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STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPLEMENTAL ONLINE LEARNING  
FOR  
CREDIT RECOVERY

by

THERESA J. PETTYJOHN

(Under the Direction of Jason LaFrance)

ABSTRACT

District decision-makers and school leaders are faced with the challenge of evaluating various options to support at-risk students who are in danger of not graduating with their peers. Supplemental online learning is considered an innovative means of assisting students with credit recovery. Virtual schools and commercial curriculum providers have enumerated the benefits of online learning; however, the majority of the research has been conducted on post-secondary learners. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

This qualitative study employed a single case study design with purposive sampling. Participants included twelve high school students who had been enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery. Additional participants included two content teacher monitors and four graduation coaches. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded for patterns in responses, from which major themes evolved. Student historical data and district online credit recovery data from the 2010-2011 school were reviewed. Findings revealed four major themes: expectations of self, others, and online coursework; students are at-risk for more than academics; the importance of

choice and control; and the impact of online coursework. Online learning allowed greater flexibility, and the opportunity for students to have control over learning promoted academic success and improved outlook. Economic disadvantage continues to impact access to online learning. At-risk students acknowledged the benefits of online learning, and admit that they outweigh the challenges; however, there is still a need for a teacher. All participants endorsed the online learning environment for at-risk students over the traditional classroom. Negativity, distraction, criticism, and demands in the regular classroom diminish its effect. A relationship with a trusted staff member is a key component of at-risk students' success in online learning for credit recovery. There is an affective part of supporting at-risk students that cannot be minimized or ignored. There continues to be a lack of understanding of the rigor and relevance of online learning in the educational community and with the public at large.

INDEX WORDS: K-12 online learning, Credit recovery, At-risk, Virtual school

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPLEMENTAL ONLINE LEARNING  
FOR CREDIT RECOVERY

by

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2012

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STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUPPLEMENTAL ONLINE LEARNING  
FOR CREDIT RECOVERY

by

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May 2012

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful husband (and editor), Bill. Your support, encouragement, patience, and love have helped me stay in the race and finish this academic marathon. Thank you for your daily example of Christ's love and service for others. I could not have done this without you. I love you and I thank God that we are fellow travelers on this terrestrial ball.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge and thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whom I live and move and have my being. I have gained strength from Philippians 4:13 throughout this endeavor. May my life bring You honor and glory.

With sincere appreciation, I acknowledge the guidance and encouragement of my committee members. To my supervising committee chair, Dr. Jason LaFrance, I am grateful for your willingness to share this project with me. Your encouragement and assurance that we could make this ambitious deadline kept me focused. To Dr. Kathryn Kennedy Ivill, I am grateful for your insight into the world of online learning. Your specific recommendations and guidance have inspired me to do my best work. To Dr. Sam Hardy, you prepared me well for this endeavor. I am truly grateful for your continuous support and encouragement. I look forward to working together soon. To Dr. Teri Melton, thank you for your positive example and helpful feedback as I worked through Chapter 1 of this project.

To the student participants in the study, I am grateful for your willingness to share your experiences in online learning with me. Hopefully, this small project will be a contribution that impacts, however slightly, the supplemental online learning experience for future students. To the staff participants, thank you for having a heart for at-risk students. Please don't be offended, but you think like special educators. You are all wonderful assets to your schools and I am blessed to know you.

I am thankful for my parents Mary Jane and the late Robert Sankey. Your work ethic and belief in my ability to accomplish anything I set my mind to have served as an inspiration to me throughout my life. I am also thankful for my sons, Tyson, Luke, and

Jacob, and my grandson, Benjamin. Your lives have made me a better leader, educator, mother, and person.

I would like to thank my professors at Augusta State University and Georgia Southern University who all helped me get this far. I would also like to thank my good friend Dr. Holly Barnes for her support and encouragement. Finally, I would like to express appreciation to my cohort members: Debbie, Wendy, Lisa B., Lisa S., Rodney, Eric, Patricia, Alexis, Michael, Sam, Perry, Christina, Angela, and Kim. Your willingness to hear my presentation over and over and provide insight and suggestions along the way has helped to shape this project. Your hard work has been an inspiration and motivator for me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....                                | 7  |
| LIST OF TABLES .....                                 | 12 |
| CHAPTER  |    |
| 1 INTRODUCTION .....                                 | 13 |
| Statement of the Problem.....                        | 26 |
| Research Questions .....                             | 28 |
| Significance of the Study.....                       | 29 |
| Procedures .....                                     | 30 |
| Limitations/Delimitations/Assumptions .....          | 35 |
| Definitions of Terms .....                           | 34 |
| Summary .....  | 37 |
| 2 REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE..... | 39 |
| Introduction .....                                   | 39 |
| At Risk Students .....                               | 40 |
| Virtual School Delivery Models.....                  | 45 |
| Types of Virtual Programs .....                      | 46 |
| The First Virtual Public Schools .....               | 48 |
| Virtual High School.....                             | 48 |
| Florida Virtual School .....                         | 49 |
| Learning Experiences and Autonomy .....              | 53 |
| Virtual Course Design .....                          | 54 |
| North Carolina Virtual Public School .....           | 57 |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Prevalent Themes in the Literature.....   | 59        |
| Misconceptions.....   | 61        |
| Overview of the Benefits of Online Learning.....  | 62        |
| Examples of Online Curriculum and Programs.....   | 64        |
| Overview of the Challenges in Online Learning.....  | 67        |
| Future Research Priorities.....   | 70        |
| Summary.....  | 71        |
| <b>3 METHODS.....</b>   | <b>75</b> |
| Research Questions.....   | 75        |
| Research Design.....  | 76        |
| Participants.....   | 77        |
| Instrumentation.....  | 89        |
| Data Collection.....  | 90        |
| Data Analysis: The Coding Process.....  | 93        |
| Summary.....  | 96        |
| <b>4 REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS.....</b>  | <b>98</b> |
| Research Questions... ..  | 105       |
| Findings.....   | 105       |
| Responses to Research Sub-questions.....  | 105       |
| Sub-question One: Student Perceptions of the Benefits of Online Learning...                                   | 106       |
| Sub-question Two: Student Perceptions of the Challenges<br>of Online Learning.....                            | 117       |
| Sub-question Three: Staff Member Perceptions of the Benefits<br>of Online Learning for At-Risk Students ..... | 125       |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Sub-question Four: Staff Member Perceptions of the Challenges<br>of Online Learning for At-Risk Students..... | 135 |
| Summary .....   | 149 |
| 5 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS.....   | 155 |
| Summary of Research Findings.....   | 156 |
| Analysis of Research Findings.....  | 157 |
| Discussion of Research Findings.....  | 161 |
| Conclusions .....   | 173 |
| Implications for Practice.....  | 174 |
| Concluding Thoughts.....  | 178 |
| REFERENCES .....  | 179 |
| APPENDICES  |     |
| A PERMISSION PROTOCOLS.....   | 186 |
| B INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS.....  | 197 |
| C ACADEMIC HISTORY OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS.....   | 202 |
| D DISTRICT PASS/FAIL RATE FOR 2010-2011 ONLINE CREDIT<br>RECOVERY COURSES.....                                | 203 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Table 1: Benefits and Challenges of Online Learning .....                  | 74  |
| Table 2: Academic History of Student Participants.....                     | 81  |
| Table 3: District Record of Passed Credit Recovery Courses:                |     |
| All Schools, All Online Platforms.....                                     | 84  |
| Table 4: Lake High School Online Data for 2010-2011.....                   | 85  |
| Table 5: Correlation of Interview Questions to Research Sub-questions..... | 93  |
| Table 6: Code Map: Three Iterations of Data Analysis.....                  | 100 |

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

During the course of the average school day over 800 students give up on their education and drop out. There are more than one million American high school students who drop out each year (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Although there is no single reason why students drop out of school, research has suggested that challenging transitions to high school, weak basic skills, and limited engagement serve as the leading barriers to high school graduation. The dropout rate in many of the nation's urban areas is up to 40%, and only 10% to 15% of ninth graders who repeat their freshman year actually graduate (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009). When students fail two or more courses, they are at-risk for not graduating with their peers due to an insufficient number of required credits. Some educational reformers now view supplemental online learning and the creation of virtual schools as viable options to traditional schools and an innovative means of educating K-12 students (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008). Struggling students are offered the opportunity to recover credit online while maintaining concurrent enrollment in brick-and-mortar schools. Critics are concerned that some online learning options risk moving students through a course without their having received true educational benefit. On the other hand, distance education is lauded for providing a highly engaging instructional environment that is self-paced, personalized, and facilitated by certified instructors who provide individualized support (Natsu, 2011; Trotter, 2008). However, what is touted by virtual education curriculum providers and what is actually occurring warrants further investigation. A careful examination of the

benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning generated recommendations to improve graduation outcomes for students participating in supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

District decision makers and school principals must play active roles in the administration and support of online programs that provide credit recovery opportunities for their students. A clear understanding of the factors that contribute to high school students' success or failure in online courses can help course designers, instructors, and school leaders improve and appropriately support online learning. This may, in turn, increase the number of students who are successful in credit recovery online courses and eventually graduate from high school. Preliminary findings in a qualitative study by Barbour (2005) yielded guidelines for designing and improving courses for secondary virtual students. Student perceptions of the design and embedded support properties of virtual curriculum added to understanding their effectiveness in the learning process. An in-depth evaluation of supplemental online programs as they occurred in traditional brick-and-mortar schools yielded valuable information to school reformers and K-12 policy makers as they seek to decide how best to use this option to increase student success while effectively managing their shrinking budgets. Studies involving student and teacher perspectives of online learning for credit recovery are emerging but have not been fully explicated (Oliver, Osbourne, Patel, & Kleiman, 2009; Rice, 2009). Further, in a comprehensive review of the literature involving K-12 online learning, Rice (2006) revealed a need to examine the relationship between at-risk students and student supports in distance education. This qualitative case study employed structured interviews, a focus group interview, and a review of student participants' high school transcripts. An

examination of district data regarding the pass/fail rate of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year was reviewed to gain insight into the benefits and challenges associated with supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

Interviews were conducted with 12, 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students at a large suburban high school who were previously enrolled in supplemental online learning in order to recover credit and potentially graduate with their peers. Two content teachers who supervise and support the students academically during this time were interviewed. A focus group interview was conducted with four graduation coaches who are charged with the supervision of the supplemental online learning program at each of their schools. The graduation coaches are certified high school teachers or school counselors. Historical academic data of the students in the study were evaluated for patterns and similarities. An analysis of the pass/fail rate district-wide in content courses for all students enrolled in online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year was conducted in order to gain a broader perspective of how the group of students in the study compare with previous online learners in the district.

### **Background**

Learning experiences can be classified by the amount of control that the student has over the content and nature of the learning activity. In traditional didactic or expository learning experiences, content is transmitted to the student by a lecture, written material, or other mechanisms. Such conventional instruction is often contrasted with active learning in which the student has control of what and how he or she learns (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). In their foundational work involving

autonomy and self-determination, Deci and Ryan (1985) stated that students demonstrate the need for autonomy when they approach a task that warrants some degree of control and choice in the situation. People resist pressure from external forces such as rules, regulations, orders, and deadlines imposed on them by others because it interferes with their need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Sometimes a person even rejects help in order to remain in control (deCharms, 1983). An understanding of students' perceptions of support in online learning may equip teachers (both site-based and online) with strategies to promote autonomy and increase self-determination.

Individual autonomy can be developed by activities and programs that emphasize setting realistic goals, personally planning goals, accepting personal responsibility for actions, and developing self-confidence (Woolfolk, 2007). A significant amount of research in distance education has been conducted with adult learners who exhibit these attributes; however, there is a need to more effectively identify the traits that are necessary for adolescents to be successful in online learning environments and to provide remediation and training for students lacking in these qualities (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009). Exploding advances in technology, and the need to support struggling students on limited budgets, are moving many school leaders toward supplemental online learning.

Distance education in the form of online courses and programs which serve the K-12 community are often referred to as *virtual* or *cyber schools* and operate in a variety of ways (Clark, 2007; Rice, 2009; Watson et al., 2011). The three dominant delivery models that have emerged for virtual schooling are independent, asynchronous, and synchronous (or a combination of asynchronous and synchronous). A student who is

taking a course from a virtual school with an independent method of delivery is similar to a student who would take a traditional correspondence course with the added benefit of submitting assignments electronically (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Asynchronous online instruction occurs at different times and in different places, where learners choose when and where to access instructional materials. Using a synchronous method, teachers can facilitate an audio or text discussion with students in real time. Instruction and feedback occur immediately (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

In K-12 public education, there are generally two types of virtual education programs: supplemental programs and full-time schools. The goal of supplemental virtual programs is to give students the opportunity to take online courses in addition to the classroom curriculum offered by the local school; this is considered a hybrid program. Supplemental programs typically do not give credits or diplomas. The local school is accountable for oversight and assessment of student progress and the provision of special education services. The majority of supplemental programs serve high school students; they are more numerous than full-time virtual schools and are operated at either the school district or state level (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008; Watson et al., 2011). Most of the new online credit-recovery options are offered by virtual schools and commercial curriculum providers who often tailor their programs for at-risk students (Trotter, 2008).

Full-time virtual schools provide most student coursework through the Internet and typically function as public charter schools created and administered by a public education institution, such as a school district or a university, in combination with a private education service provider. Full-time virtual schools serve all grade levels and

are responsible for every aspect of a student's education, including oversight, administration of state assessment exams, and provision of special education services. Needed technology is provided, and there is no cost for enrollment; on the other hand, supplemental programs often charge both material and tuition fees, either to the student or the student's school (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008).

The first public virtual schools in the United States were created in 1997. The Virtual High School (VHS) was created through a 5-year, \$7.4 million federal grant. It is a membership, fee-based non-profit organization that partners with schools to expand course offerings. The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) was established through an allocation of \$200,000 from the state legislature, and it has experienced phenomenal success and growth since its inception (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). In a case study by Friend and Johnston (2005), researchers discussed some of the key components of the FLVS which have contributed to this success. These features include effective course development, student choice, relevancy, student/teacher communication, and a focus on reaching out to the underserved. The FLVS supports students in both full time and supplemental enrollment (Friend & Johnston, 2005).

### **Benefits of Online Learning**

Advances in technology allow at-risk learners multiple opportunities to receive credits to graduate on time, as well as provide them with different avenues to learn and have their learning assessed. Existing virtual learning programs differ from traditional education in a number of significant ways, one of which is the range of students served. Online learning programs can serve students of all ages, ability levels, and learning backgrounds. Most K-12 online learning programs focus on serving older high school

students. A survey of district administrators reported approximately 64% of students in fully online programs are in grades 9-12. The reasons reported for online learning were to offer courses not otherwise available at the school, to offer advanced placement courses, and to offer credit recovery (Lips, 2010).

Proponents of online learning claim that it offers high-quality, engaging courses for students. The teachers are purported to be highly qualified, licensed professionals who deliver the online instruction and track student progress; and, online program features expand educational opportunities for students regardless of geography, family income level, or background (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008). Additionally, new formative assessment models provide performance-based virtual learning environments with tools to individualize instruction in ways that are impossible to replicate in traditional classrooms (Holstead, et al., 2008).

Shea, Pickett, and Petz (2003) reported on the relationship of pedagogy, design, and faculty development issues to students' satisfaction in e-learning courses in addition to proposing a conceptual framework for student learning in e-learning environments. As with traditional programs, the quality of instruction and course design, and how technology is adapted to promote them, is more important than the technology itself (Rovai, 2003). A more clear understanding of K-12 online at-risk students will enable courses to be scaffolded and adapted appropriately to bimodal student populations and will afford multiple avenues for students with different learning preferences. Specifically, research should examine the relationships among student needs, course design, and support services (Cavanaugh & Blomeyer, 2007).

In AVENTA, an online credit recovery program, some courses are designed in such a way that students take a pre-test and only complete the sections of the course in which they were unsuccessful. In this way, students are able to complete the course and experience success much more quickly. Acceleration methods are used for vocabulary development, and there is a text-to-speech option for students who read below grade level (Natsu, 2011).

The CompassLearning program takes the student through a critical mistakes framework, which discusses why an answer is wrong. This helps guide the student to the correct answer by reviewing content and giving hints on where the student might look. This is also used for Response to Intervention (RtI) to develop individualized learning paths and tutorials for students who need remediation on a particular concept (Natsu, 2011). Providers say they tailor learning to individual students by using flexible pacing and schedules, extra practice, frequent assessment, and robust monitoring and reporting on participation and progress, while also allowing openings for personal interaction with teachers. In many cases, the programs are billed as ways to enable students not only to salvage credit for a class but also to develop skills and work habits that will contribute to their continued academic success (Natsu, 2011). While Barbour's (2007) qualitative study involved a small number of participants, the preliminary guidelines included strategies to build student skills and increase independent learning. It also included the concepts of embedding directions, adding visual cues, and using interactive activities.

In their evaluation of highly effective high schools, Bottoms and Anthony (2008) described one high school that offers a virtual academy that students access online. Each course has a posted syllabus with lesson plans and assignments. Students use email to

send completed assignments to the teacher and take tests online when they have finished a unit or course. Students do not have to pay fees to take courses, and they can receive full credit. The advantage is that students work on missing credits outside of the typical school day--even from their own homes. The virtual academy is countywide and staffed by nearly 70 teachers.

Seattle-based Apex Learning, well known for its online Advanced Placement courses, has broadened its course catalog in recent years to provide credit recovery, as well as dropout recovery, remediation, intervention, and alternative school programs. Improvements include enhanced graphics and animation, and audio lectures to support students with reading deficits. Additionally, annotated readings and guided instruction aim to improve reading comprehension. Other new features, such as graphic organizers and study sheets, are designed to help students complete schoolwork and learn good study habits (Trotter, 2008).

### **Challenges in Online Learning**

Along with the benefits, there are also a number of challenges associated with virtual schooling. Researchers Barbour and Reeves (2009) have listed studies which show that the students who are typically successful in online learning environments are those who are independent learners, intrinsically motivated, and who have proficient time management, literacy, and technology skills. These characteristics are typically associated with adult learners and are the very characteristics that at-risk students generally lack (Oliver et al., 2009). Most research into distance education has been targeted toward adult learners. Recommendations for further studies include evaluating

the factors that account for K-12 student success in virtual school environments (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

Online learners may still face some real barriers even if they have a faculty who design interactive, engaging online learning environments and utilize user-friendly course management tools. Although the promise of online learning suggests enhanced flexibility that provides an educational opportunity to anyone with Internet access, not all students have the same abilities to access and engage in online learning (Blocher, Sujo de Montes, Willis, & Tucker, 2002). Most online learners work within an asynchronous setting where they choose the time and location for their study to a much greater extent than students enrolled in traditional courses. Consequently, the students' ability to self-monitor and garner resources independently is vitally important. Without these qualities, success in an online learning environment is less likely (Blocher et al., 2002).

In a mixed-methods approach using online surveys which included open-ended questions, Oliver et al. (2009) evaluated how high school students responded to the experience of being enrolled in online courses during the school's first year. The study focused on students who had failed a course and were enrolled for credit recovery. It also included students who were seeking challenge through accelerated coursework. A survey was distributed to all students and teachers in the state who were involved in the summer 2007 session. Ninety teachers and 706 students responded to the surveys for a response rate of 86% (Oliver et al., 2009). Teachers stated that the opportunity for students to self-pace and access course materials from any location at any time were two of the most positive aspects of the online courses. Additionally, the teachers were able to integrate web-based resources into content material without difficulty. This afforded students

individualized and unique learning opportunities. Academic proficiency, technical skills, and self-direction were reported by the teachers as weaknesses for the students in credit recovery (Oliver et al., 2009). Recommendations included ensuring course design and alignment to national standards, providing more worked out examples, especially in math, and more use of embedded videos. Credit recovery students were reported to be less motivated and less interested in taking another online course. Issues related to low self-efficacy in the online context were also noted (Oliver et al., 2009). Credit recovery teachers stated that their students required more supervision and mentoring from an instructor to succeed (Oliver et al., 2009). “This added mentoring could occur virtually through synchronous collaboration tools as recommended by students in this study, or in person at a student’s regular school with tutors, counselors, or teachers” (p. 47).

The evaluation of effectiveness of student supports is vital in the K-12 context, especially when considering the alternative nature of the online educational experience, and the proclivity for at-risk student populations to seek this option for credit recovery (Rice, 2006). The characteristics identified as successful to at-risk students-- instructional environments that are self-paced, personalized, offer diverse instructional methods that are facilitated by competent caring adults (Rice, 2006)--are the very characteristics that are praised in distance education circles. In a comprehensive evaluation of the literature surrounding K-12 distance education, Rice reported the need for further research that examines the relationship between student supports and at-risk student needs in distance education. This is essential in answering questions about the benefits or drawbacks of distance education for all students.

Rice (2009) used the Delphi method to identify priorities for K-12 online learning for the next five years. Data were taken from three distinct entities, each offering a specialized area of expertise. These professionals included day-to-day practitioners in online learning, school policy makers, and researchers in distance education (Rice, 2009). Course design and delivery was ranked as the highest priority for future research. This was followed by promising practices which looked specifically at effective pedagogy and technology that promote student achievement. Additional recommendations for research included the need to differentiate among the school levels and establish more effective accountability measures. The results of this study provide a framework of priorities which include nine subscales as a means to organize the information with the purpose of prioritizing policy development and future research. Specific recommendations included implementing research initiatives in distance education for students with disabilities or those who are at-risk, as well as removing barriers and providing sufficient support for student success in the online context (Rice, 2009).

Some critics are concerned online credit-recovery options run the risk of simply shuffling students out the door without their having received the full value of a high school education. The undeniable fact is that some students succeed in the virtual education environment and some fail, just as they do in traditional classroom environments. The key is to better comprehend the critical components in an educational context that enhance success for all students not the platform used to deliver the instruction (Rice, 2006). The "No Significant Difference" (NSD) literature in education can be interpreted in two ways. First, the NSD findings demonstrate that delivering instruction or academic content at a distance is not an inferior method of providing an

education. There is much more to the learning process than just the delivery method of instruction. Further, the NSD findings indicate that converting a traditional course into an online or technology-mediated distance delivery course does not necessarily improve student outcomes. Achieving gains involves more than adapting content to the medium; it involves a course redesign which maximizes the use of technology (Russell, 2001).

Students who are behind academically when they enter ninth grade require special supports from caring teachers and courses designed to help them acquire the content knowledge and learning skills that they missed in earlier grades (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Without this, their risk for dropping out of school and experiencing unemployment is increased exponentially. Once students experience academic failure, for whatever reason, it is difficult to reroute them and get them fully engaged in their education. Because course failure may lead to delinquency or other school failures, this can begin a decline that results in dropping out of school (Nastu, 2011). Online learning gives students an opportunity to get back on track. Online learning is a learning platform which is more about supporting the improvement of teaching practices and student achievement opportunities than it is about innovative digital technologies (Blomeyer, 2002).

The majority of K-12 students learning online participate in supplemental virtual schooling programs sponsored by school districts, universities, consortia of schools or, as is often the case, state departments of education (Tucker, 2007). Because students can integrate courses from these programs into their traditional brick-and-mortar high schools, supplemental programs allow students to take online courses in addition to their regular school-based courses. Supplemental virtual programs offer the most important information to public school reformers (Tucker, 2007).

The question for educational research is how to optimize instructional designs and technology in the online context in order to maximize learning opportunities and student achievement. Specifically, promising practices for promoting K-12 online success for credit recovery have not yet been fully evaluated (Oliver et al., 2009; Rice, 2009). Most research has been conducted on adult learners enrolled in virtual courses and/or distance education programs, and there is a disconnect in K-12 between policy decision makers and those who are charged with implementation and support of online credit recovery programs (Rice, 2006). It is imperative that leaders have the ability to accurately measure and analyze virtual education in order to discern the positive and negative impact on student achievement. This information will help determine and recommend promising practices in the online learning realm (Holstead et al., 2008). Little research into the effectiveness of K-12 online learning has been published, and there is a need to evaluate the quality of lower-performing student virtual learning experiences (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Means et al., 2009). An examination of at-risk students' experiences with online learning for credit recovery may contribute to recommendations for how they are supported in their virtual coursework. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

### **Problem Statement**

Students who have failed two or more courses in high school are at risk for not graduating on time. Counselors and teachers frequently advise students to enroll in Internet-based credit recovery courses where these at-risk students are expected to manage their own learning by maintaining effective daily engagement and successful

interaction with their online coursework. Historically, at-risk learners exhibit little autonomy and self-determination; in addition, they do not approach an academic task with forethought and consideration of what supports they will require. All too often, students enroll in supplemental virtual courses for credit recovery, paid for by their parents, and fail to meet the academic and/or time requirements, which results in their repeating the course again or dropping out of school altogether. It is the responsibility of school leaders to evaluate the process of credit recovery and supplemental online learning in order to improve at-risk student success and more effectively manage resources.

There are many benefits to online learning, and this can be a viable option for at-risk students with the needed supports and services. School leaders need to know how to support K-12 learners who have previously failed a course in a traditional setting. These students are enrolled in a traditional high school and are taking five to six other courses while enrolling in supplemental online credit recovery either during or after their school day. The virtual curriculum providers describe many benefits and available supports for students; however, an evaluation of students' abilities to access those supports and services is needed. Literature has revealed the student characteristics needed for increased success in online learning, but most of this research has been conducted on adult learners at the post-secondary level.

It was a worthwhile endeavor to evaluate student needs in supplemental online coursework for credit recovery and further assess how those needs were met. Additionally, the lack of research regarding how students are supported in K-12 online learning while simultaneously enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools suggested a need to further investigate this phenomenon. If they are provided information related to how

students experience supplemental online learning for credit recovery, school leaders will be better equipped to make decisions about the level of support and services needed to enhance student success in these programs. Ultimately, this information may be used to promote promising practices in supplemental online learning by making recommendations for the development of independent learning skills of at-risk students, virtual course design, instructor/student interactions, and on-site support. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher considered the following overarching question in this study:

What are stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online learning?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the challenges of supplemental online learning?
3. What are staff member perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online coursework for at-risk students?
4. What are staff member perceptions of the challenges at-risk students encounter while enrolled in supplemental online learning?

## **Significance of the Study**

A clear understanding of the factors that contribute to at-risk high school students' success or failure in virtual supplemental courses can help course designers, instructors, and school leaders improve and adequately support online learning in order to increase the number of students who are successful in virtual supplemental courses for credit recovery and are able to graduate on time. Therefore, the results of this study may provide policy makers, program directors, and building principals with the information needed to address issues surrounding the implementation, funding, and supporting of supplemental virtual education. Similarly, by developing an increased awareness of stakeholders' perceptions of supplemental online learning for credit recovery, local leaders will be better prepared to optimize the benefits and reduce the barriers in the K-12 online context.

Furthermore, as a special education administrator, the researcher is concerned about the continuous challenges and limited successes that struggling students encounter as they strive to earn a regular high school diploma. Despite substantially higher per capita funding and increased staff support through various entitlements, at-risk learners continue to have a dismal graduation rate and limited post-secondary outcomes. An increased awareness of what effectively promotes at-risk student success in the online context will provide the researcher with the information needed to make recommendations regarding the types of supplemental virtual learning options and on-site supports that will increase the likelihood of successful course completion and on-time high school graduation.

## **Procedures**

### **Research Design**

Given the research questions, this study was implemented with a qualitative approach using the case study method. The case study method is appropriate when the researcher intends to generate a clear understanding of people or to capture the characteristics of events (Yin, 2009). Additionally, the case study method is an effective method for gathering information when the phenomenon to be studied is descriptive in nature, especially when describing why or how a phenomenon occurred or when an event is bounded by time and place (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). This study probed into the relationships between students and their online coursework and between students and the teachers who support them on site while they are engaged in virtual learning. The case study method provides a rich, deep description through multiple means, two of which are a review of archival data and interviews in the participants' natural context at a given point in time (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007).

### **Participants**

This study employed purposive sampling techniques (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007; Glesne, 2006). The initial responsibility of the researcher in a case study is to identify the unit to be investigated, using the research questions as the basis for this determination (Yin, 2009). In this case, the primary participants were the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were previously enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery at a large suburban high school. Teacher participants included the two content teachers who supervised and supported students on site as they completed their online coursework. Additional participants included a focus group of four graduation coaches from four of

the five high schools in the county. These graduation coaches, who are certified high school teachers or school counselors, provided support and supervision for the supplemental online programs in each of their respective schools. As recommended by district leadership, the researcher made initial contact with the graduation coaches through a face-to-face meeting when they were gathered together for a monthly meeting with their program coordinator. A brief summary of the project was described and a request for their participation was made. They were not expected to decide at that time, and they were reassured of confidentiality and the option to decline without repercussion if they chose. Following this, the researcher met with the school principal, the two teachers, and the graduation coach who support supplemental online learning at the selected school in the study. Students requiring credit recovery maintain six traditional courses at 50 minutes each in addition to the supplemental online course. The lab is open at the end of school day three days a week for one hour. The students are strongly encouraged and expected to complete the majority of their online coursework at home or other location away from school.

### **Instrumentation**

The study employed face-to-face structured interviews of 12 students and two teachers. It also included a focus group interview of four graduation coaches from high schools in the district. Additionally, content analysis of data related to the academic history of the students in the study was conducted. Further, in order to gain a broad perspective of student achievement related to online coursework, available data involving the success or failure of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery throughout the county in the previous school year was examined. The

researcher contacted graduation coaches and counselors at each school in the district to obtain this specific information. As a district level employee, the researcher has access to all student transcripts and longitudinal archival data. Permission for the study was granted by the district superintendent and the school principal. Interview protocols were used for all participants. Face validity was established through a review of the protocols by a panel to include the study's methodologist. Participant feedback regarding the researcher's interpretation of their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery was given. By interviewing a number of participants, validity was established as the researcher connected and evaluated the comments of one participant against those of another. The goal of this process was to comprehend how the participants developed and made meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2006).

### **Data Collection**

In keeping with the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board procedures, informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. Parental consent was obtained from all minor students in the case, and student assent was also obtained. Care was given to ensure that all written documents were at an appropriate readability level for at-risk students. Consent for access to students and the use of student data for the study was obtained from the school principal and the superintendent of the district.

Data for this study was collected through one-on-one structured interviews with the identified students and teachers at the school site. A focus group interview with four graduation coaches was also conducted. The goal was to have the participants reconstruct their experiences within the supplemental online learning context (Seidman,

2006). Two chief uses of the case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of the participants, and the best way to do that is through interviews (Stake, 1995). Since the qualitative approach to research is intended to describe or to explain social phenomena from the viewpoints of the participants in their natural environment (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006), all interviews and focus groups were conducted in the high school setting, at the participants' convenience. The researcher initiated contact with the graduation coach at the study's site through a brief face-to-face meeting. The graduation coach supervised the credit recovery program at the school, and her assistance was a vital part of the study's success.

Before beginning the study, the researcher met with all students who were enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery and described the study in depth and asked for volunteers to participate in the individual interview sessions. All interested students received a parental consent form. Once parental permission was received, the students signed a form of assent, and interviews were conducted at a time convenient to the students. Although the researcher did not conduct three separate interviews of each participant, the precepts of the three-interview structure were followed in a condensed one-time procedure (Seidman, 2006). Participants were asked about their life experiences with school in general. This type of questioning was followed with their experiences with technology. The second component of the interview involved exploring the participants' current experiences in school, with technology, and specifically with technology in online learning. Culminating the interview were queries along the reflective line, seeking to understand how the participants made meaning from their

experiences in school, with technology, and in supplemental online learning for credit recovery (Seidman, 2006).

The researcher met the graduation coaches for all five high schools in the district when they were gathered together for a monthly meeting with their district coordinator. The study was introduced and the researcher requested their participation in a focus group interview session at a later date. Four of the five graduation coaches participated in the focus group session.

### **Data Analysis**

Following each recorded interview or focus group session, the recording was transcribed by the researcher to create a preliminary coding list and gain an overall sense of the ideas and tone present (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006). Further coding was used to identify central themes by examining phrases and words which were repeated (Glesne; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From these central themes, iterative sub-themes emerged and were organized into categories. Historical academic data of student participants, as well as the success or failure rate of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning in the county in the previous school year were analyzed for common patterns and themes and to gain a broader perspective of students involved in the supplemental online context.

### **Definitions**

*Asynchronous Instruction:* Asynchronous instruction is online instruction that occurs at different times and in different places, where learners choose where and when to access instructional materials (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

*At-risk Students:* There is no single definition of the term at-risk when applied to K-12

students. Most educators would concur that the greatest risk is that a student will leave school before earning a diploma (Watson & Gemlin, 2008).

*Blended Learning:* Blended learning is an amalgamation of online and face-to-face learning in a single course (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010).

*Credit Recovery:* Credit recovery refers to a student passing and earning credit for a course that a student had previously failed. In general, the main focus of credit recovery programs is to help students stay in school and graduate with their peers (Watson & Gemin, 2008).

*Cyber School:* Cyber schools are fully online K12 schools, also known as virtual schools (Marsh, Carr-Chellman, & Sockman, 2009).

*Hybrid Learning:* This type of learning is the combination of traditional face-to-face and online modalities; this may occur in the same course or across programs within an institution (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010).

*Supplemental Online Learning:* Supplemental online learning is a program that offers courses to students who are otherwise enrolled in physical schools; credit for successful completion of these courses is awarded by the school in which each student is enrolled (Clark & Berge, 2005).

*Virtual School:* A virtual school is any organization that offers K-12 coursework through the Internet or Web-based instruction (Clark & Berge, 2005).

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

The purposive sampling of this study limited the generalizability of the findings. The students in the study self-selected or were encouraged by teachers, counselors, or parents to enroll in supplemental online learning. The self-reporting nature of the data

collection was an additional limitation. Teachers and graduation coaches were self-selected to support students in the online learning lab or assigned by their principals to this role. The results of this study will not be generalizable to all students enrolled in online learning for credit recovery, nor will they be indicative of all supplemental online learning programs. There are many variables in this case study which could not be controlled, such as how many and which students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery during the semester in the study and which staff members were assigned to support the students. The personal experiences of the researcher, the students, and the teachers are additional variables. Nonetheless, this method was selected to allow the researcher to gather data from several perspectives and sources, adding to the vast description of the case.

This study is delimited to one large suburban, southeastern Georgia high school. This school was selected because it is the largest in the district, and it represents a diverse population of students and academic programs. This study was also delimited to 10<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were previously enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery and does not represent all students engaged in online learning in the school. Additionally, as this was a qualitative endeavor, the experiences of the participants delimit the findings to their responses and render the findings unique to the perspectives and situations of the students and teachers involved. Furthermore, as the researcher is the instrument for collecting data, an element of bias and subjectivity is acknowledged. Finally, in keeping with case study methodology, which notes that cases are bound by place and time (Yin, 2009), the content analysis of student data was delimited to the students' high school careers. Data related to the pass/fail rate of

supplemental online coursework was delimited to the 2010-2011 school year, and the interview data was delimited to the semester in the study.

This study examined the perceptions of high school students enrolled in online learning for credit recovery and those of the teachers who supported them. No assumptions were made about the relationship between the findings of this study and those of previous researchers whose studies explored similar perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning. Furthermore, it was assumed that the participants were open and forthright in their responses. It was also assumed that the researcher had access and that the instrument measured what it purported to measure.

### **Summary**

Students who fail two or more courses in high school are at risk for not graduating on time or dropping out of school completely. Supplemental online learning is considered an innovative means of assisting at-risk learners with credit recovery. Virtual schools and curriculum providers have enumerated the benefits and advantages of online learning, and many provide features that cater specifically to students recovering credits from unsuccessful traditional courses. Although technology is evolving at a remarkable pace, the majority of the research on virtual education comes from adult distance learning in higher education. Along with successful student characteristics and benefits of online learning, research has begun to reveal challenges associated with students in the K-12 context.

A clear understanding of the factors that contribute to at-risk secondary students' success or failure in supplemental virtual courses yielded valuable information to course designers, online educators at all levels, school leaders, and on-site support staff as they

seek to improve student success in supplemental online learning for credit recovery and increase the likelihood of graduation. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand secondary teachers' and students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. It is the hope of the researcher that the findings of this single case design will be used to promote promising practices in supplemental online learning by making recommendations for the development of independent learning skills for at-risk students, online course design, instructor/student interactions, and appropriate on-site support.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Despite the overall affluence of the United States, many students leave school without having received the benefit of earning a high school diploma. This has serious consequences for the future of our nation. There are commonly known characteristics of students who are at risk for dropping out and there are risk factors associated with low performing schools. School leaders and education reformers are considering options to support and re-engage at-risk students in their education and improve the graduation rate in schools. One of the options under consideration is online learning. When students fail courses and are unable to keep up with their peers, they are in greater danger of giving up altogether and leaving school. The flexibility of online classes increases student opportunity to recover credits and graduate on time. The rapid advancement of technology and the promotion of virtual schools have led many districts to implement supplemental online learning in an attempt to assist their at-risk students and improve the graduation rate. These students attend traditional brick-and-mortar schools with a full schedule of classes, and simultaneously enroll in a virtual class in hopes of catching up.

The majority of the research involving online learning has been conducted at the post secondary level, and the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for K-12 has only begun to be discussed in the literature. This study endeavored to evaluate at-risk student needs in supplemental online coursework for credit recovery and further assess how those needs were met. Additionally, the lack of research regarding how

students are supported in K-12 online learning for credit recovery while simultaneously enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools suggested a need to further investigate this phenomenon. The researcher hoped to fill a void in the literature by conducting this study.

In order to conduct a thorough review of relevant literature, the researcher examined a variety of journals, books, publications, websites, dissertations, and other documents that yielded information regarding virtual schools, at-risk students, and online learning in K-12. Based on the available literature, a framework was developed and organized into the following sub-topics which are described in the literature review: (a) at-risk students, (b) virtual school delivery models, (c) types of virtual schools, (d) Virtual High School, (e) Florida Virtual School, (f) learning experiences and autonomy, (g) virtual course design, (h) North Carolina Virtual Public School, (i) prevalent themes in the literature, (j) misconceptions, (k) overview of the benefits of online learning, (l) examples of online curriculum and programs, (m) overview of the challenges in online learning, and (n) future research priorities.

## **Literature Review**

### **At-risk students**

High school students do not decide to dropout on the spur of the moment; rather, it is the end of a long process of disengagement from the educational environment. The choice to drop out is complex and seriously impacts students, families, and society as a whole. Students who do not earn a high school diploma are more likely to be unemployed, on public assistance, or end up in prison. If they are able to find work, it is

usually in a low paying job with minimal benefits or opportunity to progress (Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Ferdig, 2010).

Multiple issues and factors impact a student's decision to leave school. In a 19-year longitudinal study by Garnier, Stein, and Jacobs (1997), researchers found that dropping out of high school is impacted by both individual and family stressors that begin in childhood. A poor sixth grade school performance, low achievement and motivation in high school, and drug use all increase the likelihood of a student dropping out of school. According to Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006), there is a dropout epidemic, and the full importance of this situation continues to go unnoticed by most Americans. The national graduation rate is between 68% and 71%; however, for minorities in some inner city schools, that rate may be as low as 50%. The top five reasons students gave for dropping out were boredom and lack of interesting classes (47%), missing too many days and could not catch up (43%), negative peer influence (42%), too much freedom and not enough rules at home (38%), and failing in school (35%) (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Although there are risk factors which exist in every area of life, most of the research on dropouts has centered on the attributes of individual students rather than on characteristics of schools or the surrounding community (Christle et al., 2007). In a mixed-methods study involving 196 Kentucky schools, Christle et al. (2007) examined school behaviors with strong relationships to high dropout rates. Their research supported previous studies which stated that student attendance, discipline, poverty, and ethnicity were all related to higher dropout rates. The characteristics and behaviors of the

teaching staff also appeared to be related to poor student outcomes. Schools with extensive supports for both teachers and students had lower dropout rates. In these schools, at-risk students were identified, closely monitored, and were provided with strategic interventions and support systems. In contrast, when students experience low expectations from teachers, they are more likely to give up on themselves (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In observations of the schools, the evaluators noted that teachers were more authoritative, engaging, used more instructional strategies, and interacted more with students in the schools with low dropout rates as compared to those with high dropout rates. The physical condition of the schools was also noted by the observers in the study. The schools with the low dropout rates were cleaner and in better condition than the high dropout schools. Finally, the researchers reported that the lack of post-high school job opportunities in the community significantly affected the dropout rate in the school (Christle et al., 2007).

Students who felt connected to supportive schools, where staff recognized them as individuals and were concerned about and promoted their accomplishments, were more likely to complete high school and transition to adult life successfully (Christle et al., 2007). Dropping out of high school is not an impetuous decision, but rather a cumulative process. Poor middle to high school transition and negative school experiences, such as truancy, academic failure, retention, discipline problems, and multiple school attendance often alienate the student from school and contribute to a destructive decision with lifelong consequences (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Christle et al., 2007).

Using data from Michigan Virtual School, Ferdig (2010) discussed the performance of credit recovery students as it related to the benefits and challenges of the

online learning environment. The synthesized literature revealed ten conclusions regarding promising practice and retention solutions that are outlined below.

1. There is a need to address why students dropped out and to determine the individual factors that pull a student out of school and the institutional factors that push a student out (push/pull effect).
2. There is no one reason why students quit school; consequently, there will not be a simple solution.
3. Dropping out is a complex process, not a single event.
4. Data collection will assist with early identification of at-risk students.
5. A personal connection, as well as instructional support is vital.
6. Innovative practices which involve both the instruction and the medium are needed.
7. Individualized instruction and attention reduces the likelihood of students falling through the cracks.
8. Communication is a critical element in online learning success. This involves all players: the parent, teacher, student, and collaboration with the community and local businesses.
9. Re-engagement should be a priority. Just as the decision to drop out is complex, efforts of re-engagement require attention toward behavioral, affective, and cognitive competencies.
10. Technology is able to provide innovative, hands-on, authentic, and individualized instruction to support at-risk students.

Ferdig (2010) reported further that the opportunities and options that online learning afforded students who had dropped out contributed to their re-engagement and ultimate ability to earn a high school diploma. The opportunities included regular communication with a teacher and the ability of the teacher to individualize coursework for the learner. The students also benefitted from the anonymity provided in an online environment and the opportunity to work with others who had negative traditional school experiences. Finally, the students reported that the support and acceptance of online teachers and on-site mentoring strongly impacted their success.

Many virtual schools have developed systematic strategies to help students succeed. Faculty and staff are assigned to mentor students and assist them as they progress through online courses. The individualization of instruction and the embedding of specific strategies through the use of technology are two additional programmatic supports provided to at-risk online learners in K-12 (Archambault, Diamond, Coffey et al., 2010). Westwood Community School District, a small district outside of Detroit, opened Westwood Cyber School to reduce its dropout rate. All of the students enrolled were considered at-risk, and some had already dropped out (Ash, 2011). This fully online school was based on a conceptual model from the United Kingdom called “not school,” which has an emphasis on online learning and project-based classes. Students in the school are described as “researchers,” and teachers are referred to as “mentors.” Students are provided computers, Internet access, printers, and cameras to be used to complete their virtual courses. As an added bonus, students may keep all of this equipment if they are successful and graduate (Ash, 2011). Teachers at this school have stated that it is essential for instructors to understand that when students enter the

program many do not have education as a priority. Their first challenge is to re-engage the students and increase their confidence in their own abilities and to raise the perceived value of a high school diploma (Ash, 2011).

### **Virtual School Delivery Models**

Distance education in the form of online courses and programs which serve the K-12 community are often referred to as *virtual* or *cyber schools*, and they operate in a variety of ways (Rice, 2009). The three dominant delivery models that have emerged for virtual schooling are independent, asynchronous, and synchronous (or a combination of asynchronous and synchronous). A student who is taking a course from a virtual school with an independent method of delivery is similar to a student who would take a traditional correspondence course with the added benefit of submitting assignments electronically (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). A specific example of the independent method may be a component in the Georgia Virtual School called Georgia Credit Recovery School (GAVSCR). GAVSCR does not have an online instructor, and students are expected to work independently. The courses are self-managed with all content and assessments available online. Students may enroll at any time and work according to their own pace. The courses are mastery-based, and students are not able to move to the next module without earning at least 70% or higher on the assessments. These courses are purported to maintain the rigor of, and are tied specifically to, the Georgia state standards (Davis, 2011; Tucker, 2007).

Asynchronous online instruction occurs at different times and in different places, where learners choose when and where to access instructional materials (Friend &

Johnston, 2005). This does not necessarily mean that there is limited interaction with staff support or that the curriculum is unstructured. For example, at Florida Virtual School, a student enrolled in a course using the asynchronous method may obtain support from the guidance department via phone, email, or text. When interacting with virtual coursework, the student can choose a real-world assessment option, submit his or her assignment, and then receive written feedback from the online teacher in the electronic course room. Further, students are encouraged to talk to the instructor via live chat or phone to discuss the student's performance and receive additional instruction on ways to improve (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Friend & Johnston; Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

Using a synchronous method, teachers can facilitate an audio or text discussion with students in real time. Instruction and feedback occur immediately. This format is especially helpful in foreign language instruction. Depending on the virtual software, single or multiple speakers may have the opportunity to participate at any given moment. The synchronous method is the least commonly used approach to K-12 online learning (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). It is typically the least cost effective because of the limited number of seats allowable, and it reduces the scheduling flexibility, individualization, and pacing options sought by many online course instructors and students (Barbour & Reeves, 2009).

### **Types of Virtual Programs**

In K-12 public education, there are generally two types of virtual education programs: supplemental programs and full-time schools. The goal of supplemental virtual programs is to give students the opportunity to take online courses in addition to the classroom curriculum offered by the local school. Supplemental programs typically

do not give credits or award diplomas. The local school is accountable for oversight and assessment of student progress and the provision of special education services. The majority of supplemental programs serve high school students; they are more numerous than full-time virtual schools, and they are operated at either the district or state level (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008).

Recent growth has been seen at the local level. Single district programs which are managed by one district for the district's own students is the fastest growing segment of online learning (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011). Many of these options blend online and face-to-face learning which contrasts the entirely online platform provided by state-level schools. The local school typically provides a computer lab, monitor/facilitator, and other on-site resources that may define the course as blended instead of completely online (Watson et al., 2011). The terms fully online and blended instruction are used commonly, and are generally understood; however, blended learning itself can take many forms, and models of blended instruction are continually evolving. If fully online or blended learning can positively impact instructional delivery, they may be viable options that result in improved quality and reduced costs for school districts (Bakia, Shear, Toyama, & Lasseter, 2012).

The term virtual schools is used to describe two different types of programs. Fully developed virtual schools allow students to earn diplomas and complete all student coursework through the Internet. These schools typically function as public charter schools created and administered by a public education institution, such as a school district or a university, in combination with a private education service provider (Lowes, 2007). Full-time virtual schools serve all grade levels and are responsible for every

aspect of a student's education, including oversight, administration of state assessment exams, and provision of special education services. Needed technology is provided, and there is no cost for enrollment; on the other hand, supplemental programs often charge both material and tuition fees, either to the student or the student's school (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008; Lowes, 2007).

In *Keeping Pace 2011*, Watson et al. (2011) cautioned policymakers about moving too quickly and heedlessly as they develop online or blended programs. Although there is a clear need to allow sufficient time from planning to implementation, the more common approach involves mere months from consideration to opening of online programs. Not allowing for adequate preparation limits the effectiveness of the online program, especially at it relates to technology, teaching, and student supports, among other areas.

## **The First Virtual Public Schools**

### **Virtual High School**

The first public virtual schools in the United States opened their virtual doors in 1997. The Virtual High School (VHS) Global Consortium was created through a 5-year, \$7.4 million federal grant. It is a membership, fee-based non-profit organization that partners with schools to expand course offerings. The VHS employs teachers from around the world (Zucker & Kozma, 2003). The VHS is unique in that most courses are electives taught by the teachers who developed them. The teachers are provided by districts or schools that are participating in VHS. Districts pay a membership fee and provide a teacher and a site coordinator, and in return receive 20 slots for students. Students have over 400 choices in course offerings and have instructors who are located

around the world. Teachers and site coordinators are required to pay to participate in extensive professional development provided by VHS. Students have a technology training component that prepares them to successfully manage the virtual learning platform. Additional technological supports and strategies are embedded in course design (Zucker & Kozma, 2003). Like almost all national virtual-schooling programs, accreditation of courses and the awarding of credits are done at the state or local level.

Fourteen years after its inception, VHS continues to stand out as a model for its structure and its purpose. The consortium approach promotes the creativity and innovation of a talented group of high school teachers whose skills extend beyond the local school walls. Three different characteristics of VHS which exemplify its mission and promote its success are its extensive catalog, with the focus on unique electives; its extensive professional development for teachers; and the use of trained site coordinators, which make this model an example for others to study and consider (Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

### **Florida Virtual School**

A different, but equally successful pioneering virtual school is The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) which was established in 1997 through an allocation of \$200,000 from the state legislature with the goal of increasing student options and providing access to high quality courses to all Florida students regardless of location. The FLVS has the motto, “any time, any place, any path, any pace,” and it is regarded by some as the best state virtual school in the nation (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). In a case study by Friend and Johnston (2005), researchers discussed some of the key components of the FLVS which has contributed to this success. These features include effective course

development, student choice, relevancy, student/teacher communication, and a focus on reaching out to the underserved (Friend & Johnston, 2005).

At FLVS, courses are developed by highly-qualified Florida curriculum specialists based on the theory and recommended pedagogy of Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction. These events are supported by cognitive theory and research on brain-based learning, and they provide an effective guide for module or unit development (Cavanaugh & Blomeyer, 2007; Gagne, Wagner, Golas, & Keller, 2005). The upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy, which focus on analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in the learning process, and vertical teaming across levels, are also employed in the development of online coursework at FLVS (Friend & Johnson, 2005). Additionally, courses undergo a peer review process and are aligned to the Sunshine State and National Standards. Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction provides a clear direction and supports well-organized expectations of the roles of teachers and students in the learning process (Gagne, Briggs, & Wagner, 1992). The Nine Events (as cited in Friend & Johnson, 2005) follow:

1. Gaining learners' attention
2. Informing learners of objectives
3. Stimulating learners' recall of prior knowledge
4. Presenting the stimulus to the learners
5. Providing guidance to the learners
6. Eliciting performance from the learners
7. Providing feedback to the learners
8. Assessing the performance of the learners

9. Enhancing the learners' retention of the information and transfer of the information to other ideas and contexts (p. 108)

The FLVS offers students an impressive list of course options, and it has a guidance department which is a crucial element in the virtual instructional process. The guidance department at FLVS assists students and their parents by advising on course selection, monitoring progress reports and final grades, and acting as primary liaison between FLVS and parents. Because FLVS has no physical building, guidance counselors, like many FLVS teachers, work from home and spend the majority of their time communicating through email or on the phone supporting students and their families. The close connection between counselors and virtual students allows guidance counselors to hear first-hand how FLVS has positively impacted, and in many cases, changed the lives of students by providing them another opportunity to earn their high school diplomas and improve their post-secondary options (Friend & Johnson, 2005).

Another primary focus of FLVS is to help students connect their online coursework to real-world application through the use of motifs and creative, metaphoric constructs (Friend & Johnson, 2005). Relevancy is especially important when working with at-risk students (Christle et al., 2007). A key component of each FLVS course is to challenge students to construct meaning through their own learning by making connections to relevant life experiences. By integrating higher order, analytical processing of workplace skills throughout its courses, FLVS promotes authentic problem-solving skill development and personally relevant application (Friend & Johnston, 2005).

FLVS student-teacher interactions are considered highly-facilitated. This facilitation is provided through emails, phone calls, synchronous chat opportunities, and

threaded discussions. Online teachers are expected to respond to students within 24 hours and feedback on course assignments is required within 48 hours. Despite the lure and ability to facilitate many students in virtual courses, FLVS maintains a reasonable student-teacher ratio in order to provide an individualized approach to student support (Dessoiff, 2009). In a highly facilitated course, the primary goal is to assist students with making valuable connections with their learning, not simply getting through the material and acquiring a credit. Courses focus on mastery learning rather than seat time requirements; and the instructors are paid according to the completion rate of students (Friend & Johnston, 2005).

FLVS has gone to great lengths to reach out to all Florida students, particularly the underserved populations, such as minority students and those in rural locations. A staff member, known as an e-learning manager, has the responsibility to find innovative ways to reach potential students. A major challenge has been to establish a means of providing access to Internet services in communities where none is available and assisting students with acquiring computers and printers, (Friend & Johnston, 2005). A key organization that has assisted FLVS with meeting the needs of the underserved is the Florida Learning Alliance (FLA). Together with regional consortia, FLA received federal grant funds and has been able to provide high-end technology to students in locations where it was previously unavailable. Activities associated with FLA and its consortia are largely responsible for the significant increase of FLVS enrollment in underserved areas (Friend & Johnston, 2005).

A unique and very important quality of VHS and FLVS that continues to set them apart from private curriculum providers, virtual charter schools, and even most state

virtual schools has been their willingness to allow outside agencies, evaluators, and investigators to go inside their virtual walls and expose and uncover anything that may contribute to their improvement. This transparency and continued self-evaluation promotes the understanding of promising practices in the virtual education realm and sets the bar for future K-12 online developers and providers. Further, both schools have extensive initial, and ongoing professional development requirements which builds capacity in their instructors and prepares them to effectively manage an online interactive instruction method (Berge & Clark, 2005).

The rapid growth of virtual schooling has affected the professional development component as pressure to meet demands has reduced the length of many initial professional development courses. The FLVS has broken its training into chunks, and the VHS has reduced the length of its professional development by weeks (Lowes, 2007). An additional challenge is the need to assist online teachers with supporting low-performing students who are less likely to be good readers. Teachers must learn how to reach and retain them as well as provide highly facilitated interactions (Lowes, 2007). There is a trend toward promoting and delivering more ‘just-in-time’ professional development opportunities which shorten initial training activities and deliver professional development when it is needed most (Lowes, 2007).

### **Learning Experiences and Autonomy**

Learning experiences can be organized by the level of control that the student has over the content and type of learning activity. In traditional, expository learning experiences, information is transmitted to the student by a lecture, in writing, or by other avenue. This conventional instruction may be contrasted with active learning where the

student has greater control over his or her learning (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). In their foundational work involving autonomy and self-determination, Deci and Ryan (1985) stated that students demonstrate the need for autonomy when they approach a task desiring some degree of control and choice in the situation. People resist and struggle against pressure from external forces such as rules, regulations, orders, and deadlines imposed on them by others because it interferes with their need for autonomy. Sometimes a person even rejects help in order to remain in control (deCharms, 1983).

The virtual learning environment can help struggling students interact with academic content in a new way. Students are able to start over and are given flexibility to manage employment or family obligations (Ash, 2011). But unless students have the support and resources they need, along with the motivation to work hard for their credits, success is unlikely (Ash, 2011). Online learning is set up in such a way that it places the control of the learning in the hands of students. Sometimes for the first time in their educational careers, students begin to feel confidence and experience control over their learning. Individual autonomy can be developed by activities and programs that emphasize setting realistic goals, personally planning goals, accepting personal responsibility for actions, and developing self-confidence (Woolfolk, 2007). However, according to Vygotsky (1962) and Moore (1973), children (to include adolescents) are generally not developmentally ready to assume large degrees of autonomy. This is especially true in virtual learning contexts where limited external structure and teacher access are acceptable and expected components of course design (Barbour, 2007).

### **Virtual Course Design**

Barbour (2007) used Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" (1962) and Moore's (1973) research regarding the development of autonomy in children to provide a theoretical base for his qualitative study on the perceptions of course developers and online teachers as related to effective asynchronous design for high school students. While the number of participants in Barbour's (2007) study was few ( $n=6$ ), their experience in designing, delivering, and supporting online distance education was vast. The transcription and analysis of data yielded ten themes which were refined into a list of the following seven summarized guidelines.

1. Course developers should plan out the course in its entirety prior to adding any web-based materials.
2. Course developers should keep navigation simple, yet provide variety in lesson presentation.
3. Course developers should provide frequent summarization and include personalized examples for students.
4. Course developers should provide easily understood directions with models for students to follow.
5. Course developers should avoid excessive text and use visuals whenever possible.
6. Course developers should be purposeful in the use of multimedia enhancements.
7. Finally, course developers should develop content for average or below-average students in mind, and provide enrichment options for above average students (Barbour, 2007).

Barbour suggested that this research supports the premise that adolescents require a large degree of structure and a higher level of teacher-student interaction to increase their opportunities to be successful in a virtual environment (2007). At-risk students especially need genuine motivation through validation and meaningful social interaction, not just instruction (Archambault et al., 2010).

According to Moore, (2007) distance education can be defined as a program in which the primary form of communication between the instructor and the learner occur through technology. In the early 1970's, Moore's work in establishing a theoretical foundation for the pedagogy of distance education emerged. Distance education programs can be evaluated in terms of transactional distance because they have a degree of structure, dialogue, and students with various levels of autonomy (Moore, 2007). Learners who struggle with self-direction prefer programs with little transactional distance. In these cases, students receive information and instruction through ongoing dialogue with their instructors and through instructional materials that allow for the individualization of needs, style, and pace (Moore, 2007). Students with greater autonomy are typically more comfortable with less dialogue and more structured course materials and can operate independently with greater transactional distance. The degree of dialogue and structure vary from course to course. The teaching philosophy of the instructor, the nature of the subject, and the skills of the learners are additional variables that impact the extent of transactional distance (Moore, 2007).

Means et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of empirical studies of online learning with the intention of gaining insights into the learning practices of K-12 students. Their initial search spanned from 1996-2006 and yielded no studies contrasting

traditional instruction to online learning in K-12. They extended their parameter two years to 2008 and discovered five studies which demonstrated that online learning is at least as good as traditional instruction in regards to student achievement; however, this number is not large enough to support how quickly secondary schools are moving to increase online learning options for their students (Means et al., 2009). The "No Significant Difference" (NSD) literature in education demonstrated that delivering instruction at a distance is not an inferior method of providing an education. Further, the NSD findings indicated that converting a face-to-face traditional course into an online or technology-mediated distance delivery course does not necessarily improve student outcomes. There are multiple factors impacting the learning process, not just the delivery method of instruction. Achieving gains involves more than adapting content to the medium; it involves a course redesign which maximizes the use of technology (Russell, 2001).

### **North Carolina Virtual Public School**

Designers of North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) (which serves about 40,000 students) implement intensive support systems for students and their parents during the first week of a course. Instructors are required to interact with the students or parents every day. Implementers of NCVPS believe that struggling students and their parents benefit from extra attention from the teacher (Davis, 2011). Additionally, NCVPS is focused on providing engaging interactive content and getting the student to feel success in the first unit. A student's initial contact with his or her virtual coursework is a good determinant as to whether the student will persist and be successful (Ash, 2011). When at-risk students feel a sense of empowerment and recognize that there is

someone who supports and cares about them, they begin to believe that success is attainable, and their futures can be positive (Ash, 2011).

In a mixed-methods approach using online surveys which included open-ended questions, Oliver et al. (2009) evaluated how North Carolina high school students responded to the experience of being enrolled in online courses during NCPVS's first year. The study focused on students who had failed a course and were enrolled for credit recovery. It also included students who were seeking challenge through accelerated coursework. Surveys were distributed to all students and teachers in the state who were involved in the summer 2007 session. Ninety teachers and 706 students responded to the surveys for a response rate of 86% (Oliver et al., 2009). Teachers stated that the opportunity for students to self-pace and access course materials from any location at any time were two of the most positive aspects of the online courses. Additionally, the teachers were able to integrate web-based resources into content material without difficulty. This afforded students individualized and unique learning opportunities. Academic proficiency, technical skills, and self-direction were reported by the teachers as weaknesses for the students in credit recovery (Oliver et al., 2009). Recommendations included ensuring course design and alignment to national standards, providing more worked-out examples, especially in math, and increased embedded videos. Credit recovery students were reported by teachers to be less motivated and less interested in taking another online course. Issues related to low self-efficacy in the online context were also noted. Credit recovery teachers stated that their students required more supervision and mentoring from an instructor to succeed. "This added mentoring could occur virtually through synchronous collaboration tools as recommended by students in

this study, or in person at a student's regular school with tutors, counselors, or teachers" (Oliver et al., 2009, p. 47).

### **Prevalent Themes in the Literature**

In their examination of open-access documents published between 1997 and 2008, Cavanaugh, Barbour, and Clark (2009) sought to move beyond broad endorsements of the benefits of online learning and review prevalent themes in the literature. They employed a template analysis procedure for coding. Categories for the template were pulled from contemporary focus in the field using an inductive process (Cavanaugh et al., 2009). They organized the results of their metasynthesis around five themes. The first theme of analysis was the type of virtual school. The majority of the literature revolved around statewide virtual schools (53%). This is not especially noteworthy given the fact that state virtual schools were some of the first to be developed, and some have been in place for more than ten years (Cavanaugh et al., 2009).

The second theme analyzed by Cavanaugh et al. (2009) was the professional role. This includes teachers, tutors, technical support, and guidance, as well as management and course designers. As is typical in newly evolving practice, a large percentage of the literature focused on descriptive elements with a key emphasis on the roles of the online teacher and administrator. This is to be expected, given the fact that teachers and their instructional practices have the greatest impact on student achievement, and administrative oversight and support contributes significantly to teacher performance (Cavanaugh et al., 2009).

The third theme which evolved from an analysis of the literature involved the benefits and challenges of online learning. The results of benefits were mixed and there

was disagreement between educators and the public on whether online learning is able to deliver the quality learning experiences that it purports to provide (Cavanaugh et al., 2009). The challenges of online learning focused on administrative difficulties involving high start-up costs and access issues. Expanding educational access could be seen as both a benefit and a challenge. Online learning provides students with greater learning opportunities, course options, and access to highly qualified teachers in areas with limited resources. On the other hand, access can be viewed as a challenge when students in rural or remote locations are unable to participate in virtual learning due to poverty or limited Internet connectivity at their locations. The technical, organizational, and academic abilities of students may also limit their access to the proposed benefits of online learning (Berge & Clark, 2005; Cavanaugh et al, 2009; Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

The fourth theme revolved around the standards from the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL), now known as iNACOL, or the International Association for K-12 Online Learning. The greatest amount of literature centered around the technology standard (78%), but overall the literature was fairly equally distributed among most of the iNACOL standards (Content 53%, Design 43%, Assessment 52%, Management 33%). The lowest area was 21<sup>st</sup> century skills with only 18%. This area is relatively new and was only introduced at the latter end of the literature analysis (Cavanaugh et al., 2009).

The final theme addressed iNACOL's National Standards for Quality Online Teaching. The primary focus of this was on the standard which focused on the core behaviors and expectations of teacher-student interactions. As in traditional instructional practices, giving frequent and meaningful feedback to students is a critical component to

student academic success. Further, providing an engaging instructional platform and active learning opportunities are necessary and highly effective components in both distance and face-to-face educational environments (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Rice, 2006).

### **Misconceptions**

Web-based learning is still a relatively new phenomenon at the K-12 level, and misconceptions are held by parents and policy makers alike (Watson, 2007). Some of these misconceptions are that online learning is just a virtual version of the traditional correspondence course and that it is less expensive than face-to-face instruction. Further, many hold the belief that online courses are less substantive than traditional courses and that they are easier to pass and easier to cheat in than traditional courses. There is also the misunderstanding that students spend all of their time on a computer and are isolated from peer and needed social interactions (Watson, 2007).

Well-developed web-based courses are not at all like those previously described, according to Watson (2007). They are facilitated by highly qualified teachers, and there is frequent interaction between instructors and students, and among students themselves. Assessment and accountability measures are in place to ensure that the student's education is appropriately evaluated and that he or she receives full academic benefits from having successfully completed coursework (Watson, 2007). The amount of time a student spends online generally depends on his or her grade level. Secondary students typically spend between 50% and 75% of their course time online, while elementary students typically spend 15% or less of their time online (Watson, 2007). At the high school level, many online courses are considered supplemental. Students enrolled in these courses are taking the majority of their courses in regular, traditional classrooms.

However, students enrolled in K-6 programs are generally full time virtual students. At the middle school level, there is a mix of supplemental and full time online students (Watson, 2007).

### **Overview of the Benefits of Online Learning**

Literature suggests recurring benefits of online learning involve expanding academic access, increasing the accessibility to high quality learning, improving student achievement, and expanding educational choice for students and their parents (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Clark & Berge, 2005; Zucker & Kozma, 2003). Supplemental online learning programs in virtual schools increase the course options for students. Specialized elective courses and joint enrollment courses with community colleges give students access to opportunities unavailable within the walls of their schools. Motivated students may earn their high school diplomas more quickly, and transfer students who come from states with different graduation requirements may take online courses to graduate on time. Advocates have described the benefits of online learning for students in small schools with limited course offerings and teacher expertise, as well as for minority, low-income, or inner city students. Online learning can give these students the opportunity to experience life and learning outside their local communities (Clark & Berge, 2005).

Online learning can go beyond simply providing access to greater instruction and coursework options. It can increase the quality of instruction afforded to students by using teaching and learning methods, content, and individualization to meet the needs of all learners. Tracking student progress and prescribing specific instructional support and remediation help to ensure academic understanding and advance student success (Clark & Berge, 2005). Further, online learning allows accelerated students the option of

enrolling in advanced placement courses which enhances their post-secondary opportunities. Participation in online learning may improve technology and Internet skills for students and better equip them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace (Clark & Berge, 2005). Finally, online learning has significantly expanded student and parent options regarding how and with what curriculum students are to be educated. Faith-based, charter, and international virtual schools have given parents who are unsatisfied with the performance of local public schools greater options for their child's education.

Advances in technology allow at-risk learners multiple opportunities to receive credits to graduate on time, as well as provide them with different avenues to learn and have their learning assessed. Existing online learning programs differ from traditional education in a number of significant ways, including the range of students served. Online learning programs can serve students of all ages, ability levels, and learning backgrounds. Most K-12 online learning programs focus on serving older high school students. A survey of district administrators reported that an estimated 64% of students in fully online programs are in grades 9-12. The reasons reported for online learning were to offer courses not otherwise available at the school, to offer advanced placement courses, and to offer credit recovery (Lips, 2010).

Proponents of online learning claim that it offers high-quality, engaging courses for students. In most cases, especially in state-run virtual schools, the teachers are highly qualified, licensed professionals who deliver the online instruction and track student progress; and, online program features expand educational opportunities for students regardless of geography, family income level, or background (Holstead, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2008). Additionally, new formative assessment models provide performance-

based virtual learning environments with tools to individualize instruction in ways that are impossible to replicate in traditional classrooms (Holstead, et al., 2008). Many online courses are divided into lessons or modules, and units. Course content may include organized text, graphics, videos, audios, animations, links, and many other interactive tools to enhance instruction and support learning. Additionally, many courses include offline materials such as textbooks and manipulatives to complement and enhance Internet content (Watson, 2007).

Shea, Pickett, and Petz (2003) reported on the relationship of pedagogy, design, and faculty development issues to students' satisfaction in e-learning courses in addition to proposing a conceptual framework for students learning in e-learning environments. As with traditional programs, the quality of instruction and course design, and how technology is adapted to promote them, is more important than the technology itself (Rovai, 2003). There are several online commercial curriculum providers that report using enhanced design features to be able to intervene and help students succeed with virtual coursework.

### **Examples of Online Curriculum and Programs**

In Aventa Learning, an online credit recovery program, some courses are designed in such a way that students take a pre-test and only complete the sections of the course in which they were unsuccessful. In this way, students are able to complete the course and experience success much more quickly. As a result of this, learning units or modules are designed as thematic units that could stand alone. This method allows students to enroll at any time during the school year and complete a course more quickly and move on depending on his or her ability (Davis, 2011). One of the areas where at-

risk students typically struggle is in vocabulary. Aventa Learning added acceleration methods for vocabulary development and a text-to-speech option for students who read below grade level (Davis, 2011; Natsu, 2011).

The CompassLearning program takes the student through a critical mistakes framework, which discusses why an answer is wrong. This helps guide the student to the correct answer by reviewing content and giving hints on where the student might look. This is also used for Response to Intervention (RtI) to develop individualized learning paths and tutorials for students who need remediation on a particular concept (Natsu, 2011). Providers say they tailor learning to individual students by using flexible pacing and schedules, extra practice, frequent assessment, and robust monitoring and reporting on participation and progress, while also allowing openings for personal interaction with teachers. In many cases, the programs are billed as ways to enable students not only to salvage credit for a class, but also to develop skills and work habits that will contribute to their continued academic success (Natsu, 2011).

In their evaluation of highly effective high schools, Bottoms and Anthony (2008) described one high school that offers a virtual academy that its students access online. Each course has a posted syllabus with lesson plans and assignments. Students use email to send completed assignments to the teacher and take tests online when they have finished a unit or course. Students do not have to pay fees to take courses and can receive full credit. The advantage is that students work on missing credits outside of the typical school day--even from their own homes. The virtual academy is countywide and staffed by nearly 70 teachers.

Seattle-based Apex Learning, well known for its online Advanced Placement courses, has broadened its course catalog in recent years to provide credit recovery, as well as dropout recovery, remediation, intervention, and alternative school programs. Improvements include enhanced graphics and animation, and audio lectures to support students with reading deficits. Additionally, annotated readings and guided instruction aim to improve reading comprehension. Other new features, such as graphic organizers and study sheets, are designed to help online students complete their schoolwork and learn good study habits (Trotter, 2008).

NovaNET purports to implement standards-based, individualized learning by using an adaptive instruction model. NovaNET uses a tutorial model that adjusts feedback based on student performance on an assigned standard (Foshay & Damyanovich, 2005). If students continue to demonstrate failure in a specific component, then their feedback and support become targeted and scaffolded. Strong evidence for this success has been shown to be in the areas of math and reading. NovaNET also includes simulation models which promote problem solving and higher order thinking skills, particularly in science and math. Moreover, NovaNET incorporates a unique tool for facilitating vocabulary and factual content development. NovaNET researchers described behavioral benefits for students as well. These include improved time on task, motivation, and conduct (Foshay & Damyanovich, 2005). As a commercial curriculum provider, NovaNET is used by single districts to provide supplemental online learning options for students for credit recovery and enrichment.

Online learning is being used in many ways. It extends learning and course options for students, particularly those in small rural towns or inner city schools.

Additional advantages include access to highly qualified teachers in subjects where qualified teachers are limited and flexibility to students facing scheduling conflicts. Further, online learning enables at-risk students, athletes and performers, dropouts, migrant youth, pregnant, homebound, or incarcerated students to continue their studies outside of the typical classroom. Online learning also improves students' technology skills by embedding technology literacy in academic coursework (Watson, 2007).

### **Overview of the Challenges in Online Learning**

Along with the benefits, there are also a number of challenges associated with virtual schooling. According to Watson (2007), a key challenge for online programs is how to effectively meet both the academic and technical needs of students. Most programs provide technical support to students separate from academic support. Typically, online learners work within an asynchronous environment, and time flexibility is a beneficial feature. Technical support may be needed when teachers are unavailable, and not all online teachers have equal technical skills. Both technical and academic support may be available to students via phone, email, live chat, or some combination thereof. Most students enrolled in supplemental online courses attend a brick-and-mortar school, and generally the online program requires a mentor for the student. This mentor is available for both technical and academic support on site as a supplement to virtual support (Watson, 2007). Full-time programs typically identify a mentor or coach to support the student. Because full-time students do not attend a physical school, this adult support person is usually a parent. Most online courses provide an orientation course to guide students through the basics of an online course (Watson, 2007).

Online programs are required to follow the legal mandates regarding students with disabilities when considering support options. For example, when addressing visually impaired or hearing impaired students, design and technology enhancements (screen readers) need to be considered. Full time virtual schools must also ensure the provision of any additional services for special education students with Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs). This is typically accomplished through modifications, accommodations or contracts for face-to-face therapists in the student's community (Watson, 2007).

Online programs may be more cost effective than traditional courses; however, the expense for hardware, software, connectivity, technical support, student support, course development, and other costs offset the physical environment upkeep needed by brick-and-mortar schools. This is especially true during the initial phase of virtual school or course implementation (Tucker, 2007; Watson, 2007). In many cases, virtual schools received start-up funding through federal technology grants (Clark & Berge, 2005). Funding continues to remain a topic of challenge and dispute among policy makers as the economy struggles and district budgets shrink (Clark & Berge, 2005; Watson, 2007).

Additional challenges to successful online learning involve the dispute over seat-times versus mastery, and also include the lack of understanding of its value and purpose by the public and education professionals. This leads to outdated or inappropriate policies related to online learning. Further, the growth of online learning has outpaced policy in many states and controversy involving the effectiveness and legality of virtual schooling continues to be disputed (Watson, 2007). Finally, access to the Internet and

web-based learning, and the role of technology in 21<sup>st</sup> century schools continues to be a challenge for online learning (Watson, 2007).

Researchers Barbour and Reeves (2009) have listed studies which show that the students who are typically successful in online learning environments are those who are independent learners, intrinsically motivated, and who have proficient time management, literacy, and technology skills. These characteristics are typically associated with adult learners and are the very characteristics that at-risk students generally lack (Oliver et al., 2009). Critics caution that placing at-risk students in an online course and expecting them to excel is unrealistic (Schaeffer & Konetes, 2010). Online instructors and on-site support staff must have an awareness of the motivational, technical, and academic needs of their students in order to effectively support them.

Online learners may still face some real barriers even if they have a faculty who design interactive, engaging online learning environments and utilize user-friendly course management tools. Although the promise of online learning suggests that the flexibility of a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week, Web-based delivery that provides educational access to anyone with a computer and Internet access, not all students have the same abilities to access and engage in online learning (Blocher, Sujo de Montes, Willis, & Tucker, 2002; Clark & Berge, 2005). Most online learners work within an asynchronous setting where they choose the time and location for their study to a much greater extent than do students enrolled in traditional courses. Consequently, the students' ability to self-monitor and garner resources independently is vitally important. Without these qualities, success in an online learning environment is less likely (Blocher et al., 2002).

The evaluation of effectiveness of student supports is vital in the K-12 context, especially when considering the alternative nature of the online educational experience, and the proclivity for at-risk student populations to seek this option for credit recovery (Rice, 2006). The characteristics identified as successful for at-risk students-- instructional environments that are self-paced, personalized, offer diverse instructional methods that are facilitated by competent caring adults (Rice, 2006)--are the very characteristics that are praised in distance education circles. In a comprehensive evaluation of the literature surrounding K-12 distance education, Rice reported the need for further research that examines the relationship between student supports and at-risk student needs in distance education. Additionally, barriers to successful online implementation include inadequate professional development, lack of time to manage and appropriately develop course content, difficulties with technology and resistance to change and innovation (Rice, 2006).

### **Future Research Priorities**

Rice (2009) used the Delphi method to identify priorities for K-12 online learning for the next five years. Data were taken from three distinct entities, each offering a specialized area of expertise. These professionals included day-to-day practitioners in online learning, school policy makers, and researchers in distance education (Rice, 2009). Panel members ranked the evaluation of course design and delivery as the highest priority for future research. Currently, there are inconsistent means of examining K-12 online effectiveness and what is available looks specifically at outcomes (Rice, 2009). The areas of best practice ranked second in priority for future research focus. Panelists cited that best practices for elementary, middle, and high schools should be looked at as

separate entities, given the vast developmental and cognitive difference among these learners. Accountability was listed third with the belief that virtual schools and curriculum providers should be held to the same standard regarding student achievement as traditional schools. Providing access to education through an alternative means is one of the most important qualities and potential in distance education. Panel members suggested the need to evaluate the capabilities of online learning as it relates to students with disabilities and at-risk populations. Specifically, recommendations were made regarding the further evaluation of the use of assistive technology in the online learning environment (Rice, 2009). This was followed by best practice which looked at effective pedagogy and technology that promote student achievement. The results of this study provide a framework of priorities as a means to organize the information with the purpose of prioritizing policy development and future research (Rice, 2009).

### **Summary**

Multiple issues and factors impact a student's decision to leave school without earning a high school diploma. The literature has revealed that the characteristics and behaviors of the teaching staff also appear to relate to poor student outcomes. When at-risk students are identified, closely monitored, and provided strategic interventions and support systems they are more likely to stay in school. Many virtual schools and supplemental learning programs are reported to embed systematic strategies and design elements to help at-risk students succeed.

Online learning is implemented through independent, synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of synchronous and asynchronous models. In K-12 public education, there are generally two types of virtual education programs: supplemental programs and

full-time schools. The goal of supplemental virtual programs is to give students the opportunity to take online courses in addition to the classroom curriculum offered by the local school. Supplemental programs typically do not give credits or award diplomas. The majority of supplemental programs serve high school students; they are more numerous than full-time virtual schools and are generally operated at the local or state level. Many online credit-recovery options are offered by virtual schools and commercial curriculum providers who focus their programs on at-risk students.

The Virtual High School (VHS) Global Consortium uses a non-profit consortium approach and provides an extensive list of course offerings to districts contributing to its membership. The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is regarded by many as the best state virtual school in the country. It promotes innovative course development, student choice, relevancy, highly-facilitated student/teacher interaction, and reaching out to underserved populations in the state. The virtual learning environment can help struggling students interact with academics in a new and different way. Experts stress the need to motivate and re-engage students in educational opportunities. Online learning provides a way to do that with needed supports and resources. The North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) has recognized that successful and well-supported early interaction with online course work has significant impact on a positive course outcome. Teachers at NCVPS suggested that students enrolled in credit recovery require more supervision and support and that these students have less self-determination and autonomy. Virtual learning may allow struggling students a second option to be successful, but on the other hand, at-risk adolescents are not technically, academically, or developmentally prepared to accept the responsibility of an asynchronous online course.

Prevalent themes in the literature revolved around state-run virtual schools and the professional roles of teachers, tutors, guidance, technical support, management, and course designers. An additional theme included the benefits and challenges of online learning. Further themes involved the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) (now called iNACOL) standards for technology and teaching. Because online learning at the K-12 level is still relatively new, there are misconceptions held by educators and the public. These include the actual costs and funding of online learning and whether or not virtual coursework offers the rigor and educational benefit expected in a traditional course.

Although there is limited research in K-12 online learning, benefits and challenges in the literature were frequently described in individual studies (see Table 1). Some examples of the benefits involve improved academic access and course offerings, acceleration options, choice, flexibility, individualization of content and methods, enhanced design elements with engaging curricula, and most importantly, the opportunity to recover credits and graduate on time. Challenges include high start-up costs, poor technical, academic and independent skills of at-risk students, as well as limited staff support and the lack of understanding by policy makers. Many studies listed the need to further evaluate the experiences of at-risk students in online learning, especially as it is related to supplemental course work for credit recovery.

Table 1

*Benefits and Challenges of Online Learning*

| <b>Benefits</b>   | <b>Researchers/Authors</b>           | <b>Challenges</b>   |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility: to include time, location, pace, courses, access</li> </ul>                       | Ash (2011);                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrative difficulties and high start-up costs</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased options/choice</li> </ul>  | Barbour (2007);                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited Internet connectivity/access</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevance</li> </ul>   | Barbour & Reeves,                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low or poor public and educator understanding</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualization</li> </ul>   | (2009);                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited autonomy; motivation, academic or technical skills of many students</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specialized elective courses</li> </ul>  | Berge & Clark, (2005);               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor organizational and time management skills</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective, engaging course design and development</li> </ul>                                   | Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, (2009); | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children and adolescents require a large degree of structure and teacher interaction and mentoring, especially in a virtual environment</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly-facilitated interaction between teachers and students; students and students</li> </ul> | Christle et al., (2007);             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low self-efficacy</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved technology skills and technical support</li> </ul>                                    | Davis, (2011);                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legal mandates for students with disabilities in full time schools</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active learning/more control/empowerment</li> </ul>  | Ferdig, (2010)                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chance to start fresh</li> </ul>   | Friend & Johnston,                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growth exceeding policy development and provision</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to HQ teachers in small or rural schools</li> </ul>                                     | (2005);                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate professional development</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved on-time graduation opportunity</li> </ul>   | Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs,            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of time to develop and manage course content</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased quality</li> </ul>   | (1997);                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties with technology</li> </ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many design enhancements/scaffolds</li> </ul>  | Herlihy & Quint, (2006)              |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalized supports</li> </ul>   | Holstead et al., (2008);             |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaching out to the underserved</li> </ul>   | Lips, (2010);                        |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are able to integrate web-based resources into content without difficulty</li> </ul>  | Means et al., (2009);                |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced placement options/joint enrollment</li> </ul>   | Moore, (1973);                       |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credit recovery</li> </ul>   | Natsu, (2011);                       |   |
|   | Oliver et al., (2009);               |   |
|   | Rice, (2006)                         |   |
|   | Tucker, 2007;                        |   |
|   | Vygotsky, (1962);                    |   |
|   | Watson, (2007, 2012)                 |   |
|   | Zucker & Kozma, (2003)               |   |

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The intent of this research study was to examine K-12 student and teacher perceptions of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. This chapter will describe the methods and materials that were used to conduct the study. This chapter is presented in the following sections: (a) Research Questions, (b) Research Design, (c) Research Procedures, (d) Participants, (e) Instrumentation, (f) Data Collection, and (g) Data Analysis.

#### **Research Questions**

The researcher considered the following overarching question in this study: What are stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery? The following sub-questions will be used to answer the overarching question:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online learning?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the challenges of supplemental online learning?
3. What are staff member perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online coursework for at-risk students?
4. What are staff member perceptions of the challenges at-risk students encounter while enrolled in supplemental online learning?

## **Research Design**

Given the research questions, this study was implemented with a qualitative approach using the case study method. The case study method is appropriate when the researcher intends to generate a clear understanding of people or to capture the characteristics of events (Yin, 2009). Additionally, the case study method is an appropriate method for gathering information when the phenomenon to be studied is descriptive in nature, especially when describing why or how a phenomenon occurred or when an event is bound by time and place (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). This study probed into the relationships between students and their online course work and between students and the staff members who support them on site while they are interacting with virtual learning.

The case study method provides a rich, deep description through multiple means, two of which are interviews and focus groups in the participants' natural context at a given point in time (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007). Creswell (2007) views a case study as a methodology, a design within qualitative research, as well as a product of the investigation. Case study researchers seek to gain understanding through maximum variation of participants in order to report a full case description and explore case-based themes (Creswell; Seidman, 2006). There are many variables in this case study which could not be controlled, including the number of students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery at the high school and which staff members were assigned to support the students. The personal experiences of the researcher, the students, and the teachers were additional variables. This method was selected to allow the researcher to gather data from several perspectives and sources, adding to the vast description of the

phenomenon. The initial responsibility of the researcher in a case study is to identify the unit to be investigated, using the research questions as the basis for this determination (Yin, 2009).

## **Research Procedures**

### **Participants**

This study employed purposive sampling techniques (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007; Glesne, 2006). In qualitative research, the investigator chooses individuals and sites for examination because they can purposefully inform understanding of the phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2007). In order to gain a thick description of the benefits and challenges at-risk students encounter in online learning, it was necessary to interview stakeholders from many perspectives (Yin, 2009). In this case, the primary participants were the 12, 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery at a large suburban high school. The student participants were considered at-risk for not graduating with their peers due to the fact that they have failed two or more courses in high school. Students requiring credit recovery take six traditional 50 minute course in addition to the supplemental online course which is completed at the end of the school day or on the students' own time. To ensure confidentiality, all study participants were assigned pseudonyms. The students self-selected their pseudonyms.

Teacher participants included the two content teachers who supervised and supported students on site as they completed their virtual coursework. Additional participants included a focus group of four graduation coaches from four of the five high schools in the county. These graduation coaches, who are certified high school teachers

or school counselors, provided support and supervision for the supplemental online programs in each of their respective schools. As recommended by district leadership, the researcher contacted the graduation coaches through a face-to-face meeting when they gathered for a monthly meeting with their program coordinator. A brief summary of the project was described, and a request for their participation was made. They were not expected to decide at that time, and they were reassured of confidentiality and the option to decline without repercussion if they chose. Following this, the researcher met with the school principal, the two content teachers, and the graduation coach who supported supplemental online learning at the selected school in the study. At this meeting the study was reviewed, and any questions or concerns raised by staff participants were addressed. All staff involved elected to participate in the study. On the day of the scheduled focus group interview, one of the graduation coaches was unable to participate due to a schedule conflict.

### **East High School**

East High is located in a large growing suburban community in eastern Georgia. The county population is just over 124,000, and the median income is \$66,000. The percentage of persons living below the poverty rate is 7.1%. The median home value is \$168,700. The county is comprised of 73% White, 14.9% Black, 3.8% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 2.8% Multi (Census, 2010). East High is the largest school in the district with 2011 enrollment at 1900 students. East High has 103 teachers, five administrators, and seven-and-a-half support staff. There are 35 male teachers and 68 female teachers; 62 of them have master's degrees or higher. In the 2011 school year, East High did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* due to

graduation rate. Of the 447 students in the graduating class of 2011, 375 of them earned a regular diploma. The graduation rate for the school was 83.9%. At this time, the school is not in “Needs Improvement.” Regarding students enrolled in compensatory programs, East High has 123 students identified as having disabilities (7%), four English speakers of other languages (<1%), and 53 students enrolled in remedial courses (3.0%). The percent of students eligible for free and reduced lunch is 24%. The district eligibility is 32%. The percentage of student ethnicity follows: Asian 2%, Black 15%, Hispanic 7%, White 69%, and Multi 7%. This information was found on the State Data Reporting website.

### **Demographic Profile of Student Respondents**

Twelve students volunteered to participate in the study. There were four male and eight female students. Six out of eleven students were designated as economically disadvantaged and qualified for free or reduced lunch. One of the students was served in special education under the category of specific learning disability. Three of the students had been retained in middle school. Ten out of twelve had been retained in high school due to insufficient credits. All are in danger of not graduating in four years. Five out of eleven students have had more than fifteen absences in any high school year; (for one student no data are available). Nine out of eleven students (one – no data) are at or below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile for class rank. Eight out of nine students failed math in ninth grade, three out of nine failed math and literature in ninth grade. Ninth grade data are only available for nine out of twelve participants. Overall, given the available information, the twelve student participants failed 78 classes (one half semester course) in high school and

only two are currently classified as twelfth graders. See Table 2 for a specific breakdown.

Table 2

*Academic History of Student Participants*

| Student                                     | Age | Grade/<br>Class<br>Rank | Failed courses   | Repeated<br>Courses                        | Online Credit<br>Recovery          | Online<br>Platform | Grade<br>Retained |
|---|-----|-------------------------|--|--|------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Liza (W)<br>-econ disadv.<br>-attendance | 17  | 10<br>430 out<br>of 513 | 1 literature<br>4 math<br>1 social studies                           | 4 math<br>1 social studies                 | 1 literature                       | 1 GAVSCR           | 9                 |
| 2. Dante (W)                                | 18  | 11<br>303 out<br>of 341 | 3 math<br>2 electives<br>1 Spanish                                   | 2 math<br>2 electives                      | 2 math                             | 2 NovaNET          | 10                |
| 3. John (W)                                 | 17  | 11<br>274 out<br>of 341 | 1 math<br>2 social studies<br>1 Spanish                              | 1 math<br>2 social studies<br>1 Spanish    | 1 social studies<br>(did not pass) | 1 BYU              | 9                 |
| 4. Michael (B)<br>-econ disadv.             | 18  | 11<br>269 out<br>of 339 | 1 literature<br>5 math<br>1 elective                                 | 1 literature<br>3 math<br>1 elective       | 2 math                             | 1 GAVS<br>1 GAVCR  | 10                |
| 5. Randy (W)<br>-econ disadv.               | 16  | 10<br>405 out<br>of 512 | 4 literature<br>2 math   | 1 math                                     | 4 literature<br>1 math             | 1 GAVS<br>4 GAVSCR | 10                |
| 6. Lela (A)                                 | 17  | 11<br>304 out<br>of 341 | 2 literature<br>2 math<br>2 social studies<br>2 Spanish<br>1 science | 2 literature<br>2 math<br>2 social studies | 2 electives<br>1 science           | 2 BYU<br>1GAVCR    | 11                |

|  |    |                         |  |  |                                  |  |   |
|--|----|-------------------------|--|--|----------------------------------|--|---|
| 7. Lauren (M)<br>-econ disadv.<br>-attendance    | 18 | 10<br>366 out<br>of 510 | 2 literature<br>1 math<br>1 social studies<br>1 elective | 1 literature<br>1 math<br>1 social studies | 1 literature                     | 1 GAVCR  | 7 & 10                                    |
| 8. Emerald<br>(W)<br>-econ disav.<br>-attendance | 18 | 11<br>274 out<br>of 339 | 3 literature<br>3 math<br>1 social studies               | 2 literature<br>3 math                     | 1 literature                     | 1 GAVS   | 8 & 9                                     |
| 9. Destiny<br>(W) transcript<br>not available    | 16 | 10                      | 1 literature<br>others? –<br>transcript<br>unavailable   |  | 1 literature<br>1 social studies | 2 NovaNET<br>–(did not<br>complete<br>social<br>studies) | 10  |
| 10. Paige (W)<br>-attendance                     | 18 | 12<br>276 out<br>of 328 | 2 math<br>1 science<br>1 Spanish                         | 2 math                                     | 1 science                        | 1 GAVSCR   | Transfer<br>student –<br>no<br>retentions |
| 11. Nicole (B)<br>(SPED –SLD)<br>-econ disadv.   | 18 | 10<br>507 out<br>of 511 | 6 literature<br>4 math<br>9 science<br>3 electives       | 5 literature<br>4 math                     | 1 science                        | 1 NovaNET  | 8 and 2x<br>in 9                          |
| 12. Caleb (W)                                    | 18 | 12<br>222 out<br>of 328 | 2 science  | 1 science<br>(currently<br>enrolled)       | 1 science                        | 1 GAVSCR<br>(1 did not<br>complete)                      | Transfer –<br>no<br>retentions            |

*Note:* Ethnicity: B-Black; W-White; A-Asian; M-Multi; Economically Disadvantage-econ disadv.; attendance-students missed more than 15 days in a school year.

After inquiring about the online credit recovery enrollment at each of the five high schools in the district, the researcher discovered that only one of the graduation coaches was maintaining a record of student enrollment in online coursework. Three out of five of the graduation coaches were new to the role in their current schools, and two of them were new to the role altogether. The district maintained a record of students who earned credits in online credit recovery. However, this information does not show students who attempted online credit recovery courses and either did not complete or did not pass them. Students earn one half credit for completing a one semester course. Students are expected to earn six credits in one school year, and they need a minimum of 23 credits to graduate from high school. In the 2010-2011 school year, students from all five high schools in the district were reported to have successfully completed 145 online credit recovery courses. The breakdown follows: literature, 73 courses; science, 43 courses; math, 16 courses; and social studies, 13 courses. See Table 3 for specific content courses.

Table 3

*District Record of Passed Credit Recovery Courses – All Schools, All Online Platforms*

| Course                | Number Passed |
|-----------------------|---------------|
| Literature 9          | 28            |
| Literature 10         | 29            |
| Literature 11         | 13            |
| Literature 12         | 3             |
| Algebra               | 3             |
| Geometry              | 2             |
| Math I                | 2             |
| Math II               | 8             |
| Math III              | 1             |
| Physical Science      | 3             |
| Biology               | 15            |
| Chemistry             | 14            |
| Environmental Science | 8             |
| Physics               | 3             |
| US History            | 2             |
| American Government   | 1             |
| Economics             | 2             |
| World History         | 7             |
| World Geography       | 1             |

One of the graduation coaches (Ann) maintained thorough data of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery during the 2010-2011 school year. She is a strong proponent of online learning, and estimated that there are three times as many students enrolled in online credit recovery at her school (Lake High) than any other in the district (see Table 4). Courses are broken down by content area and online learning platform.

Table 4

*Lake High School Online Data for 2010-2011*

| Georgia Virtual School (GAVS) | Georgia Virtual Credit Recovery (GAVSCR) | Brigham Young University (BYU) | Total Courses Passed |
|-------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| 30/34 total courses passed    | 65/66 total courses passed               | 20/20 total courses passed     |                      |
| English/literature<br>8/8     | English/literature<br>35/36              | 0                              | 43/44                |
| Math<br>6/7                   | Math<br>12/12                            | 0                              | 18/19                |
| Social Studies<br>8/8         | Social Studies<br>14/14                  | Social Studies<br>2/2          | 24/24                |
| Science<br>2/3                | Science<br>4/4                           | Science<br>1/1                 | 7/8                  |
| Foreign Language<br>3/5       | 0  | Foreign Language<br>1/1        | 4/6                  |
| PE/Health<br>1/1              | 0  | PE/Health<br>2/2               | 3/3                  |
| Electives<br>2/2              | 0  | Electives<br>14/14             | 16/16                |

**Georgia Virtual School**

Students enrolled in the Georgia Virtual School (GAVS) have an online teacher. This teacher gives assignments, establishes grading standards, and is expected to communicate with students. The cost to students for these courses is \$300 per half credit course. The only supervision required by the students' resident school is to proctor the students' final exams. All other assignments, quizzes, and tests are done by students whenever and wherever they choose. If students are able to enroll in a GAVS course

during the actual school day, they are not charged a fee and the Georgia Virtual School is able to earn full time equivalent (FTE) and receive proportional funding. This option is typically used by transfer students who do not have the required courses needed for a high school diploma in Georgia. The graduation coaches are expected to function as proctors/monitors of students enrolled in a GAVS course during the school day. There are operational challenges associated with GAVS courses. According to graduation coach Lori, “My students have the most difficult time with getting through the online mandatory orientation with GAVS courses, and also the various ways assignments are submitted causes them problems.”

### **Georgia Virtual School Credit Recovery**

Students enrolled in Georgia Virtual School Credit Recovery (GAVSCR) do not have an assigned teacher. Students desiring support at East High are expected to attend a ‘lab’ session which is open from 3:00-4:00pm Monday through Wednesday. Students are encouraged to do most of the work on their own and attend a lab session to take post-tests and the final exam. Most students who choose the GAVCR option pay \$80 to the school to enroll, but at some schools it is free. The state does not charge for enrollment. Schools use the fee to cover the cost of the monitors assigned to the lab and to promote student buy-in according to the graduation coaches. The credit recovery content teachers and graduation coaches have reported difficulties with GAVS and GAVCR. Lori stated, “It is FULL of content and assessment errors. I am appealing grade issues to the GAVS/GAVCR people almost daily.” Specifically, content teacher Jill at East High said,

We would find questions with the wrong answers and they, the two ladies that we finally started dealing with on a regular basis, became very appreciative of the

work that we were doing, that we actually looked. We took the time and the whole thing was we wanted our children to get the credit that they deserved and we wanted them (GAVS) to be able to correct it for the next person who took the test.

### **Brigham Young University**

Brigham Young University (BYU) offers online courses for high school students with costs around \$130 per half credit course. Students who need to make up elective course deficits frequently use this option. Students are able to download coursework, and they typically do all of the work on their own. According to Lori, “They don’t have a teacher per se, but most of the courses do have a portfolio or something to submit for grading that is not online, and they have a teacher to do the grading.” The lessons are submitted online and grading feedback is provided through the online platform. The final exam is done through a paper/pencil exam that is mailed to the school’s proctor who administers the assessment and mails it back to BYU. Typically, students are allowed to take the exam a second time if they fail. If students do not pass the final exam, they do not receive credit for the course. Graduation coaches reported that BYU is not used as often as the other options due to the high stakes final exam.

### **NovaNET**

Another online credit recovery option used by the district is NovaNET. The vendor for NovaNET allowed for a free nine month pilot for up to 150 seats. During the summer of 2011, students in the district were allowed to attend a daily two-hour lab session at a selected high school and work on NovaNET coursework and recover credits. Students were expected to work independently in the computer lab but could ask

questions of the monitors (teachers and graduation coaches) who were there to support them. A benefit of NovaNET was that students were allowed to take their own notes and use them on post-tests. A challenge reported by staff was that NovaNET required an 80% mastery level before a student could move to the next section (GAVS and GAVSCR required only a 70%). As a result of this, the support staff had to go in and manually move a student to the next level if they earned between 70 and 80%. They reported that this was both time-consuming and frustrating for them and for the students. NovaNET continued to be available to all students in the district for credit recovery in the fall 2011 semester; however, due to budget constraints, the district elected not to purchase NovaNET seats after the free pilot program expired. The exception to this was for students with disabilities who are in self-contained classes. The NovaNET online learning option satisfies the highly-qualified teacher requirement for core instruction at the secondary level and allows the students to earn high school credit. Students must complete all modules ‘sequentially;’ they are not able to do a pre-test and move on to the next module. This satisfies the ‘seat time’ requirement established by the state. Neither BYU nor NovaNET as they are operated in the district in the study satisfies the requirement for NCAA accreditation. Students desiring to attend an NCAA Division I or Division II college are required to have their core courses certified in order to participate or receive financial aid related to athletic eligibility. NovaNET has implemented changes to guide local schools in complying with NCAA rules and certifying their courses to meet NCAA standards (Watson et al., 2011).

## **Instrumentation**

The study employed face-to-face structured interviews of 12 students and two teachers. The time of interviews ranged from ten to 50 minutes. It also included a 50 minute focus group interview with four graduation coaches from four out of five high schools in the district. Additionally, content analysis of data related to the academic history of the students in the study was conducted. Specifically, the researcher examined the students' grades, pass/fail history, online course enrollment, attendance, and class rank, among other available data. Further, in order to gain a broad perspective of student achievement related to virtual coursework, available data involving the success or failure of students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery throughout the district in the previous school year (2010-2011) was examined. The researcher contacted graduation coaches and counselors at each school in the district through email to obtain this specific information. However, it was discovered that individual schools were not required to maintain records of students who enroll, complete, or fail any online coursework. Only one of the schools was maintaining this information. At this school, Lake High School (pseudonym) the graduation coach maintained detailed data on all supplemental online learners.

As a district level employee in the special services department, the researcher had access to all student transcripts and longitudinal archival data. The researcher was cognizant of the need to protect student privacy and maintain confidentiality at all times. Permission for this study was granted by the district superintendent and the school principal, as well as the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board. Interview protocols found in Appendix B were used and closely adhered to for all

participants. Face validity was established through a review of the protocols by a panel including the study's methodologist. By interviewing a number of participants and seeking feedback from all, validity was enhanced as the researcher connected and evaluated the comments of one participant against those of another. The goal of this process was to comprehend how the participants develop and make meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 2006).

In addition to interviews, the content analysis protocol included in Appendix C was used to examine the academic histories of each student participant. The intent was to gain an understanding of how the students have performed in school up until the time they came to be enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery. Further, the district pass/fail rate protocol included in Appendix D was used to gain a broad understanding of how many students had enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year.

### **Data Collection**

In keeping with the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board procedures, informed consent was obtained from all adult participants. Parental consent was obtained from all participant students in the case, and student consent/assent was also obtained. Care was given to ensure that all written documents were at an appropriate readability level for at-risk students. Consent for access to students and the use of student data for the study was obtained from the school principal and the superintendent of the district. All permission protocols can be found in Appendix A.

Data for this study were collected through one-on-one structured interviews with the identified students and teachers at the school site. The interview protocols were used

and closely adhered to in all individual interview sessions. The participants were encouraged to elaborate or further describe an answer if the researcher believed additional information was needed; however, prompting was used sparingly and only when absolutely necessary. The use of a protocol provided for a standardized administration of the researcher's line of inquiry (Yin, 2009). A focus group interview with four graduation coaches was also conducted. The goal was to have the participants reconstruct their experiences within the supplemental online learning context (Seidman, 2006). Two chief uses of the case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of the participants, and Stake and Yin suggest the best way to do that is through interviews (1995). Since the qualitative approach to research is intended to describe or to explain social phenomena from the viewpoints of the participants in their natural environment (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006), all interviews and focus groups were conducted in the school setting, at the participants' convenience.

Before beginning the study, the researcher met with all students who had been enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery and described the purpose and procedures of the study in depth and asked for volunteers to participate in the individual interview sessions. This occurred in the computer lab where the students go after school to work individually on their online coursework. Students are allowed to attend at their discretion; the lab is open to students after the regular school day from 3:00-4:00 pm. All interested students received a parental consent form. Once parental permission was received, the researcher met with the students and reminded them that participation was voluntary even if their parent signed consent. Interested students also

signed a form of consent, or assent if they were under the age of eighteen. Interviews were conducted at a time convenient to the students.

Although the researcher did not conduct three separate interviews of each participant, the precepts of the three-interview structure were followed in a condensed one-time procedure (Seidman, 2006). Student participants were asked about their life experiences with school in general. This type of questioning was followed with their experiences with technology. The goal was to establish the context of the participants' experiences in view of the topic up to the current time (Seidman, 2006). The second component of the interview involved exploring the student participants' current experiences in school, with technology, and specifically with technology in online learning. This portion encouraged participants to focus on the particular details and reconstruct present events (Seidman, 2006). Culminating the interview were queries along the reflective line, seeking to understand how the student participants made meaning from their experiences in school, with technology, and in supplemental online learning for credit recovery (Seidman, 2006). When participants were asked to reconstruct details of their lived experience, they selected specific events from their past and therefore assigned meaning to them (Seidman, 2006). Teacher participant interviews followed the same protocol from their perspective regarding the roles in supporting students in supplemental online learning for credit recovery, as well as their perceptions of the benefits and challenges encountered by students.

The researcher met the graduation coaches for all five high schools in the district when they were gathered together for a monthly meeting with their district coordinator. The study was introduced and the researcher requested their participation in a focus

group interview session at a later date. Four of the five participated in the focus group session. One of the graduation coaches had a schedule conflict and could not attend. The interview protocol found in Appendix B was closely followed. An ice breaker was used at the beginning of the focus group interview in order to encourage and facilitate participation by all members. The interview was recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. The researcher wrote descriptive and reflective notes during the interview session.

### **Data Analysis: The Coding Process**

The reporting of data may be more holistic in a case study than in other qualitative measures (Glesne, 2006). The study’s interview protocols provided data needed to answer the primary research question and sub-questions. Table 5 shows this correlation.

Table 5

#### *Correlation of Interview Questions to Research Sub-questions*

| Research Sub-question  | Interview Question                       |
|--|--|
| 1. What are the students’ perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online learning?                         | Q1-12, 15, 16, 17<br>18, 19              |
| 2. What are the students’ perceptions of the challenges of supplemental online learning?                       | Q1-11, 13, 14, 15,<br>16, 18, 20         |
| 3. What are staff members’ perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online coursework for at-risk students? | I. 1, 1b, II. 1, 3,<br>III.1, 2, 3, 4, 5 |
| 4. What are staff members’ perceptions of the  | I. 1, 1b, II. 1, 2, 3, 3b,               |

challenges at-risk students encounter while enrolled  
in supplemental online learning?

III. 1, 3, 4, 5

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*Note:* Q1-20 denotes questions asked of students; I-III. 1-5 designates questions found on staff members' protocol.

Following the transcription and multiple readings of the raw data, the researcher was able to gain an overall sense of the ideas and tone present (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006).

The researcher then reviewed the data and began marking entries according to the typologies using the research sub-questions as the basis for typological analysis (Hatch, 2002). Large chunks of raw data were re-typed and organized into columns according to how they related to the students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online learning for credit recovery. Staff member interview responses were also organized according to their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online credit recovery for at-risk students. This resulted in four columns of raw data organized by typology according to the study's sub-questions. Following Hatch's model for analyzing data from interviews and focus groups, the researcher then read entries by typology searching for main ideas, key phrases, and patterns across respondents. Preliminary coding was used to identify central themes by examining key phrases, statements, and descriptions which were repeated (Glesne, 2006; Stake, 1995). Patterns drawn from the research questions served as a template for analysis. The goal was to look deeply into the case to better comprehend the actions, issues, and contexts (Stake, 1995).

The researcher reviewed the data that had been organized by typology according to the study sub-questions and began to seek meaning from emerging hypothetical

patterns, relationships, and themes within typologies (Hatch, 2002). Patterns supported by data were then organized within typologies and highlighted and labeled, A, B, C, and D. When patterns emerge with consistency, meaning is uncovered (Stake, 1995). When consistency occurs within conditions, Stake refers to this as “correspondence” (1995). Patterns can be sought while reviewing documents or interviewing. Typically, significant meaning comes from reappearance (Stake, 1995). The systematic visual representation of the four columns of data assisted in the recognition of recurring data patterns across categories. This resulted in the second iteration of coding data into sub-themes. The researcher then examined each typology and wrote specific generalizations in order to bring categories together under more broad statements or themes (Hatch, 2002).

Next, the researcher wrote individual summaries of each participant interview, focusing on the main ideas and key points as interpreted by the researcher. The goal was to use these summaries to seek feedback from participants regarding the accuracy and validity of their responses to the interview questions as recorded by the researcher. The researcher emailed individual summaries to each staff member and requested feedback on the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretation of their perceptions and comments. Of the six staff members who were interviewed, four offered brief comments to the researcher stating that the accounts of the interviews were accurate and well documented in regard to both the content and the sentiment involved. The student summaries were delivered to student participants in person at the school. The researcher met with the graduation coach in the school’s media center during the school day at a time which is set aside for enrichment and remediation for all students. The students were called to the media center, and eight students met with the researcher and were asked to read over the

summaries and make any comments or corrections on the sheet and sign and date it. The researcher further commented that she was seeking feedback and clarification and genuinely welcomed anything the students wanted to clarify or add. The students were excited to get personal letters which summarized their interview sessions, and they seemed pleased to see the researcher again. Three of the students wrote a brief comment on their summaries, and all participants who were present returned them to the researcher. Many students orally commented on the accuracy of the summaries but did not write anything except their name and date on the page itself. Four students were absent from school on this day. The summaries for those students were given to the graduation coach in sealed envelopes to pass along to students for feedback. Three of the four were returned to the researcher with minimal commentary.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to gain information from stakeholder perceptions that may be used to promote promising practices in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in order to make recommendations for the development of independent learning skills of at-risk students, online course design, instructor/student interactions, and on-site support. Given the research questions, this study was employed using a qualitative single case study method. Individual structured interviews were conducted with 12 at-risk students and two content teachers involved in supplemental online learning for credit recovery at a large suburban high school. Additional information was obtained from a focus group interview of four graduation coaches in the district who support and supervise the online credit recovery programs at each of their schools. A content analysis of data involving the at-risk student participants' academic history was

conducted. Further, in order to gain a broad perspective of student achievement related to virtual coursework, data involving the success or failure of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in the district from the previous school year was sought. However, the only available data involved students who earned credits. The district did not maintain records of students who attempted and either failed or did not complete their online credit recovery courses. Protocols were used and adjusted for data collection procedures and all digital recordings were transcribed by the researcher. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. Permission was granted by the school principal and the district superintendent. Upon approval from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board, the study was explained to prospective participants, permission was gained, and interviews were conducted at a time convenient to the participants.

Following each recorded individual or focus group interview session, the recording was transcribed and read multiple times in order to gain an overall sense of the text. Preliminary coding was used to identify central themes and recurring words or phrases. In order to answer the research questions, the researcher sought key phrases, statements, descriptions, and patterns which pertained to the student benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS**

In this chapter participant interview responses and district and student historical data analysis results are described. Based on these findings, the researcher's analyses of the data are aligned with the research sub-questions and are embedded within this chapter.

#### **Introduction**

As school leaders and education policy makers consider options to increase high school graduation rates, many are turning to supplemental online learning in order to assist students with credit recovery. The majority of research involving online learning has been conducted at the post-secondary level on adult learners, and the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for K-12 has only begun to be discussed in the literature. Specifically, the lack of research regarding how at-risk students are supported in K-12 online learning for credit recovery while simultaneously enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools suggests a need to further investigate this phenomenon. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery.

The research design was qualitative in nature and used a single case study method. In this study, the researcher employed purposive sampling techniques to identify twelve high school students who have completed or are currently enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery and who are at-risk for not graduating with their peers. This primary unit of investigation included four males and eight females in grades 10 to 12. All students were at least in their third year of high school, but

because of credit deficiency, they may be categorized as tenth graders. Students were informed of the need for confidentiality, and they self-selected a fictitious name for use in the study. Additional participants include two content teachers who support students on site as they complete their online coursework. One teacher is a science teacher with a literature background, and the other is a math teacher. Both teachers have more than ten years experience at the school in the study. They were referred to as Ally and Jill. Finally, a focus group interview of four graduation coaches (three female, one male) who are certified high school teachers or school counselors was conducted. Two of the four coaches were in their current role in the 2010-2011 school year. One of the four was a graduation coach last year but at a different school, and the fourth is a former school counselor who is new to the role. Pseudonyms were used for the graduation coaches, including Ann, Lori, Don, and Kim.

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. In addition, historical academic and demographic data was reviewed for all student participants in order to gain an overall understanding of the students' educational experience without causing unnecessary duress or discomfort during the face-to-face interview process. After reviewing the recordings, transcribed data, and student participant information several times, patterns emerged and were organized according to typology. Data were further organized into themes and were used to answer the study's research questions (see Table 6). Finally, available district data involving online credit recovery pass/fail rate was examined to place the student experiences into a broader context, thus enhancing the rich description of the case.

Table 6

*Code Map: Three Iterations of Data Analysis*

---

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| (Research Sub-Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4)                |  |  |  |
| SQ#1 Student Perceptions of Benefits                   | SQ#2 Student Perceptions of Challenges |  |  |
| SQ#3 Staff Perceptions of Benefits                     | SQ#4 Staff Perceptions of Challenges   |  |  |
| Common Themes among All Participants                   |  |  |  |
| A. Expectations of Self, Others, and Online Coursework |  |  |  |
| B. At-Risk for More than Academics                     |  |  |  |
| C. The Importance of Choice and Control                |  |  |  |
| D. The Impact of Online Coursework                     |  |  |  |

---

|                                       |   |  |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| (Second Iteration: Pattern Variables) |   |  |   |
| SQ1 A<br>“It’s all about you!”        | SQ2 A<br>Student Behaviors and<br>Coursework Challenges | SQ3 A<br>Qualities of Online<br>Learning that Promote<br>Student Success;<br>Staff Roles/Focus | SQ4 A<br>Trust Issues;<br>Relationship is Key;<br>Staff Roles and<br>Perspectives |
| 1B<br>Challenges Diminished           | 2B<br>Work; Economic<br>Disadvantage; Impact of         | 3B<br>“They never had it<br>easy.”   | 4B<br>“They All Have<br>Baggage.”   |

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
|   | Repeated Failure;<br>Anxiety                  |   | Their 'Normal' is<br>Different from our<br>'Normal'                           |
| 1C<br>Ownership/Options;<br>Time                              | 2C<br>Challenged Admitted;<br>Recommendations | 3C<br>Options Promote<br>Autonomy and Progress                              | 4C<br>Student Self-Direction;<br>Different Kids/Different<br>Options          |
| 1D<br>Improved Skills;<br>Goals Realized;<br>Hope/Graduation! | 2D<br>Not There Yet;<br>Needs Identified      | 3D<br>Builds: Skills,<br>Confidence,<br>Hope,<br>Relationships,<br>Memories | 4D<br>Emotional Cost to Grad<br>Coaches;<br>Recommendations;<br>Changed Lives |

(First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis)

| SQ1  | SQ2   | SQ3   | SQ4   |
|--|---|---|---|
| Student/Benefits   | Student/Challenges  | Staff/Benefits  | Staff/Challenges  |
| A<br>1A All About Me!<br>1A Take My Own Notes<br>1A You Focused<br>1A Own Pace<br>1A More Effort/Not a Teacher<br>Telling you;<br>1A Expected to Figure Things<br>Out<br>1A Positive | A<br>2A Feelings about school,<br>teachers, classmates, learning<br>2A Subject weaknesses<br>2A Motivation<br>2A Memorization<br>2A Procrastination<br>2A Technology Not Enjoyed<br>By All<br>2A BYU/GAVS: Challenges | A<br>3A Staff<br>Roles/Purposes<br>3A Monitors: Objective<br>Separation<br>3A Grad Coaches:<br>Complex<br>role/Helping/Needed<br>3A Online vs.<br>Traditional Classes | A<br>4A They Have to Pass and<br>They Have to Do it ALL.<br>4A Academic Deficits/Poor<br>Readers<br>4A "Need to know them"<br>4A Relationship is key!<br>4A They Have Trust Issues.<br>4A Functional/Pragmatic<br>Roles of Monitors & |

|                                 |                                  |  |  |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Relationships/Support           | with Online Teachers             | 3A There is an Order and an End to Online Learning               | Emotional, Personal, Deep Roles of Grad Coaches.       |
| 1A Role of the Monitor/Proctor  | 2A Role of the Monitor/Proctor   | 3A Students can see their Progress                               | 4A Teachers have Narrow Focus and Limited Perspective; |
| 1A Basically Reading/Not Rushed | 2A Learning Styles               | 3A Clearer Expectations  | 4A Glitches Cause Frustration                          |
| 1A Own Pace/Not Rushed          | 2A Distractions                  | 3A Success is a requirement                                      | 4A Advocacy  |
| 1A Online Resources             | 2A Glitches                      | 3A Their Pace/Their Time   |  |
| 1A Clear Learning Expectations  |                                  | 3A Feel Safe to Ask Questions Because Everyone Needs Help        |  |
| 1A Faster                       |                                  | 3A Objective Separation Promotes Student Responsibility          |  |
| 1A No Distractions              |                                  | 3A Understand the Function and Purpose of Online Credit Recovery |  |
| 1A Taking Notes Helps           |                                  | 3A Motivation  |  |
| <b>B</b>                        | <b>B</b>                         | <b>B</b>   | <b>B</b>   |
| 1B Attendance                   | 2B Attendance                    | 3B Jobs/Activities   | 4B Time Management                                     |
| 1B Econ. Disadvantaged          | 2B Anxiety                       | 3B Accomplishment  | 4B Lack of Parental Involvement or Support             |
| 1B Conflicts at School          | 2B Cost/Econ. Disadvantage       | 3B Seek Help   | 4B Distractibility                                     |
| 1B ADHD/SLD                     | 2B Conflict with Teachers        | 3B Make Them Reflect   | 4B Financial Cost                                      |
| 1B Distractions                 | 2B Outside Responsibilities/Work | 3B Limited Perspective   | 4B Jobs, "Life"  |
|                                 | 2B Discouragement                | 3B Relationships   | 4B Attendance  |
|                                 |                                  | 3B "They Never Had it Easy"                                      | 4B Responsibilities                                    |
|                                 |                                  |  | 4B Death/Prison/Military                               |
|                                 |                                  |  | 4B Different Normal/Values                             |

4B “These Are Our  
Different Children”  
4B Frustration  
4B Things are not Simple  
4B Procrastination  
4B They have Baggage  
4B Insecure  
4B Grief/Shame/Lonely  
4B Pressure/Anxiety  
4B Lack of Understanding  
of Most Staff  
4B Teachers Don’t Ask,  
“Why?”

C  
1Choice  
1C Earn Credit  
1C Regret  
1C Own Time/Flexibility  
1C Like Doing Things On My  
Own  
1C Timing  
1C Outside Activities  
1C No Distractions  
1C Can Write More/Learn  
Better  
1C Easier to Review  
1C Own Pace/Own  
Schedule/Own Notes

C  
2C Strengths and Challenges  
Related to Coursework  
2C Learning Style  
2C Time Management  
2C Self-Discipline  
2C Taking Notes  
2C Recommendations

C  
3C Options for Credit  
3C They Have to do it  
for Themselves  
3C They’ve had to  
Work at it – Gives a  
Sense of  
Accomplishment  
3C They get to Choose  
3C They have  
Ownership  
3C Making Choices  
Leads to Maturing  
3C Develop Autonomy  
3C They get Chances  
3C They are Human;  
they Make Mistakes.  
3C They need another  
chance.

C  
4C Need Different Options  
4C These Are Our Different  
Children  
4C Need to be Handled  
Differently  
4C Goal Setting  
4C Students Need to Take  
Charge of Their Learning  
4C Needs Evaluated

|   |                                       |   |  |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| D   | D                                     | D   | D  |
| 1D Improved Learning Strategies/Skills              | 2D Impact                             | 3D Carries Over into Their Lives                                      | 4D They Have to Get Through the First Two Weeks  |
| 1D Learning that Lasts/Carried into Other Classes   | 2D Need a Teacher to Answer Questions | 3D “High-fiving” Celebrations   | 4D They (the Public, other Teachers) Think it’s Not Comparable to the Classroom.                             |
| 1D Learning Through Technology – Benefits           | 2D No one there to Help               | 3D Builds Sense of Community and Mutual Support                       | 4D Resentment  |
| 1D Online learning is Orderly/Sequential/Manageable | 2D Help with Vocabulary/Comprehension | 3D Students are Grateful/Trust  | 4D Staff Sacrifice   |
| Hope  | 2D Need Teacher Who Knows the Content | 3D Builds Confidence  | 4D Don’t Assume it isn’t Rigorous or that Learning isn’t Taking Place  |
| Graduation!   | 2D Need Online Support                | 3D Student Perceptions Change over Time                               | 4D Changed Lives   |
|   | 2D Not There Yet                      | 3D Gives Them a Good Memory of School-                                | 4D Lack of Understanding by Policy Makers – “Getting Kids Graduated; That’s What it’s Supposed to be About.” |
|   | 2D Not Really Helping You Learn       | 3D Gives Them the Opportunity to Turn Themselves Around (Hokey Pokey) |  |
|   |                                       | 3D Keeps Them in School   |  |
|   |                                       | 3D They Learn Time Management   |  |
|   |                                       | 3D Graduation!  |  |

## **Research Questions**

The researcher focused on the following overarching question: What are stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online learning?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the challenges of supplemental online learning?
3. What are staff members' perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online coursework for at-risk students?
4. What are staff members' perceptions of the challenges at-risk students encounter while enrolled in supplemental online learning?

## **Findings**

Included in this section are the demographic profiles of student respondents. This is followed by findings for each of the study sub-questions organized by general themes and supported by interview responses as well as academic, historical, and district data analysis.

## **Responses to Research Sub-questions**

Using interview protocol responses, the students' historical academic and demographic data, and the available district information regarding credit recovery online

course success, the research findings were used to answer each of the study's sub-questions.

**Sub-question One: Students' perceptions of the benefits of online learning.**

Analyzed data from the student interviews revealed four major themes related to the benefits of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. The first was the expectations of themselves, others, and their online coursework. As students began their online coursework, they soon realized that it was all about them and that their success or failure rested with themselves. Secondly, student responses and historical data demonstrated the complicated situations students were in and that they were at risk for more than academics. The negative academic history, economic disadvantage, and home life all impacted their school performance. Next, students described the significance of having choice and control as they took ownership of their online learning. Finally, students reported the lasting benefits and the impact of online coursework.

*Expectations of self, others, and online coursework.* Many of the student participants in the study indicated that the responsibility of passing their online course was on them. According to Randy, "It was hard at first because I had to take my own notes and I had to do everything completely by myself." Dante said,

It's all me and I learn at my own pace; it's just more helpful. I don't have to decode what a teacher says because I can read what the screen in front of me says and if I don't understand it then I can try to turn it into my own lingo, my own wording, and I can understand it better. It's you and the work, and you can focus on that.

Michael added,

It is a lot less classwork and it's more 'you' focused instead of wasting like a whole day. Sometimes days are wasted on students, well not wasted but used on students who don't really get it. And I don't like constantly repeating the classwork so that's why.... It's different also by using the computer and watching the videos; that is a lot different than being in the classroom. It's just more 'you' focused instead of everyone else.

Lela acknowledged her role in her online learning as well. She said, "It is at your own pace and it's more...I don't know how to say this. It's more about you, if that makes sense." Paige added by saying, "It's all on your own. Yeah, you have videos and everything, but it's pretty much on you." Caleb endorsed the sentiment of personal responsibility, but added, "It's more independent. You have to do a lot of it on your own and when you are watching the computer it's kind of hard because you can't like ask questions." John agreed, "It is more independent. You can move at your own pace. I feel you have to put forth a lot more effort in order to learn the information because there is not a teacher telling you it." Nicole stated, "I guess you are just learning on your own and you're expected to like figure out things better."

In reviewing student commentary regarding their expectations of others, many stated that they had positive relationships and were supported by peers, friends, family, and teachers. Dante said that his friends help him, especially in math. "He is a good friend. He is really good with numbers and he has helped me out. So if I have any kind of trouble he helps me out with that." John receives help by getting siblings or friends to quiz him or go over information with him. Lela said, "I have a cousin and he helps me a lot. He's like a genius, all around guy. I like him and he tutors very well." Randy also

had support in friends and people at church. She stated, “Most of my friends are really good in grammar, so sometimes I turn to them, and there’s people at my church who are like English majors and stuff so I can go to them as well.” Emerald said that when she needs help she tries to talk to her teachers about it. Nicole said that in the lab, “you do have a teacher there to help you.” Lauren gets help by going to Mrs. F “because she is an awesome math teacher and she can help me, and she can teach in a way that I can understand it.” Paige, Destiny, Nicole, and Caleb all mentioned going to specific teachers with whom they felt personal connections when they had questions regarding their online or other coursework. Caleb added, “I had to go to Mrs. W. because the teacher I had... I couldn’t really talk to her or learn from her very well.” Caleb stated further, “I had the supports I needed, especially with the proctors, they were really helpful. They tried to make sure I got everything done.”

Students commented on the positive attributes of their online coursework. Nicole said, “It’s easier than to actually take a class with a teacher. It’s basically like just reading and memorizing what you need.” According to Liza,

The literature one was fine. I honestly finished it in like two weeks. There was just a bunch of reading. I finished before most people and um, it was Monday through Wednesday, and I could stay there. And days whenever I was off-I could stay there longer or until the teachers wanted to leave. I wasn’t rushed or anything.

Dante said, “My math stinks so I was trying to find a way to get out of high school.” He added, “It was much better than any teacher. Like I said, I can understand what they’re

saying and it is at my own pace. I can re-read something as many times as I want. Ya know? It is easier for me.”

Michael commented,

I found it a lot easier than the class. Well, the exam was a lot harder than I expected, but it was a lot easier than the class because you could just take the post-test, read it, take the test. There wasn't a lot of classwork and that usually is what lowers my grade is classwork. I'd say it's a lot faster and more convenient than a bunch of paperwork that is repeating the same thing over and over. It's more focused and precise.

Lela described her experience by stating, “I didn't really need much because I had the actual course with me so I could just look back at it if I had any doubt or anything. Also, since it was online I could just look up stuff in case I didn't know something. So I didn't really need anything.” According to Emerald, “You aren't rushed to do anything. You have a time limit and you know when it is. It is given out a good amount ahead of time.”

Nicole stated,

It lets you know ahead of time what you are going to learn in the section and it gives you like an overview at the end, and when you get ready to take a quiz or test it will show you like what you learned throughout the chapter, like a summary. That helps a lot for me, so I don't have to go back and forth.

Michael was in supplemental online credit recovery for “pretty much failing math, over and over.” He added,

Well, it's a lot faster than the class. I finished the credit recovery class in like two weeks. Because it's like learn the formulas and take the test. Learn the

formulas and review it, then take the exam. Whereas in the class we would learn this, move on, learn something else, move on, and just have to remember all that we learned for the exam. For credit recovery it's just faster and more convenient for you.

Lela described how online learning was beneficial to visual learners. She said, "I think I'm a visual learner and they had a lot of pictures and videos and they had stuff you could play. They had kind of like games, like the crossword puzzles. So that was fun for me and it made more sense too." Caleb described how he became more resourceful and his problem-solving skills improved. Caleb said that, "just being on a computer if you didn't get something you could like look somewhere else, you could look it up and get the answers and do different versions and stuff, so that made it easier really." According to Destiny,

It's easy and you can write down your own notes instead of...like getting worksheets in a regular class, but if you write down your own notes in your own words instead of copying word for word then it's easier and you don't have the other distractions, so I would do it in the future. I didn't think it would be easier. I thought it would be difficult because I didn't have a teacher to ask questions, but it's really easy.

***At-risk for more than academics.*** Emerald disclosed that she prefers to work on her online coursework than "actually coming to school." According to historical academic and demographic data, attendance has been a problem for her as far back as middle school. She repeated 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades with excessive absences likely a significant factor. Emerald also falls under the category of economically disadvantaged,

and she stated that she thought about enrolling in more online courses, “but it’s just very costly.” Further, Emerald shared that she does not have a computer in her home and at times she would work on her online coursework at the homes of friends.

Lauren is currently in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She has been retained in 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and she will be 19 in April, 2012. She admitted that she loves school- “when I get along with my teachers” and that her biggest success has been “staying out of trouble.” She said, “I’m not literally bad, bad, but sometimes I tend to let things bother me and then I just like get really upset.” She described how online learning works for her despite personal challenges. According to Lauren,

I like it to be quiet because I’m like ADHD so I get distracted easy, like really easy. So I normally like to do it where I know I am going to stay focused. It would be nice if I could listen to the thing... But I just read it and go through the courses. I just read everything. It’s not boring. It doesn’t bore me. It keeps me like... into it. So... I don’t know – with lit you pretty much just read everything so it’s not much you can say about it.

Dante said that he hates school and prefers learning online.

I don’t have annoying kids waiting or yelling at the top of their lungs, and as in the example of my math 2b class right now. When I am trying to pay attention I don’t have kids throwing paper balls at my face. I mean that is once again where the immaturity thing comes in, ya know? In an online course, I’m the only one I need to worry about.

Nicole has a learning disability and has struggled significantly in school. She has failed 22 courses and is beginning to experience success through online coursework and

she offered encouragement to others. She said, “Some people, they think that it’s actually more work than just being in a class. But for me, it’s just easier. So I guess from my experience it may make others want to take it too.”

***The importance of choice and control.*** The students all described the benefits of ownership and options in their online coursework and the importance of choice and control. Dante described why he decided to enroll in online courses for credit recovery.

My guidance counselor said that I would be here for a full year or maybe a year and a half after. I mean this is my senior year. I would be here a year and a half after. So I was like I’m not happy with that. So I talked to Ms. C [graduation coach] and she said you can do this and you can get some of the credits knocked out. You can either be here for another year and a half or a semester and that’s the way it’s looking now. If I finish what is on NovaNET right now before it shuts down I will only have to come here for half a year!

Randy has been able to recover five credits online. She regrets her 9<sup>th</sup> grade performance; “It kind of ruined me, ya know?” She said,

The first two years I was here I didn’t take school seriously and played around and failed both semesters of lit and both semester of math. So in order to graduate on time I had to enroll in credit recovery so I could make it up. I think the 10<sup>th</sup> grade lit part b was with Georgia Virtual and the rest were just credit recovery, with no teacher. But I did them all on my own, online. I was able to isolate myself from everybody so I would be able to concentrate more.

Emerald enjoyed the flexibility of online learning and said you can “do it whenever you feel like it. You don’t have to be on there that long or you can be on there for hours. It’s

whenever you can fit it into your schedule. I like that.” John said that he would “do however much he felt like doing.” He added, “If I got stressed out, I’d stop for the day. Maybe start again later, not normally. I liked it because you can move on your own pace. I did not feel pressed for time.” Paige compared online learning to the traditional classroom. She said, “It was better for me than learning in the classroom. The teachers were there so if I had questions they would answer them for me, but I mainly do work on my own, so it’s better for people like me, who kind of like doing things on their own.”

Caleb was a transfer student who was only missing two credits to graduate with his peers. He said that the chemistry class worked well for him, but he admitted that he procrastinated at first. “I procrastinated a lot. The last two weeks I really kicked it into gear and knocked it out of the way.” Lela took a physical science class with GAVS credit recovery and child development with BYU. She said,

I think the classes online were really easier for me because I could do it when I felt like it and it let me pace myself rather than going along with the whole class. Like if I didn’t understand something I could slow down on it, but if I really understood it I could breeze through it and I liked that rather than in a class. Also, I had band and stuff and it took up half my time. So I just went home and did it, and then I didn’t have to leave at a certain time or anything. I didn’t have to be there at a certain time.

The flexible scheduling worked for Lauren. She said, “I barely stayed after school because it was hard. Because I have a job and I cheer, so I just had to work it out. I did most of my work at home. I never really needed any help on it. I mean, it was mainly reading, and if you paid attention and did the little quizzes and stuff it helped out a lot.”

Emerald said the best part of online learning is, “You can do everything at your own pace.” Dante added, “It’s at my own pace and I don’t have to deal with other people, nor a teacher.” He also said that working from home was helpful. “It is an environment where I can actually relax and I can have fun, and then on top of that, I can listen to my music. I’m not a self-motivated person, but music motivates me to do stuff.” Randy said, “I can write more information than the teacher gives me. It’s not all there is, like in the classroom. I can just write more and visually look at it and take my own time, just visually reading it and comprehending it than I usually can in the classroom.”

Paige also commented on the ability to stay on a topic until she understood it. She said, “The fact that you could re-read it was a benefit. Because if you are getting lectured by a teacher you can’t ask him to back up a paragraph and figure out what he said. But with online courses you can go back and look at it yourself.” Destiny said one of the benefits was fewer distractions and doing it herself was easier most of the time.

*The impact of online coursework.* The students described how their online coursework led to improved skills and brighter outlooks. According to Randy, “It was hard at first, but then they gave me things I could do to study and stuff. So like now I am able to take my own notes and I could study them. It helped me pass.” Lauren said,

Taking those little tests... doing those and reading them over and over and taking them, helped it stick and like a bunch of things, like the way it explained it, into where... and the good examples it gave helped. It made it stick and it also helped me do a lot better in the lit I am in now. It helped me learn to look up things because when you are working by yourself you have to do it. You have no choice but to learn how to research.

Destiny endorsed the fact that online learning contributed to learning that carried over. She said, “Online learning is easier for me... in class there are a lot of distractions and other students and stuff like that. If you read it yourself you get it better implanted in your mind than if somebody tells you. So it’s easier.” Paige added, “It’s easier to learn through technology. From taking credit recovery I was able to get my course done a lot faster. I still remember it more even though I took it almost a year and a half ago. I can still remember it.” Nicole added that online learning “helps you concentrate more because it helps you focus on that one thing and you don’t have any distractions – like with students or anything.” Liza feels hopeful; she said, “I got my credit. I don’t feel as behind as I was.” According to Dante,

I’ve pretty much just gotten the school work done a lot easier than before and I’ve actually learned it. I just didn’t learn it for five days, take the test, learn something new, and forget it, ya know? I’ve actually learned how to do matrices and complicated problems. I’ve actually learned how to do it – not like a minor thing where you just glue it on your brain for a little bit, now rip it off.

Michael stated, “I learned the math stuff pretty fast and sometimes what I learned in credit recovery I would carry over to the class with me and I’ll know the stuff before we get to it.” Randy said that she learned things that she did not get in the regular classroom. She commented,

Like when we went over hyperboles and extended metaphors and everything. I know a lot more about those. Then when I had to write an essay for one of the credit recoveries I made an 80 on it so online classes have really helped me and showed me how to blend quotes and everything that I never really understood in

my lit classes. It's helped me to take notes better so that I can understand what the teacher is talking about and it's helped me improve my grades in so many ways.

Paige added that she is more resourceful now and her ability to scan texts has improved since taking online courses. Lela said that her grades are higher now. Nicole said that, "just knowing I'm getting the credit makes me want to do my best in the class." Emerald and Destiny both acknowledged that catching up their credits gives them hope about graduating soon. Caleb summed it up by saying, "I got my credits and I can graduate!"

*Analysis of data: Sub-question one.* A review of the data from the student participant interviews revealed four major themes. The first reflected the students' perception in regards to the expectations of self, others, and their online coursework. All of the students acknowledged that the success or failure of their online coursework rested on their own shoulders. Although the coursework was not especially difficult, it did require effort that involved taking notes, reading, and memorizing. Their responses indicated that they felt supported by friends, family, and school staff.

The second theme evident in the student interviews and demographic information was that the students were at-risk for more than academics. Before beginning online coursework for credit recovery, the students were discouraged and doubted that they could graduate. As a group, the students were experiencing poverty, limited technology in the home, and years of truancy.

Students cited several characteristics of online learning and circumstances that promoted choice and control. Students experienced ownership of their learning, and options as to when, where, for how long, and in what way they would complete their

online coursework. Distraction was reduced and learning enhanced as students conveyed their positive experiences with online learning.

Students also indicated that their experiences in online learning have carried over into other areas of their lives. Students described increased skills and how those skills were applied in traditional coursework. For example, they are able to take notes in class more effectively. They have a better understanding of core course content. Students gave specific examples of improved grammatical skills, writing ability, and mathematical conceptual understanding. Students also noted that they are more resourceful in their ability to locate information and study assistance on the Internet. They can scan texts more efficiently online and in the classroom which saves them time and reduces frustration. Students shared that they are experiencing hope and encouragement as a result of their online learning success. Moreover, students felt that they would be able to make up credits and graduate.

**Sub-question Two: Students' perceptions of the challenges of online learning.**

Although responses to student interview protocols revealed a predominant amount of benefits associated with online coursework for credit recovery, they also encountered challenges. These challenges provided contrast within the broad themes and identified points of disagreement among student participants.

*Expectations of self, others, and online coursework.* Many of the students made negatives statements when asked how they felt about school. Those with positive commentary qualified it. Lauren said, "I love school... when I get along with my teachers." Liza said, "It's good, I guess. I'm doing better than I was. I have one more year left and I'm ready to get out of here." Paige added, "I feel like school is important,

but some of the teachers could be a little more pleasant.” The students acknowledged subject weakness and negative behaviors that impact their success in school. Dante described his challenges in math by saying, “I struggle with self-motivation. I’m just not good at it [math] and when you start throwing letters into the mix of numbers, it can ...it throws me off.” John said, “My greatest struggle would definitely be history because... all you have to do is memorize the information, but still that can be the hardest.” Lela admitted to struggling in all classes. She attributes this to putting things off. She said, “That’s the worst part about everything. I’m a procrastinator.”

While all of the students admitted to having cell phones and using technology for school assignments and online learning, not all of them enjoy technology. Emerald said she prefers to be outdoors, and Lauren said, “Me and technology don’t get along. It makes me frustrated.” Liza said, “I’d be cool without it.” Randy added, “Technology is pretty confusing now. They have more complex stuff added in to them and it gets really confusing after a while.” Conversely, Dante, John, and Paige are comfortable with building computers, designing web pages, or having a career in technology. Caleb said, “It’s innovative – like [online] credit recovery is a really good way for students to catch up with anything they to need to catch up with.”

Randy said, “I wouldn’t say I really have a lot of support at school, but my counselor pushes me toward it. If I don’t go she will usually call me in and ask why.” Emerald said that her biggest problem with online coursework was not having a teacher. She was enrolled in GAVS, and she was assigned an online teacher. She said, “I had someone I could call and talk to on the phone and stuff and she was supposed to help me. But it was just really complicated to get answers. I had to wait days to get any

information back. That was probably the worst part about it.” John took his online history course independently through BYU and was unsuccessful. He added, “It’s different because if you have a question it is a lot harder to get help. You have to go through a lot more trouble.” Paige did her online course in the lab after school. She said, “You can’t ask too many questions because the teachers aren’t like there to help you. They are mainly there to see that you get your work done.” Randy said a challenge for her was limited support. She said,

There is no one there to help you, like no one can help you. Maybe they don’t know. Because, like when we were doing credit recovery, the teachers that were in there, they were just there to watch us. So they didn’t really know what we were doing half the time because some people would be doing math and lit and science or history. So it is difficult because you don’t have a teacher there that knows the stuff who can help you.

John commented that preferred learning style also plays a key role in online success.

You have to actually read the information. That can be difficult for people who are auditory learners. I am an auditory and kinesthetic learner. So to have to actually read the information and learn it like that was difficult. And it’s not the same as sitting in school because you know you can be doing other things so you’re not concentrating on the course.

John added further, “I think it was difficult because they give you the information and you have to memorize it. It’s like being given a book and saying, ‘Here, you are gonna have a test. Good luck.’” According to Emerald, “Online learning is actually simpler, but

there are certain things where I wish they'd explain that a little more. It's kind of vague. But okay, I'll go with what I think it means. But if I would have had somebody, an instructor or somebody, explain that to me it would be... ya know, easier."

Michael described glitches in the system, especially in math. He said, "In the math 1b part there would be the same answer and it would be wrong. Sometimes it would have questions that you didn't really learn." Both Paige and Caleb commented on the challenges with the videos in their online chemistry class. Paige said, "Some of the videos didn't really make sense to me and I couldn't ask questions with that."

*At risk for more than academics.* Emerald has truancy problems, and she admitted to experiencing significant anxiety. She said, "I have problems like presentations and stuff in front of people. I'm pretty sure I have anxiety, but I haven't went to the doctor or anything like that." Emerald also commented on how cost of the coursework was a problem for her. When asked if she would take more online courses she said, "If I had the money. Definitely! I've thought about it, but it's just very costly."

Destiny added,

I don't think they should put that big of a price on it for half of a semester.

Because that's a lot of money for just a half credit. I didn't have to pay for the last class because it was a trial, but for this semester I will have to pay, and if it's that much then I won't be able to it. It's \$80 for a half credit, and that's a lot.

Conflict with classroom teachers was mentioned by some participants. Dante said, "A couple of my teachers... yeah, I tried getting help from them, but they are stuck teaching their ways and it's more comfortable for me to doing it another way and that's where the condescending comes in." Caleb described that the reason he was in credit

recovery was because of a conflict with a teacher. He mentioned that at times online learning was challenging, “but I think it was a lot better than being in the class with the teacher I had.”

The students described challenges associated with outside responsibilities. Liza was unable to complete her second online course by the deadline. She said, “It seemed like there was a lot to that one, so I didn’t have enough time. Plus I work after school so I had to be out of there by like 4:00.” Caleb was not able to complete his second online course either. He said, “This year they started having it [the lab] only three days a week and I just started working and stuff so I didn’t have time to go. I couldn’t take the post-test. I didn’t finish.”

Time management was noted to be a challenge for many participants as they would often procrastinate and be required to do many sections in a short time. Lela said that her self-admitted problem with procrastination could be improved by pacing herself. Further, at times she experienced discouragement. She added, “I could work more on taking smaller breaks. If I want to take a break I usually quit and I’ll just walk away. If I feel discouraged I’ll just quit.”

***The importance of choice and control.*** The students conveyed an understanding of when and with which courses they could be successful online. Lauren said, I thought it was going to be really hard at first. Like, just in general, I thought it was going to be like really hard, and I didn’t think I would be able to do it. I tried it out anyways; I wanted to be a senior, so that was my motivation. I mean I had to do something to get it done... I would absolutely not take math in an online credit recovery. I would literally go to summer school if I needed it

because I can't... I'm a visual learner so when it comes to like math and like physical science I would definitely have to have a teacher for those.

Michael admitted that he did not manage his time well. He said he could have done better. "I mean if I took a little more time. I kind of rushed through it. If I took a little bit more time I'd know the answers" He added, "Don't procrastinate because it's kind of what I did." Lela described a friend's challenges with online learning. She said,

Don't procrastinate. Take your time. Because I know that my friend tried to rush and she would just skip the whole lesson and try to take the test. You have three tries to take a test and she would have to keep resetting it. So don't just fly by the lessons, you should actually try to learn something.

Emerald described her challenges by saying, "You need a lot of self-discipline. You are going to have to make yourself do it sometimes. Because there will be times when you'll say, 'I don't really want to do it tonight.' But you'll think, I do have to kind of do it tonight. So you'll need some self-discipline for that." Randy said that students can choose to take notes or not during their credit recovery courses, but "if they choose to write notes it will help you throughout the whole entire thing. These notes will help you determine whether or not you pass the credit recovery course or not. If you take notes with credit recovery you can pass those tests with A's and B's. That what I did."

John agreed that students enrolled in online credit recovery "should definitely take notes even though the information is right there. They can go back and look at it." Liza added, "Definitely take your time. No skim reading, just read through everything. Don't think that you are going to get that credit just because you paid for it, ya know? You can fail and that is a waste of \$80 and you have to re-take it so... that wouldn't be good."

*The impact of online coursework.* The majority of the student participants described the need for a staff member to support them in their online learning. Emerald said,

Actually what I think would be the best is like having like a classroom of online students and having somebody who can teach that class at the same time. The would be doable, that would be good – just to have somebody there to answer questions that you would have, ya know? That would be cool. That’s probably the worst part about any online class, not having a teacher.

Lauren preferred working online at home because it reduced distractions and worked with her schedule. She added, “The only thing different is if you have a question you can’t like ask a teacher.” Dante added that working alone on his online coursework took a lot of time because he would have to read things over and over if no one was there to help. He said, “If I had a one on one for only the parts that I needed that would be a lot better. That would make everything so much better.”

Lauren admitted struggling with the vocabulary in some of the reading passages. She said,

It was a lot to read. It sounds like I’m being lazy, but I don’t know... there was a lot to read. Also, I have a hard time understanding things when I read it in my head, especially when it’s like a long book or something. I tend to get confused... They just use a lot of words that I don’t understand. It would be understandable if I had a teacher like translate it. The way it’s written – it confuses me.

Randy recommended a support person with content knowledge that is aligned to the course. She said, “If you are enrolling in an online class, if there is a specific teacher that

knows all the topics for that subject and they're there to help you, or you can have their email address or email them questions. I think that would be a lot easier and would help a lot of people." John said that study guides would help, as would making the courses more interactive between the teacher and student. "The students could ask their questions and the teacher could be right there to respond immediately, such as a chatroom."

John also said, "My experience with online learning showed me that there is potential for online learning but we're not quite there yet. It's just giving information and then giving a test. It's not really...It's not really helping you learn. It's just giving you a chance to redeem yourself."

*Analysis of data: Sub-question 2:* According to the student participants, school is not a positive place. Interview responses revealed challenges with coursework, motivation, technology, and internal/external struggles. Data also revealed recommendations to others, and how the support of a teacher continues to impact student success in online coursework. Students described difficulties with academics, but mainly in math. Lack of self-motivation and poor time management impacted their lack of success in both traditional and online classes. All of the students endorsed use of technology daily and several anticipated careers in the field; however, participants also described that technology was at times confusing, frustrating, and that they could manage without it.

Students enrolled in online courses who had online teacher support described poor interaction and complication when attempting to communicate with the online teacher. The students who attended the lab sessions after school described the limited role of the monitor/proctor and lamented the teachers' ability to assist with their specific content.

Students described how their preferred learning style was not conducive to success in online learning. Work, attendance, cost, discouragement, and poor time management placed students further at-risk for not completing their online coursework and dropping out of school.

Data from the interview protocols supported the third theme which described the importance of choice and control. This was evidenced as students acknowledged their individual experiences regarding working at their own pace, managing their time, managing their learning by reading thoroughly and taking notes, and making themselves work on their online coursework even when they did not prefer it. The students acknowledged personal consequences when they made poor choices. Overall, the students revealed a self-awareness regarding the expectations of experiencing success in online learning; but the majority of them expressed the need for teacher support –both online and on site. They described needing a teacher who knows the specific content they are working on. Teachers are also needed to answer questions, to clarify confusing vocabulary or learning expectations, to assist when they get stuck, or to be available online at various hours. The students acknowledged the benefits of online learning, but admitted, “We are not there yet.”

**Sub-question Three: Staff member perceptions of the benefits of online learning for at-risk students.** Content teachers and graduation coaches also provided insight into the four major themes identified by students. The responses of the staff members assisted the researcher in defining these elements more clearly.

*Expectations of self, others, and online coursework.* The teachers and graduation coaches who support students enrolled in supplemental online learning for

credit recovery described very different roles and purposes. According to content teacher Ally,

I think our role is twofold; one, we're just the monitor. We're there if their tests need to be re-set, if people are having technical issues as far as pictures not showing up, not understanding the protocol as far as how you get your essays in on time. Those kinds of questions – there's that role. But we take our role a little further because we do make sure we have people who have knowledge in different subject areas, like I have a degree in science, but my minor is in English, so I help a lot of those kids even in English and we do a lot of tutoring or helping them.

Ally said that the teachers must also have a firm knowledge of the academic standards, and “be familiar enough with the whole purpose of what credit recovery does in order to answer questions and not create too much stress or work for everybody involved.” Jill said that the content teacher monitor role is more specific than that of the graduation coach. “The graduation coach or counselor said, ‘these are the classes you need.’ Mine was to take it at that point. ‘This is the class you are enrolled in and I need to make sure that you’re successful in THIS online class.’” Ally added, “Because I’m the teacher I’m only focused on that class that they are taking and the counselor or graduation coach are looking at them from the graduation perspective.” Ally described how an objective separation actually benefitted students in online credit recovery. She said,

I don’t know any of their background information. I am there to facilitate, so that removes for them, if they have a really complicated social history as far as may Child Protective Services involvement, foster homes- I don’t know any of that

and I can treat them just as a student. For a lot of those kids, as I find out later on as they become more comfortable, it takes that stress off because we are not judging them other than what they are doing right now in the class and so it gives them a separation, I guess.

The graduation coaches commented on the complexity of their role. According to Ann, “I think our role incorporates some teaching, some counseling, some social work, some parent-type skills, and administrative type duties. It has a little bit of just about everything in the educational realm.” According to Lori, “I always start out with saying that my job is a helping job. I’m not here to hurt you or get you in trouble. That helps when we can have that one on one time with these students.” Kim said, “We are a very non-threatening party. We are someone they can come to and express concerns about their classes and what is going on with their life.” Ann contrasted the role of the graduation coach to that of the classroom teacher. She said,

We get to see the big picture, you know- what is going on with them within our schools, where with a teacher, the only picture you see is what is going on in your classroom. It’s more eye opening to see everything that is going on in the school.

In our positions, we see a lot more.

Kim said, “The one word that you always are is needed. Somebody needs something or needs you to do something. It may be a teacher or a student or an administrator.”

According to Don, “Every day is different from every other day.” Lori added, “A typical day is not knowing who is going to show up at your door. There is not a moment when there is not a kid in my room or at my door.”

Staff members described how they encouraged students and how online learning is different from the classroom. Ann described how she encouraged students,

You say, ‘okay, you’re gonna get through this. You’re going to get through this.

Alright, only one more lesson.’ They’re not hearing this in the classroom. It’s

‘You owe me this. You owe me that. You’ve got a test. There’s more to do.’ So they say it is a more positive atmosphere working online.

Kim said, “Besides being a more positive environment, it also lacks the negativity that they’ve come to expect and the fear factor of speaking up and advocating for themselves – where they don’t feel as uncomfortable about it.” When students are working in the lab on their online coursework, Lori added,

They are all in different classes so it’s not like you, you’re sitting in a math class and it’s not like you are the only one who doesn’t know what is going on so you don’t want to raise your hand. Well, she’s in lit. He’s in history and she’s in that, and they’re in that, so if I have a question about it, it doesn’t feel like you are drawing attention to yourself in the same way of how much you don’t know. At some point everybody is gonna ask a question.

Ally described how being open and frank about who is there and why, it removed student reluctance to seek assistance. She said,

Most of the kids who are in there initially are scared to ask questions until you, well, the first or second day, okay, we say, ‘You’re in here because you failed, so now that we know that everybody is here because you failed a class, you need to get over any shyness you have about, ‘I need help.’ Everybody in here needs help or you wouldn’t be here.’ They’re more willing to relax and they become more

comfortable with that group. They are more comfortable with you.

Staff members commented on the benefits of a structured online course which gives students a clear picture of what they have done, where they are going, and how they are doing. According to Don, “In most [regular] classes they don’t really see the end of where that class is going. Well, when they log onto their online class they can see what they have to work on and how much more they have to do and what they are going to have to do. So it is a bit clearer. It’s a clearer picture.”

Lori added,

For these kids...we can show them. ‘You finished this much. You’ve only got this much to go.’ So we look at it in a much more positive way. This is nice with the online because they can see where they stand. They can check their grades immediately. They can at least in most of the platforms, and pretty much know at least how much there is to do. They see that getting smaller and smaller. They don’t see that in a classroom.

Ann said, “They have to be successful and they will.” Kim stated further, “They like that. In a classroom they don’t have to be successful.” Don said, “It’s okay to not be successful. You get it or you don’t. It’s okay to have a 40. They are moving on without you.” Lori said, “You’re not required to learn anything [in the regular classroom]. You can fail everything and they’ll just move you to the next thing. In online classes, you’re not going anywhere until you pass it.” Jill said, “It’s at their pace. If they get it quickly, they move on. If they don’t get it quickly, then it takes them a longer time.” Kim concluded, “In an online class you’re not leaving until you master that, period, end of question. End of story. They find the motivation in that.”

*At risk for more than academics.* Online learning supports students' successes in several ways. According to Ally,

A lot of them have jobs; a lot of them have activities. If they are going to be successful, it becomes a job in its own right. And they have to organize their life. They have to really realize, 'where are my goals?' They have to make goals and work towards them. In some cases, it changes their sense of entitlement because they've had to do it for themselves and they've had to work at it. And it gives them a better sense of accomplishment, I think. It does more for them self-esteem-wise than, 'okay you passed a test. I'll just give you B and move on.

Jill described her online credit recovery students. She said,

They are very appreciative. They are very, I guess, humble. They know what they need to do. They come in, they do it, and they'll go, 'I just don't understand, please help me.' And it's that they want to learn. They'll say, 'I'm good to right here and then there is where I get stuck.' They'll ask very good questions and I don't know why that happens in that environment and not in the regular classroom. I guess we kind of turn it around and we'll make them reflect. 'Why didn't you do this in your regular class? Why did you have to come to after school to get it?' And they'll be very frank. 'I didn't get along with the teacher.' 'I didn't like the class.' 'I just was lazy.' I think that's... we kind of pick on them about it, not in a mean way, but we'll tell them that now you've shown us that you can do it. Now you gotta keep it up. So, they're a good bunch.

Lori said, "The students are at risk for more than just academics." Kim concurred, "Absolutely! That's why they're there [in credit recovery]." Don said, "It's their

perspective. They're at-risk for not being the best they can be as well." Ann added, "They don't even know what is out there, and they don't know how to get it." Kim described the benefit of having the chance to build a relationship with students who are in credit recovery. She said, "As far as getting to know the kids – I think that we have more opportunity to spend time talking about things that are maybe not even academic, whereas a teacher doesn't really have the opportunity to sit down with a student and speak to them at length about whatever is impacting their education. Ally added,

Really, I don't realize how much they appreciate it until graduation and they're there and you're standing at the bottom of the stairs making sure that they look decent to cross the stage and they're hugging your neck and you're like, 'okay, you're going to make me cry. You have to stop now.' 'But I'm only graduating because of you.' I say, 'I'm not the one who did all the work. I just sat there and made you do it.' But it's those kids who mean a lot to you. Most credit recovery kids have never had it easy in life. They're so appreciate and they're so wonderful and I think we help them more than just academically.

***The importance of choice and control.*** According to staff members, when students have options they begin to take ownership of their learning. This promotes autonomy and academic and personal progress. Jill said,

This [online learning] has benefitted them by letting them graduate and getting them on a road to becoming a productive citizen. I think keeping them in school, knowing there is an option, with the number of credits they have, it's hard... I think it does given them that opportunity. They are human; they make mistakes. They need that opportunity.

Kim described how students improved. “They get to develop autonomy. Even though we’re the ones saying, ‘If you don’t get this done, you’re going to get behind. You’ve got to get finished.’ But when they are able to work through that class -and managing their own time, no matter what we do, they truly are managing their own time.” Ann added, “They are making choices of their own and I think that’s a positive, kind of maturing.” Don concurred, “And if they get to choose, they have ownership.” “They get chances, yes,” Kim said. Ann described how one student’s success motivated others. She said,

They start to see other kids... They think, ‘He’s done already?’ ‘Yeah, he’s on his second class.’ ‘How?’ The kid is like, ‘Because I come here, I take a pre-test, I take a post-test. I go home. I work on the unit. I come back. I take a post-test... because I don’t have time to stay in high school for another year.’ Someone will ask, ‘You can take more than one class?’ “Yes, you can take more than one class – however many you can get done in the term, you can get done.’ So those who really want to graduate are doing it.

Lori described her relationship with credit recovery students as a partnership. She said, “You are working with them, you’re not just directing all the time. You’re actually a partner.” Kim said, “You’re a facilitator and that’s it.”

***The impact of online coursework.*** The staff participants described how online learning positively impacted students and carried over into other areas of their lives. Ally said,

Yes, there’s the diploma. Yes, there’s the whole AYP other side of education that we’re so worried about. But for those kids, it actually gives them a good memory

of school- that someone cared. That someone cared about them and got them to graduate and didn't let them just fall through the cracks. So, I think I've done more than just teach, there's more to it than just that.

Ann described how students reflect on their online success. "Once they get finished they look back and say, 'I can do these kinds of things; I can manage my own time.'"

Students learn to develop a sense of support and community with their peers who are in the lab for online learning. According to Lori, "They'll talk to each other and help each other." Ally said, "When they realize that everybody in credit recovery has failed and you're not the only one. Everybody there is in the same boat. It finally gives them almost a peer group that they normally wouldn't have outside of the lab." Don concurred, "They'll help each other. They do – even if they are not in the same class." Jill said, "We had our celebrations in there. Everybody high-fiving, for some it took them a while to get through." Kim added,

We clap for each other at times. She passed unit three, after fifteen attempts, but that's okay, she passed. Yay! They have never had anybody say, 'Yay! you passed.' They might have never been able to hear, 'You passed.' Or they've never been able to make 15 attempts. That's another thing. They get chances.

Ann described how she cheers students on. "You know you can do this, we tell them.

The point is, 'you're going to pass this and you can't move forward until you do. So buckle down and do it.'" Lori described students' hope for the future. "It's nice to see their relief when they are finally done, when they realize, 'I'm done! I don't have to take another class. I'm back on track. I'm gonna graduate!'" Don added, "Things that they thought they couldn't do, all of a sudden it gives them a success that they can transfer to

life. They would say, ‘I never would have thought I could complete this online class, this math class, this science class. I never thought I could get back on track.’” Kim also commented on how students’ increased self-efficacy, “They say, ‘I never thought I would have a chance to be able to graduate’, and then all of a sudden they do, and they realize, ‘Wow, I can conquer something! I just conquered something.’” Ann added, “It gives them hope.”

*Analysis of data: Sub-question 3.* According to staff members, content teachers and graduation coaches have very different roles, purposes, and perspectives. The content teachers, who function as monitors/tutors for students working on site on their online coursework stated their role is one of objective separation. They have a narrow, immediate goal of assisting students in their current online coursework. They stated that acknowledging student failure frees students to admit need and seek help. This also contributes to positive community. The graduation coaches have complex roles, and are able to see the big picture, and work with students more often and on a deeper level. They are concerned about everything going on in the students’ lives, not just their academics. All staff members described how the online environment is more positive for students than the traditional classroom. Mastery is required in an online class, and students found motivation in that.

Staff members described how online learning promotes success, even though the students are at-risk for more than academics. The students have jobs and outside activities which cause conflicts for them. The students experienced a sense of accomplishment because they had to work hard in their online coursework. Staff members described how students have a limited perspective and that “they’ve never had

it easy.” Students were described as grateful, humble, and appreciative. They had the opportunity to build positive relationships with staff members and peers as a result of being enrolled in online courses for credit recovery.

Interview protocol data also revealed the benefits of choice and control for at-risk students. Staff participants described how options promoted student ownership and autonomy. When students had increased opportunities for success, they began to mature and manage their own time more efficiently. Staff members saw their role as one of a partnership where they facilitated and supported students, not controlled or directed them. Positive student examples promoted and motivated other students to be successful in their online coursework.

The positive impact of success in online coursework carried over to other classes and their lives. Students began to believe they can graduate. They developed good memories of school, and they celebrated each others’ successes. Because students had to work for their own success, it was more meaningful. Mastery is required in online learning, and that impacted students’ perceptions of success and failure.

**Sub-question Four: Staff perceptions of the challenges of online learning for at-risk students.** As with the students, staff member responses to interview protocols revealed the same four overarching themes. Staff members provided greater detail regarding student challenges, both personal and academic. The words of adult participants aligned with the students’ views on the challenges of online learning.

*Expectations of self, others, and online coursework.* Adult participants interviewed for this study described the challenges and differences in their respective roles. All participants found themselves in the role of advocate for students enrolled in

online learning for credit recovery. The content teachers described challenges with computers and the online platforms, especially with Georgia Virtual and Georgia Credit Recovery. According to Jill,

We developed a good rapport with a couple ladies in the department of education, because that was the main one we worked with. At first they were a little concerned that we were criticizing. I guess they took it negatively that we were criticizing. We would find questions without pictures. We would find questions with the wrong answers and they became very appreciative of the work that we were doing, that we actually looked. We took the time and our whole thing was we wanted our children to get the credit that they deserved and we wanted them to be able to correct it for the next person who took the test.

Jill added, “The students did get frustrated on the tests when the pictures weren’t there, and we did have some dead links that would kind of mess things up and that was very frustrating for students. But as soon as we were able to say we will notify them and they will take care of it, then they would breathe easier.” According to Ally, “The most difficult thing is getting them set up, getting them in the right class because only certain people have access to all their records. So there is a lot of running back and forth to guidance.” Ally described how the students are blamers at first. She reminded them, “This is all about you. This isn’t about me the teacher. This is about you the kid. You’re here because you didn’t do something and I had nothing to do with it.” Ally added, “So on the side you are teaching a lot of problem solving skills and personal responsibility.” Kim added that “if reading skills are poor, they will struggle without a doubt.” Graduation coach Ann described students’ lack of buy-in as an additional barrier to

online success. According to Ann, “They know they have to take the class, but they don’t apply themselves, they sort of take it. Some of them start out that way – not buying in to the fact that you are going to have to do it all. We are not going to just pass you. We can’t socially promote you in an online class.” The graduation coaches responses to the interview protocols indicate that their role in supporting students is complex and demanding. According to Ann,

I find myself sometimes of being in the position of being an advocate. Of taking what the student says and trying to create a fix for a student, and that may require me to go and do some mediation between the student and the teacher, and the student and the parent, and maybe the counselor... So that’s a lot of advocating.

We spend most of our time in advocacy.

Don described his role in supporting at-risk students. “At least they have someone to talk to. They’re not going to call the social worker. That is not going to happen. But they think, ‘I know that you have my best interest at heart,’ so they’ll come and see you.”

Ann said, “If they don’t trust you and have that relationship, they won’t. Lori added, “The last thing you want to do is lose their trust. When you get the relationship piece in there you find that they come to you and want to tell you what they’re doing and what their grades are. But from 6:45am until you finally run out the door... whenever, you are seeing kids.” Kim commented on conflicts which come from advocacy. She said,

At times we find ourselves in the middle of a lot of things as well. We are advocating for students, for teacher with the students. You are always in the middle and you get caught between policy and... so you add that on top of it.

We’re just kind of trying to make things work for these kids that are so behind.

Kim reflected as a former teacher. She said that teachers don't have the time or opportunity "or the ability to get on a more personal basis with them and find out what is really going on at home." She added, "I also think students are hesitant to share with their teacher because they are afraid that somehow or another they are going to be viewed in a way that will negatively impact their grades." Ann said, "We are the advocates, we are student-centered, and we're looking at it from the student perspective, not what is easier for us, or easier for anybody else." Lori added that classroom teachers do not realize how much the graduation coaches do.

It is misperceived as it's just social or they're out running around all the time and assuming that it is frivolous where I know I have to go to save everybody's time... Sometimes it looks like oh, she's just flitting around with no purpose, but there's always purpose. I don't think most people realize how busy we are or how much we really do.

Don described that graduation coaches may be easily taken advantage of. He said,

I think one of the hazards that we all face is I think we can very easily be taken advantage of because a lot of people look at you from the administrators' office and the teachers. They think that you don't have, you really don't have a set job description that they know about, so why can't you go do this, and we need you to go and do that.

*At risk for more than academics.* All staff participants endorsed challenging and difficult situations that at-risk students face, and that it is largely unnoticed by their teachers. Students have behaviors that interfere with academic success. They are easily distracted and unmotivated at times. According to Kim, "Some of these kids, if we didn't

say, “Sit physically, come here, write your paper,’ they don’t. Some of them don’t have that motivation or that as their priority, so just being that cheerleader to say you can do it, you will do it – give that extra push.” Ann added, “There’s no one at home. With most of our kids they don’t have that. We’re almost like a mother or parent to them. They don’t have that home.”

Attendance is a problem for many at-risk students and reaching them to provide support can be challenging for the graduation coaches. Kim described her experience.

A lot of days they’re not there during the school day so it may take, I may have a list of 15 kids that I want to see on a particular day, it takes a week, but only five of them may actually be at school and then you have to get lucky and get them at the periods that they happen to be there because they are going to come in late or leave early. Or be somewhere else trying to make up something from their other absences -so it’s very difficult to pinpoint.

Ann added, “You can’t count on the contact information being correct either, so that means you have to know who their friends are. You go and ask their friend and that’s where you get cell phone numbers and text them. They will answer that.” Don added, “They will only answer your text. So it’s amazing you have to learn to think like the animal.”

Ally described the students as being insecure when they initially began their online coursework and attended lab sessions. She said,

They’re really insecure and if you can understand that they’re insecure you can understand a lot of the behaviors. They have, a lot of them try to socialize and talk and play a popularity card because they’re not comfortable yet. They all have

baggage. They all have jobs. They have things going on in their background you don't know a lot about. They want to move on, and a lot of them have beaten themselves up by saying, 'I'm not gonna get out of here. I'm going to be stuck here forever.' So their first session is usually a difficult one.

The graduation coaches described "life changing experiences" that have significant impact on students' academic performance. Ann said, "I have a lot of students who have lost a parent or they've lost a sibling. That is very much overlooked and it has a huge impact." She added further,

They don't know what to do with their feelings and their grief... I think most people have no idea how much of this exists, how many students are at-risk for various reasons. It's not just the low performers, but students who have a bad circumstance that comes on them through no fault of their own, or the parents that are so sorry and they're expecting them [students] to get out there and work every night.

Students are also at-risk due to parents or family members who are incarcerated. Ann said, "Those students need to be handled entirely differently than a student who has lost a parent through death. I mean this is different; they are not really dead, but they are not there." She added that "students feel ashamed, but they love their parents. I mean they are lonely." Lori described students who have talked about a parent in jail, or being in jail themselves, as "almost a badge of honor." She added,

Jail is something that the large majority of the population is very familiar with. They don't think that that is out of the ordinary where at some point you are going to have to be bailed out of jail or go bail somebody out. That is just a part of life.

For them, that is not anything wrong; that's just part of life. As we think part of life is going to the grocery store... well, you add in go and bailing somebody out of jail as part of their normal lives.

Kim said, "And it breaks our heart, but it's their normal." Don added, "That's a good way to put it. Their normal is different from our normal." Kim concluded, "We put our values on their values and they can sleep at night and we can't because we're worried about them." Ann commented further, "Yes, but it's just like you said. We go pay the water bill; they go and bail somebody out of jail. I don't get it." The county has a large military installation located nearby and many of the students have parents who are deployed overseas. Lori said,

Besides having to handle all of the moves that they've had to make themselves, they have to deal with a parent being deployed for long periods of time. To miss that parent and just feeling lonely and left behind, that takes its toll.

Students experience difficulties in the classroom for more than just academic deficits.

Kim said,

I wish teachers could sometimes see the big picture. The stress level of students, the anxiety level of students has become much higher than I've ever seen or experienced and I get very frustrated with teachers who don't realize that the choices that they're making are really putting a lot of pressure on teenagers, to not really do something wrong, but putting them under so much anxiety that they just kind of shut down, or do drugs, or...

Ann described her frustration with classroom teachers. She said, “We keep doing the same thing over and over, and they [teachers] go, ‘Well, they can’t pass it.’ Well, you know what, maybe YOU need to change. Maybe you just need to look at things different. That frustrates me!”

Kim added,

Or deadlines. The teachers will say, ‘I’ve told them five times that the deadline was last Friday. I told them three weeks ago. I told them two weeks ago.’ They don’t stop and say, ‘Why are you off task?’ ‘Why are you behind?’ ‘Why do you not have more than one page written?’ It’s because the students don’t understand. ‘I told you when the deadline was.’ As if that covers it.

Don said, “They get overwhelmed and they just shut down.” Lori agreed, “They just shut down and sit there and do nothing.” According to Ann,

The teacher will say, ‘They can come in before school and they can come in after school.’ But he doesn’t have transportation. Well, the teachers will say, “I don’t know what to tell you. I guess he’ll have to take his lunch hour.’ That’s the only hot meal he gets a day. Sometimes our lack of understanding is amazing.

Jill described students’ outside challenges, “They are poor time managers and they have lives outside. These are our different children. They have to work to help support the family or they have families of their own and they are struggling to get out of school.” Staff participants described how cost is a problem for some students and “we’re going back and forth in the district right now – whether or not students are going to have to pay for it.” Don added, “That is a challenge for some of them. That draws the line for

some of them, that they will or won't take it even...to how you are going to do the class, if you are even in there to begin with if you thought cost was a problem."

*The importance of choice and control.* Staff interview responses described the need for at-risk students to have options. Jill recommended, "They need to keep looking at these types of [online] programs that we can use with these students. Definitely keep that option open to students." She added, "Obviously, the more we could get to offer the students for free, the better." Further, Jill stated,

Some students do not learn in the classroom as well, but if they do it on their own, they do it better on the computer. I think we just have to recognize that fact and we've gotta figure something else out for that group. I don't know that answer. We do try to boost their egos and make them realize that they are not stupid or worthless, or dumb because they are in this situation. Life happens.

Ally commented on different student needs during the lab sessions and the need for them to commit and persevere. She said, "Some are working on just work, some are working on post-tests. Some are getting tutoring, some are... you just have to be able to... you start to learn who needs what and how to manage it. The first two weeks, it's difficult. They have to get past the first two weeks." Ally added further, "If you walk around they are more willing to stop you and ask for help. If you always sit behind the desk, they are not as willing."

Staff participants made recommendations to their students in credit recovery. Jill said, "Manage your time. Make a commitment; make a realistic goal. Do it three days or do a total of five days in a week: three days in the building, two out of the building. You can work outside of the school building." Don recommended, "You need to take it

seriously or you're never gonna make it. You need to pace yourself and say, 'I'm going to be here by this date, and here by this date.'" Ally bluntly told students that they were in control of their success or failure. She said,

If you want help you come see me. Stop me in the lunchroom when I'm walking through. Come see me before school. Come see me after school. Outside of credit recovery period and that's fine. But it still comes down to what you do and if you don't do it then you don't pass, and you have to do it again. You have to be able to direct yourself. That's the biggest thing.

***The impact of online learning.*** Staff members, especially graduation coaches described the challenges of supporting at-risk students in credit recovery. Lori said, "Unless they [classroom teachers] worked with us one on one with a student or a specific group of students and then they see through that student how much we've contributed. If they hadn't had that then they do not tend to appreciate the job that we do and the amount of work that is involved." Kim described the resentment she feels from some teachers. She said, "If you're not a good teacher and you're just coming to do your thing. You don't care about your students and you're just putting in your hours, you're probably gonna hate me and you're to resent me for intruding and for feeling like I am pressuring you."

Ann said,

The biggest challenge I have, honest to goodness is, dealing with student issues that are so close to your heart. Seeing situations and you know, the minute you hear it or see it, it's an automatic social worker. The prevalence of that in our society is amazing to me, that there are so many sorry adults. That, and picking

up and going to the next student and slapping a smile on my face, when in fact me and the social worker have been out back hugging each other and balling our eyes out over this kid.

Kim said, “You take it to heart so much more, you cry more as a graduation coach.” Lori said,

Personal involvement is so deep and you really have to learn to find that place where you’re not carrying around with you 24 hours a day because there are terrible situations; and we look at those and you want to help but there’s just some things you can’t change, and knowing that, I hate that feeling, knowing that I can do what I can do, but is it really going to be enough?

Staff members made recommendations for the improvement of online learning. They described how they like the fact that students are able to test out of a section by earning an 85 on the pre-test. Ally said,

This allows them to work at their own pace. And I think that is really important – forcing them to do everything when they don’t need to do everything is an issue. It is a really big issue for me and for the kids, because they view it as a waste of time. If they are in credit recovery then they ‘almost’ passed. And if they almost passed then we need to treat them like they almost passed, not like they can’t do it, especially for the older kids. They don’t need to take the whole class over again. They need to take what they missed.

All staff members commented on the need for the online learning platform to be user friendly and fast. Don said, “Waiting for that page to load and then the next one and then

the waiting- It's awful from our perspective. It is not really something that is useful to us. We want to be able to see. We need to be able to pull that up and immediately find out." Graduation coaches described frustration over the reluctance of policy and decision makers to embrace online learning as a viable option for credit recovery. Ann said,

It's time to move on. Virtual learning, its... we're gonna be more blended. Entertain ideas about blending education with brick-and-mortar with virtual. Don't just assume. I know that some of them are not necessarily rigorous. Don't just assume that because it is an online class, it isn't rigorous or that learning is not taking place. I know for a fact that one young lady went to summer school and did NovaNET and she looked at me one day and she said, 'I have learned more math this summer than I ever did sitting in a classroom.' She is a 5<sup>th</sup> year senior, but she is graduating in December.

Lori added,

Most of them [students] will say that it's really harder to do online. As far as looking at it from people's perspective that it's not rigorous enough, or they're not meeting the standard. They think it's not comparable to what we're offering in our county in the classroom. That's not the case at all, but when people make decisions on online venues and platforms that's not the criteria to use. How about involving the people who are on the ground level with these kids working with them? Those should be the people who have the biggest weight in the decisions of what's chosen and what's not.

Kim said,

Sometimes you are saving a little now to have to spend it later. When to make a

really sound decision with your money you get something that is for the better good for long term - that is usable to everybody. You're really amplifying what you are getting for your money and getting a lot more benefits for the school, and their meeting AYP standards, and getting kids graduated, and successful, and that is what it is supposed to be about.

*Analysis of sub-question 4:* Staff participants described the challenges encountered with online learning for credit recovery by their at-risk students. Staff interview data revealed that the role of advocacy was significant for content teachers and graduation coaches who support online credit recovery learners. They reported providing technical support by collaborating with the Georgia Department of Education and GAVS regarding corrections and glitches with the course materials. Staff described the need to be frank and forthright with students regarding student personal responsibility for their online coursework. Staff members described how they serve as advocates and intermediaries for students with parents, teachers, and administrators. Trust is essential in developing relationships with at-risk students. Staff members reported that when trust is established with students the students will seek them out for support and share their successes with them.

Many classroom teachers have limited understanding of the role of the graduation coach, and the coaches reported that they can be easily taken advantage of. Staff members described that the students are at-risk for more than academics. They are distracted and unmotivated. They have limited parental support or involvement. Further risk factors indicated by the staff members included attendance and outside responsibilities. Staff members use texting to communicate with students. It is reported

to be the most effective method. According to staff members, the first two weeks of an online class are the most challenging for students due to insecurity.

The graduation coaches described 'life changing experiences' that have a significant impact on the students' academic performances. Students may have lost a parent or sibling to death, have a parent incarcerated, or have a parent deployed overseas with the military. Staff participants described the limited understanding given to the students by school staff and that this is very frustrating for them (graduation coaches). Staff participants indicated that they have limited understanding of the challenges their at-risk students face and described it as being a 'different normal' or value system than theirs.

According to staff responses, students experience anxiety, severe pressure, and feelings of being overwhelmed which lead to shutting down or seeking destructive outlets. This is largely unnoticed by their classroom teachers who are generally unwilling to bend or change. Staff members described students as being poor time managers and that cost can be a big factor in whether students have the option of online coursework for credit recovery.

Staff reported the need to continue to seek online options for credit recovery. They experienced frustration over policy makers who are slow to regard online learning as a viable option. They described online learning as rigorous. Students experience success, and lives are changed as a result of it. Staff members described the need for stakeholders on the ground and directly responsible for the implementation of online learning to be a part of the decision-making process. They reported that the main thing is not about policy, cost, or AYP, but "getting kids graduated."

## Summary

This qualitative case study utilized a single case design to address the overarching research question: What are stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery? The data gathered from interviews and content evaluation were coded and analyzed to determine common themes among participants. Consistent among the interview participants were themes reflecting the expectations of self, others, and online coursework; online credit recovery students were at-risk for more than academics; the importance of choice and control; and the impact of online coursework.

In regard to expectations of self, others, and online coursework, student participants agreed that the primary responsibility for success in online learning rested upon their own shoulders. Descriptions of online courses included much reading, taking notes, and memorizing. Although online curriculum providers described the active, engaging components of online courses, students described a more passive approach to learning. The benefits of online coursework for visual learners were contrasted by the challenges encountered by auditory learners. Many student participants described a negative school environment and preferred online learning because of fewer distractions, greater control, and having the ability to see their progress and manage their own learning. Most student participants experienced repeated traditional course failure, grade retention, discouragement, and procrastination. Some had problems with attendance, no home computer access, and limited interaction with support staff. Lack of self-motivation and poor time management impacted their success in both traditional and online classes. All of the student participants endorsed use of technology daily for

communication and social networking, and several anticipated careers in the field; however, participants also described that technology was confusing, frustrating, and that they could manage without it.

Students enrolled in online courses with an online teacher described poor interaction and complications when attempting to communicate with the online teacher. The students all described the need of a teacher either online or on-site to assist in varying degrees. Student autonomy grew as a result of successful online course completion, yet these participants faced global challenges which recommended instructor-student communication with low transactional distance. This was especially critical during the first two weeks of the course when students were insecure and faced glitches with enrolling and managing their online courses.

Students disagreed on the benefits and level of support provided by the monitors in the lab. Some students lamented the teachers' inability to assist with their specific content. An overarching evaluation of the monitors was of accountability rather than content support. Further, the content teachers (monitors) who supported students on-site described their role as one of objective separation. Students were reported to have experienced less interpersonal difficulty with the monitors in the lab because the teachers kept them focused on the course at hand. Staff members reported that earnest conversations between students and teachers who monitored them promoted positive community and empowered students to seek assistance when problems arose as they worked. Graduation coaches who supervised and supported the supplemental online credit recovery programs in their schools described their own role as complex and broad. They stated that they were able to work with students more frequently and at a deeper

level than the classroom teachers. They were concerned with everything going on in the students' lives, not just their academics. All staff members described how the online environment was more positive for students than the traditional classroom.

Staff participants described the challenges encountered with online learning by their at-risk students. They reported providing technical support by collaborating with the Georgia Department of Education and GAVS regarding corrections and glitches with the course materials. Staff members described how they serve as advocates and intermediaries for students with parents, teachers, and administrators. Trust was essential in developing relationships with at-risk students. Staff members reported that when trust was established with students the students sought them out for support and volunteered to share their successes with them.

Before beginning online coursework for credit recovery, the students were discouraged and doubted that they could graduate. As a group, the students were experiencing poverty, limited technology in the home, and years of truancy. Work, attendance, cost, discouragement, and poor time management placed students further at-risk for not completing their online coursework and dropping out of school.

Additionally, they were reported by staff as distracted and unmotivated. Students had little parental support or involvement and limited perspective and outlook for the future. Graduation coaches have reported that many undergo significant emotional challenges such as death or incarceration of a parent, or a parent deployed overseas in the military. Staff participants described the limited understanding or concern given to the students by school staff and that this is very frustrating for them (graduation coaches).

Data from the interview protocols supported the third theme which described the importance of choice and control. Students experienced ownership of their learning, and were given options as to when, where, for how long, and in what way they would complete their online coursework. Distractibility was reduced and learning enhanced as students conveyed their positive experiences with online learning. This was evidenced as students acknowledged their individual experiences regarding working at their own pace, managing their time, managing their learning by reading thoroughly and taking notes, and making themselves work on their online coursework even when they did not prefer it. The students acknowledged personal consequences when they made poor choices.

Staff members described how online learning promoted success. The students experienced a sense of accomplishment because they had to work hard in their online coursework. Staff participants described how options promoted student ownership and autonomy. When students had increased opportunities for success, they began to mature and manage their own time more efficiently. Staff members saw their role as one of a partnership where they facilitated and supported students, not controlled or directed them. Positive student examples promoted and motivated other students to be successful in their online coursework.

Students indicated that their experiences in online learning carried over into other areas of their lives. Students described increased skills and how those skills were applied in traditional coursework. For example, students were able to take notes in class more effectively. They developed a better understanding of core course content. The students gave specific examples of improved grammatical skills, writing ability, and mathematical conceptual understanding. Students also noted that they were more resourceful in their

ability to locate information and study help on the Internet. They learned to scan text more efficiently online and in the classroom which saved them time and reduced frustration. Students shared that they were experiencing hope and encouragement as a result of their online learning success. They developed good memories of school, and they celebrated each others' successes. Because students had to work for their own success, it was more meaningful. Mastery is required in online learning, and that impacted students' perceptions of success and failure. Moreover, students felt that they would be able to make up credits and graduate.

Overall, the students revealed a self-awareness regarding the expectations of experiencing success in online learning; but the majority of them expressed the need for teacher support –both online and on site. They described needing a teacher who knows the specific content they are working on. Teachers are also needed to answer questions, to clarify confusing vocabulary or learning expectations, to assist when they get stuck, or to be available online at various hours. The students acknowledged the benefits of online learning but admitted that we are not there yet.

Staff reported the need to continue to seek various online options for credit recovery. They experienced frustration over policy makers who are slow to regard online learning as a viable option. They described challenges they encountered as they advocated for students. At times they felt resented by classroom teachers, and they commented that their jobs are emotionally taxing due to the depth of their relationships with students who are at-risk for more than academics. They admitted that they also had difficulty understanding the perspective of needy students due to a different normal or value system. They described online learning as rigorous. Students experienced success

and lives were changed as a result of it. Staff members described the need for stakeholders on the ground and directly responsible for the implementation of online learning to be a part of the decision-making process. They reported that the main thing is not about policy, cost, or AYP, but “getting kids graduated.”

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

Within this chapter, a brief summary of the study findings from Chapter IV is presented, followed by discussion of the findings. This section also includes implications, recommendations, and concluding thoughts.

#### **Introduction**

District decision makers and school leaders are faced with the challenge of exploring various options to support at-risk students who are in danger of not graduating with their peers. One of the options under consideration is online learning. The rapid advancement of technology and the promotion of virtual schools have led many districts to implement supplemental online learning in an attempt to assist their at-risk students in credit recovery and improve the graduation rate. A clear understanding of the factors that contribute to at-risk secondary students' success or failure in a supplemental online course yielded valuable information for school leaders, course designers, online educators at all levels, and on-site support staff.

The lack of research regarding how students are supported in K-12 online learning while simultaneously enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools suggested a need to further investigate this phenomenon. Specifically, stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supplemental online credit recovery have not been fully explicated. To that end, this qualitative study explored the following overarching research question: What are stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental

online learning for credit recovery? The following sub-questions were used to answer the overarching question:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online learning?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the challenges of supplemental online learning?
3. What are staff member perceptions of the benefits of supplemental online coursework for at-risk students?
4. What are staff member perceptions of the challenges at-risk students encounter while enrolled in supplemental online learning?

### **Summary of the Research Findings**

The purpose of this study was to understand the stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of high school supplemental online learning for credit recovery. Using a single case study design the researcher employed purposive sampling techniques to identify the following participants: 12, 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students who had been enrolled in online learning for credit recovery; two content teachers who supported credit recovery students and served as monitors in the lab; and a focus group of four graduation coaches who supervised and supported at-risk students enrolled in online credit recovery in each of their schools. Interview protocols were developed and approved by the dissertation committee. The protocols were strictly adhered to for the structured interviews. Following the audio-recorded interviews, all participant responses were transcribed and coded for patterns. Content analysis of data related to the academic history of the student

in the study was conducted. Further, in order to gain a broad perspective of student achievement related to online coursework, available data involving the success or failure of all students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery throughout the district in the 2010-2011 school year was examined. Using the identified patterns and topographies from the raw data, four major themes were identified. Each of these themes and corresponding sub-themes are discussed below.

The first theme that emerged was stakeholders' perceptions of the expectations of self, others, and the online coursework. As student participants began their online coursework, they quickly discovered that they were expected to work independently and manage their own learning. This is a stark contrast to traditional classroom instruction and expectations. Secondly, interview responses and historical data demonstrated the complex issues students faced which placed them at-risk for more than academics. Staff members described the significant challenges students coped with and the lack of understanding provided by many classroom teachers. Next, stakeholders described how the impact of having choice and control resulted in greater student autonomy and ownership of their online learning. Finally, interview data revealed the lasting benefits and the impact of online coursework. Participants commented on how their online experience changed the way they felt about learning, their abilities, and their futures.

### **Analysis of Research Findings**

Consistent among the interview participants were themes reflecting the expectations of self, others, and online coursework; online credit recovery students were at-risk for more than academics; the importance of choice and control; and the impact of

online coursework. In regard to expectations of self, others, and online coursework, student participants acknowledged sole responsibility for the outcome in their online coursework. Although commercial online providers described the active, engaging components of online courses, students described passive learning. The impact of preferred learning styles was also addressed by student participants. Many students described challenges in the school environment and preferred online learning because of fewer distractions, greater control, and the ability to see their progress. Most student participants experienced repeated traditional course failure, grade retention, discouragement, and procrastination. Some had problems with attendance, no home computer access, and limited interaction with support staff. Lack of self-motivation and poor time management impacted their success in both traditional and online classes. All of the student participants endorsed use of technology daily for communication and social networking, and several anticipated careers in the field; however, participants also described that technology was confusing, frustrating, and that they could manage without it.

Students who were enrolled in GAVS courses with an online teacher described poor communication and challenges when seeking assistance from the online teacher. The students all described the need of a teacher either online or on-site to assist in varying degrees. Student autonomy improved with successful online course completion, but most participants required a highly facilitated model of communication and support. On-site mentoring appeared to be especially critical during the first two weeks of the course when students were insecure and faced problems with enrolling and accepting the responsibility of managing their online courses.

Students described contrasting experiences with the level of support provided by the monitors in the lab. The majority of the students stated that the monitors were mainly there to provide accountability and handle technical or logistical needs rather than academic support. Further, monitors described their role as one of objective separation. They encouraged and supported students, but they did not try to learn about their lives or address problems not related to the course at hand. Staff members reported that frank conversations between students and the teachers who monitored them reduced student insecurity and promoted safety in seeking assistance. The role of graduation coaches in supporting at-risk students enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery was more complex and involved. Their relationship with students was deeper and encompassed all areas of the students' lives. All staff members described how they served as advocates and intermediaries for students with parents, teachers, and administrators. Trust was essential in developing relationships with at-risk students. Trust promoted the student initiation of sharing successes as well as concerns.

As a group, the students were experiencing poverty, limited technology in the home, and years of truancy. Work, attendance, cost, discouragement, and poor time management placed students further at-risk for not completing their online coursework and dropping out of school. Additionally, they were reported by staff as distractible and unmotivated. According to staff members, students had little parental support or involvement and a limited perspective and future outlook. Graduation coaches reported that students were facing significant emotional challenges such as the death or incarceration of a parent, or a parent deployed overseas in the military. Graduation coach

participants described their frustration over the lack of understanding and compassion given to at-risk students by school staff in general.

The third theme described the importance of choice and control. Distractibility was reduced and learning enhanced as students conveyed their positive experiences with online learning. Students preferred working at their own pace, managing their time, managing their learning by reading thoroughly and taking notes, and benefitting from exercising self-discipline to work on their online coursework.

Staff members described how online learning promoted success. The students experienced a sense of accomplishment because they had to work hard in their online coursework. Staff participants described how options promoted student ownership and autonomy. When students had increased opportunities for success they began to mature and manage their own time more efficiently. Staff members saw their role as one of a partnership where they facilitated and supported students, not controlled or directed them.

Students indicated that their experiences in online learning carried over into other areas of their lives. Students described increased academic skills in math, writing, and chemistry. Further, they commented on being more resourceful on the Internet and more confidence in problem-solving. They gave examples of how those skills were applied in traditional coursework. Students shared that they experienced hope and encouragement as a result of their online learning success. Mastery learning forced students to work through challenges and succeed, rather than accept failure and give up. Overall, the students revealed a self-awareness regarding the expectations of experiencing success in online learning; but the majority of them expressed the need for teacher support –both

online and on site. They described needing a teacher to answer content questions, clarify directions or learning expectations, and provide technical assistance.

Staff reported the need to continue to seek various online options for credit recovery. They experienced frustration over policy makers who are slow to regard online learning as a viable option. They described challenges they encountered as they advocated for students. At times they felt resented by classroom teachers, and they commented that their jobs are emotionally taxing due to the depth of their relationships with their needy students. They admitted that they had difficulty understanding the value system of their students. They described online learning as rigorous. Staff members described the need for stakeholders on the ground and directly responsible for the implementation of online learning to be a part of the decision-making process. They reported that the main thing is not about policy, cost, or AYP, but “getting kids graduated.”

## **Discussion of Research Findings**

### **Expectations of Self, Others, and Online Coursework**

Several studies have shown that the technical, organizational, and academic abilities of students may limit their access to the proposed benefits of online learning (Berge & Clark, 2005; Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Zucker & Kozma, 2003). At-risk students specifically, are described in the literature as displaying weaknesses in academic proficiency, technical skills, and self-direction (Blocher et al., 2002; Clark & Berge, 2005; Oliver et al., 2009), but online learning can help struggling students interact with academic content in a new and different way. It gives them a chance to start over and they are given more flexibility to manage employment or outside activities (Ash, 2011).

Online learning is set up in such a way that it places control of the learning in the hands of students. Students for the first time begin to develop self-efficacy and experience control over their learning. Individual autonomy can be developed by activities and programs that emphasize setting realistic goals, accepting responsibility, and building self-confidence (Woolfolk, 2007). Students in the study described how they soon realized that the responsibility for their online course success rested in them. Support was generally available, but they had to seek it out. Not all of them were able to garner the resources they needed, and a few were unsuccessful in their online coursework as a result. It would be expected that these millennial students would be ‘digital natives’ and comfortable with all facets of technology. However, while all students reported daily use of technology for personal and social reasons, some described it as confusing and frustrating. Moreover, students reported that they generally had control over the time, place, and effort involved in their online learning. Many described a passive learning experience where they read a predictably organized learning module and took tests. For some students, this structure and sequential presentation of content contributed to greater understanding and lasting learning because it reduced distractions and allowed them to track their progress and know what more was expected.

Students also endorsed the benefits of embedded design elements which aligned with Barbour’s (2007) research on effective asynchronous course design for high school students. Specifically, students commented on the benefits of frequent summarization, worked-out examples and models, especially in math, the use of visuals and video, the avoidance of excessive text, and an accessible readability level. Similar recommendations were made by Oliver et al. (2009) in their research with the North

Carolina Public Virtual School. Much has been described in the literature regarding the benefit of individualizing the online learning environment for at-risk students (Dessoff, 2009; Holstead et al., 2008; Natsu, 2011); however, the students in the study reported no such benefit. The students were using four different online platforms, and none of them were adjusted or altered in any way to meet the needs of individual learners. Student participants acknowledged that preferred learning style impacted their success with online course content. Visual learners described positive experiences; reading and re-reading course materials as needed was not a problem for them. They described how augmented design features such as videos and pictures were beneficial and enhanced their learning. However, one participant who labeled himself as an auditory learner admitted great difficulty with the content. He said that it was much reading and memorization and that was especially challenging for him. He was unsuccessful in his course. In evaluating this student's academic history, the researcher discovered that this student had excellent grades in science and math; he had no issues with reading skills, distractibility, attendance, or motivation, yet he failed a history course online and in the classroom.

As in traditional instructional practices, giving frequent and meaningful feedback to students is a critical component to student academic success. Further, providing an engaging instructional platform and active learning opportunities are highly effective components in both distance and face-to-face environments (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Barbour, 2007; Friend & Johnston, 2005; Rice, 2006). Several of the students in the study took an online course through a state-run virtual school. These students had the benefit of an online teacher to support them. However, participants described poor interaction and complications when attempting to communicate with the online teacher.

It should be noted that some participants did not have computers in the home. Further, the lab at the school was only open and available to students Monday through Wednesday. Therefore, a problem or question emailed to a virtual teacher on Wednesday would not get to the student until Monday afternoon when the student reported to the lab. Attendance issues and employment responsibility further complicated this interaction.

Staff members reported several features of online learning which promoted student success. It lacks the negative social and academic experiences encountered in a traditional classroom. At-risk students especially need genuine motivation through validation and meaningful social interaction (Archambault et al., 2010; Christle et al., 2007). Staff participants described how students experience anxiety, pressure, and withdrawal as a result of repeated failure in school and that students are more likely to advocate for themselves and seek assistance in the lab after school. They are encouraged to acknowledge need and request help from the teachers (monitors) who are assigned to the lab. Most students enrolled in supplemental online courses attend a brick-and-mortar school, and generally the online program requires a mentor be provided to the student. It is expected that this mentor be available for both technical and academic support (Watson, 2007). Student participants presented contrasting views of the available support in the online learning lab. Some acknowledged that the monitors provided academic as well as technical assistance, while others noted the limited content knowledge of the monitors as it related to their own online coursework. Overall, the students felt that the monitors' primary responsibility was for accountability, not necessarily instructional support.

Many online courses are divided into lessons, or modules, and units. Course content may include organized text, graphics, videos, audios, animations, and links. Staff members reported how students benefitted from the opportunity to test out of a particular unit or section. This particular feature allowed students to progress more rapidly which resulted in increased motivation and self-discipline. Many of the online curriculum providers described this feature, but researchers caution moving students too quickly through a course and reducing the likelihood of their gaining adequate educational benefit (Davis, 2011; Foshay & Damyanovich, 2005; Natsu, 2011; Rice, 2006). Additional challenges to successful online learning involve the dispute over seat-time versus mastery. When a student enrolls in an online course for credit recovery, they have met the seat time requirement in the failed traditional course. When courses are completed solely online, they have not met the seat-time requirement and may not meet the criteria for eligibility for participation in NCAA athletic competition in Division I and II universities. Districts caution students that the online course credit is only acceptable for earning a high school diploma, not necessarily to meet entrance or eligibility expectations at post-secondary schools. This continues to be a problem and an example of the limited understanding of the benefits and rigor of online learning by policy makers and the public at large (Rice, 2009; Watson, 2007).

In regard to staff expectations of self, others, and online coursework, staff members reported very different roles, purposes, and perspectives. The content teachers (monitors) stated that their role is one of objective separation. Their focus is narrow and immediate, and they support students by assisting with technical issues, providing a risk-free environment to seek help and answer questions, and monitor student progress. The

graduation coaches who support and supervise the supplemental online learning in their schools commented that their roles are more personal, their contact with students is more frequent, and at a deeper level. They are concerned with all facets of the students' lives, not just their academics. The literature is replete with descriptions of how a personal connection is vital for at-risk student success (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Oliver et al., 2009; Schaeffer & Konetes, 2010). Teachers must learn how to reach and retain students as well as provide them with highly facilitated interactions (Lowes, 2007). Many virtual schools have developed systematic strategies to help students succeed. Faculty and staff are assigned to mentor students and assist them as they progress through online courses (Archambault et al., 2010). Further, when students believe that they are entering a partnership with their teachers and course facilitators, they are more likely to remain in school and complete online coursework (Ash, 2011). This is a unique component of an online learning environment.

Study participants described how when they work as partners or facilitators, rather than directors of student learning, the students develop self-management skills and take ownership of their progress. A key component of working with at-risk students is building a relationship that is based on trust. Further, in order to partner with students in online learning, a teacher or mentor must first understand that, when students enter the program or coursework, many do not have education as a priority. Therefore, the staff members' first challenge is to re-engage the students and increase their confidence in their own abilities and to raise the perceived value of a high school diploma (Ferdig, 2010). The study participants concurred with research that the first two weeks of interaction with online coursework are the most critical for student success (Ash, 2011).

## **At Risk for More than Academics**

Studies have described how at-risk students are more likely to drop out of school due to complex issues and negative influences and experiences which occurred over the course of students' academic careers (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Christle et al., 2007; Ferdig, 2010; Garnier et al., 1997). Students were reported to struggle with motivation, self-efficacy, academic and technical deficits, and time management (Christle et al., 2007; Oliver et al., 2009). Staff member study participants portrayed heartbreaking examples of the at-risk students who enroll in online learning for credit recovery in their schools. Students were described as distractible and unmotivated. They had little parental support or involvement, and they had limited perspective and future outlook. Further, the students were reported to have experienced significant life challenges such as the death or incarceration of a parent, or a parent who was deployed with the military overseas. Moreover, students were additionally impacted by what the graduation coaches in the study described as a lack of understanding and concern from their regular content teachers. According to Bridgeland et al., (2006), when students experience low expectations from teachers, they are more likely to give up on themselves. All staff participants described the students as "different;" they have different value systems; they need different options; and they should be handled differently.

Researchers have described how when students are connected to supportive schools where staff recognize them as individuals and are concerned about and promote their accomplishments, they are more likely to complete high school and transition to life successfully (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Christle et al., 2007). Staff participants in the study described how online learning promoted success. The students experienced a sense of

accomplishment because they had to work hard in their online coursework. Student options promoted student ownership and autonomy. When students had increased opportunities for success they began to mature and manage their own time more efficiently.

### **The Importance of Choice and Control**

Conventional instruction may be contrasted with active learning where the student has greater control over his or her learning (Means et al., 2009). In their foundational work involving autonomy and self-determination, Deci and Ryan (1985) stated that students demonstrate the need for autonomy when they approach a task desiring some degree of control and choice in the situation. According to Vygotsky (1962) and Moore (1973), children and adolescents are not generally developmentally prepared to assume large degrees of autonomy. Most online learners work within an asynchronous setting where they choose the time and location of their study to a greater extent than students enrolled in traditional courses. Consequently, the students' ability to manage their learning is vitally important (Blocher et al., 2002). It was reported in this study that when students had support and took advantage of it, autonomy, maturity, and time management skills developed. Study participants described the benefits students received as they experienced ownership of their learning. Students cited examples of working at their own pace, on their own time, when and where, and for how long they chose. Distractibility was reduced, skills were developed, and overall learning was enhanced as students took responsibility for their learning.

Recurring benefits of online learning in the literature involved expanding academic access, increasing the accountability to high quality learning, improving student

achievement, and expanding educational choice for students and their parents (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Clark & Berge, 2005; Zucker & Kozma, 2003). Advances in technology allow at-risk learners multiple opportunities to receive credits and graduate on time (Lips, 2010). Online learning is mastery-based, and this gives students additional chances to be successful within the coursework as well. They may re-read and review as often as is necessary to understand the material. When they take their own notes, students are able to process the information more effectively. They also learn how to evaluate key ideas and constructs in the course. Further, when students are able to take pre-tests for each section, they need only complete the units in which they were unsuccessful. In this way, students are able to complete the course and experience success more quickly.

### **The Impact of Online Coursework**

Providing access to education through an alternative means is one of the most important qualities and potential in distance education. Accountability and the belief that virtual schools and curriculum providers should be held to the same standard regarding student achievement as traditional schools was a main recommendation for future research by Rice (2009). Further, the growth of online learning has outpaced policy in many states, and controversy involving the effectiveness and legality of virtual schooling continues to be disputed (Watson, 2007). Study participants indicated that student experiences in online learning carried over into other areas of their lives. Students described increased academic and organizational skills, as well as improved time-management and focus ability. They further described how what they learned in their online coursework made a permanent impact on classroom content knowledge. Students contrasted how in a traditional course they may learn something for an assessment in the

immediate future, but they did not completely understand or have the ability to apply that knowledge to other content. Contrarily, the content knowledge gained in an online course was understood more fully and provided a framework and background for further learning and transferability. When students were actively engaged in learning, true learning occurred. The students were able to identify this and communicate it. Students shared that they were experiencing hope and encouragement as a result of their online learning successes. Further, students developed positive memories of school and learned to support one another and celebrate each other's success. Moreover, the students acknowledged the benefits of a high school diploma and began to believe that they could attain it.

Overall, the students were cognizant of what was required to be successful in an online course; but the majority of them expressed the need for teacher support – both online and on-site in varying degrees. Oliver et al. (2009) described how this support could occur online through real-time collaboration tools and learning platforms or at the home school with tutors, mentors, teachers, or counselors. Ideally, 24-hour availability through multi-medium access would provide optimal support. Although participants in this study described how students were gaining content knowledge and developing autonomy, they continued to require ongoing support. Moore purported that learners who struggle with self-direction prefer programs with little transactional distance (2007). He added that distance education programs can be evaluated in terms of transactional distance because they have a degree of structure, dialogue, and students with various levels of autonomy. Students with greater autonomy are generally more comfortable with less dialogue and more structured course materials and can operate independently

with lesser transactional distance. Further, the degree of dialogue and structure vary from course to course. The teaching philosophy of the instructor, the nature of the subject, and the skills of the learners are additional variables that impact the extent of transactional distance (Moore, 2007). The student participants in this study described how they needed very little support in some courses, but with others they needed significant amounts of assistance. Some students stated that there were certain content courses that they would have to take in a traditional classroom because they believed that their skill deficits would be difficult to overcome in a course with greater transactional distance. The “no significant difference” literature in education demonstrated that delivering instruction at a distance is as effective as providing an education and multiple factors, beyond the delivery method, impact the learning process. Further, achieving gains involves more than adapting content to the medium; it involves a course redesign which maximizes the use of technology (Russell, 2001).

Florida Virtual School described their online courses as highly facilitated. That is, there is frequent communication and interaction between student and teacher. In a highly-facilitated course, the primary goal is to assist students with making valuable connections with their learning, not simply getting them through the material and acquiring a credit. This facilitation is provided through emails, calls, synchronous chat opportunities, and threaded discussions (Friend & Johnston, 2005). The students in this study commented that they would benefit from these same forms of communication and support.

Fourteen years after its inception, the Virtual High School Global Consortium continues to stand out as a model for its structure and its purpose. Three characteristics

of VHS which exemplify its mission and promote its success are its extensive catalog; its well-developed professional development for teachers; and the use of trained site coordinators (Zucker & Kozma, 2003). However, the rapid growth of virtual schooling has affected the professional development component, as pressure to meet demands has reduced the length of many initial professional development courses. The trend is toward promoting and delivering more “just-in-time” professional development opportunities which delivers training when it is needed most (Lowes, 2007). In evaluating prevalent themes in the literature, Cavanaugh et al. (2009) analyzed the role of the professional. This included teachers, tutors, technical support and guidance, as well as management and course designers. A large degree of the literature focused on descriptive elements with a key emphasis on the roles of the online teacher and administrator (Cavanaugh et al., 2009). A role that is largely overlooked and for which little or no training is provided is that of the on-site support person. This could be the monitor in the lab where students work on their supplemental online learning or the graduation coach who supervises the program. In many cases, district administrators select an online platform based on cost and leave it to the site support staff to manage the details and operation of the program. Graduation coaches found their role to be especially taxing, given the proclivity of at-risk students to enroll in online credit recovery and the fact that student academic deficits were the least of their problems. They described feelings of alienation and resentment. They also felt that teachers and administrators did not understand the role they played or the work they did in supporting at-risk students at their schools. Staff members described the need for stakeholders on the ground and directly responsible for implementation of

online learning programs to be a part of the decision-making process. They reported that the main thing is not about policy, cost, or AYP, but “getting kids graduated.”

### **Conclusions**

Conclusions drawn from the findings of this study include the following:

1. Online learning is a viable option for at-risk students for credit recovery. Autonomy and time-management are developed as a result of successful online course completion.
2. Students’ challenges were diminished when they were given the opportunity to recover credits online. Problems with attendance, teacher-student conflict, distractions, and disabilities were reduced in the online learning environment.
3. The flexibility of online learning and the opportunity for students to choose and have control over learning promoted academic success and improved outlook.
4. Online learning resulted in improved skills that carry over into the traditional classroom. Students experienced hope, tried harder, and were able to graduate.
5. Not all “Digital Natives” are comfortable with and prefer technology for learning.
6. Economic disadvantage continues to impact access to online learning.
7. At-risk students understood the challenges and requirements for success in an online learning course, even when they did not act on their understanding.
8. At-risk students acknowledged the benefits of online learning, and admitted that they outweigh the challenges; however, they expressed there was still a need for a teacher.
9. The online learning environment is more positive for at-risk students than the traditional classroom. Negativity, distraction, criticism, and demands in the regular classroom diminish its effect.

10. A relationship with a trusted staff member was a key component of at-risk students' success in supplemental online learning for credit recovery. There is an affective part of supporting at-risk students that cannot be minimized or ignored.

11. The completion of online learning for credit recovery in at-risk students helped to turn them around and resulted in changed lives.

12. There continues to be a lack of understanding of the rigor and relevance of online learning in the educational community and in the public at large.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study and the work of previous researchers, several implications for use of this study are noted. These implications are for school leaders, educational policy-makers, online course designers, university preparation programs, and for stakeholders who directly support supplemental online programs in the local school.

#### **School Leaders**

First and foremost, the results of this study should be reviewed by principals who make decisions regarding how to best support at-risk students and improve graduation outcomes. At-risk students have complex issues and challenges which require different options, considerations, supports, and opportunities. Opening a lab at the end of the school day for an hour, a few days a week and staffing it with a couple teachers does not adequately provide for the learning and emotional needs of students who require additional supports. Considerations must be given as to how to provide follow-up, accountability, and ongoing encouragement and communication with at-risk students enrolled in online credit recovery. It is incumbent upon school leaders to ensure that all staff members have the opportunity and training to better understand their roles in

reaching and supporting at-risk students, especially those who are enrolled in additional online coursework in order to recover credits and graduate on time. There is a potential for tremendous student growth and re-engagement in their education in online learning. Supporting needy students in a high school is the responsibility of all staff, not just the graduation coach and a few others. On-site mentors and tutors may significantly impact the success or failure of at-risk students in online coursework. When hiring new teachers, principals should consider individuals with knowledge of content, technical skills, and the ability to relate to students of all abilities and backgrounds. A well-organized, well-planned program with staff to support each of the main content areas, and who are available to communicate with students on off hours will further enhance student performance. Students enroll in online courses with differing levels of academic ability, autonomy, and self-efficacy. A system of supports that is scaffolded to meet the needs of individual learners will likely yield the greatest results and promote student independence with lifelong benefits. Further, a system of accountability which provides data regarding the effectiveness of various online platforms is vital when considering which option is most appropriate for the targeted population. Additionally, online learning is a viable option for many learners, not just those recovering credit. School leaders set the tone and the climate in their schools, and when the success of all students by all means becomes a priority for the principal that impact is felt in every classroom.

### **Educational Policy Makers**

There continues to be a lack of understanding among the public and in the educational community regarding the rigor and relevance of online learning programs. Too frequently, the program with the least cost is accepted without the input from

stakeholders who are responsible for local implementation. It is vital that all stakeholders participate in the decision-making process regarding which online learning platform or curriculum is best suited to the needs of individual students, schools, and districts. There is also a misconception that programs can be implemented with minimal cost and attention. As we prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce, we must evaluate the skills that are necessary for their success. Online learning can impact all students by providing a multi-modal approach to content delivery. There is also the potential to promote self-management and self-efficacy which may have a lasting impact on learners of all abilities.

### **Virtual Curriculum Designers**

The development of embedded learning strategies into online coursework is a feature that not only promotes learning of the course content; it also teaches students how to learn and apply that learning in all contexts. Accountability is a critical component of any online package. Applying concepts of universal design will meet the needs of all learners and give them options of which features will suit their preferred learning style. The goal would not be to continually add more, but to simplify, highlight, and present information in several ways to address all modalities. Further, staff development of on-site support staff must be a part of program implementation. Stakeholders described the need for a platform that is structured, efficient, and easy to navigate.

### **University Preparation Programs**

As traditional schools move toward a blended learning model where they use technology to deliver or enhance learning objectives, teachers must be prepared to manage online platforms (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). Teachers should be expected

to navigate discussion boards, facilitate synchronous activities, and embed strategies, links, and other online features into their traditional courses. Further, teachers should be expected to complete an online instructor endorsement if they are going to facilitate distance learning courses. The challenge likely lies in the diversity of skills of adult students and the divide between the technology-oriented and the technology-challenged generations.

### **Stakeholders in the Schools**

It is to be expected that when at-risk students are initially enrolled in a supplemental online course for credit recovery, they will require support, both emotional and academic, in varying degrees. Frequently, at-risk students are unwilling to seek help and may resist support in an effort to remain in control. However, understanding why they are insecure and helping them move toward success will have lifelong benefits for them. It is the responsibility of all staff members to seek innovative and interesting ways to reach all students and be willing to self-assess and change when it is required.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

1. Because this study was limited to a large suburban high school, further qualitative research should be conducted among urban and rural schools of all sizes.
2. Because the student participants in the study had been enrolled in several different online learning programs and platforms, further study should examine a specific program thus reducing the variables.
3. Because of divergent responses from students in regard to the benefits and challenges of online coursework for credit recovery, further quantitative data should be gathered via survey research and explored further with qualitative measures.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The school leader's responsibility is to promote a positive learning environment which allows all students to access effective and engaging instruction. As school budgets shrink and students lean toward technology, online learning must become a part of every high school students' educational career. There is a substantial gap between what is and what works - with teachers and policy makers holding on to ineffective programs and delivery models. Strong leadership with a clear plan is needed to bridge the gap and bring America's education system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**PERMISSION PROTOCOLS**

### **PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT**

Dear Parent of a Potential Research Participant:

My name is Teri Pettyjohn, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to better understand the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. Your child is being invited to participate in this study because he or she is currently, or has recently been enrolled in an online course for credit recovery.

1. The purpose of this research is to understand the student and staff perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online learning for credit recovery in order to make recommendations on how to better support students and improve the likelihood of on-time graduation.
2. Participation in this research will include a brief audio-taped, one-on-one interview with your child at a time that is convenient to him/her and school staff. Once the interviews are completed, the tapes will be transcribed by the researcher. The researcher will also review the high school academic history of student participants. Additionally, the researcher will review the pass/fail rate of all students in the district who enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year.
3. Some participants may experience discomfort in answering some interview questions. Your child may decline to answer any and all questions, and he/she may terminate involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in the study, the benefits to society include improving the supports to students enrolled in online learning, thus enhancing the possibility of graduation and post-secondary opportunities. Additionally, educational leaders may be better equipped to make decisions regarding the staff and supports needed in supplemental online programs.
5. Only one interview will be conducted and it is expected to last from 40 to 60 minutes.
6. Every effort will be made by the researcher to protect your child's identity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant, school, and school district. Notes, interview transcriptions, digital recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked drawer in the possession of the researcher. After verbatim transcripts of the interviews are prepared, digital recordings will be destroyed. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2014. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation, will maintain anonymity by utilizing assigned pseudonyms. Each participant has a right to a copy of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.

7. Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your child's rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843. The IRB tracking number is H12164.
8. The research involves no cost to the participant.
9. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You may end your child's participation at any time by informing the researcher of your desire to withdraw from the study. Your child is not required to respond to any questions he/she does not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for electing that your child not participate in this study, and your child may decide to at any time not to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
11. If you consent for your child to participate in this research study and you agree to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Title of Project: Stakeholder Perceptions of Supplemental Online Learning for Credit Recovery

Principal Investigator: Theresa (Teri) Pettyjohn  
 4781 Hereford Farm Rd.  
 Evans, Georgia 30809  
 706-541-2723 x5343  
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Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jason LaFrance, Georgia Southern University  
 College of Education  
 Department of Leadership, Technology, & Human Development  
 P.O. Box 8131  
 Statesboro, Georgia 30460-8131  
 jlafrance@georgiasouthern.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent of Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure was followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

**ADULT STUDENT INFORMED CONSENT**

Dear Student:

My name is Teri Pettyjohn, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to better understand the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are currently, or have recently been enrolled in an online course for credit recovery.

1. The purpose of this research is to understand the student and staff perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online learning for credit recovery in order to inform practice regarding how to better support students and improve the likelihood of on-time graduation.
2. Participation in this research will include a brief audio-taped one-on-one interview with you at a time that is convenient to you and school staff. Once the interviews are completed, the tapes will be transcribed by the researcher. The researcher will also review the high school academic history of student participants. Additionally, the researcher will review the pass/fail rate of all students in the district who enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year.
3. Some participants may experience discomfort in answering some interview questions. You may decline to answer any and all questions, and you may terminate involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in the study, the benefits to society may include improved supports to students enrolled in online learning, thus enhancing the possibility of high school graduation and post-secondary opportunities. Additionally, the results may better equip educational leaders by providing information regarding the staff and supports needed in supplemental online programs.
5. Only one interview will be conducted and it is expected to last from 40 to 60 minutes.
6. Every effort will be made by the researcher to protect your identity. A fake name or letter will be assigned to each participant, school, and school district. Notes, interview transcriptions, audio recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked drawer in the possession of the researcher. After verbatim transcripts of the interviews are prepared, digital recordings will be destroyed. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2014. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be

used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation, will maintain anonymity by utilizing assigned pseudonyms. Each participant has a right to a copy of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.

7. Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843. The IRB tracking number is H12164.
8. The research involves no cost to the participant.
9. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher of your desire to withdraw from the study. You are not required to respond to any questions you do not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for electing not to participate in this study, and you may decide to at any time not to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
11. If you consent to participate in this research study and you agree to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Title of Project: Stakeholder Perceptions of Supplemental Online Learning for Credit Recovery

Principal Investigator: Theresa (Teri) Pettyjohn  
4781 Hereford Farm Rd.  
Evans, Georgia 30809  
706-541-2723 x5343  
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Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jason LaFrance, Georgia Southern University  
College of Education  
Department of Leadership, Technology, & Human Development  
P.O. Box 8131  
Statesboro, Georgia 30460-8131  
jlafrance@georgiasouthern.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure was followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**MINOR STUDENT ASSENT**

Dear Student:

My name is Teri Pettyjohn, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to better understand the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are currently, or have recently been enrolled in an online course for credit recovery.

1. The purpose of this research is to understand the student and staff perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online learning for credit recovery in order to better support students and improve the chance of on-time graduation.
2. Participation in this research will include a brief audio-recorded one-on-one interview at a time that is convenient to you and school staff. Once the interview is completed, the file will be transcribed by me. I will also review the high school career of student participants. Additionally, I will review the pass/fail rate of all students in the district who enrolled in online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year.
3. Some students may be uncomfortable answering some interview questions. You may choose to not answer any and all questions, and you may stop involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in the study, the benefits to society may include improved supports to students enrolled in online learning. This will increase the possibility of high school graduation and post-secondary opportunities.
5. Only one interview will be conducted and it is expected to last from 40 to 60 minutes.
6. Every effort will be made by me to protect your identity. A fake name or letter will be assigned to each participant, school, and school district. Notes, interview transcriptions, audio recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked drawer in the possession of the researcher. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2014. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation, will maintain the anonymity of all participants. Each participant has a right to a copy of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify me if a copy of the interview is desired.
7. You have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact me at 706-541-2723 x 5343 or my faculty advisor, Dr. LaFrance at [jlafrance@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:jlafrance@georgiasouthern.edu). For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University

Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

8. The research involves no cost to you and participation in this project is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time by simply letting me know. You are not required to respond to any questions that you do not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for choosing not to participate in this study, and you may decide at any time not to participate further and may withdraw without consequences.
11. If you consent to participate in this research study and you agree to the terms above, please sign your name on the Student Participant line below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Title of Project: Stakeholder Perceptions of Supplemental Online Learning for  
Credit Recovery

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure was followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**STAFF FOCUS GROUP INFORMED CONSENT**

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Teri Pettyjohn, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to better understand the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are currently supporting students who are currently or have recently been enrolled in an online course for credit recovery.

1. The purpose of this research is to understand the student and staff perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online learning for credit recovery in order to inform practice regarding how to better support students and improve the likelihood of on-time graduation.
2. Participation in this research will include a brief one-time audio-taped group interview with you and the graduation coaches from the other high schools in the district at a time that is convenient to the group. Once the interviews are completed, the tapes will be transcribed by the researcher. The researcher will also review the high school academic history of student participants. Additionally, the researcher will review the pass/fail rate of all students in the district who enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year.
3. Some participants may experience discomfort in answering some interview questions. You may decline to answer any and all questions, and you may terminate involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in the study, the benefits to society may include improved supports to students enrolled in online learning, thus enhancing the possibility of high school graduation and post-secondary opportunities. Additionally, the results may better equip educational leaders by providing information regarding the staff and supports needed in supplemental online programs.
5. The focus group interview is expected to last from 40 to 60 minutes.
6. Every effort will be made by the researcher to protect your identity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant, school, and school district. Notes, interview transcriptions, digital recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked drawer in the possession of the researcher. After verbatim transcripts of the interviews are prepared, digital recordings will be destroyed. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2014. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation,

will maintain anonymity by utilizing assigned pseudonyms. Each participant has a right to a copy of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.

7. Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843. The IRB tracking number is H12164.
8. The research involves no cost to the participant.
9. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher of your desire to withdraw from the study. You are not required to respond to any questions you do not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for electing not to participate in this study, and you may decide to at any time not to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
11. If you consent to participate in this research study and you agree to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

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P.O. Box 8131  
Statesboro, Georgia 30460-8131  
jlafrance@georgiasouthern.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure was followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### STAFF INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Teri Pettyjohn, and I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University where I am pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a study to better understand the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning for credit recovery. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are currently supporting students who are currently or have recently been enrolled in an online course for credit recovery.

1. The purpose of this research is to understand the student and staff perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online learning for credit recovery in order to inform practice regarding how to better support students and improve the likelihood of on-time graduation.
2. Participation in this research will include a brief audio-recorded one-on-one interview with you at a time that is convenient to you and school staff. Once the interviews are completed, the digital recording will be transcribed by the researcher. The researcher will also review the high school academic history of student participants. Additionally, the researcher will review the pass/fail rate of all students in the district who enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery in the 2010-2011 school year.
3. Some participants may experience discomfort in answering some interview questions. You may decline to answer any and all questions, and you may terminate involvement at any time during the study.
4. While there are no direct benefits to participants in the study, the benefits to society may include improved supports to students enrolled in online learning, thus enhancing the possibility of high school graduation and post-secondary opportunities. Additionally, the results may better equip educational leaders by providing information regarding the staff and supports needed in supplemental online programs.
5. Only one interview will be conducted and it is expected to last from 40 to 60 minutes.
6. Every effort will be made by the researcher to protect your identity. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant, school, and school district. Notes, interview transcriptions, digital recordings, and any other identifying information will be kept in a locked drawer in the possession of the researcher. After verbatim transcripts of the interviews are prepared, digital recordings will be destroyed. All identifying information will be destroyed by the end of 2014. Only the researcher and the research committee will review the collected data. Data from this study will be used solely for this research, and any published material, including the dissertation, will maintain anonymity by utilizing assigned pseudonyms. Each participant has a

right to a copy of his/her transcribed interview. Please notify the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.

7. Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843. The IRB tracking number is H12164.
8. The research involves no cost to the participant.
9. Participation in this research project is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time by informing the researcher of your desire to withdraw from the study. You are not required to respond to any questions you do not wish to answer.
10. There is no penalty for electing not to participate in this study, and you may decide to at any time not to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
11. If you consent to participate in this research study and you agree to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

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jlafrance@georgiasouthern.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure was followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX B**

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

## FOCUS GROUP: GRADUATION COACHES

As part of this interview, I must include a brief consent statement before we continue. The contents of this project will be analyzed as part of my doctoral dissertation at Georgia Southern University.

All information on your identity will be kept confidential unless otherwise required by law. If information about this interview is published, it will use pseudonyms or fake names. This project is for research and educational purposes only.

The research is not expected to cause any discomfort or stress. However, if you feel uncomfortable during the interviews, you may decline to answer and stop participating at any time without penalty. No risks are expected. This interview will last approximately 40 minutes to one hour. Do you have any questions?

During this interview, I will be taking written notes and this communication will be recorded for future transcription. At the conclusion and approval of this dissertation, all records will be destroyed. Do I have your permission to continue?

Ice Breaker: Tell about a recent trip that you've taken.

### Part I: Establishing the Context

1. How would you describe your role as a graduation coach?
- 1b. How is different from a teacher or counselor?

### Part II: Reconstructing Details of Experience in Context

1. Thinking specifically about your role in working with students in supplemental online learning for credit recovery, describe a typical day.
2. What are some of the challenges you encounter and how do you handle them?
3. What are your students like?
- 3b. Describe the challenges they encounter and how do they respond to them.

### Part III: Participants' Reflections on the Meaning of Their Experiences

1. How have you helped students who are enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery?
2. How has this virtual experience benefitted them?
3. What recommendations do you have for online curriculum developers and designers?
4. What recommendations do you have for district policy makers?
5. For students?

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL CONTENT SUPPORT TEACHERS

As part of this interview, I must include a brief consent statement before we continue. The contents of this project will be analyzed as part of my doctoral dissertation at Georgia Southern University.

All information on your identity will be kept confidential unless otherwise required by law. If information about this interview is published, it will use pseudonyms or fake names. This project is for research and educational purposes only.

The research is not expected to cause any discomfort or stress. However, if you feel uncomfortable during the interviews, you may decline to answer and stop participating at any time without penalty. No risks are expected. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Do you have any questions?

During this interview, I will be taking written notes and this communication will be recorded for future transcription. At the conclusion and approval of this dissertation, all records will be destroyed. Do I have your permission to continue?

### Part I: Establishing the Context

1. How would you describe your role in supporting students who are enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery?
- 1b. How is your role different from a graduation coach or a counselor?

### Part II: Reconstructing Details of Experience in Context

1. Thinking specifically about your role in working with students in supplemental online learning for credit recovery, describe a typical day.
2. What are some of the challenges you encounter and how do you handle them?
3. What are your students like?
- 3b. Describe the challenges they encounter and how do they respond to them.

### Part III: Participants' Reflections on the Meaning of Their Experiences

1. How have you helped students who are enrolled in supplemental online learning for credit recovery?
2. How has this virtual experience benefitted them?
3. What recommendations do you have for online curriculum developers and designers?
4. What recommendations do you have for district policy makers?
5. What recommendation do you have for students?

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL STUDENTS

As part of this interview, I must include a brief consent statement before we continue. The contents of this project will be analyzed as part of my doctoral dissertation at Georgia Southern University.

All information on your identity will be kept confidential unless otherwise required by law. If information about this interview is published, it will use or fake names. This project is for research and educational purposes only.

The research is not expected to cause any stress. However, if you feel uncomfortable during the interviews, you may decline to answer and stop at any time without penalty. No risks are expected. This interview will last about 45 minutes to one hour. Do you have any questions?

During this interview, I will be taking notes and this interview will be recorded for future transcription. At the end and approval of this dissertation, all records will be destroyed. Do I have your permission to continue?

### Part I: Establishing the Context

1. How do you feel about school?
2. What has been your biggest success at school?
3. What has been your greatest struggle at school?
4. How did you (do you) get help for this?
5. How do you feel about technology?
6. How do you use it? Leisure? Social? Learning?
7. How did you come to be enrolled in an online course?
8. Is this the first course you've taken online?
9. How is it working for you?

### Part II: Reconstructing Details of Experience in Context

10. Describe your experience as you work on your online coursework. Basically, walk me through what you do from the time you get started until you log off.
11. Describe how online learning is different from a regular classroom experience.
12. What things about online learning are helpful or beneficial to you?
13. What aspects of online learning are difficult for you?
14. How could these challenges be minimized or overcome?
  - What support do you need?

### Part III: Participants' Reflections on the Meaning of Their Experiences

15. How has your experience in online learning impacted the way you feel about learning through the use of technology?
16. Would you take another online course in the future?

17. How have you benefitted from this experience?
18. What recommendations do you have for students who are just starting their first online course?
19. What suggestions do you have for the people who develop and design online courses?
20. What suggestions do you have for principals and teachers as to how to make online learning better for students?

## APPENDIX C

### *Academic History of Student Participants*

| Student | Age | Grade/<br>Class<br>Rank | Failed courses | Repeated<br>Courses | Online Credit<br>Recovery | Online<br>Platform | Retained |
|---------|-----|-------------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------|
| 1.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 2.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 3.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 4.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 5.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 6.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 7.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 8.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 9.      |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 10.     |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 11.     |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |
| 12.     |     |                         |                |                     |                           |                    |          |

*Note:* Ethnicity: B-Black; W-White; A-Asian; M-Multi; Economically Disadvantage-econ disadv.; attendance-students missed more than 15 days in a school year.

