor, and graduation coach. The committee meets and has a difficult conversation with the student letting them know that stipulations are mandated for graduation. The Graduation First Committee serves as the first line of defense in preventing students from dropping out of high school through the identification of at-risk credit deficient learners in need of enrollment in online credit recovery courses. Also, the committee reviews student records in the form of grades, attendance, and behavior. Members of the committee are familiar with the students through personal relationships and not just data review. The adults can provide the background information and the missing link to them, helping to answer the question, “Why did Johnny begin failing school in 10th grade?”

The graduation rate steadily increased at Langley High School after the second year of Mrs. Norwood’s principalship. From the 2014 to 2015 academic year, the graduation rate increased from 76.4% to 90.7%. Throughout her tenure at Langley High School, the graduation rate has increased from 76.4% in 2014 to 91% in 2021. The graduation rate for Langley High School has remained in the 90% range for the past three years. The graduation rate for Langley High School is significant due to the increase from 2018 to 2019, the percentage increase was 8.5%. Although there was a slight decrease in the graduation rate from the 2019-2020 academic years, the graduation rate has remained above 90% (see Table 8).

Table 8

Langley High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2018-2020

Year	Langley High School's graduation rate	Georgia's graduation rate
2018	84.8%	81.6%
2019	93.3%	82%
2020	92%	83.8%

Note. From Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021.

It is worth noting that K-12 schools in Georgia ceased face-to-face instruction in mid-March of 2020, due to COVID-19. Langley and the Graduation First Committee had to track students who left the state for work and family-related obligations. During this unprecedented time in global history, the graduation rate from 2019- 2020 only decreased by 1.3%. Langley High's graduation rate remains above the Georgia state average graduation rate of 83.7% in 2021 (Georgia Department of Education, 2021).

Mrs. Norwood cites multiple factors in the increased and sustained above-state average graduation rates for Langley High School. Langley High's Graduation First committee has helped create targeted interventions for at-risk students. Students at Langley have a relationship with caring adults in the building. There is someone at Langley to provide needed support for students, whether it be a coach or cafeteria worker. Students also have a homeroom format where they interact with the same adult for an extended time. Mrs. Norwood periodically attends extracurricular events and cheers the school teams on to victory, which also affords her the allows her to form connections. She also takes part in school dress-up days and many fun school-related events to formulate a connection with her outside the "traditional mean principal."

Mrs. Norwood credits attendance at a Dropout Prevention Conference hosted by Clemson University for providing strategies to assist students at risk of dropping out of high school. From her attendance at the conference, the Graduation First Committee was created. This committee meets frequently to discuss student data and to determine what interventions are needed to help students graduate. The Graduation First Committee also consists of a Graduation Coach, teachers, and the principal. The Graduation Coach provides an additional caring and supportive adult to help students graduate.

Mrs. Norwood mentioned students having multiple opportunities to access credit recovery as a way to increase graduation rates, Students can access online credit recovery platforms through scheduling and location-flexible options. Students can take online recovery classes at Langley High School during the academic day under the supervision of a full-time credit recovery bilingual instructor. The format of the credit recovery evolved from having a small space in the media center supervised by the media specialist to hiring someone whose sole duty was to work with online credit recovery students. Also, students who may need to take classes outside of the regular school day can take classes at an alternate site within the district. Providing alternative locations for students to take credit recovery courses meant more students were able to take and complete requirements towards graduation, in addition, it removed the barrier to being able to take courses beyond the traditional school day.

Moreover, beyond having the Graduation First Committee, Langley High School has a full-time, on-site graduation coach. The graduation coach works with students to ensure they are on the path towards graduation with their cohort. The graduation coach for Langley has a link on the school's webpage. Through the link, students can gather

information about the role of the graduation coach and the services offered. The mission and vision of the school are reiterated on this page. The assistance offered by the graduation coach includes post-secondary planning. The graduation coach at Langley serves as another caring adult in the building, student advocate, and data analyzer, to name a few. One specific duty highlighted on the website is the monitoring of credits earned vs. credits required for graduation. This is an impactful practice towards increasing graduation rates because a student may be enrolled in a course they do not need and have enough credits to graduate, but they do not have credits in required courses for graduation.

Mr. Watkins

“It is my job to work as hard as possible to meet them, regardless of whether they fall academically, and close their achievement gaps. I am willing and eager to meet the challenge”. Warrior High School is positioned south of Metro Atlanta in an up-and-coming county with a population of under 40,000 residents. For this research study, Warrior High School is located in King County, GA. Warrior High School is a part of the largest district in this study. Students who attend Warrior are the most racially diverse in comparison to the other schools in this research study. Warrior is located in a part of the state that is rich in manufacturing jobs. There are several plants in the district where students who leave high school with a high school diploma can gain employment and make a livable wage. The population of the town where Warrior high school is located is under 5,000 residents. Warrior is located in an area where one turn can lead you

to the small general store. The town is a combination of a nostalgic time and current-day shops.

Mr. Watkins is a passion-filled, uplifting, and captivating leader who serves with his heart. The staff and students of Warrior High School mean everything to him. He can be found on social media making motivational messages to students or highlighting the many outstanding accomplishments at Warrior High School. His personality is magnetic. I have spent a great deal of time watching him on social media through the school's website. The responses from parents, students, teachers, and others are informative. Mr. Watkins is truly a staple in his community and relationship building, academic achievement, and communication are top priorities.

Our meeting took place via Zoom. Mr. Watkins greeted me with his larger-than-life personality. I can understand why he means so much to his community and stakeholders. He is not only approachable but extremely authentic and kindhearted. Speaking with him via Zoom did not feel as though we were over 100 miles apart. He was eager to discuss his "heartbeat" at Warrior High School. From the moment the interview began, the smile on his face was an indication of the meaning Warrior High School holds in his heart.

The school's website contains an inspirational message from Mr. Watkins. The students are described as, "beautiful and powerful beyond measure." He declares the importance of student success and the role of the school: "It becomes our jobs to work as hard as possible to meet them, regardless of where they are academically, then close their gaps, respond to their social-emotional health needs, and ensure they are up to grade level." His message also includes information on various clubs and extra-curricular

activities offered at Warrior. Mr. Watkins promotes student engagement and achievement in his message to the community. The mission of the school is to focus on a commitment to student success. The vision of the school is to ensure that each student is successful. The belief statement is a statement that embodies the beliefs of King County Schools. The belief statement mentions the commitment of educators to continuously learn and operate as a learning community and the school district is in partnership with parents and the community.

Mr. Watkins has over 22 years of experience in the field of education. Before becoming the leader of Warrior High School, Mr. Watkins was the athletic director and assistant principal at the rivaling high school. However, his administrative experience did not begin on the secondary level. Before becoming a high school administrator, Mr. Watkins served as a middle school assistant principal within the district. During his time as a middle school administrator, data tracking and data review were a part of his day-to-day routine. His love of leading and sports guided him to take a position in high school as the athletic director and assistant principal. He was later promoted to his current role as principal of Warrior High School. Mr. Watkins is certified in special education, business education, and leadership. All of his teaching experience occurred at the high school level. Mr. Watkins is not a Georgia native. He is not linked to the King County School district through previous educational connections as are some school leaders in this study.

Mr. Watkins is no stranger to working with at-risk students. Mr. Watkins has experience working in Title I schools throughout the majority of his career. He also has experience working with special education students. He worked closely with the graduation coaches when he served as an assistant principal and athletic director to help

students earn credits and complete high school. He has always reviewed student achievement data with students and parents and made decisions for students that were best for them academically. For instance, if a student was failing a course Mr. Watkins may not assign out-of-school suspension but after-school detention so the student did not miss academic classes. Mr. Watkins has advocated for students his entire career. He has also mentored students and helped guide them towards success. His work at the middle grades level entailed collecting, reviewing, and discussing student achievement data with stakeholders. He continues this practice as the principal of Warrior High School. Mr. Watkins and his administration have used student data to create programs to help students access a high school diploma. They understand that the traditional route towards graduation is not a “one size fits all” approach.

The administrative team at Warrior High School created a program to identify students who were not on-target for graduation. Student data in the form of grades, attendance, behavior, progress monitoring, weekly check-in data from students, historical data from state databases, and any other factors known by the staff were used to make informed, needs-based, and student-centered decisions. The Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is comprised of school administrators and teachers. There are three Tier levels in the MTSS program. Teachers who work well with students are selected to be members of the MTSS team. MTSS meets one hour per week to discuss the structures that are in place to ensure all students have the best and most appropriate level of support. Students who are credit deficient are at Tier 2 status in MTSS. Credit deficient students receive a mentor. Student is a check-in with their mentor weekly regarding academic counseling and any other concerns the student may have. Tier 2 students are flagged in

Infinite Campus and assigned a homeroom teacher who functions as their mentor and academic advisor. Infinite Campus is a K-12 student information system used by school districts to track student historical data; the company was founded in 1993 (Infinite Campus, 2022). The role of the mentor is to meet with the student, encourage, and set goals. MTSS provides strategic support for students, based on their needs. Before enrolling in MTSS, students are screened and provided access to mental health services, if needed. Students are referred to a licensed therapist through the Georgia Hope Program. According to Mr. Watkins, “Oftentimes mental illness is a barrier to graduation, so the access to therapy improves academic performance.”

Online credit recovery courses are offered at Warrior High School through the SPEAR program. Credit recovery is offered in an onsite computer lab. Members of the school’s leadership team target at-risk students for enrollment. Students meet with their guidance counselor and school administration for enrollment in SPEAR. Academic teachers serve as the teacher of record for the online credit recovery program. Students and teachers form a relationship in which the student’s progress is constantly monitored and feedback is provided to the student. Students who are enrolled in online credit recovery courses are not left to navigate the process alone. Students have access to flexible times to access online credit recovery programs offered at Warrior. If a student is unable to complete online credit recovery during, before, or after school, then the student has a Saturday School option as well.

Students who struggle with traditional academic core classes and prefer a career in welding, cosmetology, manufacturing, and other technical field options are offered the Option B diploma. Option B, formerly known as Senate Bill 2, offers Georgia students

the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and two technical certificates in a career pathway simultaneously (Wiregrass Georgia Technical College, 2022) (see Table 9).

Table 9

Option B Curriculum

Total courses needed	Required courses
2 English/Language Arts	American Lit / EOC
2 Math	Algebra 1 / EOC
2 Sciences	Biology / EOC
2 Social Studies	
1 Health/PE	

Note. From Wiregrass Georgia Technical College, 2022.

Under Option B, students take an altered academic course load in comparison to their college-bound peers. Under Option B, students can enter the workforce with credentials upon completing high school. Option B can serve as a means to engage students who may have been disconnected from high school. These students may be bored with the traditional brick-and-mortar setting of high school and prefer hands-on learning. Option B captures a forgotten audience in education, technical students.

The graduation rate for Warrior High School has been on a steady upward trend over the past four academic years (see Table 10). The largest increase was from 2018 to 2019 academic year. The graduation rate increased by 5.1%. The graduation rate for Warrior High School has remained above state average from 2018- 2021. From 2019 to 2020 Warrior’s graduation rate continued to increase by 3.6%, during a time many districts decreased during the shutdown due to COVID-19. Warrior’s graduation rate remains above the state average by 5.5% in 2021.

Table 10

Warrior High School and Georgia State Graduation Rates 2018-2020

Year	Warrior High School's graduation rate	Georgia's graduation rate
2018	80.5%	81.6%
2019	86.6%	82%
2020	90.2%	83.8%
2021	89.2%	83.7%

Note. From Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021.

Mr. Watkins attributes the steady and sustained increase in graduation rates to many factors. The staff at Warrior created numerous intervention-rich programs to address student needs such as mental health, credit recovery, and attendance. The administration created need-based programs in the form of MTSS, SPEAR, ELEVATE site-based counselors, purposefully selected teachers, administrators, and licensed therapists to provide students with tailored resources to meet their exclusive needs. If a student needed food, clothing, mentoring, tutoring, or mental health services, Warrior High School made provisions. The school's registrar maintains precise records of students who enrolled, transferred, or withdraw from Warrior. Maintaining accurate student enrollment data is essential to increasing high school graduation rates. Having exact records and being able to account for student transfers means that students are not inaccurately coded as dropouts. Warrior High School partnered students with a caring adult advocate. Students who were credit deficient were assigned an initially selected adult as a homeroom teacher who had a proven track record of working well with at-risk learners. Students also have access to credit recovery opportunities beyond the confines of the normal school day. If a student could not participate in credit recovery during school hours, other opportunities were afforded.

Mr. Watkins reviews student achievement data with teachers, assistant principals, and department chairs. The department chairs review student achievement data with teachers, along with one school administrator. Teachers collaborate and have shared planning time. Mr. Watkins protects the instructional time during the academic day by not allowing unnecessary interruptions. Student data is reviewed by counselors and school administrators in order to determine targets for students to be most successful academically. Mr. Watkins provides his teachers and staff with needs-based professional development, as well as classroom resources to assist students. During school announcements and faculty meetings, Mr. Watkins refers to the mission and vision of the school. His administration and counselors review the student data of students enrolled at Warrior through a screening process that finds students who may need additional support. Mr. Watkins is active in reviewing student achievement data. He is aware of those students who are at risk for academic failure, behavioral concerns, and those students who may need supplementary family resources. Mr. Watkins also reviews feeder pattern data with feeder school administrators to define the academic needs of students entering Warrior High School.

Mrs. Aldrin

“I advocate for my kids. If somebody’s going to try to prevent my kids from being successful, I’m going to go back and go back and go back. I am not going to give up on the conversation.” Mrs. Aldrin is the esteemed leader of Propel Academy in the Roosevelt County School District. Mrs. Aldrin is a perspicacious, solution-driven advocate for at-risk students. She is an out-of-the-box thinker who will find a way or make one. Propel Academy is located on the campus of the local technical college. Propel

is a multifaceted program that assists student needs on a case-by-case basis. The program is in year four of its inception under the leadership of Mrs. Aldrin. Mrs. Aldrin serves as the liaison between Roosevelt County Schools and the Technical College of Georgia. She ensures students are on track for graduation from high school and enrolled in the correct technical college courses. She also manages the enrollment of homeschooled and credit recovery students. She is the administrator for the Propel Academy while providing online and face-to-face instruction to numerous student populations. One purpose of Propel Academy is to serve the academic needs of middle and high home-schooled learners. An added purpose of the Propel program is to assist students at risk of dropping out to recover lost credits and help those students graduate with their cohort. Students who want to take part in the dual enrollment program and earn a high school diploma and technical certificate are also eligible to participate in Propel Academy.

Through dual enrollment, students can take core college level, certificate, and diploma level coursework. Students can complete high school with a certificate, and/or an associate's degree, in addition to a high school diploma. The dual enrollment cost is covered by the GA Department of Education. Transportation is provided from the two base high schools to Propel Academy daily for students in need. Some students drive, and lunch is also provided at no additional cost to the student. Students are given the equipment, supplies, and books they need for their program of study, at no extra cost. Students can earn certificates in welding, cyber security, drafting, and automotive. cosmetology, HVAC, and health care management. Propel students have earned over one hundred technical certificates since its inception.

Propel Academy has served roughly thirty students in a face-to-face format each academic year. Students who are enrolled in Propel Academy come from varying academic circumstances. Several students lack credits towards graduation and are at risk of dropping out of their base high school for sundry reasons ranging from poor attendance, parenthood, family obligations, disconnection to school, behavioral issues, and a desire for a smaller academic setting, to name a few. Other students are not credit deficient and may have high-grade point averages and want to take advantage of the dual enrollment opportunities offered by Propel Academy. Homeschooled students are also enrolled in online classes through Propel Academy. Whatever the reason, Propel Academy helps students obtain a high school diploma.

Propel Academy helps increase and sustain the graduation rates of the feeder high schools. Students who would have dropped out of high school have not only been able to complete high school but earn a skill through their enrollment in Propel Academy. Propel helps students who require a non-traditional environment to complete high school. Students work in an online format to finish their assignments for high school classes and some college courses. This flexibility allows students who may need to work a part or full-time job to do so. Also, students can complete their work at their own pace, with some restrictions, but with more freedom than in a traditional brick-and-mortar school. By attending Propel Academy, students do not have to choose whether to work to support their families or drop out. There have been two students who have dropped out of Propel and their base high school in the four years of its inception.

Propel Academy uses Edgenuity as the online credit recovery software to assist students who are credit deficient in earning lost credits and getting on track for

graduation. Teachers also upload class assignments in Google Classroom. Propel Academy serves as a haven for learners who were not successful at their base high schools because the academic setting at Propel is much smaller and students can work one-on-one with their instructor more often.

Mrs. Aldrin has a degree in history and Spanish and provides direct instruction to students, as one of her many duties. A certified teacher from one of the base high schools comes to the college campus and helps certain students who are enrolled in math; those students work on math online Monday through Thursday and receive direct instruction on Friday. Depending on the instructor, some students complete all of their assignments online without any face-to-face instruction and some students receive 100% hybrid instruction. The academic environment at Propel Academy requires a great deal of intrinsic motivation, maturity, and adult support. Certain Propel Academy students are also able to take ELA and math on the collegiate level. The academic demands of Propel Academy are numerous. Students have to be able to finagle between high school and college life.

Mrs. Aldrin is familiar with working with the at-risk student population throughout her career. After a career as a high school foreign language teacher, Mrs. Aldrin was promoted to the role at the district level similar to that of a Graduation Coach, known as a data interventionist. She served as one of the first data interventionists for Roosevelt County Schools. She became a data interventionist after the position was dissolved by the Georgia Legislature. She has a furor for helping all students reach the finish line in life known as, “high school graduation.” Her role differed from that of a Graduation Coach in that Mrs. Aldrin was not only required to assist students at her

appointed high school but also work with students from the feeder pattern schools. She did not report directly to the school principal, but to the school system superintendent. Throughout her time in this role, she aided students in acquiring a high school diploma.

Mrs. Aldrin also has experience working overseas. She taught internationally for two years before returning to the United States. Upon her return, Mrs. Aldrin taught in a private school for six years. She then took a position in Roosevelt County Schools as a Spanish teacher for college-bound students at one of the high schools. After being in the classroom for three years, she was promoted to the data interventionist role. She worked as a data interventionist for two years. She was then promoted to her current position at Propel Academy.

Mrs. Aldrin's current role requires her to build relationships with many stakeholders. Through community partnerships, Mrs. Aldrin has perfected the art of securing resources to help students get the equipment they need to be successful in their college classes. Securing the necessary tools and equipment the students may need for their courses and in their everyday lives helps overcome the barriers to success. Not only does she meet their needs in the form of books, equipment, and supplies, but she helps in other ways as well. For example, if students need access to mental health services, she reaches out to counselors at the school or Georgia Hope to make sure their mental health needs are addressed. Whatever barriers the students are facing, Mrs. Aldrin teams up with the data interventionist, principals, teachers, parents, social workers, and school counselors to help students with housing, food, utility payments, and other needs. She is also a shoulder the students know they can not only lean on but depend on.

My interviews with Mrs. Aldrin took place on the campus of the technical college that houses Propel Academy. The school was out for the summer and the campus was uninhabited. Propel has a school media presence and is in the process of creating a website for the upcoming school year. Student success is showcased on the school's Facebook page. When visiting the page, a student who entered the workforce was highlighted in a "signing day" manner. There was a signing table with table cloths from SkillsUSA. The student received an award from SkillsUSA and he was signing to enter the workforce. His family, classmates, base high school and district admin, and his employer were present for the event. The praise of a student entering the workforce with the same enthusiasm as a student signing to go to college for a sports-related scholarship makes Propel Academy different from traditional Southern American high schools. This student was celebrated for completing his welding program at the technical college, his performance in the SkillsUSA competition, and becoming gainfully employed in the field of welding. The student is an at-risk success story of the Propel Academy.

The mission and vision of the program were not posted on the wall, as they were at the traditional schools. Since Propel Academy is housed in a technical college, there is not much of a Propel Academy presence on campus. Propel occupies the equivalent of two classrooms on campus. Although the mission and vision are not plastered on the wall, the undertaking of the mission and vision of the school are apparent to Mrs. Aldrin. The mission and vision of Propel are framed around student success beyond the scope of high school. The mission of Propel Academy is to, "Prepare students for careers and life post-high school, as well as to prepare students with personal finance, soft skills, and

technical training as a workforce, ready citizen.” The vision of Propel Academy is for all students to graduate high school.

Mrs. Aldrin serves as an instructional leader by keeping the vision and the mission of Propel at the forefront of key stakeholders. She meets monthly with school, district, college, and community leaders to discuss program goals, new student pathways, and student achievement data. She gathers feedback on ways to make Propel a viable entity within the region. Mrs. Aldrin continuously reviews student academic performance in college and high school courses. The success of Propel Academy is dependent upon student success in their courses. Mrs. Aldrin meets with students to devise action plans to tackle their class loads. She collaborates with their college instructors to help ease the transition between high school and college using data in the form of grades and attendance to drive the dialogue. Mrs. Aldrin provides direct instruction to students in Propel also. She reviews previous student academic performance on state-mandated and teacher-created tests to determine how to hone her instruction.

Summary

This chapter presented the context of the study regarding the lived experiences of Georgia secondary school leaders whose graduation rates continuously increased while using online credit recovery software. The study participants were purposefully selected from multiple districts throughout the state. All leaders in this study had a mission and vision statement that was focused on student achievement. The leaders in this study did not have a “magic bullet” to increase student achievement. All leaders had targeted interventions to assist the needs of at-risk learners at their schools while they were enrolled in online credit recovery classes. Most of the schools in the study had district-

level support for at-risk learners in the form of a school-based graduation coach or similar personnel. All schools in the study provided students with copious chances to access their online credit recovery curriculum beyond the regular school day. All leaders provided students with a mentor or a caring adult in the form of the homeroom teacher. This teacher was someone the students were able to formulate a consistent connection with at the school. Tracking student enrollment and accurate record-keeping was paramount to all of the leaders in this study. Every leader in this study created a way to connect students to their school in the form of relationship building. Relationship building and being approachable were some things that all of the leaders made an effort to do daily. The desire to be an agent of broad change is the reason many teachers transition into the role of school leaders. The task of being a school leader is arduous and multifaceted. Leaders are responsible for increasing student achievement and meeting the needs of their students and staff. The school leaders in this research study were all fully immersed in meeting the whole child's needs. Student data was important in the decision-making process; however, what was most important was c a child and a story to the data. All of the leaders led schools in which the mission and the vision of the organization were directly connected to student achievement.

In the following chapter, the emerging themes that were identified through the analysis of the findings provide thick descriptions of the findings for this basic interpretative study. The emerging themes offer an interpretation of the data and help answer the research questions that guide this research study.

Chapter V

OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The principal methods of data collection for this research study included participant interviews, credit recovery documents, historical data, and district/school website reviews. I made observations before and during each interview and included the information as a supplemental data source. My previous employment as a graduation coach, online credit recovery facilitator, and school administrator created a potential bias due to the impact each role may have on student achievement.

In Chapter I, I detailed that I have experience and knowledge working with online credit recovery software. This helped me assist students who were at risk of dropping out of school in obtaining a high school diploma. I have experience working as a graduation coach for two years and as an online credit recovery instructor for over five years. As a researcher, I recognized the influence of my past employment experiences on my study. It's important for me to acknowledge any biases that may arise as a result.

The positionality statement acknowledges how our identities and experiences shape our understanding of the world and affect our interactions within a social context (Brown, 2022). Being a graduation coach and online credit recovery instructor has greatly influenced my perspective on student achievement. I understand that it can be challenging for students to complete an online recovery class while also earning current credits. Graduation coaches usually work behind the scenes and their efforts often go

unnoticed by the faculty. While conducting research, I identified possible areas of bias and ensured to reach out to the participants for clarification whenever necessary.

Before I share the results of my research study, I want to mention that my past experiences as a graduation coach, online credit recovery instructor, and school administrator have shaped my perspective on this topic. Graduation coaches are employed to specifically help increase graduation rates, providing students and school leaders with valuable assistance. While I am not currently working as a graduation coach, administrator, or online credit recovery instructor, I have a thorough understanding of the responsibilities and difficulties that come with these roles.

Themes

In qualitative research, it's important to identify and organize patterns and recurring topics within the data collected. This is known as theme identification, and it's a critical step in the process of data analysis. By utilizing Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis method, I successfully identified themes within the research data. In order to identify themes, I thoroughly reviewed transcripts that were transcribed by Otter.ai multiple times while simultaneously listening to the audio recording in a quiet setting in order to capture the context of the participant's statement. Otter.ai has identified potential codes by adding specific words in a section called "keywords." Certain "keywords" were not considered potential codes because they were simply repetitions of what the research participants had already said. For this study, I examined the transcripts generated by Otter.ai and assigned codes accordingly. The total number of codes included codes I identified and codes generated by Otter.ai.

Once I identified the codes, I proceeded to identify any emerging themes. To do this, I enclosed each highlighted code word in a box and drew lines from the words to the margins. In the margins, I wrote notes about each code word. I then placed information or keywords or phrase from the participant on Post-it notes. I arranged the Post-it notes in an attempt to find connections between the code words and the emergence of potential themes, this step was confusing and overwhelming. Next, I took a plain piece of paper and placed the keyword in a circle or nod, and drew connecting lines to statements made by each participant. This process is known as data display in the Miles & Huberman Data Analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The use of data display enables researchers to draw conclusions based on organized information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The heading was a code placed in a circular nod with lines drawn to boxes with supporting text from participants. The reason for taking this step was to identify any potential themes from the codes.

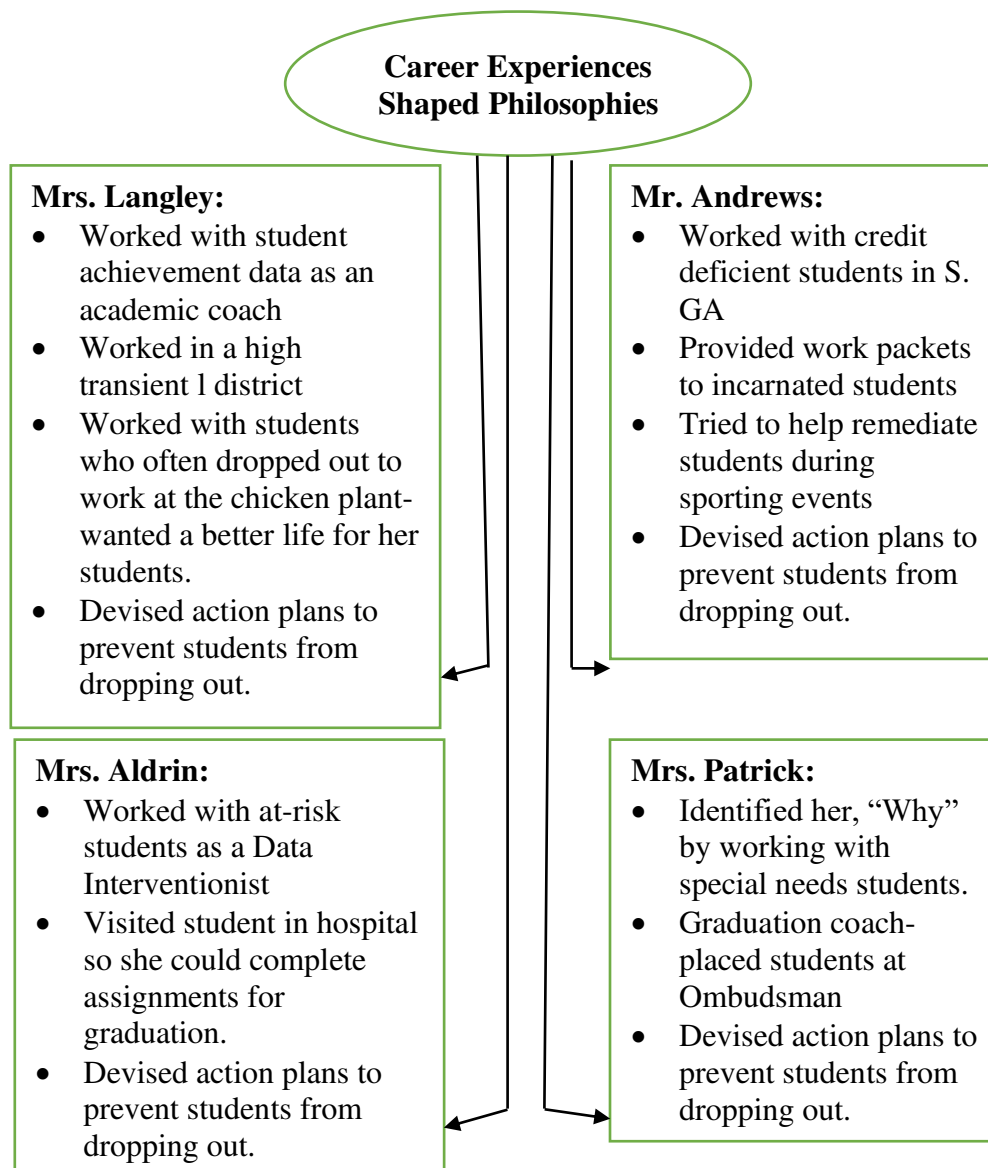
Relationship Building

Each study participant throughout each interview reiterated the importance of relationship building with students as a means to increase student achievement. As a result of the actions and statements made by the participants, the establishment of authentic connections between students and adults was their focal point. Each study participant had a plan for building student relationships. The relationships could have been established by having a caring adult in the building in the form of a homeroom model, leader visibility at events, and/or leaders participating in schoolwide dress-up events. It is through the formation of solid, genuine adult-student relationships that students can connect and engage with the school. Adult-student relationship creation

should not be taken lightly. Many times, school administrators focus solely on collecting and analyzing student data instead of fostering personal connections with students to improve their academic performance. Findings from 50 years of collective research data (Doll et al., 2013) indicate that 25% were pushed out of school because of poor relationships with teachers. Fostering meaningful adult-student relationships is important for the overall academic success of the student.

Figure 6

Data Display Example for Theme Emergence



Mr. Andrews

Mr. Andrews is no stranger to building solid, genuine connections with his students. Relationship building has been the hallmark of Mr. Andrews's career. Dating back to his first years in education at a South Georgia high school, Mr. Andrews ensured his incarcerated students received work packets. He was vested in their overall success. Mr. Andrews also attended track meets to try to speak with failing students about improving their grades while they waited on their chance to enter the meet. It is worth noting when Mr. Andrews took his new principal assignment at the high school, he had previous relationships with many of the students attending Restoration High School because he was their middle school principal. Mr. Andrews had a reputation for making connections with students. As he reminisced about his early days at Restoration High School, Mr. Andrews described the period directly after his appointment in the following manner:

I was named principal originally in April 2012, I immediately started going up there and having lunch with the kids. And what I asked them was the top three things going on at Restoration, the top three things we could do to make it better. I heard from them, I listened to them.

Mr. Andrews built relationships with students by having Student of the Week and Student of the Month celebrations. Mr. Andrews was enthusiastic in his explanation, "The Student of the Week was a nomination process where the teachers wrote out whom they nominated and why. So, we called these kids down and I put prize packages together. They got a picture with me." The students also received certificates and a school crest. During the luncheons, Mr. Andrews discussed the history and importance of the

school crest. Sharing the history of the school crest was a deliberate effort to boost school spirit and highlight the significance of the crest. Mr. Andrews invited these students to lunch to discuss innovative ideas for the school. Mr. Andrews had allocated this time to personally meet and get to know each student. It was also an opportunity for the students to interact and possibly establish connections with their peers.

As a way to connect with the community, parents, and students, Mr. Andrews threw the first pitch of the baseball season opener while accompanied by his daughters. This allowed him to appear more relatable and approachable, like a friendly neighbor. Every month, Mr. Andrews marks the birthdays of students in the school by buying a cake and displaying the names of the students on the school television. Mr. Andrews engaged with students from his school during school events. He took note of the student's interests and casually mentioned them when he saw them again. Building strong relationships between teachers and students was a crucial aspect of the hiring process employed by Mr. Andrews. Over time, he removed teachers who did not prioritize the students' best interests. During his interview, Mr. Andrews vehemently stated his staff would, "give a damn about students." At the school level, Mr. Andrews emphasized the significance of students having an encouraging adult in their lives. It is evident to me regarding the boldness with which Mr. Andrews led Restoration. When he began in 2012, Restoration was under a SIG grant, and many at-risk students were unenrolled in certain teachers' classes for fear that these students would reduce their SIG grant incentives. Through policy changes, Mr. Andrews swiftly ended this practice.

Mrs. Patrick

Mrs. Patrick began building relationships with students in her first-year teaching. Mrs. Patrick recollected about her early years in education with a deep sense of satisfaction and bliss, “I taught special education my first year in the self-contained classroom. It was a wonderful experience because I learned a lot about building relationships with students.” Mrs. Patrick gained further experience in student relationship building while working as a graduation coach. Upon reflecting on her former role as a graduation coach Mrs. Patrick stated,

You are ultimately supporting a kid and helping them achieve something and the high school diploma for students at this age can change their life and that’s what you need to give them hope, vision, purpose, and connectivity.

Mrs. Patrick, as a graduation coach, established a support system for students and facilitated connections between teachers and at-risk students. She described the process of supporting students as a chance to grow relationships. Creating a support system for students, according to Mrs. Patrick, “Caused teachers to have to work individually with students and support them outside of the classroom. And I think that’s where you grow your relationships with kids.” Mrs. Patrick, who was previously the assistant principal at the middle school, became the assistant principal at the high school and had preexisting relationships with several students. She attributes the success of the graduation program at Henry Ford during the 2011-2012 academic school year to her previous connections with students in the graduating class. Mrs. Patrick's voice shook as she remembered,

I already had a bond and a connection with them. And I think that probably was the most instrumental in the success of the graduation

program at Henry Ford High School in 2011-2012. Those were my seniors that were sixth graders and they believed in me and they already knew I believed in them. I knew every kid by name, I knew every story.

Mrs. Patrick is affectionately known as the “PrinciPAL” and the students’ #1 fan on the school’s website. During one of our interviews, she was adorned in sports apparel and headed to the school’s basketball game. The walls of her office were decorated with photographs of both herself and her students. She reflected on the importance of her students knowing who she is because she did not “know” her school principal growing up. Mrs. Patrick recounted a childhood memory involving her former principal, “When I was growing up, I knew my principal, but I did not ‘know’ my principal. I wanted my students to know me. My students know me, they know I am here to support them.” Mrs. Patrick further defined the nature of her relationship with her students; by saying, “I’m going to hold them accountable, but they know if they ever need anything they can turn to me. They know who I am. They know my name.” Mrs. Patrick is not a fear-driven, authoritative leader. She is proud that her students want to interact with her in the halls. Mrs. Patrick beamed with enthusiasm as she explained, “What makes me most proud is being able to walk through the hallways and kids not run from me or ask me who I am.” Mrs. Patrick recalled students seeing her in public and referring to her as their PrinciPAL was a rewarding experience. She stated, “I am even out in the community and the kids now started picking up on the PrinciPAL. It becomes very fun because that means that child has made that connection.” It is unmistakable that her students are important to her.

Mrs. Patrick is committed to ensuring that the students of Henry Ford High School successfully graduate. Mrs. Patrick emotionally detailed the events of graduation

night, “The highest honor that a principal has at a high school level is to hand a student a diploma, a piece of paper that changes their lives forever. It is an honor that I do not take lightly.” Mrs. Patrick looks forward to graduation night. She wears a graduation gown signed by all students in the graduating class during their freshman year. At the entrance of the cafeteria, there is a showcase displaying a gown. This symbolizes the commitment of the student to graduate together with their cohort. In recalling the events of graduation night and handing each student their diploma, Mrs. Patrick tearfully recounted, “I mentally go through the struggles we’ve had or the difficulties they’ve overcome. And the eyes catch each other and we just smile because we know that we’ve made this together.”

Each Huddle Squad teacher is present on the field during graduation with the students they have spent the past four years nurturing, love for her students beamed in her eyes as went on to describe the events of graduation night. The Huddle Squad leader serves a small family unit for the student during their four-year enrollment at Henry Ford. Mrs. Patrick was crying while explaining the crucial role of the Huddle Squad leader and highlighting the squad's significance., “They get each other through breakups of a girlfriend, the death of a family member to struggling in a loss of a basketball game. That family unit is created by the leadership of the Huddle Squad leader.” At Henry Ford High School, students come across several adult advocates who care for them, and the Huddle Squad leader is one of them. The Huddle Squad leader is with them from the first day of 9th grade until graduation night. According to Mrs. Patrick,

As I call the rows to stand, the Huddle Squad leaders stand with their homeroom. And the last person in the space that they see before they walk across the stage is the one adult that they've had all along, it's been the Huddle Squad leader.

The attention and support rendered to Henry Ford students go beyond the PrinciPAL and graduation night. I noted the positive adult-student interactions during the afternoon dismissal of students awaiting their Special Education bus. Teachers and front office staff held conversations with the students while they waited. The students were allowed to wait in the comfort of the front foyer and adjoining office to escape the elements. It was clear to me that this was a routine because the students had no problem, "making themselves at home." The students were also offered water and snacks from a cart the secretary brought from a closet. They were familiar with the cart and quickly made their selections. Mrs. Patrick has established a culture of "all students" matter at Henry Ford High School. The secretary was not going out of her way to provide comfort to the football team or the cheerleaders, but to an often-forgotten population in many schools, special needs children. This was an extremely heartwarming moment to witness and a true testament to the importance of establishing a culture of building relationships with all student populations, not *just* a select few.

Mrs. Norwood

As a former basketball coach, Mrs. Norwood was aware of the pivotal role of quality relationships. The culture at Langley High School supported the success of all students. It is unmistakable that Mrs. Langley has great affection for her students, as demonstrated by her enthusiastic speeches about them and her attendance at their sporting events. The school environment was favorable for fostering positive and encouraging

relationships between adults and students. When I arrived at Langley High School, I witnessed Mrs. Norwood and her staff smiling and interacting with students. Unlike many schools, the adults were not gathered in groups discussing the day's events or gossiping. The adults prioritized their students by taking the time to interact with them. It was a moment where the students should feel valued and acknowledged. The atmosphere during dismissal was calm and joyful, without any chaos.

Langley High School has advisement during which time students can connect with their caring adults. Advisement is similar to homeroom; attendance is taken and students receive important school-related information. Mrs. Norwood's students form connections with other teachers in the school beyond advisement. She has an "out of the box" and "whatever" and it takes an approach to the relationship-building process. Mrs. Norwood stated, "Whatever relationship they have with a specific teacher, we work to get that teacher involved, we just tried about everything." When a student did not make the soccer team, the coach allowed the student to manage the team. This allowed students to remain connected to the school, coach, and their passion for the game of soccer. In Finn's Model of Participation and Identification (Finn, 1989; Finn & Zimmer, 2012), participation in school activities and identification with school is a developmental process that impacts whether a student finishes high school or is a dropout.

Mrs. Norwood builds relationships with her students by engaging them in conversation. Mrs. Norwood explained straightforwardly how she interacts with students, "I have a conversation with them. I speak to them." Acknowledging students as human beings is important in the relationship-building process. Many principals in this study, simply interacted with their students and tried to get to know them. Principals showed

their students that they cared in various ways such as acknowledging them, attending events, and dressing up.

Mrs. Norwood recalled when a student stopped coming to school to become a chicken catcher at the local chicken house. He did not want to attend school because he was making \$15 per hour working at the chicken house. She described the condition of his red, swollen hands. The young man caught chickens between his fingers, upside down. Mrs. Norwood asked, “Do you wear gloves? Dude, you got to do this for thirty years? Do you realize what that is going to feel like when you are my age? You’re gonna be bending over catching chickens with fifty-year-old hands?” The candid dialogue between Mrs. Norwood and her student is a testament to her relationship-building abilities. She was aware of his absenteeism and was trying to get him to realize that obtaining his high school diploma would be life-altering. In conversation, she spoke to him in layman’s terms. Relationship building is not ego-driven. At that moment, it was not about Mrs. Norwood being the “all-knowing principal,” she simply demonstrated care for his current and future outcomes. The Graduation First Committee was able to convince the young man to attend the all-day online alternative school in the district. Transferring to the online academy allowed him to complete high school. Mrs. Norwood’s caring attitude towards this young, flexible learning opportunities and connection to resources from the Graduation First Committee allowed him the opportunity to earn a high school diploma.

Mr. Watkins

During one of our Zoom interviews, Mr. Watkins was adorned with beach attire. He explained it was a “beach day” at the school to celebrate the students. Like Mrs.

Norwood and Mrs. Patrick, Mr. Watkins loves to take part in school events. He can be found on Friday nights in the fall cheering his team to victory. His face lit up describing his affection for his students. Mr. Watkins is also no stranger to building authentic relationships with at-risk learners. As a high school assistant principal, Mr. Watkins recalled reviewing student grades, attendance, and behavioral data when students were referred to his office. He also worked in conjunction with the school's graduation coach to help students complete high school. When he assigned students to in-school suspension, Mr. Watkins would follow up with the in-school suspension teacher to make sure the students were turning in assignments. Mr. Watkins believes sound discipline is followed by strong relationship building; "They have to know you care about them," Mr. Watkins stated with great declaration and conviction.

Warrior High School has a homeroom structure in place, similar to the other schools in the study. The students remain with a constant adult during high school enrollment from grades 9th-12th. The 9th-grade year is a critical transition year for many students. Students who are credit deficient and at risk of dropping out of high school are given a special homeroom teacher who progress monitors their student achievement goals. Providing a teacher with proven skills to work with at-risk populations helps to further strengthen the connection to the school.

In addition, Mr. Watkins builds relationships with his students through social media. Mr. Watkins has a presence on Facebook. On any given day, viewers can see social media postings to his students and staff, inspiring them to be better than the day before. His teachers and staff also post messages of encouragement to students on the school's Facebook page. The students are one click away from positive affirmations from

their caring adults. A science teacher stated, “You can do it, we will through this together.” During the pandemic Mr. Watkins made videos encouraging his students to remain hopeful. He shot footage of himself walking through the hallway of the school and showcasing the emptiness without them. When viewing the school’s Facebook page, I came across Mr. Watkins singing karaoke with the school chorus. The students were singing and fighting back laughter as Mr. Watkin sang his rendition of, “Lean on Me.” The students will never forget this moment of fun and fanfare with their beloved leader. Being able to formulate bonding opportunities with students during the school day makes Mr. Watkins relatable. When a student can relate to their leader, they may feel a sense of belonging and connection to the leader and the school. Students feel they have meaning to connect with the adults at school. Mr. Watkins creates a welcoming atmosphere for students by being kind, and relatable, meeting students where they are, and creating a positive social media presence.

Mrs. Aldrin

Students who attend Propel Academy have an experienced relationship builder in the form of Mrs. Aldrin. She honed her relationship-building skills while employed as a Data Interventionist. There were many times Mrs. Aldrin was a shoulder of support for her students in the face of adversity. She made lunch dates with her students to get to know them better. Mrs. Aldrin recalled those moments by saying, “I have spent hours at lunch with kids trying to get to know them and build relationships with them.” Mrs. Aldrin interviews students, counselors, and teachers before a student is admitted into Propel. She is aware of their story, their family, and their needs.

Propel Academy students know they have a support system and an ally in Mrs. Aldrin. When a student at her school gave birth, Mrs. Aldrin visited the student in the hospital to ensure she was well and completing her assignments. There are not many teachers of teen mothers who would take the time to visit their students in the hospital to check on their well-being and ensure work completion. The students of Propel Academy have a jewel in Mrs. Aldrin. She often calls her students when they are absent to check on them and make sure they will be returning to school soon.

Mrs. Aldrin builds relationships with students by talking to them and learning about their interests. Mrs. Aldrin stated, “You talk to them about the cultural things they value. I am not into pop culture music; I wasn’t into it when I was a teenager. I’ve never been trendy and up to date on pop culture.” The way she bonds with her students is by entering their world Mrs. Aldrin boastfully reiterated her commitment to relationship building, “I let them tell me about the new bag or new song or whatever.” Engaging students regarding their interests allows the student to open up and have a dialogue beyond the classroom.

Every student encounter has not been positive for Mrs. Aldrin. However, when faced with a difficult student, Mrs. Aldrin still was able to establish a relationship with one of her female students. Many educators have encountered brash students. It is in those moments educators must take the high road. Mrs. Aldrin recollected a time when a student called her a “bitch.” Mrs. Aldrin recalled proudly, “One time I went and bought a straightening brush because the girl called me a bitch. The student murmured under her breath with a large dose of, ‘teen girl temperament,’ ‘that bitch wrote me up.’” The young lady aspired to be a cosmetologist. Mrs. Aldrin took the student’s beauty

recommendations, “She told me I needed to strip my hair and straighten my hair with this big ole brush. I think of her every single time. And we were best friends after that because I took her beauty advice,” recounted Mrs. Aldrin.

In an attempt to build relationships with students, Mrs. Aldrin quantified, “You have to be willing to try different things.” In a separate incident, a student suggested Mrs. Aldrin wear her hair in a “messy bun” hairstyle. Mrs. Aldrin allowed the student to teach her how to make a “messy bun.” According to Mrs. Aldrin, “Don’t always assume the role of a teacher. Be the student when they are smart about something. Find out what they are good at let them teach me and learn.” It’s important to be joined together by similarities; as stated by Mrs. Aldrin, “Listen, find common ground, we all have common ground.” Mrs. Aldrin also listens to her students’ daily life events; she joyously proclaimed, “I like to listen to what they are interested in. I hear about their work and even if I have no reference point, they still want somebody to listen to them and care about them, encourage them.”

Student Engagement (Finn Participation Model)

Students feeling connected to school is fundamental to their long-term academic performance. A sense of connection to the school is vital to the establishment of their desire to remain enrolled in school until graduation. Some at-risk students have been bombarded with a multitude of negative school experiences by the time they reach high school. Adverse school experiences can cause students to become disengaged. The leaders in this research study identified effective means to reconnect disengaged students to the school community through celebrations, recognitions, and club creations. Benner et al. (2008) indicated that 9th-grade students performed better academically when they felt

a sense of connection to the school, establishing a link between school climate and student engagement.

When school leaders construct a school climate that is inviting and inclusive of all students, students should feel more connected to the school and an increase in student achievement is the by-product of that engagement. Data collected by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Design suggest that minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students benefit from participation in extracurricular activities, with increased chances of college admissions, a stronger connection to the school, and lower dropout rates for marginalized students (Patterson, 2017). All student populations need recognition. Gone are the days when athletic students had more value on campus than anyone else. Ensuring all students feel welcomed and have a place within the school builds a sense of belonging. The leaders in this study made strategic efforts to provide all students under their care with a sense of connection to their school through the formation of genuine relationships and opportunities for students to connect with the school.

Mr. Andrews

Mr. Andrews at Restoration High School provided his staff and students with birthday cake each month in a schoolwide celebration. The administration showcased staff and student birthday names on computer monitors in the cafeteria. Birthday celebrations allowed each student in the school the opportunity to receive a token of appreciation and recognition from the administration. Every student in the school may not receive an award on Award's Day or make the honor roll, but every student has a birthday. When schools pinpoint ways to show students they are esteemed, it helps the student feel a sense of belonging to the school.

During his tenure at Restoration High School, the number of clubs increased. Mr. Andrews was excited as he detailed, “We went from eight clubs when I got there to over thirty clubs when I left.” Clubs brought connections between teachers and students, and connections between students. There were connections between teachers and students. Clubs brought more, “give a damn.” Mr. Andrews wanted all students to find their niche at Restoration High School.

Assimilation can be a challenging period for some students during the awkward years of adolescence. In this period, students are experiencing hormonal changes and self-identification. Locating a group of students with similar interests can be the supportive and uplifting setting many students need. LGBTQ student populations are increasing nationwide. Mr. Andrews recognized the necessity of an inclusive support system for LGBTQ students attending Restoration High School. The formation of an exclusive club in which LGBTQ students could congregate in a judgment-free setting was a forward-thinking approach to meeting the needs of an often-forgotten group of students. Mr. Andrews was no stranger to relationship-building and out-of-the-box approaches. Mr. Andrews visited students in the county jail in South Georgia to guarantee they completed their requirements for graduation. Therefore, it was no surprise that he spearheaded the creation of clubs to meet the needs of the diverse student population of Restoration High School. Regarding the creation of the all-inclusive anti-prejudice club, Mr. Andrews stated, “This was a safe club for our LGBTQ students. I have been to schools where it wasn’t safe to be an LGBTQ student. My goal was it, not an issue to be a student.” Mr. Andrews created an inclusive environment for all students with his powerful statement. Restoration's expansion of clubs not only provided more

support but also promoted a culture of caring and empathy. It was undeniable that Mr. Andrews spoke with a kind tone as he expressed his benevolence.

If you are going to have a breakdown, let it be because you are worried about your girlfriend, not because nobody believes in you, nobody cares about you. Everybody is against you. So that give-a-damn culture extended so many aspects of what these kids experienced.

Mrs. Norwood

Mrs. Norwood understood the significance of collaborating on a common interest. She was a basketball player and coach. As a leader, she believed that students needed to engage with school through extracurricular activities. Mrs. Norwood was cognizant of the barriers some of her students faced remaining after school to attend clubs. Some students had prior obligations such as work and credit recovery. Therefore, Mrs. Norwood scheduled time in the school day for all students to participate in club-related activities. Specifying a time within the school day allowed all students to join a minimum of one school-related club. Mrs. Norwood's dedication to attending the club was evident in her statement, "We've tried to have clubs, we've done this for several years now, chose to meet during the school day. Because kids can't stay after school. So, we try to get them engaged in something during the school day."

Club membership permitted students to formulate relationships with teachers and students outside of their classes. Research findings from the National Center for Educational Statics indicated that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and minority students preferred to join clubs geared towards vocational skills (Patterson, 2017). Mrs. Norwood overcame the barriers of low club attendance by changing the

meeting times of clubs from after school to during school. This amplified club participation and required all students to be a part of one club. Club membership at Langley served as an adult advocate relationship between staff and students. Langley High School linked each student with a group of students who shared a common interest and who were outside of their regular classes.

Mrs. Patrick

Mrs. Patrick found a unique tactic to unite students to school through the establishment of a school-based club that targeted students who were not interested in the band, sports, school-based clubs, or chorus. The club was known as, “Community Crew.” Mrs. Patrick spoke about Community Crew with a sense of fulfillment. “We started having them help us pass out tickets on Friday nights, helping us run connection stand or sell stuff at games. I allow them the opportunity to kind of find some kind of way they plug in.” Students who are a member of the Community Crew Club are granted free admission into Friday night football games. Recognizing techniques to weave all students into the fabric of the school culture is an integral role of the school leader. Mrs. Patrick has created an all-inclusive environment at Henry Ford. Connecting students to the school through clubs or extra-curricular activities allows students to bond with other students and staff. Many schools cater to the needs of athletic students, making all students feel valued makes a long-lasting difference in the life of a student. Many students want to feel a sense of belonging and worth. The formation of the Community Crew Club is a testament to the need for many schools to pinpoint means to encourage students to become involved in school activities in any capacity.

Information on the school’s website provides information on the club offerings at Henry Ford High School. Throughout open house events, each club sets up an information table with a display board, in-person club members, and brochures. There is a massive club recruitment effort at Henry Ford High School via in-person and social media marketing efforts. If desired, all students have the opportunity to become members of a club or organization at Henry Ford.

Mrs. Patrick was knowledgeable about the importance of club advisors and coaches in helping students feel connected to their school., “They’re the first line of defense for us if a kid is struggling emotionally or academically, coaches tend to be part of that personnel structure that supports students, club advisors also.” The responsibility of supporting students is not limited to the academic teacher. Students can associate with any caring adult working with or at the school.

Access to Nontraditional Educational Formats

All the leaders involved in this research study had a unique and unconventional approach to education. The research participants did not view their brick-and-mortar institutions as the only means of procuring a high school diploma. The leaders in this study did not adjudge themselves as the “gatekeepers” of high school diplomas. Every participant in the study expressed their willingness to support their students in obtaining a high school diploma, even if it required the students to attend a different school.

Option B

Propel Academy, Henry Ford, and Warrior High Schools encouraged their students to partake in Option B. Option B allows students the opportunity to receive a certificate towards a trade, while earning a high school diploma. Option B is an

alternative path toward graduation. Under Option B, students take reduced high school credit hours in place of earning two technical colleges in the same pathway or an associate degree (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). Students enrolled in Option B take End of Course exams in math, science, social studies, and science. Option B is a promising opportunity for students who do not want to attend college and have decided to enter the workforce upon graduation.

The Option B plan may be beneficial for at-risk students as it allows them to receive the advantages of a high school diploma and technical school certificate immediately after graduation, potentially increasing their engagement with the high school. Option B is a viable option for students who want to enter the skilled workforce (Flamm & Chalasani, 2019). Although it is difficult to compare graduation rates amongst dual enrollment students and Georgia High School graduation rates during the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 academic years due to different calculation ratings, the graduation rate for dual enrollment students was higher than non-dually enrolled students. By enrolling in Option B, at-risk students can gain access to a curriculum that aligns with their long-range academic goals. Option B enables students to lighten their academic course load and concentrate on courses that support their career goals.

Ombudsman

Ombudsman Educational Services was designed to assist the needs of at-risk students in 1975 (Ombudsman, 2022). Ombudsman provides flexible learning opportunities for middle and high school students at-risk of dropping out (Ombudsman, 2022). Students who are enrolled in Henry Ford High School, Propel Academy, and Restoration High School are eligible to attend Ombudsman. Ombudsman operates as a

multiple-purpose school within the district. Students can attend if they are severely credit deficient, expelled, or self-placed. Students can earn credits at a faster pace by attending Ombudsman. Ombudsman Educational Services is accredited by AdvancED (Ombudsman, 2022)

Mrs. Patrick reflected on her time as a Graduation Coach during our interview. Enrolling students in Ombudsman was a strategy often used to help students earn credits towards graduation rapidly while using online credit recovery software. Students who graduated from Ombudsman were not granted a Georgia High School Diploma. Ombudsman's diplomas are issued by the state of Illinois. When Mrs. Patrick was principal, students were mandated to pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test, in addition to earning required credits towards graduation. Helping her students obtain a high school diploma was of the utmost importance to Mrs. Patrick. Although the students who earned diplomas from Ombudsman counted against Henry Ford's graduation rates, the right thing to do for students was to help them receive an opportunity to advance their education through the acquisition of a high school diploma.

When students enrolled in Ombudsman, they were unenrolled in Henry Ford and Restoration High Schools. students had to take two additional courses to satisfy graduation requirements for the state of Illinois. The commitment to student success from the school district was evident in the willingness of district officials to allow students who failed the Georgia High School Graduation Test to withdraw from their schools and enroll in district-funded programs that would grant students a high school diploma that would not increase the high school's graduation rates. It was evident in Mrs. Patrick's statement that her mission was student achievement, "Bottom line is, it's about getting a

diploma. “The school district said it wasn’t fair for students who met everything else but can’t pass a test not get their diploma.” The district-level administration was forward-thinking and as well progressive in its ideals. Employing a Data Interventionist after the removal of the Graduation Coach as a state-funded position is just one example of the devotedness demonstrated by district leaders to guarantee students graduate high school.

Propel

Two of the leaders in this study referred me to Mrs. Aldrin during their interviews. Mr. Andrews and Mrs. Patrick mentioned the success stories at Propel Academy. Although Propel Academy was not operational during Mr. Andrews’s tenure as principal, he was aware of the benefits Propel Academy students reaped from their participation. Mrs. Patrick referred several students from Henry Ford to Propel Academy during their 11th-grade year. There is an application process for admission into Propel Academy. School counselors or the data may also refer students, depending on circumstances. Propel Academy allows students to complete their high school diploma, while enrolled in technical school. Students who attend Propel Academy leave their base high schools and complete their classes on the campus of the technical college.

To prevent students from dropping out of Henry Ford, Mrs. Patrick, and the graduation committee arrange meetings with both students and parents. During these meetings, they suggest alternative options for completing high school. When describing the withdrawal process, Mrs. Patrick stated, “There was a strategic procedure in place for when a student wants to withdraw. There is a level of hoops we like to call that support.” Mrs. Patrick and Graduation Task Force provide parents with information regarding dual enrollment, online learning, credit recovery programs, and Ombudsmen. Allowing

parents and students the opportunity to select other educational opportunities other than dropping out gives students another chance to complete high school in a non-traditional matter. Regarding the outcomes of the withdrawal process, Mrs. Patrick compassionately added, “A lot of times parents don’t think there’s any other option.” Uncovering the cause of early withdrawal helps school leaders provide other avenues in which a student may obtain a high school diploma.

Mrs. Patrick detailed the benefits of online learning and non-traditional educational opportunities to help students graduate high school, “Non-traditional has a hybrid the kids can be half at home or they can be at Ombudsmen and getting a level of support, but they can also come for a band class or JROTC.” Mrs. Patrick made sure students who selected an alternative path to education were able to remain connected to the school if they wanted to continue participating in sports, band, clubs, or JROTC. Providing students with the flexibility to take classes online, off campus, or through dual enrollment and remain connected to the support system of extra-curricular activities, gives some students a reason to remain in school and avoid dropping out. Some students attend school for the social aspects of school or the connections they have developed with an adult advocate. Allowing students to remain plugged into the school beyond academics, builds a sense of connection to the school and helps at-risk students who need a support system.

Propel Academy allows students to complete their high school diploma in a smaller, non-traditional academic setting. Students can complete high and technical school requirements simultaneously. Some students have the opportunity to work a full-time job and attend school. Student academic schedules at Propel Academy are flexible

and some students can attend their technical college classes Monday through Thursday and work a 40-hour-per-week job at the local plant from Friday through Sunday. Propel Academy students do not have to choose between school and work. Flexibility in scheduling and course offerings is important to many at-risk students. Many students want to find the meaning and the “why” behind course completion when they reach the high school level. At-risk students need to know the relevance of the curriculum.

Attending a non-traditional school like Propel Academy provides students with a meaningful educational experience. Students enrolled in a welding class can utilize the skills learned Monday through Thursday on their job at the local plant. These students can see the value of education and how attending school will help them in the present and future. At-risk students who can identify their career pathway, earn needed credits towards graduation, and have support are more likely to commit to completing high school because they know the result is employment. Students become motivated and engaged when what they are learning has value to them. When describing the benefit of her students attending Propel Academy, Mrs. Patrick enthusiastically reiterated the importance of non-traditional learning opportunities, “Propel is another non-traditional route, it requires online learning for kids to be able to pursue either a work or living arrangement in which they are raising kids.” Some students who attend Propel Academy are teen parents, taking care of an elderly relative, or providing for younger siblings. Mrs. Patrick adamantly proclaimed, “It allows them to still earn and meet state requirements, but not in a traditional setting like Henry Ford High School.”

Programs at Langley

Students at Langley High School had the opportunity to take credit recovery classes after school at an in-district high school dedicated to online credit recovery. Having the opportunity to take credit recovery classes after the school day allowed students the opportunity to enroll in the academic courses they need for the current semester and retake the missed courses after school. Therefore, the earning potential for the number of credits a student can earn within a semester greatly increases with the after-school program. Students who enroll in the off-campus credit recovery program receive assistance from a certified teacher. Receiving assistance from a certified teacher may help students who have struggled academically in the past.

The off-campus credit recovery high school provided online credit recovery for students during school hours, as well as after school. Students also had the opportunity to withdraw from Langley and attend the off-campus credit recovery high school full-time if they were severely credit deficient. The off-campus credit recovery high school is a fully functional school staffed with teachers, a graduation coach, a school counselor, and a principal. Students have to be at least 16 years of age to enroll. Upon enrollment, students receive a personalized graduation plan tailored to target their specific graduation requirements.

Like many teens, some Langley High School students are employed. Providing students with opportunities that differ from the traditional brick-mortar school is beneficial to students who have obligations other than school. If a student attends the credit recovery high school within the district, they can earn more credits than in a face-to-face setting over the course of a school year. This may help the student either graduate

on time with their cohort if they are behind or graduate early and enter the workforce. Having multiple avenues to earn a high school diploma may appeal to non-traditional students. Mrs. Norwood was willing to promote outside opportunities for credit recovery to help her students earn a diploma.

Moreover, the study participants had not subscribed to the dogma that for a diploma to have merit and validity, the credits had to be earned on their campus in a face-to-face setting. These leaders were invested in successful student outcomes, more than their egos. These leaders embodied what is meant to put students first. School leaders overcame barriers of time constraints due to work or other obligations, deleted excuses, and created solutions by providing multiple alternatives for students to earn credits. The creation of PLCs, or credit recovery high schools, credit recovery programs was beyond the scope and control of the building-level leader. However, it was the mission of increasing student success for all that drove school leaders to guide students toward alternative pathways of credit recovery.

Online Credit Recovery

All schools in this research study offered online credit recovery for credit-deficient students to earn a high school diploma. Each school had an online credit recovery program on campus during the traditional school day. Schools in this research study had an identification process for students who needed to participate in online credit recovery classes. The schools in this research study utilized Edgenuity as the online credit recovery software program. The credit recovery labs in this study were run by certified instructors.

Multiple Credit Recovery Options

If students' academic schedules permitted; they were able to complete their credit recovery classes during school hours. However, in the event, students were unable to complete credit recovery classes during the regular school day, online credit recovery courses were offered in an alternative format. For instance, students who attended Langley High School were able to attend online credit recovery classes after school hours at an off-campus facility. Students who attended Henry Ford had the option of attending off-campus locations for online credit recovery classes at the Ombudsman or attending Propel Academy. According to Mrs. Patrick, “Ombudsman runs a summer school, students can earn three credits that are necessary for five weeks. Five days a week for eight hours a day. Some students are very smart. They can do it online.” Mr. Watkins’s administrative team created a program for credit recovery opportunities for at-risk students. Warrior High School administrators placed students in an academy format to make up for lost credits needed for graduation. Restoration High School was in the beginning stages of implementing an online credit recovery program under the leadership of Mr. Andrews. In year two of his tenure, Restoration High School had a credit recovery program to address the needs of struggling students. Propel Academy serves as a dual enrollment and credit recovery program. Students who lack required credits towards graduation can recover lost credits at Propel. Each school leader had a plan to address the needs of credit-deficient students at their schools.

Schools in this study did not forget or ignore credit-deficient students. Leaders and school personnel devised plans to support students who were struggling academically to identify the resources available during the school day as a first option. If students were

unable to take credit recovery courses during the academic day, district officials had programs or resources available for students to enroll in optional programs or complete online credit recovery courses at home, after school, during the summer, or at another district facility. School officials did not deny students an opportunity to recover credits due to the inability to attend classes during the confines of the school day. Students who attended Henry Ford High School, Propel Academy, and Restoration High School had the opportunity to attend Ombudsman if they were severely credit deficient. Warrior High School students had an option to attend a Performance Learning Center (PLC) or Saturday school, in addition to the on-campus credit recovery programs. Langley High School students were able to attend an off-campus school after school hours to take online classes if they could not take online credit recovery classes during the school day. In addition, Langley students could attend the off-campus credit recovery program offered by the school district on a full-time basis if they were severely credit deficient. Mrs. Norwood described the off-campus online credit recovery program as a haven for students in need of a second chance, “Kids like that smaller environment when they’re working at their own pace, and they can do as much as they want to and finish early.” Mrs. Norwood portrayed the off-campus credit recovery program as being similar to a Performance Learning Center offered by Communities in Schools. The off-campus school is not an alternative school for students with behavioral issues; the purpose of the off-campus credit recovery program is for students who are multiple grade levels behind to obtain lost credits at their own pace, in a shorter period than a traditional school. Students who withdraw from Langley and enroll in the off-campus online credit recovery program are there all day. As accounted by Mrs. Norwood, “You go there to recover

credits, you get behind, you go to Appleton (off-campus credit recovery school), and it's legendary. There is a teacher of record, to help in classrooms, but they (students) are online all day.” Students do not have to withdraw from Langley to attend Appleton. Langley students can take an afterschool course at Appleton.

Affording students multiple opportunities to take online credit recovery classes helps remove barriers to a high school diploma for non-traditional students. In some instances, students can complete coursework from wherever a Wi-Fi connection is available. Being able to take credit recovery classes after school hours provides an opportunity for teen parents and working students to meet the demands of their lives and school. Being willing to address the needs of nontraditional students requires compassion and a willingness of the school leader to create solutions for students who are struggling to attend credit recovery programs during the school day.

Online Credit Recovery Staffing

The majority of educational leaders in this research study had credit recovery classes facilitated by certified staff or paraprofessionals. Each credit recovery class was staffed by a consistent staff member who was familiar with the needs of the students. Having members who are certified teachers in charge of the operations of the online credit recovery courses meant students had access to someone who was able to provide academic assistance when needed. Online educators who can assist students academically and non-academically help increase student achievement (Heinrich & Cheng, 2022). When students are enrolled in an online course and the teacher is certified, the student can receive more in-depth content expertise than with a non-certified teacher. The certified teacher can access the special education documentation or 504 plans the students

may have. In addition, the certified teacher may have a greater understanding of the content and student pedagogy. Mrs. Patrick reiterated the importance of having certified teachers staff online credit recovery as she recalled, “We put math kids needing online credit recovery with a math teacher if the schedule could support that. The math class teacher is the one providing them with a level of support.” When needed, students sought guidance and clarification from an instructor, instead of attempting to figure out the information on their own. In many instances, there will be a gap in content knowledge. The student has failed the course in a previous attempt and there may be areas of confusion that need to be addressed by a content specialist. Having a certified teacher allows the student the opportunity to ask questions and gain a deeper understanding and true mastery of the content. Mrs. Patrick’s dedication to her students was evident in her statement, “A student that needs any level of help can reach out to an online teacher that is highly qualified in that subject area to provide them with a level of support.” Interview results from certified online credit recovery teachers indicated staffing online credit recovery classes with a certified teacher ensures students receive necessary content support and enhances the validity of the online credit recovery class amongst teachers within the school (Frazelle, 2016).

Mrs. Aldrin was one of the certified instructors at Propel Academy, in addition to being the school leader. She directly influenced the content students received at Propel through her instructional practices, as well as through monitoring students enrolled in Edgenuity. Mrs. Aldrin provided face-to-face instruction for some of her students. Not all Propel Academy students attend Propel in person. All Propel students had a portion of their classwork delivered online through teacher-created content placed on Google

Classroom and/or using Edgenuity. Some Propel Academy students received hybrid instruction, while others received 100% online instruction. The instructional model of delivery was based on funding and teacher flexibility. Algebra II math students received hybrid instruction. The students received teacher created-assignments via Google Classroom Monday through Thursday and the certified math teacher came to Propel Academy on Fridays during her planning period to provide face-to-face instruction. The math teacher was certified to teach math in Georgia. Students asked questions and received feedback on assignments and tests.

The online credit recovery teacher at Langley High School was a bilingual paraprofessional. Many of the students who attended Langley spoke Spanish. Having a teacher staffed in credit recovery dedicated solely to online credit recovery provided students with a familiar adult who was also able to bypass communication barriers. Being able to communicate with students in their native language was essential in identifying deficiencies in content accessibility. Mrs. Norwood detailed the evolution of Langley's online credit recovery program over the years under her leadership during our interview: "We had Edgenuity students in a media center and the media specialist was kind of overseeing that and they were out on their own. We have evolved into having a full-time credit recovery teacher."

The online credit recovery class at Warrior High School was staffed by certified teachers. Students were able to take online credit recovery classes before, after, and during the academic day if their schedules permitted. Warrior has multiple certified online credit recovery teachers. Warrior students who are severely credit deficient enroll in an on-campus credit recovery program known as, SPEAR. Academic content teachers

staff the SPEAR program. Mr. Watkins was proud when detailing the ways his staff supports online credit recovery students, “We utilize academic teachers to assist students in the classroom with online credit recovery. Students must confer with their teacher intermittently throughout the program, which contributes to the positive perception and success of the program”

When I asked Mrs. Andrews to describe the supportive learning online environment established at Restoration High School under his leadership he did not hesitate to respond, “That’s why we offered class times and digital labs with a certified teacher, not a para-professional who was not a content expert. We rotated our teachers who would do into that digital lab.” A certified teacher would cover the online credit recovery lab during their planning period. Mr. Andrews continued,

We assigned tutors to kids to make sure that they are individually getting the attention that they needed. ... We put a team around those kids, I mean no kid was ever in a position where they didn’t have somebody who was checking on them, following up with them, and in many cases wearing them slap out.

Providing a supportive environment to help students achieve and navigate online learning was important. One essential trait of an excellent instructional leader is the ability to pinpoint the academic needs of students. Mrs. Norwood and other leaders recognized students enrolled in online credit recovery courses required the support of a dedicated teacher. Students who have failed a course for initial credit may have academic learning gaps that create confusion. Providing students with content support allows for additional academic support and access to resources so that students are not struggling in silence.

School leaders cannot perform every organizational demand. One attribute of an effective organizational leader is the ability to delegate tasks effectively. The leaders in this study helped prepare their students for successful matriculation through online credit recovery courses with the employment of staff to oversee online credit recovery.

Although the students used online credit recovery software to obtain lost credits due to prior course failure, the students required ongoing support from a certified teacher as the students navigated the software. The support required by students enrolled in online credit recovery courses has been well documented. These learners may need additional content support, as well as encouragement. Working online requires self-motivation. Students who are enrolled in online credit recovery courses may require additional support beyond that of a teacher. Some students may need non-academic related support in the form of confidence and relationship-building with a trusted adult (Heinrich & Cheng, 2022). Online credit recovery instructors equipped with content and socio-emotional knowledge are more qualified candidates to work with online credit recovery students (Heinrich & Cheng, 2022).

Online Credit Recovery Software

The use of Edgenuity Online Credit Recovery Software was pervasive throughout this study. Each secondary school and off-campus credit recovery program utilized Edgenuity. Warrior High School has used Edgenuity for over a decade for credit recovery. Henry Ford's leader, Mrs. Patrick, had experience with another credit recovery vendor before the district switched to Edgenuity. During the time Mrs. Patrick served as a Graduation Coach, she had experience using multiple online software companies. Mrs. Patrick provided great insight into her familiarity with using online software, "We

(district) left Apex and moved into Odysseyware. Odysseyware was a step-down, in my opinion, from APEX. Odysseyware seemed easier for the student and harder for the teacher to manipulate.” Langley High School and the off-campus credit recovery program utilized Edgenuity for credit recovery.

I was unaware of the district process implemented to determine which online credit recovery vendor to select. I was unaware of the cost associated with purchasing each online credit recovery software. It was worth noting that all schools in the study utilized the same online credit recovery platform.

Educational Philosophies Developed Through Career Experiences

Four out of five research participants have over twenty years of experience in education. One study participant had fifteen years of experience in education. All study participants had critical moments in their careers that helped developed their ideologies towards working with at-risk student populations. Kini and Podolsky (2016) indicates that teaching experience is directly related to student achievement. The experience that school administrators bring from their years of experience as classroom teachers help construct them into the leaders they are in their current roles. Each position before the principalship provided exposure for the leader to expand their knowledge of the world in which their students lived. These experiences could have involved working with students in jail, poverty, special education placement, or online credit recovery course enrollment.

Mr. Andrews

Mr. Andrews developed his leadership philosophy through his experience under two distinct leadership styles while at Renaissance High School. Mr. Andrews witnessed first-hand the role of effective leadership and high student expectations on student

behaviors and school climate. He implemented the “give a damn” culture when he became principal based on his experience as a high school teacher working with at-risk students. Over the course of his career, Mr. Andrews was employed in numerous capacities. He worked as a teacher, assistant principal, middle school principal, high school principal, and district-level administrator. Each role provided Mr. Andrews with new experiences and opportunities to grow, interact with students, and obtain insight into different perspectives. Had he not taken the position at Renaissance High School and chosen to work at the private high school instead, Mr. Andrews may have had a different perspective regarding at-risk learners. Working with students in jail, overaged, and under-credited gave Mr. Andrews a real-world account of the struggles of inner-city students. No textbook can replicate the real experience. Through his experiences over the course of his career, Mr. Andrews understood the importance of relationship building and maintenance.

Mrs. Patrick

Mrs. Patrick entered education as a special education teacher. It was in that position, Mrs. Patrick proclaimed, she found her “why.” It was early in her career that Mrs. Patrick was able to identify her rationale for entering education. This is paramount for educators. As the years and demands grow, many in education need a solid “why” to increase their longevity. Mrs. Patrick has been dedicated to her students for the duration of her career. Her commitment to student outcomes is not laced with ego. She is warmly known as the PrinciPAL in her community. Her experience as a special education teacher, Graduation Coach, and assistant principal has helped prepare her for her role as a PrinciPAL. Mrs. Patrick cites her relationship with her former principal as the reason she

became the relationship builder she is today. Her former principal did not have a relationship with the students at their school and Mrs. Patrick made it her mission to know her students.

In her role as graduation coach, Mrs. Patrick was able to increase graduation rates of the two district high schools by forming a cohort of students who could not pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Mrs. Patrick helped remediated students for the graduation exam. If students were unable to pass the graduation exam, Mrs. Patrick was able to enroll students in Ombudsman to earn a high school diploma. While employed as a Graduation Coach, Mrs. Patrick gained experience in working with at-risk students. This would later pave the way for her as a high school principal as she worked to increase graduation rates. Her experiences over the duration of her career taught her that there are multiple avenues for students to earn high school diplomas. It is up to school leaders to help guide their students towards alternative learning opportunities, such as online credit recovery, if those opportunities will allow those students a chance to finish high school. During her career, Mrs. Patrick encountered instances of teacher bias regarding alternative educational options available to students. Her experiences as a Graduation Coach working with teachers who were against students attending Ombudsman and who viewed online credit recovery courses as subpar compared to in-person instruction helped prepare Mrs. Patrick for her role as the administrator overseeing credit online recovery programs at Henry Ford. Mrs. Patrick was aware through the course of her career in working with special education and at-risk students that additional teacher support is required for these student populations. Mrs. Patrick used her knowledge to hire certified personnel to supervise the credit recovery classes. With years of experience in education,

she has encountered a diverse range of students, including those enrolled in online credit recovery courses, at-risk students, and those who require relationship-building.

Mrs. Norwood

Mrs. Norwood has more than 20 years of experience in the field of education. She began her career as a middle school science teacher. During her tenure in education, Mrs. Norwood has served as a teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal, and principal. Mrs. Norwood attended the school district where she now serves as principal. Her career in education has included work in a transient, Title I, largely Hispanic school district. Her work in this district allowed Mrs. Patrick to familiarize herself with the community trends of her area. She was aware of the employment patterns of the families in her community. Her experience as an instructional coach helped Mrs. Patrick and the Graduation Coach formulate groups based on academic needs for targeted interventions for graduation.

Mr. Watkins

Mr. Watkins was a special education teacher before entering into administration. His work with special education students helped Mr. Watkins locate his purpose for being in education. Mr. Watkins's experience working at a Title I school allowed him to work with impoverished students daily. Mr. Watkins's prior work experience with impoverished and at-risk students is why Mr. Watkins recognized the need for additional support services for students at Warrior High School. Warrior offers a myriad of programs to combat credit deficiencies. Mr. Watkins and his staff also connect students with mental health professionals outside of the school. Mr. Watkins asserted without hesitation, "I realized early on you can't educate a child you can't reach." The experiences he had early in his career related to data collection as a middle school

assistant principal helped Mr. Watkins and his staff track and maintain accurate attendance records of students.

Mrs. Aldrin

Mrs. Aldrin worked as a Data Interventionist and Spanish teacher before becoming the principal of Propel Academy. Mrs. Aldrin has the least experience of the five leaders in the study. Her work as a Data Interventionist most prepared her for her principalship. Working as a Data Interventionist allowed her to develop relationship-building techniques. Mrs. Aldrin also honed skills related to online credit recovery and alternative educational opportunities. Through her work as a Data Interventionist, Mrs. Aldrin gained exposure to building community partnerships as well.

Experience Working with At-Risk Students

The leaders in this basic interpretative study were classroom teachers before their promotion into school administration. Each participant had previous experience working with at-risk students before becoming a school leader. Their previous experiences helped cultivate their current leadership abilities. Working with at-risk students helped the leaders in this study develop a deeper willingness to go above and beyond for their pupils. Each leader exemplified outstanding relationship-building skills with their students. The leaders demanded their staff and faculty build relationships with students as well. Mr. Andrews created a “give a damn” culture at Restoration High School. Being willing to put the mental health and basic needs of students before academic gains helps schools increase academic gains long term. Student’s basic needs have to be addressed now more than ever and having a leader who is willing and able to look beyond data and see the whole child is a requirement of the post-pandemic educator and school leader.

Working with at-risk populations gives educators a first-hand account of the struggles students encounter daily. For instance, if a leader works in a Title I school, they are aware of the impact poverty may have on student achievement. The educator is a witness to the barriers that impede learning related to poverty, such as hunger, scarcity of resources, and lack of access to healthcare. Working with at-risk populations helped the school leaders in this study create programs and strategies to eliminate school-related barriers to academic achievement.

Mr. Andrews

Mr. Andrews's experience working with at-risk students dates back to the early years of his career when he was a teacher in southern Georgia. When he began working at Affirmation High School, many of the students in his class were only a few years his junior. Many of his students were overaged and under-credited. Many of the students Mr. Andrews taught at Affirmation High School lacked credits toward high school graduation. Affirmation administration created one of his classes for students who failed the initial course credit. Therefore, the concept of credit recovery was not an abstract concept during its inception at Restoration High School.

Mr. Andrews's time in South Georgia was the clay that molded him into a leader with high expectations of himself, his staff, and his students. He experienced the climate shift of Affirmation High School under the guidance of two distinguished administrations. The first administration had limited expectations and consequences for student misbehavior were lacking. Under the second administration, high, measurable expectations were the norm. Many of his students were not much older than Mr. Andrews when he worked in South, Georgia. These students were overaged and under-credited; as

he explained, “My first year at Affirmation I had a 20-year-old freshman. I’m a 22-year-old teacher.” Teaching students within his peer range forced Mr. Andrews to develop strategies to help them complete high school.

Mr. Andrew was instrumental in students receiving work while in the county jail. Providing work packets was an attempt to remove any excuses for students not accessing the curriculum. He brought the curriculum to the county jail. Through his efforts, his students were able to maintain their studies while incarcerated. This meant they would not become credit deficient and at risk for not graduating on time with their cohort.

Many of the students Mr. Andrews taught at Affirmation High School lacked credits toward high school graduation. Affirmation administration created one of his classes for students who failed the initial course credit. Therefore, the concept of credit recovery was not an abstract concept during its inception at Restoration High School.

Experiences working with at-risk populations helped developed Mr. Andrews’s motto of, “I will never fail a student for a lack of support.” Working in a high-poverty and crime school exposed Mr. Andrews to the day-to-day struggles some students faced. As an educator, he tried to remove the excuses for a high school diploma for his overaged students by going to the county jail and giving students their work. As a school leader, he removed teachers from his building nonrenewal who did not have the student’s best interests in mind.

Mrs. Patrick

Mrs. Patrick’s experience with at-risk student populations began in her first year as an educator. Fresh out of college, Mrs. Patrick began her career in education in a self-contained special education classroom. In a self-contained classroom, the teacher

provides a minimum of four segments of instruction daily (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). According to Mrs. Patrick, when recalling year one, “I was in education because I could relate well with kids and that was important to me. I saw how the kids blossomed and worked.” Working with at-risk populations was vital to helping develop her purpose for entering education early in her career. Mrs. Patrick stated, “That first year was instrumental in developing my vision for why was I really in education. I was in education to make a difference. I was in education because I could relate well to kids.”

Mrs. Patrick also had experience working with credit-deficient students when she was a graduation coach. She created interventions to help students graduate from high school with their cohort. She also had experience working with online credit recovery software programs when she was the graduation coach. Working as a graduation coach helped her have a better insight into the struggles faced by at-risk students. She also was able to understand through working with online credit recovery software programs that students can access the curriculum in non-traditional formats. As graduation coach, Mrs. Patrick asked the superintendent for permission to work intensively with twenty students to prepare them for the high school graduation exam. At the time, the state of Georgia required students to pass four sections of a high school graduation test in science, social studies, math, and English to receive a high school diploma. In addition to earning all required credits, students had to pass all sections of the high school graduation test to receive their high school diploma. Her work with the twenty students was a success. Mrs. Patrick stated, “We did individual plans for them and we did a lot of tutoring. We did a lot of reviews. We did a lot of test prep and it was a very big success. It was a shock to

everybody.” Mrs. Patrick’s experience as a graduation coach equipped her with proven strategies to increase student achievement within at-risk student populations.

When Mrs. Patrick became the principal of Henry Ford High School, relationship building was pivotal to her. Building relationships came from her experience as a graduation coach helping the twenty students prepare for the graduation tests. It took the assistance of multiple content teachers to help prepare the students for the exams. In preparation for the examinations, the teachers began to form relationships with the students. Mrs. Patrick’s love for her students beamed in her eyes and tone as she stated, “You are ultimately supporting a kid and helping them achieve something and the high school diploma for students at this age can change their life and that’s what you need to give them, hope, vision, purpose, and connectivity.” The birth of the Huddle Squad came from these tutoring sessions. Huddle Squad serves as the long-term adult positive adult connection at Henry Ford High School. When reflecting on teacher-student connections that grew from the tutoring sessions, Mrs. Patrick stated, “It (the tutoring sessions) caused teachers to have to work individually with students and support them outside of the classroom. I think that’s where you grow your relationships with kids.”

Mrs. Aldrin

Mrs. Aldrin’s experience with at-risk students began with her time as a Data Interventionist. She had several responsibilities that involved giving students access to resources and analyzing their data. Data Interventionists replaced graduation coaches in the Roosevelt School District. Mrs. Aldrin was selected for the role of Data Interventionist after working as a Spanish teacher. Her role as a data interventionist helped prepare her for her current position as the leader of Propel Academy. In her

present position, Mrs. Aldrin reviews students' course credits for placement in dual enrollment, online credit recovery, or online courses and reviews students' transcripts to determine what courses students need for graduation. As a Data Interventionist, she enrolled students in online credit recovery courses and reviewed transcripts to determine what courses were needed for high school completion. When describing her current job responsibilities, she referenced skills obtained from working with at-risk students: "I've done audits even as a Data Interventionist to look at their graduation requirements."

In her position as a Data Interventionist, she witnessed the power of online credit recovery software after a student gave birth in the hospital. The student could not attend school, yet she was able to connect to the internet and complete her coursework toward graduation. Her experience with online credit recovery software makes her emphatic towards students who are enrolled solely in online courses. She is aware of the amount of rigor an online course contains. Through experience, Mrs. Aldrin is familiar with the level of support a student enrolled in an online credit course requires. Propel students use online credit recovery software. Her experience as a Data Interventionist gave her the background knowledge needed to assist Propel Academy learners.

Previously, working with at-risk students taught Mrs. Aldrin vulnerability; she did not hesitate as she explained, "Apologizing when you get it wrong, that goes a long way. We don't always get it right." Being vulnerable is the cornerstone of relationship building. Students can view the teacher as genuine. Mrs. Aldrin entered the Data Interventionist position attempting to learn how to develop authentic relationships with students. She was able to do this by meeting with at-risk students during lunch. Mrs.

Aldrin was emphatic about the needs of her students. In addition to empathy, she provided resources for students who were in need.

Moreover, Mrs. Aldrin's prior experience enabled her to hone her relationship-building skills. Her ability to cultivate and maintain relationships is what has sustained Propel Academy's enrollment and completion rates. Completion of Propel means a student can enter the workforce ready to make a difference in their community as a gainfully employed citizen. Through her soft-spoken demeanor and diplomacy, she has been able to help impact the graduation rates at both high schools in the Roosevelt School District from skills gained early in her career.

Mr. Watkins

Mr. Watkins's experience working with at-risk students at Title I schools as assistant principal provided direct insight into the struggles of students who attend schools in low socioeconomic areas. These students may face a lack of resources or decreased parental involvement due to parents working multiple jobs. To combat some of the barriers faced by his students, as assistant principal/athletic director Mr. Watkins partnered with the head football coach to ensure all student-athletes received tutoring for the high school graduation test. Mr. Watkins ensured student-athletes had transportation to and from Saturday Graduation Test Prep Sessions.

Mr. Watkins currently provides programs to assist the social and emotional needs of the students at Warrior High School through the creation of programs with the guidance department, social workers, and Georgia Hope. Mr. Watkins utilized student data to make decisions regarding the needs of students. When Mr. Watkins worked as a middle school assistant principal, his primary job was collecting student data. Collecting

and analyzing student achievement data at a Title I middle school helped Mr. Watkins review student achievement data in his present role to make decisions for his current student outcomes. He employs the data collection skills he previously gained to help guide his leadership team to make decisions for the students at Warrior High School; as he explains, “When we meet to make decisions for our students at Warriors, we look at many factors. We look at what the data says, but more importantly, what does the child’s story tell us?” Some leaders lack the skills to review student information and make informed decisions in the student’s best interest. Schools across the nation use “data-driven decision making,” but there is a question of how that looks in reality. At Warrior High School, data-driven decisions look like a team of educators meeting with a common goal, to serve young people led by a compassionate leader. Mr. Watkins’s previous experience working with at-risk students and data analysis helped prepare him to serve his current student population. When the team meets, they can decide which program best meets the needs of the student, such as mental health, credit recovery, or dual enrollment.

Mrs. Norwood

Mrs. Norwood has worked within the same school district for most of her career. Her school district serves a highly transient Hispanic population. This population is at-risk, of dropping out of school for sundry reasons. Hispanic students not born in the United States must overcome cultural and language barriers, putting them at risk of dropping out. According to nationwide data regarding dropout rates, Latino students have a 300% higher chance of dropping out of high school in comparison to their Caucasian peers (NCES, 2023). Previous research suggests there is an achievement gap concerning Latino students’ graduation rates from American schools, citing numerous causes for the

low graduation rates and student achievement impacted by factors such as educator training, isolation of school districts based on economic status, lack of bilingual education, lack of parental involvement, and family poverty (Hawkins et al., 2013; Marshall, 2006). Mrs. Norwood has worked as a teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal, and principal within the same school district. She is more familiar with the school district than the other study participants because Mrs. Norwood is also a product of the Franklin County School District. Having increased familiarity brings greater awareness of community challenges. Educators who lack preexisting knowledge of a community first must build relationships with community members and determine how to overcome the barriers to student achievement. Being a product of the community, school district, and employee, Mrs. Norwood was aware of the challenges her students faced. Her students were torn between work and school, whether to help support their families or get an education. Students within her district often drop out of school to work at the local plant as a means to financially support their families. Research indicates that Hispanic and other immigrant students between the ages of 16 and 18 drop out of high school at a rate of 30% to obtain employment (Rosales, 2015).

Mrs. Norwood's experience and community knowledge have helped her engage in tough conversations with Hispanic parents regarding the bigger picture for their children's futures. When explaining to parents the economic pitfall of dropping out, Mrs. Norwood stated, fifteen dollars an hour is fifteen dollars an hour and it will stay fifteen dollars an hour and not go anywhere without a high school diploma." Outlining the long-term economic implications of not obtaining a high school diploma sheds light on the long-term consequence of dropping out.

Mrs. Norwood and her staff attempt to overcome the language barriers Langley students and their families face by having bilingual correspondence available for families. Upon entering the school, it was apparent that Mrs. Norwood and her staff were committed to effectively communicating with Langley's families. There were brochures in the front office in Spanish and English. Mrs. Langley also explained during parent meetings an interpreter is available to translate. Providing effective, clear communication between school and home in the native language of the parent is one way to increase parental involvement amongst Hispanic parents through the removal of the language barrier.

Instructional Leadership

The mission and vision of an organization serve as roadmaps to the future. The mission statement explains why the organization exists and it defines its overall purpose (Gurley et al., 2015). The vision statement describes what the future of an organization would look like if operated under optimal conditions (Gurley et al., 2015). Each school represented in the research study had vision and mission statements that were student-centered. All vision statements referenced student achievement as an outcome. Each school hoped to increase student achievement. All schools placed their mission and vision statements on their school websites. Placing mission and vision statements on the website provides digital access to stakeholders.

Propel Academy, Henry Ford, and Restoration High Schools had similar district-wide mission and vision statements. Having the same mission and vision district-wide ensures all stakeholders are working towards the same goal. The mission and vision statements were posted on each school's website. Henry Ford's principal reiterated the

mission and vision statements over the announcements during afternoon dismissal on the day of our interview. The mission and vision statements were posted around the campus of Henry Ford School. Propel Academy did not have a visual representation of the mission and vision statements posted. Propel Academy is housed in an off-campus location and is not allowed to post decor. Mr. Andrews was the principal of Restoration before this research study and his building was not toured for postings of mission and vision statements because he is no longer the building leader. The district-wide mission statement addressed postsecondary preparedness. The mission of the district was to ensure that students are ready to enter the workforce or higher education. The vision statement described a desire to be recognized as a leading school district within the state. Members of the district would inform stakeholders of decisions and create a culture of high student expectations while utilizing standards-based grading.

Mrs. Patrick has taken the district-wide mission statements and broken them down into tangible postsecondary goals for her students. Her mission statement for the schools is to “know their WHY.” It breaks down to knowing their “why” for coming to school each day. Each day they are working towards their “WHY,” whether it be enlistment, enrollment, or employment; she explained, “What is your E? And your E is either employment, enrollment in a college or trade school, or enlisting in the army. We help our students devise that to help them understand that there’s a bigger picture out there.” The mission and vision statements of the district are recited to the students and staff in addition to students knowing their “why.” Expanding the mission of the school district to student-friendly terms makes the mission statement reliable and applicable to students. When Mrs. Patrick turned this vision into what is your “why,” students could relate.

Students can conceptualize the reason they get up in the morning. Students may now better understand that a B in biology may mean acceptance into college or technical school. So, their ‘why’ is their new motivator. Mrs. Patrick turned the mission statement from motivating stakeholders to engage with students to students being the stakeholders of their academic fates.

Although the vision of Propel Academy is in direct alignment with the district’s vision of student success in a postsecondary world, Mrs. Aldrin was able to articulate the vision of the district to her students through the application. Paraphrasing the vision of the school district, students should be able to obtain employment, enroll in college, and contribute to society after graduating from the district. Mrs. Aldrin proclaimed with honor, “Our mission is to prepare students with personal finance, soft skills, in technical training so that they can go to work right after graduation.” School leaders have to be able to articulate the vision in layman's terms to their students. The vision statement has to be more than a slogan. The vision statement should be an action. Mrs. Aldrin provides students with lessons on the soft skills needed to be successful after high school. She executes the vision statement by preparing the students for the future that is referenced in the vision statement.

The same as the district's, Langley High School’s mission and vision statements were student and community-centered. The mission statement referenced that educators in the district would provide a challenging and engaging educational experience for students. The vision statement was centered around addressing student and community needs. The mission and vision statements are easily located on the school and district websites. Parents and community members with internet accessibility can locate the

founding purpose of the district under a tab labeled, “about us.” The district and school websites have the same navigational formatting, which makes locating information predictable.

During our interview, Mrs. Norwood was asked how she conveyed the importance of maintaining student engagement to Langley High School’s staff. She described how she reviews student achievement data through the state longitudinal portal that flags students in color codes. She displays the school data to her staff regarding student performance in each subgroup. Once reviewing student data in each area, staff took some time for inward reflection and creating an action plan to help students achieve at greater levels. Mrs. Norwood explained, “You look at the breakdown by subgroups and different things. I think the ‘ah ha’ moment was we knew we needed to get better because you look around the surrounding areas and they are better than us.” Improving graduation rates at Langley came down to owning that the change that needed to take place had to occur amongst the staff. There were no excuses; as accounted by Mrs. Norwood, “We sit here and we all felt like, well you know, our kids, they are transient. We still need to teach them. So, we tried to develop a plan to get them to school and get engaged.” Select members of the Langley High School staff attended a dropout prevention conference hosted by Clemson University. Upon returning from the school created a committee solely focused on helping students graduate.

Warrior High School’s mission and vision statement are also in direct alignment with the school district’s mission and vision statement. The mission statement references student success. The vision statement reiterated the stakeholders’ commitment to student success. The mission and vision statements are almost identical. The mission and vision

statements are located on the school and district websites. When Mr. Watkins addresses students and staff, he begins his announcements with the mission and vision statements. Mrs. Patrick at Henry Ford High School used a similar methodology by stating the mission and vision statements on the afternoon announcements. Stating the mission and vision statements regularly reminds teachers and students of the “why,” and of how after the reminders come to action. When asked to describe how Warrior High School keeps the mission and vision at the forefront of the organization, Mr. Watkins stated, “During staff meetings, the curriculum AP goes over student achievement data. We drill down to know the needs of each student. We then determine an action plan for that kid. whether it be Option B, SOAR, Elevate.”

Organizational Practices

The leaders at the school were dedicated to improving student achievement and this was clear in their organizational practices. They, along with other staff members, were responsible for collecting and monitoring student data using strategic methods to maintain accurate records. Additionally, procedures were in place to prevent students from dropping out, which was a goal shared by the entire school community.

Data

All leaders in this study were responsible for continuously reviewing student data and maintaining accurate student enrollment records. The state tracks and maintains student data and the school leaders are responsible for reviewing it. When students withdraw from school, they are assigned a withdrawal code indicating the reason for their departure. Dropout codes are assigned to students who exit high school prematurely for some of the following reasons: marriage, pregnancy, removal for lack of attendance, low

academic performance, and expulsion (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). When a student transfers to another school in or out of the district, the previous school should ensure the student has enrolled in the new school and assign the proper withdrawal code. Falling to provide the prior withdrawal codes will count against the school's graduation rate. For example, if a student transfers to a district across town and graduates, the student counts towards the new school's graduation rate. If the old school did not follow up with the new school to ensure enrollment, the student will count against the previous school as a dropout, when in fact the student was a transfer.

The leaders in this study had systematically determined how to accurately code students who withdrew. Each school maintained student data by having a dedicated employee monitor student attendance information. School registrars are responsible for enrolling and withdrawing students. The role of the registrar is vital in maintaining an accurate record of students who transferred, died, and relocated out of state. Having a registrar who is adequately trained to follow up with student withdrawals, track attendance trends, and knows the students is an integral part of preserving precise records. All schools had a formal withdrawal plan which included a form that parents completed when the student exited the school. The form allowed school personnel to know where the student was headed after withdrawing. Therefore, the school personnel could follow up and assign the correct transfer code for the student. Assigning the correct transfer code meant the student was not counted as a dropout and did not decrease the school's graduation rate.

Mr. Watkins suggested that consistency in, “withdrawal procedures, monitoring, and updating codes for students that un-enroll” are factors that helped increase graduation

rates at Warrior High School. Like the other high schools in this study, students have to complete an exiting form upon withdrawal. The exiting form provides the registrar with information regarding the reason for the withdrawal and where the student will continue their education. Langley has a highly transient in-district student population, students frequently transfer to schools within the district, as opposed to out of the district.

Graduation Coach or Similar Personnel

All the schools in the research study had personnel employed for the sole purpose of increasing graduation rates except Warrior High School. Langley High School referred to their personnel as Graduation Coaches; Propel, Restoration, and Henry Ford referred to their personnel as Data Interventionists. During the interview process, Mrs. Norwood, Mrs. Aldrin, Mr. Andrews, and Mrs. Patrick often referenced the critical resources and support rendered by the Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist was integral in the identification of at-risk students. Warrior High School utilized the guidance department and school administrators to identify students at risk of dropping out.

The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist served with school counselors, teachers, and school administrators to formulate graduation boards. The role of the graduation board was to meet and discuss the needs of at-risk students, deter dropping out, and provide parents with information regarding alternative educational options, and resource allocation. Although Warrior High School did not have a Graduation Coach, it did have a graduation board that met and provided students with access to credit recovery opportunities, mental health, food, and clothing resources. There was no difference in the availability of resources for schools with a Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist and

Warrior High School. All schools in this study had access to off-campus mental health resources from GA HOPE.

Mrs. Aldrin and Mrs. Patrick had first-hand experiences in the role of a Graduation Coach/ Data Interventionist because they were both employed in these roles before promotion. Mrs. Aldrin and Mrs. Patrick both recalled many instances in which their roles as Graduation Coach/Data Interventionists helped prepare them to work with at-risk student populations. The other leaders in this study were not employed as Graduation Coaches or guidance counselors. Mrs. Aldrin and Mrs. Patrick's experience familiarized them with the resources available to help students remain in school.

In this study, the Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist played a crucial role for leaders. They had access to personnel who were solely dedicated to improving graduation rates. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist was available to perform home visits when students were absent from school. School leaders utilized this position as an extension of support for students. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist was able to build relationships with students and connect students with community resources. For example, if a student was struggling to come to school due to teen pregnancy, the Graduation Coach/ Data Interventionist would make a home visit to meet with the student and parents during the school day to explain alternative education options for the student. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist was able to help the student enroll in online classes through PLC, Ombudsman, or school-based online credit recovery programs. Mrs. Patrick provided an example of how the Data Interventionist for Henry Ford assists students enrolled in online credit recovery courses off-campus in the Henry Ford Cyber Academy: "My Data Interventionist checks in with them every four and a half weeks to

keep a map of their progress and grades. It is their job to check at appropriate times to make sure students are being successful.”

The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist has more flexibility in their schedules in comparison to other school personnel and can quickly meet the needs of at-risk students. Whereas school leaders and counselors are focused on the needs of the entire student population, the Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist can hone in on the needs of a specified population. Having a smaller, targeted population of students allows for more individualized assistance and resource allocation. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist becomes familiarized with the needs of the family and student through working one-on-one.

The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist role provides schools with another opportunity for student data collection and review. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist can review transfer, withdrawal, and attendance data. This is helpful for secondary leaders because the Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist encourages school attendance in truancy situations. The Graduation Coach/ Data Interventionist can partner with the school social worker or attendance clerk and make frequent welfare checks on students. School leaders and guidance counselors do not have the flexibility within their schedules to leave campus.

Graduation Coaches/Data Interventionists are often involved in reviewing students' grades and credits. This process provides an additional person overlooking pertinent information. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist may identify students who were accidentally overlooked by school officials in earlier data reviews. The Graduation Coach/Data Interventionist serves as an additional source of information,

support, and intervention creation. Langley High School's Graduation Coach assisted Mrs. Norwood in the creation of the graduation-centered task force to identify at-risk students. After attending a Dropout Prevention Conference at Clemson University, Mrs. Norwood and the Graduation Coach identified twenty seniors at risk for not graduating with their cohort. Mrs. Norwood and the Graduation Coach met with a group of 12th-grade teachers monthly to discuss the academic, behavior, and student progress of the twenty seniors. The team also provided mentors for the students, if needed. The purpose of the committee was to engage students with school and build relationships. Mrs. Langley, with the help of the Graduation Coach, has been able to create specific interventions to assist students who are close to graduating, but need additional support. As she explained, "We try to target the kids who are close in passing and being on track. We (the Graduation Committee) meet and talk about them (the student), and we come up with a plan. The counselor, Graduation Coach, and student discuss the plan." The graduation plan may include enrollment in online courses or changing their schedule to retake failed classes in a face-to-face setting Mrs. Patrick zealously summarized the significance of the Data Interventionist who serves Henry Ford High School in the following statement.

The whole purpose of the Data Interventionist went back to We have got to catch these kids that are in 3rd and 5th grade and already deemed to be at risk. How do we support them, if you wait until they get into 9th grade to try to be successful, you have already lost them?

Early identification of at-risk students allows school districts to create academic interventions to help students become successful throughout their matriculation. Schools

have previous documentation regarding whether a student is struggling socially or academically before their enrollment in high school. Linking students with mental health services or academic assistance may diminish the student being considered “at-risk” their entire academic career. The Data Interventionist for Henry Ford High School assisted students within the feeder pattern for Henry Ford High School. Mrs. Patrick is a proponent of at-risk students receiving support from the Data Interventionist before high school enrollment. Mrs. Patrick’s unwavering devotion to student achievement and relationship building was apparent in her statement, “I think student achievement is going to come with the focus of the relationship and targeting those specific kids, whether its academics, behavior or whatever the team decides to support to kid to get them through.”

Creating plans to address the needs of at-risk learners with feeder pattern leaders, the Data Interventionist, and other key stakeholders are essential in the establishment of a culture of achievement. The challenge of increasing high school graduation rates does not rest on the shoulders of the high school principal alone. A plan of how a student will cross the graduation stage needs to begin in kindergarten. Identifying and addressing student achievement deficiencies before high school enrollment will help equip high school freshmen with a solid educational foundation.

Adults as Barriers to Success

During the research study, leaders recognized that adults can hinder student success. Most educators can recite their educational philosophies. However, an educational philosophy should not become an educational doctrine that hinders the long-range academic progression of students. COVID 19 has shone a light on the need for

online learning opportunities. The pandemic has also allowed many educators to become more aware of the challenges of an online learning environment for students.

Mrs. Aldrin

Some educators believe that obtaining credits through online credit recovery software is considered an easy or insufficient way to earn credits. When asked to reflect upon the barriers to student success, Mrs. Aldrin stated, “Sadly, sometimes adults are the obstacles in our lives.” Mrs. Aldrin teaches economics, which is a required course for graduation. She explained her teaching approach for the course as follows: “Sometimes we have to give students an alternative so that I’m not the person that has to judge their proficiency and unbiased computer could do it. Where I think it's most beneficial is the flexibility of the schedule.” In her statement, she referenced placing students with online software to complete course requirements instead of face-to-face instruction if it met the needs of the student. School leaders should explore the option of allowing students to earn credits for required courses online if it is more convenient for their needs instead of face-to-face instruction. Some students may need to take initial and recovered credits in online formats. “Online credit recovery programs allow them even not for credit recovery, but for initial credit all of them to do their schoolwork when they are available,” Mrs. Aldrin stood firm in her belief that students needed to recover credits and did not back down during our discussion. Attending traditional schools can be challenging for some students, which makes enrolling in online courses the only feasible way of obtaining a high school diploma.

Mrs. Patrick

During the interview, Mrs. Patrick reminisced about the time when Ombudsman awarded diplomas to its students. Students enrolled in Ombudsman because they met the course requirements for graduation, but were unable to pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Therefore, students received a diploma from the state of Illinois. However, students were equipped with a high school diploma. Filled with passion in her voice, Mrs. Patrick recalled, “It was non-traditional. It was unpopular. People really resisted it because they felt like the only way you should be able to get a diploma is here at the high school with a teacher.” The non-traditional approach of Ombudsman opened the door to the conversation of what an effective non-traditional education looks like. As she continued to elaborate, “That becomes the first I guess open communication about what non-traditional looks like, which was very driven on the computer.” Mrs. Patrick is on a mission to help teachers understand that it's acceptable for students to earn credits in non-traditional settings. In her statement, Mrs. Patrick emphasized her dedication to exploring non-traditional opportunities, “Getting teachers to see that there is another way that isn't the traditional way in which they were raised, in which they were taught, in which they lived through. It is very archaic sometimes how our teachers feel that only they are the “gatekeepers” to grades,” with irritation in her voice, Mrs. Patrick recalled past events.” Mrs. Patrick tried to overcome the “gatekeeper of knowledge” mindset in her staff by showcasing the success stories of students who were able to graduate high school while utilizing online credit recovery software; as she explained, “Showcasing students who are struggling and now able to earn their diploma, helping the fifth-year

cohort seniors come back, be able to walk with graduate and walk their class are success stories.”

Mr. Andrews

The adult barriers to student success at Restoration High School were at the beginning of Mr. Andrews’ principalship. Teachers received monetary incentives for student achievement. Some teachers removed students from their classes to maintain their eligibility. Teachers removed low-performing students from their classes and had the students reassigned to other teachers. By implementing these practices teachers were not placing the academic needs of their students above their monetary gains. Improving the academic outcomes of students was the purpose of the grant. The need to help students was lost in the desire to advance financially. Mr. Andrews made staffing changes because of the practices of the teachers. He also implemented a, “give a damn culture” amongst his staff. If teachers were unwilling to place the academic needs of their students above their need to receive monetary incentives or simply care about students, they were non-renewed.

Additionally, there was a recurring theme of dispelling the notion that online credit recovery is an effortless way to obtain a diploma. The students' perceptions did not prevent them from enrolling or attending the courses. However, it was worth noting this section as a common theme. Some educators wanted students to retake the entire course if a student only failed a certain section. Depending upon the student’s grade when they enroll in online credit recovery courses, the student may only have to retake the portion of the course they failed. If a student enrolled in biology and failed the course with a 68%, the student did not fail each content area presented or their grade would have been

lower, Therefore, in instances such as this, a student could retake the section of the class that was challenging. If the student did not understand genetics, the course teacher could communicate with the online credit recovery instructor that the student needed to retake course material related to genetics only and earn a score of no lower than 85% on all tests and quizzes. Some educators argue that if a student receives a grade of 68%, they should retake the entire course.

Finn's Identification and Participation Model

Themes 1 and 4 from Chapter V supported Research Question 1 and were described in the section related to the *identification* aspect of Finn's Model of Identification and Participation. Identification in Finn's Model refers to the student's emotional attachment towards school-based adults, as well as the student's interests and values (Fredricks et al., 2004). To strengthen student relationships with staff, the homeroom model was implemented in each of the five schools represented in the study. Students had the opportunity to formulate meaningful, long-term relationships with their homeroom teacher. Students were assigned the same homeroom teacher for the duration of their high school careers. Therefore, the student was able to form solid relationships with one another, as well as the teacher over a period of four years. If the student is struggling socially, academically, or emotionally, the homeroom teacher or another caring adult may be aware and report their findings to counselors. Homeroom teachers could advise students regarding academic credits, build strong, genuine relationships with students, and distribute resources when needed. The homeroom model allowed one adult to oversee the care of the twenty to thirty students over the course of their matriculation through high school.

Warrior High School, for example, placed severely credit-deficient students in the same homeroom. Their homeroom teacher was able to monitor their academic progress in their online credit recovery courses and provided students with motivational pep talks. Warrior strategically selected homeroom teachers who worked well with at-risk student populations to serve as credit-deficient homeroom teachers. Providing students who are most at risk of dropping out with the most empathic teachers is important in helping students regain their sense of self-worth. Some students who are struggling academically need a teacher who provides structure, as well caring, and support. Identifying teachers who can relate to students emotionally was just as important as identifying teachers who can engage students academically. Some at-risk students have become disengaged from school early in their academic careers.

Having a teacher with whom they can build trust and connect remained critical to their identification with the school. An example of this intense adult-student connection would be when Mrs. Aldrin went to visit a student in the hospital who had just given birth to ensure the student was completing her online credit recovery assignments. Few school-based adults would have reached out to a student while hospitalized under those circumstances. Mrs. Aldrin's willingness to visit the student validated the student's role within the school community during a critical juncture in her academic career. Providing validation to students who are at risk of dropping out of school for whatever reason proved beneficial to the leader and the student. Mrs. Aldrin's desire to advocate for at-risk learners increased over the course of her career. The student completed high school and became a success story for Mrs. Aldrin.

When students develop connections to the school setting through the formation of relationships with caring adults, students are more likely to receive access to needed resources in the form of mental health services, food, clothing, and extended learning opportunities. The entire school does not have to know the student and the formation of the relationship does not have to occur in the homeroom. Warrior High School provides its students with access to external mental health counselors, an on-campus food and clothes pantry, school supplies, and enrollment in various tiers of online credit recovery interventions. The Graduation Coaches/Data Interventionists were able to connect students with resources like Warrior High School. No school within the study lacked access to support for students. When schools serve hundreds of students, adults must create genuine connections with segments of the student population. If each adult can connect with a segment of the population, in theory, all students with needs would be identified. I understand that this is an under-simplification of the problem of not enough adults being able to connect with students. However, if each adult becomes intentional with their actions to check on the well-being of the students under their care by paying attention to student behaviors, such as students withdrawing or trying to get each student to have one peer that connects with them at school, this can help build student relationships. Establishing a centralized long-term meeting location for students is essential to them feeling a sense of belonging. If schools do not have a homeroom model in place currently, the implementation of a homeroom would serve multiple purposes. Students would be able to interact and connect with a familiar “pod” of students. Students would also have the opportunity to form a connection with an adult. The teacher would be able to check student grades, help with advice for future courses, serve as a caring

adult, and monitor student attendance. The homeroom teacher could prevent students from “falling through the cracks” because each student would have someone responsible for monitoring their well-being long-term.

Secondary school leaders should create a safe environment for students to gather in the school community. This process should begin freshman year. The learner needs to know that this environment will be stable and unchanging over the duration of time in high school. If the student can form a relationship within the homeroom model and is assigned the same guidance counselor for four consecutive years, the student has two adults monitoring them who are familiar with the student, their academics, home life, traumas, and successes. Forming meaningful relationships with a familiar peer group and a minimum of two caring adults allows the student to begin their academic undertaking with a sense of family and belonging. Entering high school can be a frightening and difficult transition period that has been well-documented and researched. Providing incoming freshmen with a tour of the high school before enrollment and allowing the student to meet the counselor and homeroom teacher before school begins gives students and their parents one-on-one time with both adults and begins the relationship-building process.

Participation

Study participants encouraged student participation in extracurricular activities in numerous ways. Mr. Andrews and members of his staff created clubs for underrepresented populations at Restoration High School. All Restoration High School students had to participate in a minimum of one club. Mr. Andrews attended extracurricular activities to further connect with families and students. Mrs. Patrick

created a club for students who were not interested in sports or band. The club served food at home games. All students were able to participate and had the opportunity to serve and belong to a group within the school. Mrs. Norwood created time within the school schedule for working students to attend club meetings. There was a culture at Langley High School that supported student connections to and involvement in extracurricular activities. When a student did not make a sports team during tryouts, the student was offered a management position to formulate a connection with the team and coach. Students at Propel Academy are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities at their base schools. Students can attend their base schools during 4th block to ensure they are on campus when the activity begins. Mrs. Aldrin provided students with a bus back to their base high schools so they could remain connected while attending the credit recovery or dual enrollment program at Propel Academy.

Summary

Every participant in the study showed a strong desire to help at-risk students. Each leader devised a plan of action to assist students in graduating high school. Many leaders entered education with the aspiration of being career-long teachers. All entered leadership to invoke systemic change. Before becoming building-level principals, the leaders in the study had prior experience working with at-risk students. Those early career-altering experiences helped to shape the leaders in this study into advocates for at-risk learners. Working with at-risk populations before entering administration expands the viewpoint of the leader, it takes the rose-colored glasses off and shines a light on the realities their students face. Once the leader is faced with the realities their students face, they are faced with how to create solutions to the problems they can no longer unsee.

Providing long-term steady support for students in the form of a homeroom teacher is an initial way to foster adult-student connections. The guidance counselor, school principal, and graduation coach cannot possibly formulate authentic bonds with each student enrolled in high school. However, the homeroom setting allows one adult to create meaning and solid student connections that are built over time. Leaders in this research study identified ways to build genuine relationships among students and staff. Students were all connected with a club, extracurricular activity, coach, or homeroom teacher who was able to formulate a relationship with the student.

The common theme regarding mission and vision statements is each school's mission and vision statement was directly taken from the district's mission and vision statements. The mission and vision statements were accessible to the public via school and district websites. Student achievement was the cornerstone of each vision statement. Each school leader made sure the students and staff had knowledge of the mission and vision statements through print, websites, and announcements, and the school leaders used student achievement data to make decisions regarding the trajectory of the organization. The vision statement has to have life, in that the leader is providing the staff with strategies in which to help the vision become a reality. The vision statement should not be a slogan, it should be a call to action for all members of the organization

The leaders possessed the ability to assist students who were facing difficulties in achieving their goal of graduating. The principal was not the only person responsible for the increase in graduation rates at these high schools. It was a collaborative effort of many stakeholders. School leaders invested in online credit recovery instructors. The instructors provided academic support and were constant adults. Four out of the five

schools had either a Graduation Coach or the equivalent on staff to assist at-risk students. Staff members were strategically selected to mentor, instruct, and counsel at-risk students.

Ironically, many leaders identified adults as barriers to student success in online credit recovery courses. In the past, learning usually involved being in a classroom with a teacher, using a pencil and paper, and sitting at a desk in a neat row. However, times have changed. Academic content is easily accessible for students as long as they have a computer, internet connection, and themselves. They can engage in rich learning opportunities from anywhere. The academic teacher is not the gatekeeper of knowledge, students can acquire knowledge through multiple platforms. To provide better assistance to students who are at risk of dropping out and need alternative options to earn a high school diploma, educators should embrace the idea that there are other effective approaches besides their own.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter begins with a restatement of the research purpose, questions, and problem. The purpose of this research investigation was to examine the lived experiences of secondary school leaders in Georgia whose graduation rates consecutively increased while using online credit recovery software to assist at-risk learners. I interviewed leaders from five secondary schools within the state of Georgia regarding strategies used to improve student achievement. From 2012 to 2022, the graduation rate in Georgia jumped from 69.7% to 84.1 (Georgia Department of Education, 2022). The use of online credit recovery software is widespread among American school districts. Nearly 70% of secondary schools provide access to online credit recovery opportunities for students (Heinrich & Cheng, 2022).

Chapter I introduced the purpose and significance of the research investigation. The research identified potential research biases related to previous work experience as a Graduation Coach and building-level administrator. Since the introduction of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), school districts across the country have been bombarded with multiple school reforms over the years to increase student achievement. One indicator of student achievement at the secondary level is graduation rates. Schools have been tasked with increasing the graduation rates of all students under their tutelage. School districts had to devise strategies to increase student

achievement and reduce dropout rates. The characteristics of an at-risk learner have not been a mystery to those in education.

One framework utilized in this research study was the Finn Identification and Participation Model. The rationale for this model selection was based on student engagement. Student engagement signifies the degree of involvement, interest, and participation that students exhibit in their learning experiences. Engaged students are actively involved in their education, motivated to learn, and display a sense of ownership and obligation to their academic outcomes. The Finn Identification-Participation Model highlights the internal (identification) and external (participation) factors that contribute to students dropping out of school (Finn, 1989). The participation component of the model refers to students taking part in class discussions, behaving in school, and participating in school-related functions. The identification component references where the student feels emotionally connected to the school and valued (Finn, 1989).

Chapter I provided a discussion on the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model of instructional leadership. One trait of an instructional leader is keeping the vision and mission of the organization at the forefront. Student achievement is embedded in the mission and vision statements of many schools. The role of the secondary leader is always expanding. School principals not only manage the day-to-day operation of the school, but they are responsible for student achievement. Determining how the leaders in this study communicated the vision and mission of the organization to stakeholders was viable in understanding how the leaders made meaning out of their leadership experiences in the quest to increase student achievement. One major aspect of the instructional leadership model by Hallinger and Murphy indicates in the absence of

clearly defined goals and objectives it is extremely difficult to determine organizational effectiveness. For this study, I only researched how the mission and vision were communicated to stakeholders. I was not equipped to determine the effectiveness of the secondary schools in this research study. Schools have attempted to connect students with mentors or caring adults over the past decade. Homerooms allow students to connect with an adult over their matriculation through high school. The homeroom setting also provides students with a familiar group of peers with whom they may be able to formulate a “school family.” Finn’s Model of Participation and Identification discussed the importance of a student feeling connected to the school. The homeroom model provides a way for students to connect with familiar adults and students.

Chapter II was an in-depth Literature Review covering a broad range of topics such as school reform, student achievement, online credit recovery programs, at-risk students, instructional leadership, and student engagement. I described both theoretical frameworks anchoring this research study and the rationale for implementation in this study. The Finn Identification-Participation Model (1989) was chosen as an anchoring framework because at-risk students who are not engaged and connected to school either socially, academically, or emotionally are at greater risk of dropping out. Students who are enrolled in online credit recovery programs have already experienced a course failure and may become more isolated and disengaged from school if they student is tasked with working in an online credit recovery platform without adult support. The second framework used to underpin this research project was the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) instructional leadership model.

Chapter III described the basic interpretive qualitative research approach and defined criteria regarding the participation selection process. I then established the role of the researcher and identified researcher biases. The chapter concluded with a discussion of validity and reliability.

The findings of the research study were presented in Chapter IV. The chapter consisted of an in-depth review of the research participants, research design, and data collection procedures. I provided vivid descriptions of the settings and locations of each high school and introduced the study participants based on their lived experiences. The participants' experiences in education, from the beginning of their careers to the present day, were detailed. Each participant's experience working with at-risk students and online credit recovery software provided insight into the molding of their educational ideologies. I also presented an overview of historical data from each school in this chapter.

In Chapter V emerging themes of each research participant were described. Data was collected and methodologies were analyzed. All interview data were collected and transcribed using Otter.ai software. Otter.ai transcribed each interview. During the transcription process, Otter.ai identified potential themes from each interview. Each transcript was reviewed to determine the emerging themes based on repetitive patterns. During the transcription phase, Otter.ai misidentified participants' restatement of the research questions during the interview as a possible theme. In these instances, those misidentified themes were discarded. The remaining Otter.ai themes were later cross-referenced with themes collected in isolation from the software. Each potential theme was color-coded using a highlighter. I later reviewed each highlighted theme to cross-

reference wording with previously identified themes. If a potential theme was identified from other research participants' themes, I kept placing the theme in a chart with an identifying code.

Methods and Procedures

This research study employed the Basic Interpretive Qualitative approach. In a basic interpretive study, one of my attempts to comprehend a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I sought to interpret how the study's participants made meaning out of their lived experiences as secondary school leaders employed in Georgia public high schools and whose graduation rates consistently increased while using online credit recovery software to assist at-risk students. Understanding how the study's participants experience their world and the meaning they constructed from it is known as interpretative qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The phenomenon in this study was the consistent increase in high school graduation rates. Three 60 - 90-minute semi-structured interviews with each research participant were conducted. Information regarding the mission and vision statements, online credit recovery offering, and student achievement data on the school and district websites and social media pages were reviewed before contacting principals for interviews. Artifacts about student achievement, online credit recovery programs, and the mission and vision were collected from school leaders during the interview process. The identification of four of the five research participants was based on purposeful sampling. The fifth study participant was a result of the snowball sampling. Two of the research participants voluntarily mentioned and referred me to the fifth participant.

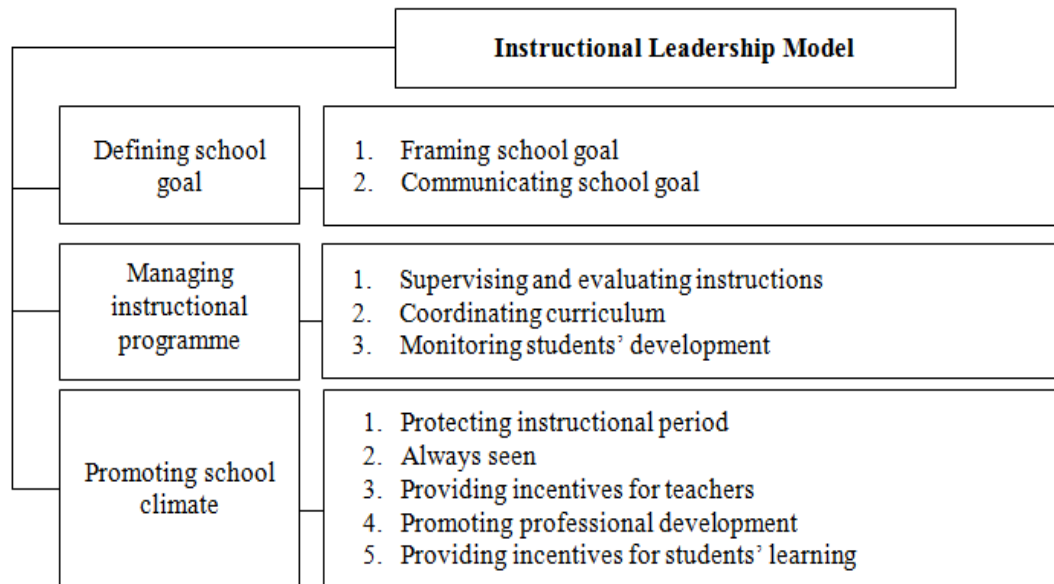
The recording software, Otter.ai, was utilized to perform initial coding. I disregarded many of the codes provided by the software because some of the words suggested by the software as themes were the participants repeating phrases from the research questions. Genuine themes were not being formed through the sole utilization of Otter.ai. A manual analysis of transcripts was performed by reading each participant's response, replaying the recording while reading the responses to capture the essence of each statement, and then assigning codes where phrases, concepts, or statements were redundant. Recurring themes and words were highlighted signifying a potential theme. Thematic data analysis using three steps from Miles & Huberman's (1994) approach was employed.

Interpretation of Findings

This section provides an overview of the interpretation of the research findings from collected and analyzed data presented in Chapters IV and V. Figure 6 represents the Finn Participation-Identification Model. In the diagram, school participation is directly linked to successful school outcomes, as well as students being able to identify with school. Successful school outcomes are directly influenced by students' ability to identify with the school, in addition to possibly participating. Students participate in school when they interact in classroom lessons, attend school-related functions, and join extracurricular activities. Having a sense of connection to the school is a vital step in reconnecting disengaged learners. Through the implementation of strategies that promote student engagement, educators can generate a more vibrant and effective learning environment, leading to increased academic achievement and, potential high school completion.

Figure 7

Finn Participation-Identification Model



Note. From Hallinger, 2011.

Georgia secondary school leaders in this research study implemented ways to form genuine relationships with students through homerooms, club involvement, and partnership formation between home and school. Each school had a homeroom structure for students to create a meaningful relationship with a caring teacher over the course of their high school career. Homeroom units served as places where students were able to regularly interact with a caring adult and the same set of students, it became an “on-campus family unit.” Teachers were able to monitor students' academic progress, touch the basics with students regarding resources, and home life, and served as dependable emotional support.

Study participants were familiar with the needs of the students at their schools. Students who were at risk of dropping out of school had the support of a Graduation Coach or Data Interventionist in four of the five schools. The Graduation Coach/Data

Interventionist connected students with resources to alternative educational programs, clothing, school supplies, and food. Communities were created at all schools in this study to support the needs of at-risk students. The committees identified students who were at risk of dropping out of high school and developed individualized graduation plans to include online credit recovery, Option B, Dual Enrollment, or total immersion in online credit recovery courses, such as PLCs, or Ombudsman.

The Hallinger and Murphy Instructional Leadership Model (1985) identified traits of an instructional leader. One attribute of an effective instructional leader, according to the model, is related to the ability of the school leader to define the school's goal (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Research questions were developed that centered around the mission and vision statements of each school to comprehend how the school leaders articulated the vision to stakeholders and students.

Research Question 1

What are the life and career experiences of school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program and significantly decreasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit and increasing the school's graduation rate using online credit recovery software?

The study showed that all the leaders were compassionate and wanted their students to succeed, which is what anyone would hope for in education. The leaders formed their approach to working with at-risk students early on and were willing to make unpopular decisions if it helped their students. It's important for those in positions of influence to shape policies and procedures for the benefit of students. A lackluster educational leader can hinder student achievement. Their experience working with

socioeconomically disadvantaged, teen moms, credit deficient, transient, and special education students as teachers, helped develop them into leaders who were more than willing to assist students under their care obtain a high school diploma. Their early career experiences enabled them to better serve at-risk students. They were able to derive meaning from those experiences and use them to improve their skills.

Research Question 2

What organizational practices and strategies were used by school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program, significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credits at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rate?

Identification

All leaders in the research study had a clearly defined system for identifying students for online credit recovery. Each participant in the research study had access to the academic credit accumulation using their dedicated Georgia data collection system. Some school districts utilized PowerSchool while others utilized Infinite Campus. Within both databases, school personnel can run a query to determine the number of credits a student should have as opposed to what is currently recorded on their academic record. This query will alert school personnel to students who need to enroll in online credit recovery courses.

There was a transcript review system in place within each school in the research study. Each school had a "graduation committee or team" dedicated to helping students graduate. Having a dedicated board whose purpose was to review students' transcripts and recommend online credit recovery courses helped credit-deficient students graduate

with their cohort. Their role was useful when students wanted to drop out of high school. If a student wanted to withdraw from high school and was not transferring to another school, the student and their parents met with the graduation committee for an alternate solution to dropping out of school. Some students wanted to drop out of school because they lacked credits toward graduation and had fallen drastically behind. Meeting with the committee provided students and their families with options for credit acquisition. In some cases, students may have to enroll in a Performance Learning Center or Ombudsman, in other instances students could enroll in online credit recovery classes. Having conversations with students and their families before dropping out may not always prevent students from leaving high school before graduation, but it equips students and their families with the available options.

Henry Ford High Schools leader, Mrs. Patrick, provided insight into the procedures employed by the registrar at her school. The registrar ensured proper coding of each student who withdrew from Henry Ford. Proper coding of students who withdraw can ensure a student is not miscounted as a dropout, when in fact the student transferred to another school district. Maintaining student records and tracking students who withdraw can help schools code schools correctly. Miscoding and/or inaccurate reporting of student withdrawals can lower a school's graduation rate. To increase graduation rates, schools have to maintain accurate state reporting of student deaths, withdrawals, and transfers.

Personnel

Warrior High School was the only school in the research study without a graduation coach. However, Mr. Watkin's staff formed a dedicated team to identify at-

risk students. The team at Warrior High School consisted of administrators, counselors, and teachers. The role of the team was to identify students at risk of dropping out of high school. The team at Warrior reviewed student transcripts and enrolled students in homeroom classes with teachers who were previously identified as working well with at-risk students. These students reviewed their grades in their online classes and were aware of the academic progression. Strategically placing students with adults who are willing and capable of expressing concern and support is necessary for helping students remain in high school.

The remaining high schools in the research study had access to a dedicated graduation coach. The graduation coach, along with counselors and school administrators, worked to identify students who were at risk of not graduating due to lack of credits. Having a person whose primary role is to identify and assist at-risk students was a vital resource to the leaders in this study. Each leader referenced time and time again during the interview process how the graduation coach was able to reach many students. The roles of administrators and counselors are demanding. Having someone who is solely dedicated to ensuring credit-deficient students are enrolled in online classes for graduation and helping at-risk students in all other sundry areas in which they need assistance is priceless. School districts can benefit from the addition of a graduation coach because their work spans many areas. Graduation coaches assist with credits, truancy, resource identification, and allocation, as well as reconnecting students to school.

All four high schools, Henry Ford, Langley, Propel, and Warrior, had online credit recovery programs staffed by certified teachers. Staffing online credit recovery

programs provides students access to academic assistance if needed. Students who have previously failed a course, and are enrolled in online credit recovery courses, may have a lack of knowledge in specific areas of the curriculum. When students have access to certified personnel the opportunity to increase their knowledge of previously failed content increases. If certified content instructors are accessible, then students are not being “babysat” in the online setting. The student can ask questions and expand their learning experience. Investing in online personnel who are certified may be costlier than staffing an online credit recovery class with a non-certified teacher. If increasing student achievement is important to the leader, providing students with the chance to learn missed content is vital.

Multiple Opportunities to Recover Lost Credits

Each school in the research study had numerous opportunities for students to earn lost credits toward graduation. Students were able to earn credits during academic blocks at all of the schools in the research study. Students could attend an off-campus school for additional credit if they attended Langley High School. Students who attended Propel were able to earn their academic credits during the school day. These students were able to earn additional credit for a study skills course counting as an elective. This would allow credit-deficient students to earn five credits within the semester. Warrior High School provided credit-deficient students with the opportunity to earn additional credits during the academic day, before and after school, and during the summer. Henry Ford students were able to take online credit recovery with a certified teacher. The students also had the option of recovering a credit in a hybrid format, with a part online and part face-to-face, as well as during the summer months.

Allowing students multiple opportunities to take an online class gives students who work, have children, or have other life demands a chance to recover credits when outside of the traditional 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. school day. Therefore, a student can honor their obligations and complete their online work in a timeframe conducive to their life circumstances. The reevaluation of the paradigm that school is legitimized by a particular teacher, teaching a particular way, during particular hours Monday through Friday has to shift to meet the needs of students. Students are facing insurmountable challenges necessitating the flexibility to complete academic content outside of the brick-and-mortar setting while requiring some degree of emotional connection to school personnel.

Willingness to Refer Students for Outside Assistance

Mrs. Patrick did not hesitate to refer students who needed additional academic support to other educational opportunities outside of Henry Ford High School. Early in her career as a Graduation Coach, Mrs. Patrick referred students who were unable to pass the Georgia High School Graduation Test to the Ombudsman, although the students would not receive a Georgia High School diploma and the students would count as a dropout. Her ideology towards impacting student achievement has not wavered over the years. Mrs. Patrick and specified staff dedicated to increasing graduation rates will refer students to the Ombudsman for online credit recovery courses if the student is severely deficient in academic credit and Ombudsman is the only means for the student to graduate on time. Mrs. Patrick, guidance counselors, and Data interventionists also seek the assistance of Mrs. Aldrin from Propel Academy for students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. Students who leave Henry Ford to attend Propel under the tutelage of Mrs. Aldrin are often offered Option B to complete the requirements towards

graduation. Option B students remain on campus with Mrs. Aldrin to complete their high school credits in a hybrid format and earn a technical certificate in their pathway of choice. Credit-deficient students can attend Propel Academy and earn credits towards graduation, increase their GPA to qualify for admission into the technical program, and begin working towards Option B or a regular diploma option.

Mrs. Norwood's students have the choice to leave Langley High School to attend an alternative placement for credit-deficient students within the district. Langley students can return upon completion and receive a diploma from Langley High School or they can receive a high school diploma from the PLC high school. Mrs. Norwood gives students the information they need to make an informed decision before they enroll in Langley.

Mr. Watkin's students have the option of attending a PLC high school within his school district. The students who attend the PLC high school will receive a high school diploma from Warrior High School after increasing their credits. There is no option to attend Ombudsman for Warrior and Langley students. Having the option to offer credit recovery opportunities to those students who are severely credit deficient is paramount in increasing high school graduation rates.

The removal of ego and the replacement of compassion was evident in each leader. The principals in this study genuinely wanted to increase student achievement in the form of increased graduation rates because they were devoted to their student's quality of life post-high school. Each leader wanted their students to achieve a high school diploma even if it meant the student had to leave their school and earn the diploma elsewhere. The leaders were more attached to the academic outcomes of their students than the gains of their high schools. Principals in this study were not afraid to push their

students towards non-traditional placements for them to earn a high school diploma. The students' long-term quality of life was important to each leader. Mrs. Norwood, wanted her students to earn a high school diploma because, she expressed, "I did not want them subjected to 30 years of working in the chicken processing industry." Mrs. Aldrin went to the hospital when her student was giving birth to ensure the teen mother completed her requirements toward graduation. Mrs. Patrick conferenced with parents to explore other paths toward graduation; dropping out was not an option. Mr. Watkins and his staff put the mental health of students above and beyond everything because they knew students struggle to learn when their basic needs are not met or they are depressed. Mr. Andrews took work packets to students in jail because he wanted them to know there was hope awaiting them upon release. In each instance, these leaders could have turned their backs on their students, but their motivation for students' well beings was their "why."

Data Review

Increasing high school graduation rates did not rest on the shoulders of the principal alone. In each building, a team of stakeholders gathered frequently to discuss the achievement of students identified as, "at-risk." This population of students was well known to members of each staff. Schools created teams or committees to review student attendance, grades, test scores, and credits. After reviewing this information, action plans were devised to assist students who fell into the category of "at-risk."

The team at Warrior, per Mr. Watkins, "Met often with the sole focus of data disaggregation to target and place them into the program." Warrior High School reviewed student data and placed students in varying Tiers based on need. The graduation team assigned students to a homeroom teacher who reviewed academic progression with

students regularly. Langley High School created a data review committee after attending a dropout prevention conference. The data committee reviewed the credits of high school seniors in its inaugural year. In the years to follow, Langley implemented a data review committee for each grade level. Henry Ford students met with counselors, graduation coaches, and administrators to determine their appropriate placement for credit recovery. Student data files were accessed and reviewed regularly by each participant in this study. Data were retrieved from state databases such as Infinite Campus or PowerSchool. Data review teams/committees ran queries to quickly identify students who were at risk of dropping out.

The data review process was not only integral in determining which students needed enrollment in online credit recovery programs, but it was also helpful in determining which online credit recovery program best met the needs of the student. The use of queries provided graduation teams/committees with a snapshot of the potential needs of the student. The graduation teams met with students to attempt to determine how they became in need of additional academic support. Meeting with students provided teams with an opportunity to know the student beyond the data. The students were not just “data” to leaders in this study. Students were a culmination of their experiences, needs, and historical data to members of the graduation teams/committees. Looking beyond the numbers allowed leaders the opportunity to identify areas of potential support. For instance, Warrior High School referred students to Georgia Hope for additional mental health services if needed. All study participants were allocated resources if a need was identified.

One of the job duties of the registrars at Henry Ford and Warrior High Schools was to review student enrollment and withdrawal data. The review ensured the appropriate coding was administered to each student who withdrew. Maintaining accurate coding of student withdrawals may help increase graduation rates because the student is coded as a transfer student, instead of a dropout. Each school must account for students within a specific cohort. Following up when students withdraw to another school or district to make sure the student reported to school helps maintain accurate records. All secondary schools are advised to have dedicated personnel to track transfer students.

Research Question 3

What were some of the barriers encountered by school administrators responsible for effectively utilizing an online credit recovery program, significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credits at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rate?

Teacher's Perceptions of Online Credit Recovery

Study participants identified teacher perceptions of online credit recovery programs as a barrier they encountered while attempting to increase student achievement amongst at-risk students. When students fail a course in a traditional face-to-face, brick-and-mortar setting and have to retake the course on an online platform, the initial teacher may perceive a decline in academic rigor by using the online platform. All study participants cited the perceptions of teachers in the face-to-face, traditional classroom were anti-online credit recovery, yet each stated the coursework in an online credit recovery class, such as Edgenuity was arduous and provided students the necessary academic rigor. Online credit recovery courses are aligned with Georgia State Standards.

Teachers who were against online credit recovery programs, Mrs. Aldrin called “gatekeepers of knowledge.” The overreaching theme regarding teachers as barriers to online credit recovery programs was the resistance to embracing online learning as a viable alternative to redeeming a lost credit due to initial course failure.

The negative perceptions of the teachers regarding online credit recovery programs did not hinder leaders from referring students to online credit recovery course options. The credit recovery programs were staffed by certified teachers. Therefore, the disapproving perceptions did not diminish the vision of school leaders to assist at-risk learners to graduate with their cohort. Staffing online credit recovery programs with a certified teacher may have been a way to increase the perception of academic rigor amongst teachers who were against online credit recovery programs.

The negative perception of online credit recovery programs was an internal barrier for secondary leaders. Participants had to reiterate the importance of successful student outcomes to teachers who opposed online credit recovery as an option for a failed course. The leaders were advocates for students retaking courses. The major barrier was overcoming the perception of teachers that online credit recovery was not as effective and lacked academic rigor. The opposing teachers perceived the traditional face-to-face course model as the “best” way to learn. Therefore, their perception was that students who did not retake the course through them and sit in their class or a similar face-to-face class lacked an appropriate education. This opposition from teachers established the dynamic of a teacher’s being the “gatekeeper” of knowledge.

Implications of the Study

As we move into the post-Covid Era, it is crucial for school leaders to prioritize the support of all students. Many students are grappling with challenges such as supporting their families, dealing with mental health issues, and facing food insecurities. Despite the fact that the graduation rate in Georgia has increased, there is still room for improvement. (Georgia Department of Education, 2023) The graduation rate in Georgia is 84.1%, which is lower than the national public high school adjusted rate cohort of 87% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023). The quality of life for a high school graduate is far greater than those who drop out. One way to boost graduation rates is by offering students numerous chances to make up lost credits from previous course failures. Additionally, fostering a sense of belonging to the school environment may be beneficial to their mental well-being.

Homeroom

In this study, the importance of relationship building was exemplified by all participants. Each leader was invested in the formation of genuine teacher-student relationships. There was a homeroom unit established at each school in which students could connect with a familiar adult over the course of their high school enrollment. The high schools in the research study had a steady increase in graduation rates, which may be attributed to the relationships established through homeroom placement. Students at Henry Ford High School remained with the same teacher from 9th-12th grades. Warrior High School students who demonstrated a need for credit recovery and who were at risk of dropping out of school were placed in a homeroom with a teacher who had experience providing a supportive setting for at-risk learners. These findings suggest providing

students with a strategically selected adult and “pod” of students for four years could help increase the connection of at-risk students to school. Mr. Watkins, principal at Warrior High School, paired students with teachers who had a history of working well with at-risk student populations.

Before 9th-grade enrollment, counselors and administrators from the middle and high school could meet to identify students who may need additional support throughout their high school career. The secondary leader could place students who need additional support with teachers who have expressed an interest in working with at-risk populations or who have done well with this group of students. Every student cannot play a sport or join the band; however, having a homeroom allows students to connect with a familiar adult and students over the duration of their high school enrollment. It would be ideal for students to remain with the same teacher and classmates from 9th grade through the 12th grade.

Relationship Building

The principals in this research study were not the stereotypical stern and unapproachable school leaders. All of the leaders in this study displayed a “human” side to the role of principal. Mrs. Patrick was affectionately known as PrinciPal. Her experience of not knowing her school principal developed her viewpoint on the role of the school principal. Mr. Watkins created motivational video messages for students at Warrior during the COVID-19 lockdown. Mrs. Aldrin learned hair techniques from a student who previously called her a bitch. Mr. Andrews sent work packets to his students locked up in jail so they would not fail behind. Mrs. Norwood took the time to learn the needs of the families in the community she served. She tried to get her student to see the

value of an education when the young man's hands were scratched by chickens at the processing plant. All of the leaders in this research study had a connection to their students' life outcomes. They wanted what was best for their students long-term. Their concerns for their students were not driven to increase graduation rates, yet increasing graduation rates could have been a byproduct of their efforts. The leaders viewed their students beyond the data. The students were not a number or demographic, they were children with futures. Each leader had the same "give a damn" mentality Mr. Andrews talked about. These findings suggested that school leaders must not view their students as "data." Leaders must examine and attempt to meet the needs of the whole child when able. Meeting the needs of the whole child includes providing connections to agencies that can support the growth and wholeness of students. In addition, providing resources such as school supplies, food pantries, clothing, and shoes when the school is able could be another example of addressing students' needs.

Mr. Watkins provided students with access to outside mental health resources to help students who were struggling. All students had access to some form of mental health services, a food pantry, and additional resources if needed. Establishing on-site clothes closet for students may help students who do not come to school because of the lack of adequate clothes and shoes. Having a food pantry or providing students with additional food over long breaks and weekends could benefit students who are food insecure. Providing students with access to mental health support beyond the offerings of the school counselor may help those learners who are struggling with depression, suicidal thoughts, or other mental health challenges.

Graduation Coach

Warrior High School was the only high school in the research study that did not have a dedicated graduation coach on staff. The other school leaders referenced the importance of their graduation coaches concerning increasing student achievement. The findings in this study suggest that schools that can fund a graduation coach may consider employing someone to work full-time with the sole purpose of increasing graduation rates and working with at-risk student populations. The duties of school administrators and counselors are overwhelming. Having a person who identifies at-risk students, helps provide resources, and oversees enrollment in credit recovery programs will centralize the focus of at-risk students to specified personnel. School leaders and counselors would have a dedicated person who is trained in targeted interventions in preventing dropouts and helping at-risk learners. The creation of interventions and strategies would not rest on the shoulders of the principal. Graduation Coaches would have the ability to monitor student truancy, and academic failures, and allocate resources when needed. Having dedicated school personnel for at-risk learners may increase the likelihood of high school graduation and create a path for possible reconnection to school for students who have withdrawn or who are low achieving.

Online Credit Recovery Courses

Students were enrolled in online credit recovery classes to increase lost academic credits due to previous course failures. Staffing of the online credit recovery classes was an initial and well thought out process for the leaders in this study. Students had the assistance of certified teacher in credit recovery classes in four out of the five schools. Having a certified teacher in credit recovery classes provides students with the

opportunity to seek assistance in from a teacher who may have experience teaching the content area in which the student retaking. Teams of stakeholders were responsible for identifying students who may need online credit recovery classes. The teams met regularly to discuss student progression in the online course. Frequently monitoring student attendance and progression in online classes may help students complete online courses faster and may alert online instructors when students are struggling. If possible, school leaders should staff credit recovery courses with certified teachers. Students who are enrolled in online credit recovery have already failed in traditional settings and may require the expertise of content teachers for clarification. Rotating different certified teachers in before and after school sessions may afford students the chance to obtain assistance in multiple content areas. For example, schools could have a dedicated certified teacher to teach credit recovery during the academic day. Monday through Friday rotate between a science, math, English, and social studies teacher before and after school. Students who need additional support in those areas may be able to attend before or after school to access the specific required support.

Offering credit recovery before, during, and after school will allow more students the opportunity to attend classes. Numerous students have stresses outside of school which may hinder their ability to attend online credit recovery classes. The schools in this study had multiple opportunities for students to take online credit recovery classes. Students who are credit deficient may not be able to take online credit recovery during the academic day because they may have to complete other credits towards graduation. Offering classes during the summer is a viable option for students in grades 9th -11th who are credit deficient. Depending on the circumstances, taking classes during the

summer could get the student back on track with their cohort in the fall. Offering credit recovery classes on Saturdays may help students who work, play sports, or have after-school obligations recover lost credits also. Not every school district has access to Ombudsman or a Performance Learning Center. Creating various opportunities to register students in online credit recovery may help students recover lost credits.

Schools have to identify outside resources to address the needs of severely credit deficient learner. When students have failed multiple credits and recovering credits towards graduation cannot take place with on-campus online credit recovery, the leader may have to recommend credit recovery intense programs. Placement in programs such as Ombudsman, Performance Learning Centers, or in-district online credit recovery programs are recommended. Having knowledge of the entrance requirements prior to attempting to enroll students is helpful. Leaders should select a designated school-level person to facilitate enrollment in off-campus credit recovery programs. This person should have knowledge of program acceptance requirements and regularly monitor the progress of the student's advancement in courses.

Limitations of the Study

Intending to provide in-depth transparency, it is critical to identify the limitations of this research study. This research study was specific to Georgia secondary school leaders whose graduation rates continually increased on an annual basis. High schools located in states other than Georgia were not eligible for participation. Schools that did not have a consecutive increase in graduation rates were not considered. The sample was purposefully selected, except for Mrs. Aldrin who was referred to the study by Mr. Andrews and Mrs. Patrick. Research participants had to be secondary leaders within

Georgia whose respective school's graduation rates increased consecutively each academic year while using online credit recovery software to assist credit-deficient students. Secondary schools within the state of Georgia were not considered for participation if their location was in proximity to an urban or large city.

The study participation period occurred during the later phase of COVID-19. Although I attempted to interview participants in other school systems who met the research requirements, invitations to participate in the study were not acknowledged through numerous attempts. The sample population is not an accurate reflection of other schools within Georgia that met the research criteria. The results of this research study are not necessarily representative of other secondary schools within Georgia that used online credit recovery software and increased their high school graduation rates.

Recommendations for Future Research

There have been numerous studies regarding teacher perceptions of online credit recovery programs. In this research study, one emergent theme was adult perceptions of online credit recovery courses as a barrier encountered by school leaders. Most leaders in the study staffed their online credit recovery programs with a certified teacher to assist students who had previously failed an academic course. Further research should explore whether teacher perceptions of online credit recovery programs vary based on staffing of the online credit recovery program. A future researcher may want to explore the perception of the effectiveness of online credit recovery programs concerning the staffing of certified or non-certified personnel.

Relationship building was another emergent theme in this research study. All study participants employed a homeroom system to track student attendance, conduct

needs assessments, and build relationships. Researching the perceptions of the importance of homerooms in preventing dropouts is another topic for deeper exploration. Schools have attempted to connect students with mentors or caring adults over the past decade. Homerooms allow students to connect with an adult over their matriculation through high school. The homeroom setting also provides students with a familiar group of peers with whom they may be able to formulate a “school family.” Finn’s Model of Participation and Identification discussed the importance of a student feeling connected to the school. The homeroom model provides a way for students to connect with familiar adults and students.

Conclusion

This research study sought to understand the lived experiences of Georgia secondary school leaders whose graduation rates increased consecutively while using online credit recovery software. The leaders in this research study formed their leadership philosophies early in their careers. It was apparent that each leader was invested in the long-term success of their students. The motivation of each leader appeared to be what was best for students. The leaders did not have a problem being an advocate for at-risk students. Their early career experiences appeared to mold the leaders into what they identified as important for student achievement.

The work of increasing student achievement does not rest solely upon the shoulders of the principal. Each school represented in this study formed a committee/team to support at-risk students. It was the ideas and efforts of the entire committee/teams, teachers, counselors, and administration that helped increase student achievement. Although the task of placing the mission and vision of a school is the

responsibility of the school leader, key stakeholders must assist in the execution of the mission and vision. The work of keeping the mission and vision at the forefront of an organization is a daily task that requires the initial actions of all stakeholders.

Leaders in this study utilized online credit recovery software as a targeted intervention to address credit deficiencies. Edgenuity was the most popular online credit recovery software used by study participants. Most schools in the study had certified staff to oversee the operations of online credit recovery courses. The rationale for employing certified staff instead of classified staff was to assist struggling students. Credit-deficient students may require additional support because they have to retake a previously failed course to earn credits. The leaders viewed online credit recovery courses as an essential option for students who needed to earn credits lost due to course failure. Therefore, viable resources were allocated to the online credit recovery program in the form of certified, strategically hired staff, numerous opportunities to take online classes during the school day, and off-campus sites for severely credit-deficient students. School leaders must be willing to provide students with numerous chances to earn credits towards graduation, even if it means students have to take non-traditional routes toward the acquisition of a high school diploma. Employing certified educators to facilitate online credit recovery classes may be useful if students encounter difficulty. Having the support of a certified teacher who monitors students' performance and progression may encourage students to complete coursework promptly. Students can receive assistance from certified staff, they may remain vested in completing the program.

Staff members with proven abilities and willingness to support and advocate for at-risk students were placed as homeroom teachers at Warrior High School to assist low-

performing learners. In Langley's first year of addressing credit deficiency, the staff identified students in need of additional support and developed a plan of action with their senior teachers. Mrs. Patrick from Henry Ford met with stakeholders to determine placement for students in need of credit interventions. School leaders should identify staff who are capable of addressing the unique needs of at-risk students. These teachers should possess a passion to help students, be supportive, and encourage students to graduate. At-risk students could have a case manager or homeroom teacher who monitors their progress through high school. Having a specific person who checks in with the student regularly helps foster a connection between the school and the student. Student connections are essential to students identifying with the school and maintaining student engagement.

Based upon need, some students were enrolled in online credit recovery classes at Henry Ford, while other students took classes at Propel under Option B or Ombudsman. Mrs. Aldrin placed students in Option B at Propel, while assisting them in their transition into technical college courses. School counselors, graduation coaches, and school leaders should seek to identify the needs of each at-risk student. Creating a graduation plan, similar to an IEP in special education, could help at-risk students get on track for graduation. The graduation plan could include information such as the number of credits, credit recovery strategies, grades, attendance, discipline history, and career pathways. Each student's career interest information is accessible through the GAfutures state database. Reviewing this information can help counselors guide students in career pathway selection. Counselors, graduation coaches, and leaders should inform parents of Option B early in students' high school matriculation. Option B should not only be

utilized as the “magic bullet” when a student indicates they want to drop out of high school. Option B is a viable alternative to a traditional high school diploma. Guiding students toward a technical certificate and high school diploma may encourage students to remain in school. Inform parents of Option B upon entrance into 9th grade and help students identify career paths.

Teams of administrators, graduation coaches, counselors, and teachers within each school were created with the sole purpose of identifying and guiding students who needed to enroll in online credit recovery courses. Warrior High School had different tiers of intervention depending on the level of credit deficiency. Langley High School provided opportunities for students to take classes during the academic day and after school. Students could also withdraw from Langley and attend a school for severely credit-deficient students and return to Langley when they have recovered their lost credits. The Data Interventionist and guidance counselors identified Henry Ford students for enrollment in online credit recovery courses. Students who were at risk of dropping out had the option of attending Ombudsman or Propel Academy under Option B.

Each secondary school provided online credit recovery courses during flexible times. The flexibility allowed teen parents to take care of their responsibilities and attend online classes at their convenience. Langley students were able to attend a satellite high school for credit recovery course completion instead of the Ombudsman. Warrior students were able to attend a branch of Communities in Schools if they were severely credit deficient. Students who had to work to contribute to their family unit were also able to take advantage of the flexibility of classes because they could take courses half day if enrolled in Ombudsman if they attended Henry Ford High School. Those who

wanted to earn a trade could take reduced high school courses under Option B and complete a certificate program at a technical school. This undertaking would prepare the learner to enter the workforce gainfully employed, and ready to contribute to society upon graduation. Gone are the days when learning is confined to the constraints of 7:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. in a brick-and-mortar secondary school. The leaders in this research study removed the barriers to a high school diploma by removing the time and location for recovering high school credits. For some students, a high school diploma became obtainable when they were able to complete assignments on their terms.

Online credit recovery courses in this research student were successful because the leaders had non-conventional ideologies to address the mission and vision of increasing student achievement. To increase student achievement, a leader has to be willing to try something different. An example of exploring alternative approaches to increase student outcomes is Warrior High School's intervention model. The Warrior model was multi-tiered based on student needs. Students were provided referrals to off-campus mental health agencies to provide the best support for students who required more intense services offered by a school-based counselor. I anticipate a need for schools to address the mental health crisis students face may encounter in a post-COVID 19 America. The grief, anxiety, and depression from the pandemic are now experiences of school children during their time at school that manifest in the form of crying in younger children and bullying and aggression in teens (Vestal, 2021).

Schools have attempted to connect students with mentors or caring adults over the past decade. Homerooms allow students to connect with an adult over their matriculation through high school. The homeroom setting also provides students with a familiar group

of peers with whom they may be able to formulate a “school family.” Finn’s Model of Participation and Identification discussed the importance of a student feeling connected to the school. The homeroom model provides a way for students to connect with familiar adults and students. Creating a secure place for students to meet with a familiar adult each academic year allows teachers the opportunity to monitor students under their care. The homeroom teacher can track attendance trends and help prevent truancy by reporting student absences to social workers.

Increasing and sustaining long-range student achievement is the result of the efforts of various steadfast and empathetic staff members. Invoking systemic transformation within an organization is the byproduct of strategic planning, accountability, and collaboration. Although the principal is the leader, the duty of rising graduation rates does not solely rest upon the shoulders of the principal. Hiring personnel who are willing to help, reassure, educate, and advocate for at-risk learners is an essential role of the principal. The mission and vision statements of the organization are based on a catchy slogan that collects dust and no one remembers. The mission and vision statements are used to influence an organization toward its objective. Increasing student achievement will always be the mission and vision of schools, it is why they are in existence. What must not be forgotten in the process of increasing student achievement is the, “why.” The adults may have to remember what brought them into the field of education and the barriers they faced as students. When students are connected to their school and have compassionate adults who are devoted to their success, the milestone of graduation is obtainable.

REFERENCES

- Addis, S., & Withington, C. (2016, September). *Improving high school graduation rates among males of color* (Issue brief). National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University. Princeton, NJ: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
- Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2007, July). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year* [Research report]. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved from www.consortium.uchicago.edu
- Alliance for Excellence in Education. (2013, June). The high cost of high school dropouts: What the nation pays for inadequate high schools. *Alliance for Excellence in Education*. Retrieved from <https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/HighCost.pdf>
- Al-Zoubi, S. M., & Younes, M. A. B. (2015). Low academic achievement: Causes and results. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(11), 2262–2268. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0511.09>
- Anney, V. (2014) Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(2), 272-281. Retrieved from <http://jeteraps.scholarlinkresearch.com/abstractview.php?id=19>.
- Ansell, S. E. (2004, September 10). Achievement gap. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/achievement-gap/2004/09>

Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Fallu, J. S., & Pagani, L. S. (2009). Student engagement and its relationship with early high school dropout. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32(3), 651–670. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2008.06.007>

Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Fallu, J. S., & Pagani, L. S. (2009). Student engagement and its relationship with early high school dropout. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 651–670. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2008.06.007>

Aurora, H. (2019, December 20). *For struggling students, recovery where credit is due*. Retrieved from www.innovateli.com

Autor, D. H. (2014). Skills, education, and the rise of earnings inequality among the “other 99 percent.” *Science*, 344, 843–851. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1251868>

Balfanz, R. H., & Herzog, L. L. & Mac Iver, D. (2006). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation track in high-poverty middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235.

Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J. M., Hornig Fox, J., DePaoli, J. L., Ingram, E. S., & Maushard, M. (2014, April). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic* (Annual update). America’s Promise. Retrieved from www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/17548_BGN_Report_FinalFULL_5.2.14.pdf

- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist*, 28, 117–148.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep2802_3
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Barbour, M. K. (2011). The promise and the reality: Exploring virtual schooling in rural jurisdictions. *Education in Rural Australia*, 21(1), 1–19. Retrieved from
<https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/589/720>
- Barbour, M. K. (2017). The state of K-12 online learning. In J. G. Cibulka & B. S. Cooper (Eds.), *Technology in the classroom: Can it improve teaching and student learning in American schools?* (pp. 37–51). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Barbour, M. K., & Reeves, T. C. (2009). The reality of virtual schools: A review of the literature. *Computers & Education*, 52, 402–416.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2008.09.009>
- Barnum, M., Belsha, K., & Wilburn, T. (2022, January 24). *Graduation rates dip across the U.S. as pandemic stalls progress*. Chalkbeat. Retrieved from
<https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/1/24/22895461/2021-graduation-rates-decrease-pandemic>
- Beekhoven, S. & Dekkers, H. (2005). The influence of participation, identification, and parental resources on the early school leaving of boys in the lower educational track. *European Educational Research Journal*, 4(3), 195-207.
<https://doi.org/10.2304/eeerj.2005.4.3.4>

- Benoot, C., Hannes, K. & Bilsen, J. (2016). The use of purposeful sampling in a qualitative evidence synthesis: A worked example on sexual adjustment to a cancer trajectory. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 16(21).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-016-0114-6>
- Berg, N., & Nelson, T. (2016). Pregnancy and dropout: effects of family, neighborhood, and high school characteristics on girls' fertility and dropout status. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 35(6), 757-789. Retrieved from
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26158965>
- Bhat, M. A., & Mehraj, A. (2013). Academic achievement of secondary school students in relation to self-concept and parental encouragement. *International Journal of Recent Scientific Research*, 4, 738–741. Retrieved from
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262689649_academic_achievement_of_secondary_school_students_in_relation_to_self-concept_and_parental_encouragement
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. F. (2016). *Completing your dissertation: A road map from beginning to end*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bomia, L., Beluzo, L., Demeester, D., Elander, K., Johnson, M., & Sheldon, B. (1997). *The impact of teaching strategies on intrinsic motivation*. ERIC database (ED418825).

- Boser, U. (2012, March 26). *Race to the Top: What have we learned from states so far? A state-by-state evaluation of Race to the Top performance*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/race-to-the-top-what-have-we-learned-from-the-states-so-far/>
- Bowers, A. J., Sprott, R., & Taff, S. A. (2013). Do we know who will drop out? A review of the predictors of dropping out of high school: Precision, sensitivity and specificity. *The High School Journal*, *96*, 77–100.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2013.0000>
- Bradshaw, C. P., O'Brennan, L. M., & McNeely, C. A. (2008). Core competencies and the prevention of school failure and early school leaving. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *2008*(122), 19–32.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.226>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., Jr., & Morison, K. B. (2006, March). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises & Peter D. Hart Research Associates. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED513444.pdf>
- Brolund, L. (2016). Student success through instructional leadership. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, *8*(2), 42-45. ERIC: EJ1230490. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230490.pdf>

- Brown, N. (2022). Scope and continuum of participatory research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 45(2), 200–211.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2021.1902980>
- Burrus, J. & Roberts, R. (Feb 2012). Dropping out of high school: Prevalence, risk factors, and remediation strategies. *R&D Connections*, 18. Retrieved from https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RD_Connections18.pdf
- Bustamante, J. (2019, September 23). High school dropout rate.
<https://educationdata.org/high-school-dropout-rate/>
- Carnevale, A. P., Rose, S. J., & Cheah, B. (2011). *The college payoff: Education, occupations, lifetime earnings*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/reg/hearulemaking/2011/collegepayoff.pdf>
- Carr, S. (2014). Credit recovery hits the mainstream. *Education Next*, 14(3), 31–36.
www.educationnext.org
- Cawthon, T. W. (2016, June 8). National Dropout Prevention Center. In *South Carolina encyclopedia*. University of South Carolina, Institute for Southern Studies.
Retrieved from <https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/national-dropout-prevention-center/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Charmaz, K. (2015) *Qualitative research: Grounded theory: What is it?*
Retrieved from <http://guides.temple.edu/groundedtheory>
- Ciric, M., & Jovanovic, D. (2016, April). *Student engagement as a multidimensional concept*. Paper presented at World LUMEN Congress, Iasi, Romania.
- Civic Enterprises. (2019). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in raising high school graduation rates*. Everyone Graduates Center. Retrieved from https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/18930_Civic_BGN_FinalReport_v6.pdf
- Clark, T. (2003). Virtual and distance education in American schools. In M. G. Moore & W. G. Anderson (Eds.), *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 673–699). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Clark, T., & Barbour, M. K. (Eds.). (2015). *Online, blended and distance education: Building successful school programs*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers.
- Coates, H. (2007). A model of online and general campus-based student engagement. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(2), 121–141.
- Coleman, J. S. (1966). *Equality of Educational opportunity (Coleman) Study (EEOS), 1966 (ICPSR 6389)*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.
- Cox, A. (2018, March 9). *The current education system is failing our students* [Web log post]. EdSurge Independent. Retrieved from www.edsurgeindependent.com/the-current-education-system-is-failing-our-students-b35614943541
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage

- Crow, L. D., & Crow, A. (1956). *Adolescent development and adjustment*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Daniel, E. (2016). The usefulness of qualitative and quantitative and approaches methods in researching and problem-solving ability in science education curriculum. *The Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(15), 91–98. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1103224.pdf>
- Davis, J., Ruhe, J., Lee, M., & Rajadhyaksha, U. (2007). Mission possible: Do school mission statements work? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 70(1), 99-110. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25075273>
- De La Rosa, S. (2019, May 24). *Online credit recovery problems linger* [Web log post]. K–12 Dive. Retrieved from <https://www.educationdive.com/news/online-credit-recovery-problems-linger/555303/>
- De Witte, K., Cabus, S., Thyssen, G., Groot, W., & van den Brink, H. M. (2013). A critical review of the literature on school dropout. *Educational Research Review*, 10(December), 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2013.05.002>
- Decatur Rotary Club. (2022). PAGE STAR awards luncheon returns to the historic Dekalb courthouse Feb 10. *Imagine Rotary*. Retrieved from <https://www.decaturrerotaryga.org/stories/page-star-awards-luncheon-returns-to-the-historic-dekalb-courthouse-feb-10>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York, NY: Plenum.

- Deming, D. J., & Figlio, D. (2016). Accountability in U.S. education: Applying lessons from K–12 experience to higher education. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30(3), 33–56. Retrieved from <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdf/10.1257/jep.30.3.33>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DePaoli, J. L., Atwell, M. N., & Bridgeland, J. (2017). *Ready to lead: A national principal survey on how social and emotional learning can prepare children and transform schools*. Civic Enterprises with Hart Research Associates.
- DePaoli, J. L., Balfanz, R., Atwell, M. N., & Bridgeland, J. (2018). *Building a graduation nation: Progress and challenge in raising high school graduation rates*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises and Everyone Graduates Center at the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University.
- DeVito, M. (2016). *Factors influencing student engagement* [Certificate of Advanced Study thesis, Sacred Heart University]. Digital Commons @ SHU. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=edl>
- Dhuey, E., & Smith, J. (2014). How important are school principals in the production of student achievement? *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 47(2), 634-663. <https://doi.org/10.1111/caje.12086>

- Doll, J. J., Eslami, Z., & Walters, L. (2013). Understanding why students drop out of high school, according to their own reports: Are they pushed or pulled, or do they fall out? A comparative analysis of seven nationally representative studies. *SAGE Open*, 2013(October–December), 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013503834>
- du Plessis, P. (2013). The principal as instructional leader: Guiding schools to improve instruction. *Education as Change*, 17(sup1), S79–S92.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2014.865992>
- Duckenfield, M., & Reynolds, B. (2013, February). *School climate and dropout prevention*. National School Climate Center. Retrieved from
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED584517.pdf>
- Dupéré, V., Dion, E., Leventhal, T., Archamubalt, I., Crosnoe, R., & Janosz, M. (2017). High school dropout in proximal context: The triggering role of stressful events. *Society for Research in Child Development*, 89(2), e107–e122.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12792>
- Ecker-Lyster, M., & Niileksela, C. (2016). Keeping students on track to graduate: A synthesis of school dropout trends, prevention, and intervention initiatives. *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, 19(2), 24-31. Retrieved from
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1117591.pdf>
- Egalite, A. (2016). How family background influences student achievement: Can schools narrow the gap? *Education Next*, 16(2). Retrieved from
<https://www.educationnext.org/how-family-background-influences-student-achievement/>

- Egalite, A., & Kisida, B. (2018). The effects of teacher match on students' academic perceptions and attitudes. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 40(1), 59-81. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373717714056>
- Farmer, T., Robinson, K., Elliott, S. J., & Eyles, J. (2006). Developing and implementing a triangulation protocol for qualitative health research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(3), 377-394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305285708>
- Farmer, T., Robinson, K., Elliott, S. J., & Eyles, J. (2006). Developing and implementing a triangulation protocol for qualitative health research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(3), 377-394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305285708>
- Federal Communications Commission. (1952). *Fourth report and order*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research*, 59, 117-142. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543059002117>
- Finn, J. D. (1993, August). *School engagement and students at risk*. Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93470a.pdf>
- Finn, J. D., & Cox, D. (1992). Participation and withdrawal among fourth-grade pupils. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(1), 141-162. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312029001141>
- Finn, J. D., & Zimmer, K. S. (2012). Student engagement: What is it? Why does it matter? In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 97-131). Boston, MA: Springer US.

- Fischer, C. T. (2009). Bracketing in qualitative research: Conceptual and practical matters. *Psychotherapy Research, 19*(4–5), 583–590.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10503300902798375>
- Flamm, M., & Chalasani, K. (2019, December 30). *Georgia dual enrollment and postsecondary outcomes*. Governor's Office of Student Achievement. Retrieved from
<https://gosa.georgia.gov/document/document/dualenrollmentfinalreport2019pdf/download>
- Flath, B. (1989). The principal as instructional leader. *ATA Magazines, 69*(3), 19-22, 47-49.
- Florida Virtual School. (n.d.). *About us*. Retrieved from <https://www.flvs.net/about-us#:~:text=FLVS%20provides%20a%20robust%2C%20award,Florida%20and%20around%20the%20world.>
- Fortin, L., Marcotte, D., Diallo, T., Potvin, P., & Royer, É. (2013). A multidimensional model of school dropout from an 8-year longitudinal study in a general high school population. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 28*, 563–583.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-012-0129-2>
- Fortin, L., Marcotte, D., Diallo, T., Potvin, P., & Royer, É. (2013). A multidimensional model of school dropout from an 8-year longitudinal study in a general high school population. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 28*(2), 563–583. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23421910>
- Foss, S. K. (2015). *Destination dissertation: A traveler's guide to a done dissertation* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Frazelle, S. (2016). *Successful strategies for providing online credit recovery in Montana*. Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED566109.pdf>
- Fredericks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 59–109. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059>
- Fulk, B. (2003). Concerns about ninth-grade students' poor academic performance: One school's action plan. *American Secondary Education*, 31(2), 8–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064483>
- Fusch, P. I., & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(9), 1408–1416. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/facpubs/455/>
- Gansemer-Topf, A., & Schuh, J. (2006). Institutional selectivity and institutional expenditures: Examining organizational factors that contribute to retention and graduation. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(6), 613-642. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40197570>
- Gates, S., Hamilton, L., Martorell, P., Burkhauser, S., Heaton, P., Pierson, A., Gu, K. (2014). New leaders partnerships. In S. M. Gates, L. S. Hamilton, P. Martorell, S. Burkhauser, P. Heaton, A. Pierson, M. Baird, M. Vuollo, J. J. Li, D. C. Lavery, M. Harvey, & K. Gu. (Eds.), *Preparing principals to raise student achievement: Implementation and effects of the new leaders program in ten districts* (pp. 37-58). RAND Corporation.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Georgia Department of Education. (2012-a). *Four-year adjusted cohort high school graduation rate*. Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/Four-year%20Adjusted%20Cohort%20High%20School%20Graduation%20Rate%20FAQ.docx>

Georgia Department of Education. (2012-b). *Georgia's Race to the Top (RT3) plan*. Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved from from <https://www.gadoe.org/Race-to-the-Top/Pages/default.aspx>

Georgia Department of Education. (2016, November 1). *Georgia's graduation rate increases for fifth straight year*. <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=488>

Georgia Department of Education. (2017, September 27). *Georgia's graduation rate increases for sixth straight year, tops 80 percent*. <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=567>

Georgia Department of Education. (2019, September 18). *Georgia's graduation rate continues to rise* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org>

Georgia Department of Education. (2021). *2021 four-year cohort graduation rate – All students*. Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/4-Year%20Cohort%20Graduation%20Rate%20State%20District%20School%20by%20Subgroup%2010.21.21.pdf#search=graduation%20rate%202021>

Georgia Department of Education. (2022). *Georgia high-school graduation rate rises in 2022*. Georgia Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Pages/PressReleaseDetails.aspx?PressView=default&pid=996#:~:text=%E2%80%8BOctober%206%2C%202022%20%E2%80%93%20Georgia's,up%20from%2083.7%25%20in%202021>

Georgia Department of Education. (2023, July 7). *Georgia's graduation rate raises in 2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org>

Georgia Department of Education. (n.d.-b). *Georgia Milestones Assessment System*. Retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Pages/Georgia-Milestones-Assessment-System.aspx>

Georgia Department of Education. (n.d.-c). *Georgia's Race to the Top (RT3) plan*. Retrieved from www.gadoe.org/Race-to-the-Top/Pages/default.aspx

Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement. (2021). *Downloadable data*. The State of Georgia. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov/dashboards-data-report-card/downloadable-data>

Georgia Virtual School. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.gavirtualschool.org/>

- Giorgi, A. (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Goldberg, A. E., & Allen, K. R. (2015). Communicating qualitative research: Some practical guideposts for scholars. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12153>
- Goldin, C. D., & Katz, L. F. (2009). *The race between education and technology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gonzalez, G., Bozick, R., Daugherty, L., Scherer, E., Singh, R., Suárez, M., & Ryan, S. (2014). Cutting the dropout rate: Analysis of NHPS district high school dropout rates. In G. C. Gonzalez, R. Bozick, L. Daugherty, E. Scherer, R. Singh, M. Jacobo Suárez, & S. Ryan (Eds.), *Transforming an urban school system: Progress of New Haven School change and New Haven Promise education reforms (2010–2013)* (pp. 87-100). RAND Corporation.
- Groves, M., Sellars, C., Smith, J., & Barber, A. (2015). Factors affecting student engagement: A case study examining two cohorts attending a post-1992 university in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 4(2), 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v4n2p27>
- Gurley, D. K., Anast-May, L., O’Neal, M., & Dozier, R. (2016). Principal instructional leadership behaviors: Teacher vs. self-perceptions. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 11(1), 1–16. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1103651.pdf>

- Gurley, D. K., Peters, G. B., Collins, L., & Fifolt, M. (2015). Mission, vision, values, and goals: An exploration of key organizational statements and daily practice in schools. *Journal of Educational Change*, *16*, 217–242.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-014-9229-x>
- Hallinger, P. (1983). *Principal instructional management rating scale*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hallinger, P. (2008, March). *Methodologies for studying school leadership: A review of 25 years of research using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.
- Hallinger, P. (2011). A review of three decades of doctoral studies using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale: A lens on methodological progress in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *47*(2), 271–306.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x10383412>
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (2010). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative leadership make a difference in school improvement? *Educational Management, Leadership, and Administration*, *38*(6) 654–678. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143210379060>
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (1998). Exploring the principal's contribution to school effectiveness: 1980–1995. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *9*(2), 157–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0924345980090203>
- Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. F. (1985). Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals. *Elementary School Journal*, *86*, 217–247.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/461445>

- Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. F. (1987). Assessing and developing principal instructional leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 45, 54–61. Retrieved from https://files.ascd.org/staticfiles/ascd/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_198709_hallinger.pdf
- Hallinger, P., Bickman, L., & Davis, K. (1996). School context, principal leadership, and student reading achievement. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96, 527–549. <https://doi.org/10.1086/461843>
- Hammond, C., Linton, D., Smink, J., & Drew, S. (2007). *Dropout risk factors and exemplary programs: A technical report*. National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N). Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497057.pdf>
- Hammond, C., Linton, D., Smink, J., & Drew, S. (2017). *Dropout risk factors and exemplary programs: A technical report*. National Dropout Prevention Center. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED497057>
- Hanson, K., & Stipek, D. (2014, May 16). Schools v. prisons: Education's the way to cut prison population. *San Jose Mercury News*. Retrieved from www.ed.stanford.edu/in-the-media/schools-v-prisons-educations-way-cut-prison-population-op-ed-deborah-stipek
- Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2011). The economics of international differences in educational achievement. *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, 3, 89–200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-53429-3.00002-8>
- Harvey, L. (2015). Beyond member-checking: A dialogic approach to the research interview. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 38, 23–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2014.914487>

- Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (1992). Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, *112*(1), 64–105.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.64>
- Hawkins, R. L., Jaccard, J., & Needle, E. (2013). Nonacademic factors associated with dropping out of high school: Adolescent problem behaviors. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, *4*(2), 58–75.
<https://doi.org/10.5243/jsswr.2013.5>
- Hayes, R. L., Nelson, J. L., Tabin, M., Pearson, G., & Worthy, C. (2002). Using school-wide data to advocate for student success. *Professional School Counseling*, *6*, 86–94. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732397>
- Heckman, J., & LaFontaine, P. (2010). The American high school graduation rate: trends and levels. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, *92*(2), 244-262. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27867535>
- Heinrich, C. J., & Cheng, H. (2022). Does online credit recovery in high school support or stymie later labor market success?. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *41*(4), 984–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22376>
- Henderson, A. T., & Berla, N. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement*. Washington, DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education.
- Hirshi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

- Hoerr, T. (2015). Principal connection / What's an instructional leader? *Educational Leadership*, 73, 84–85. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educationalleadership/oct15/vol73/num02/What%27s-anInstructional-Leader%C2%A2.asp>
- Howell, W. G. (2015). Results of President Obama's Race to the Top: Win or lose, states enacted education reforms. *Education Next*, 15(4), 58–66. Retrieved from <https://www.educationnext.org/results-president-obama-race-to-the-top-reform/>
- Hughes, W., & Pickeral, T. (2013). *School climate and shared leadership*. School Climate Practice Brief. National Climate Center. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED584519>
- Infinity Campus. (2022). *About*.
- Ismail, M., Mansor, A., Iksan, Z., & Nor, M. (2018). Influence of principals' instructional leadership on science teaching competency. *Creative Education*, 9, 2234–2244. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2018.914164>
- Jacobsen, B. (2018). *The economic upside to increasing graduation rates*. America's Promise Alliance. Retrieved from <https://www.americaspromise.org/news/economic-upside-increasing-grad-rates>.
- Jenkins, B. (2009, January/February). What it takes to be an instructional leader. *Principal*, 88(3), 34–37. Retrieved from <https://www.naesp.org/resources/publications/principal-magazine/>

- Jimenez, L., & Sargrad, S. (2017, March 3). *A new vision for school accountability*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from https://www.navajonationdode.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/AccountabilityFramework_Report_FINAL.pdf
- Johnson, R. B. (1997). Examining the validity structure of qualitative research. *Education, 118*(2), 282–292. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/246126534_Examining_the_Validity_Structure_of_Qualitative_Research
- Jordan, W. J., Lara, J., & McPartland, J. M. (1994). *Exploring the complexity of early dropout causal structures*. Baltimore, MD: Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED375227.pdf>
- Kaufman, P., & Bradbury, D. (1992, August). *National education longitudinal study of 1988: Characteristics of at-risk students in NELS:88* (NCES 92-042). Berkley, CA: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from www.nces.ed.gov/pubs92/92042.pdf
- Kimball, P. (1984). Most school principals do not practice Potter's principle. *American Secondary Education, 13*(4), 24-25. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41063689>
- Kini, T., & Podolsky, A. (2016). *Does teaching experience increase teacher effectiveness? A review of the research*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606426.pdf>

- Klein, A. (2015, April 10). No Child Left Behind: An overview. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html>
- Kuh, G. D. (2007, June 15). How to help students achieve. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(41), B12–B13. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-help-students-achieve/>
- Kurland, H., Peretz, H., & Hertz-Lazarowitz, R. (2010). Leadership style and organizational learning: The mediate effect of school vision. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(1), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231011015395>
- Kurtz, B. E. (1959). *Pioneering in educational television, 1932–1939*. Iowa City, IA: State University of Iowa.
- Kustigian, B. M. (2013). *Mission driven educational leadership—Does it matter? Examining the correlations between district mission and student achievement*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Laird, J., Kienzl, G., DeBell, M., & Chapman, C. (2007). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2005*. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/dropout05/NationalStatusDropout.asp#:~:text=These%20status%20dropouts%20accounted%20for,figure%202%20and%20table%207\).](https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/dropout05/NationalStatusDropout.asp#:~:text=These%20status%20dropouts%20accounted%20for,figure%202%20and%20table%207).)

- Lashway, L. (2002, July). Developing instructional leaders. *ERIC Digest*, 1–7. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED466023.pdf>
- LaValley, M. (2018). *Out of the loop: Rural schools are largely left out of research and policy discussions, exacerbating poverty, inequity, and isolation*. National School Board Association Center for Public Education. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED608842>
- Lawson, M., & Lawson, H. (2013). New conceptual frameworks for student engagement research, policy, and practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 432-479. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24434165>
- Lee-St. John, T. J., Walsh, M. E., Raczek, A. E., Vuilleumier, C. E., Foley, C., Heberle, A., Sibley, E., & Dearing, E. (2018). The long-term impact of systemic student support in elementary school: Reducing high school dropout. *Aera Open*, 4(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858418799085>
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 28, 27-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701800060>
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R. (1999). *Changing leadership for changing times*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Leiva, M. V., Montecinos, C., Ahumada, L., Campos, F., & Guerra, S. (2017). Novice principals' instructional management practices in high poverty, low performing schools in Chile. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 237, 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.003>

- Libbey, H. P. (2004). Measuring student relationships to school: Attachment, bonding, connectedness and engagement. *Journal of School Health, 74*, 274–283.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08284.x>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marshall, M. (2006). Parent involvement and educational outcomes for Latino students. *The Review of Policy Research, 23*(5), 1053–1077.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-1338.2006.00249.x>
- Maxwell, S., Reynolds, K. J., Lee, E., Subasic, E., & Bromhead, D. (2017). The impact of school climate and school identification on academic achievement: Multilevel modeling with student and teacher data. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 1–21.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02069>
- McClees, E. (2016). School mission statements: A look at influencing behavior. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Review, 2*(1). Retrieved from
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3d1a/e00fd5e533d5e56bf3363a69f9bf00c63aa0.pdf>
- McKinsey & Company. (2009, April). *The economic impact of the achievement gap in America's schools: Summary of findings*. New York, NY: Author.
- McMurrer, J., & Yoshioka, N. (2013). *States' perspectives on waivers: Relief from NCLB, concern about long-term solutions*. The Center on Education Policy. Retrieved from <http://www.cepc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=418>

- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA Jossey Bass.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, M., Huberman, M., & Saldaña, J. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Miller, T. D., & Hanna, R. (2014, March 24). *Four years later, are Race to the Top states on track?* Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/four-years-later-are-race-to-the-top-states-on-track/>
- National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary Principals. (2013). *Leadership matters: What the research says about the importance of principal leadership*. Reston, VA: Authors.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *COE – Public high school graduation rates*. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi/high-school-graduation-rates>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Table 1. Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), by race/ethnicity and selected demographic characteristics for the United States, the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico: School year 2018–19*. Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/acgr_re_and_characteristics_2018-19.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Fast facts: Dropout rates*. Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Public high school graduation rates. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi>

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: National Commission on Excellence in Education.

National School Climate Center. (NSCC). (n.d.). *What is school climate and why is it important?* NSCC. Retrieved from <https://www.schoolclimate.org/school-climate>

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L. 107-110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002).

Noble, K., Pelika, S., & Coons, A. (2017). *Online credit recovery programs* (NEA Research Brief, NBI No. 2). Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED595237>

Odysseyware. (2018). Imagine Learning. <https://www.imaginelearning.com/products/imagine-odysseyware/>

- Odysseyware. (2022, August 4). *CRx mode (definition)*. Imagine Learning. Retrieved from <https://help.imagineodysseyware.com/hc/en-us/articles/360053636074-CRx-Mode-Definition->
- Odysseyware. (n.d.). Credit recovery. <https://www.odysseyware.com/solutions/credit-recovery>
- Ohlson, M. (2009). Examining instructional leadership: A study of school culture and teacher quality characteristics influencing student outcomes. *Florida Journal of Educational Administration & Policy*, 2(2), 102-124. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ930117>
- Oliver, K., Osborne, J., Patel, R., & Kleiman, G. (2009). Issues surrounding the deployment of a new statewide virtual public school. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 10(1), 37-49. Retrieved from www.infoagepub.com/quarterly-review-of-distance-education.html
- Ombudsman Educational Services. (2022). *Overview*. Retrieved from <https://careers.chancelight.com/ombudsman-educational-services/>
- Patterson, K. M. (2017). *Civic identity, civic skills, and civic knowledge: The role of adolescent school experiences in facilitating civic engagement in adulthood* (Publication No. 10682109) [Doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Peguero, A., Ovink, S., & Li, Y. (2016). Social bonding to school and educational inequality: Race/ethnicity, dropping out, and the significance of place. *Sociological Perspectives*, 59(2), 317-344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121415586479>

- Petrilli, M. J., & Northern, A. M. (2018, December 5). *Credit recovery: Good intentions, poor execution*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/credit-recovery-good-intentions-poor-execution>
- Pettyjohn, T., & LaFrance, J. (2014). Online credit recovery: Benefits and challenges. *NCPEA Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research*, 1(1), 204–219. Retrieved <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1105728.pdf>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 137–145. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137>
- Powell, A., Roberts, V., & Patrick, S. (2015, September). *Using online learning for credit recovery: Getting back on track to graduation*. Vienna, VA: International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED560789.pdf>
- Punch, K. F. (1998). *Introduction to social research*. London: Sage.
- Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Rebora, A. (2004, September 21). No Child Left Behind. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind/2004/09/00000175-2310-d387-a175-671d252b0003>

- Reynolds, K. J., Lee, E., Turner, I., Bromhead, D., & Subasic, E. (2017). How does school climate impact academic achievement? An examination of social identity processes. *School Psychology International*, *38*, 78–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034316682295>
- Ritter, B. (2015, Spring). *Factors influencing high school graduation* (Issue brief). Washington, DC: Washington Student Achievement Council. Retrieved from www.wsac.wa.gov
- Rosales, J. (2015, June 8). Why students drop out: The economic pressures that make leaving school unavoidable. *neaToday*. Retrieved from <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/why-students-drop-out-economic-presures-make-leaving-school-unavoidable>
- Rumberger, R. W. (2011). *Dropping out: Why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rumberger, R. W., & Larson, K. A. (1998). Student mobility and the increased risk of high school dropout. *American Journal of Education*, *107*(1). Retrieved from <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/journals/aje>
- Rumberger, R. W., & Larson, K. A. (1998). Student mobility and the increased risk of high school dropout. *American Journal of Education*, *107*, 1–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/444201>
- Rumberger, R. W., & Lim, S. (2008, October). *Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research* (California Dropout Research Project Report #15). Santa Barbara, CA: University of Santa Barbara. Retrieved from www.lmri.ucsh.edu/dropouts

- Rumberger, R., & Palardy, G. (2005). Test scores, dropout rates, and transfer rates as alternative indicators of high school performance. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42(1), 3-42. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312042001003>
- Saettler, L. P. (2004). *The evolution of American educational technology*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sanjari, M., Bahramnezhad, F., Fomani, F. K., Shoghi, M., & Cheraghi, M. A. (2014). Ethical challenges of researchers in qualitative studies: The necessity to develop a specific guideline. *Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine*, 7, 14. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4263394/>
- Schildkamp, K., Poortman, C. L., Ebbeler, J., & Pieters, J. M. (2019). How school leaders can build effective data teams: Five building blocks for a new wave of data-informed decision making. *Journal of Educational Change*, 20, 283–325. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-019-09345>
- Scott, M. M., Zhang, S., & Koball, H. (2015, April). *Dropping out and clocking in: A portrait of teens who leave school early and work* (Brief). The Urban Institute. Retrieved from www.urban.org
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Shahnazarian, D., Hagemann, J., Aburto, M., & Rose, S. (2017). *Informed consent in human subjects research*. University of Southern California Office for the Protection of Research Subjects. Retrieved from <https://hrpp.usc.edu/>

- Simkus, J. (2022). Convenience sampling: Definition, method and examples. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/convenience-sampling.html>
- Sparapani, E. (2013). *Differentiated instruction: Content area applications and other considerations for teaching Grades 5–12 in the twenty-first century*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- SPARK. (2018). *Learning through relationships*. Search Institute. Retrieved from https://www.search-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2018_SPARK_Report_Schools_final.pdf
- Sparks, S. (2019, March 13). Why Teacher-student relationships matter. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/03/13/why-teacher-student-relationships-matter.html>.
- Stickl Haugen, J., Morris, C., & Wester, K. (2019). The need to belong: An exploration of belonging among urban middle school students. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*,5(1), 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2018.1556988>
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Student Engagement. (2016, February 18). In S. Abbott (Ed.), *The glossary of education reform*. Retrieved from <http://edglossary.org/student-engagement>
- The White House, President Barack Obama. (n.d.). *Race to the Top*. Retrieved December 17, 2017, from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/education/k-12/race-to-the-top>

- Thomas, D. R., & Hodges, I. D. (2010). *Designing and managing your research project: Core skills for social and health research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125.
<https://doi.org/3102/00346543045001089>
- Tobin, G. A., & Begley, C. M. (2004). Methodological rigour within a qualitative framework. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 48(4), 388-396.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2004.03207.x>
- Tooley, M. (2017). *Painting the ESSA canvas: Four ideas for states to think big on educator quality*. New America. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED590768.pdf>
- Trochim, W. M. K. (2006). *Research methods knowledge base*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualmeth.php>
- Trotter, A. (2008). Online options for “credit recovery” widen. *Education Week*, 27(38), 13–16. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/online-options-for-credit-recovery-widen/2008/05>
- Trotter, A. (2008, May 19). Online options for ‘credit recovery’ widen. *Education Week*, 27(38). Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/online-options-for-credit-recovery-widen/2008/05>
- Tyner, A., & Munyan-Penney, N. (2018, November 29). Gotta give ’em credit: State and district variation in credit recovery participation rates. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/gotta-give-em-credit>

- United States Census Bureau. (2021). *QuickFacts: Georgia*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/GA/PST045222>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2010, August). *Free appropriate public education for students with disabilities: Requirements under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/edlite-FAPE504.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (1983). *A Nation at Risk: The imperative for educational reform: A report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Excellence in Education. Retrieved from www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/A_Nation_At_Risk_1983.pdf
- U.S. Department of Education. (2009-a). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2009-b). *Race to the top*. Retrieved from <https://ed.gov>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *Racial/ethnic enrollment in public schools*. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cge.asp
- U.S. Department of Education. (2018, March). *Issue brief: Credit recovery*. Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service. Retrieved from www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/high-school/credit-recovery.pdf

- U.S. Department of Education. (2020). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. Retrieved from
<https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn#:~:text=The%20Elementary%20and%20Secondary%20Education,was%20a%20civil%20rights%20law>
- Umbach, P., & Wawrzynski, M. (2005). Faculty do matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education* 46, 153–184.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-004-1598-1>
- United States Census Bureau. (2022). Georgia. *Census.gov*. Retrieved from
<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-2/37779083v2p11ch3.pdf>
- Van Ryzin, M. J., Gravely, A. A. & Roseth, C. J. (2009). Autonomy, belongingness, and engagement in school as contributors to adolescent psychological well-being. *Journal of Youth Adolescence* 38, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-007-9257-4>.
- Verduin, J. R., Jr., & Clark, T. (1991). *Distance education: The foundations practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Vestal, C. (2021, November 8). *COVID harmed kids' mental health — and schools are feeling it*. The PEW Charitable Trusts. Retrieved from
<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-andanalysis/blogs/stateline/2021/11/08/covid-harmed-kids-mental-health-and-schools-arefeeling-it>

- Watt, D. L. E., & Roessingh, H. (1994). Some you win, most you lose: Tracking ESL dropout in high school (1988–1993). *English Quarterly*, 26(3), 5–7. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ487682>
- Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Williams, M., & Moser, T. (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International Management Review*, 15(1), 45–55. Retrieved from <http://www.imrjournal.org/uploads/1/4/2/8/14286482/imr-v15n1art4.pdf>
- Wiregrass Georgia Technical College. (2022). *Senate Bill 2*. Retrieved from <https://www.wiregrass.edu/uploads/groups/3/PDFs/academics/SB2.pdf>
- Wiss, G. Z. (2014). Dropping out of school and chronic disease in the United States. *Journal of Public Health*, 22, 265–270. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-014-0615-x>
- Witziers, B., Bosker, R. J., & Krüger, M. L. (2003). Educational leadership and student achievement: The elusive search for an association. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39, 398–425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03253411>
- Zhijun, S., Zeyun, L., & Baicai, S. (2015). Family, schools, and children's academic achievements: A study based on rural regions in China Gansu Province. *Chinese Education & Society*, 48, 464–482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611932.2015.1119515>

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

Research Questions, Interview Questions, and Conceptual Framework

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Conceptual Framework
<p>RQ1: What are school administrators' lived experiences responsible for effectively implementing an online credit recovery program significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rate?</p>	<p>Interview 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about your career as an educator from start to present day. 2. What lead you to become a building level administrator? 3. What experiences shaped you into the leader you are today? 4. Prior to becoming a building level administrator describe your experience with at-risk students. <p>Interview 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What was your experience like getting stakeholders to make critical changes regarding student achievement? 2. Describe your experience implementing or managing the operations of an online credit recovery program? 3. What were some of the lessons learned from implementing or managing the operations of an online credit recovery program? 4. What were some of the successes of the credit recovery program at your school? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose of study • Establish the context of the participants' experiences.

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Conceptual Framework
	<p>5. What were some of the challenges faced in implementing or managing the operations of the online credit recovery program?</p> <p>6. What is your perception of online credit recovery software as a tool to assist at-risk learners in completing high school?</p> <p>7. What advice would you give a school leader who is implementing or managing an online credit recovery program?</p> <p>Interview 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections and clarifications 	
<p>RQ 2: What organizational practices did school administrators responsible for effectively implementing an online credit recovery program significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit at an identified Georgia high school and increasing the school's graduation rate?</p>	<p>Interview 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What organizational practices do you believe lead to student achievement? 2. What procedures are or were in place to identify struggling students? 3. How is/was student success celebrated at your school? 4. What are ways school leaders can create a sense of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational practices • Finn Model of Identification & Participation, 1993 • What do members within the organizational structure do when there is no student progression? • What organizational practices are in place to help students achieve?

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Conceptual Framework
	<p>belonging for all students?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Can you provide examples of the types of organizational practices that help engage students who are socially or academically disconnected to school? 6. How did your school encourage student participation in extra-curricular activities for at-risk learners? 7. What procedures were in place if students enrolled in credit recovery required extra support or needed help? 8. What procedures were in place if a student was not engaged or participating in online credit recovery? <p>Interview 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Were there any challenges working with at-risk students? 10. How did your school overcome these challenges? 11. How does/did your school create a welcoming atmosphere for all learners? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At-risk students

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Conceptual Framework
	<p>12. What strategies do you attribute to student engagement?</p> <p>Interview 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections and clarifications 	
<p>RQ 3: What management practices did school administrators responsible for effectively implementing an online credit recovery program significantly increasing the number of at-risk students making up course credit?</p>	<p>Interview 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What was your leadership style when you first became a building level admin? 2. Has your leadership style remained the same or changed over time? 3. If your style has changed, what do you attribute to the change? 4. If your style remained the same, what do you attribute to your style remaining unchanged? 5. What are the characteristics of a strong instructional leader? <p>Interview 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discuss your role as an instructional leader? 2. What leadership actions do you believe increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hallinger & Murphy, 1985 • Mission • Vision • Student achievement • Managing the instructional program • Instructional leadership

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Conceptual Framework
	<p>student achievement?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. What criteria was used to select online credit recovery instructors? 4. What methods were used to monitor student progress in online credit recovery? 5. What resources were allocated for at-risk students at your school? 6. How important is the mission and vision of an organization to student achievement? 7. What type of professional development was provided school wide or targeted to assists stakeholders in educating at-risk students? 8. What policies, practices, and or procedures do you attribute to your school's continuous increase in graduation rates? 9. How did you a communicate your mission and vision with stakeholders in regards to increasing graduation rates? <p>Interview 3 Reflections and clarifications</p>	

APPENDIX B

IRB Protocol Exemption Reports



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04212-2021

Responsible Researcher(s): Deidrienne Gross

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Michael Bochenko

Project Title: *A Basic Interpretive Study of the Lived Experiences of Secondary School Leaders in Georgia Who Have Used Online Credit Recovery to Assist At-Risk Students Graduate*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Your research study is authorized to begin at the following research sites: Dooly County Schools (11.17.2021), Troup County Schools (09.24.2021), Walker County Schools (09.29.2021), & Whitfield County – Southeast High School principal, Deni Pendley (09.28.2021).*
- *Upon completion of the research study collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines permit the recording of interviews provided the recording is made for the purpose of creating an accurate transcript. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted immediately from all devices. Exempt guidelines prohibit the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings.*
- *As part of the informed consent process, interview recordings must include the researcher's reading of the consent statement, confirming participant's understanding, and establishing willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be offered a copy of the research statement.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie *09.21.2021*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.