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An Evaluation of A Non-Traditional Program for High School Students

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AN EVALUATION OF A NON-TRADITIONAL PROGRAM FOR HIGH SCHOOL

STUDENTS

A Dissertation

Presented to the

The Faculty of the School of Education

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

By

Anne H. Neve

March 2017

AN EVALUATION OF A NON-TRADITIONAL PROGRAM FOR HIGH SCHOOL

STUDENTS

By

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Dedication

      This journey would not be complete without expressing my deep gratitude to the people in my life who have made this degree possible. Kyle, you have given me infinite support and inspiration throughout this process. On the days when I questioned why I was doing this, you simply responded that it would be worth it and to keep going. Without your love, support, and patience this may not have happened, so thank you. We now get our full weekends! Mitch, you have also supported me in this process with your understanding and patience on the occasions when I was in class and not at your games. If nothing else comes of this, I hope I have instilled in you a love of learning and an appreciation of hard work. It is now my turn to watch you get a doctorate! I want to thank my parents for teaching me early on that hard work and perseverance pay off. They are traits that have made this degree possible. And finally, I must dedicate this dissertation and degree to the little, feisty lady who set the highest expectations without saying a word. Grandma, I know, without a doubt, that you are looking down, grinning, and thinking you knew I could do it!

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Abstract

This mixed-methods program evaluation focused on the short-term outcomes of a non-traditional program for high school students. The program evaluated, the Non-Traditional Program, is designed to provide an option for students who are not successful in the traditional setting. The program provides two teacher faciliators, a part-time school counselor, and a part-time security position . Students attend the program for a half-day and take courses via online instruction with the goal being on track to graduate. Participants in this evaluation were the program staff who participated in a focus group interview and six students who were interviewed individually. Extant documents provided evidence of credits earned, Standards of Learning (SOL) tests passed, and evidence of meeting program goals. Overall, the findings showed that the program is meeting its short-term outcomes with success. The students earned credits toward graduation at a rate of 64%, passing SOLs at a rate of 65%, and met program goals at a rate of 67%. Students who attended the program for medical reasons showed higher results than students who attended for attendance or disciplinary reasons; however, when tested for a relationship between the variables, there was no statistical significance. Students in the program reported that the individualized online learning is beneficial as is the smaller environment in which they are able to work without distractions. Staff reported that students are successful to a degree but would benefit from an orientation in organizational skills to help them manage their time more efficiently online. Recommendations for future evaluation include tracking long-term outcomes of the program, tracking the success of students who transition out of the program, and further evaluating the different categories of students and their performance.

AN EVALUATION OF A NON-TRADITIONAL PROGRAM FOR HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Background

Traditional school has operated the same for the past 50 years and for those students who are not successful in traditional school, an ever increasing network of alternative settings has formed (Sagor, 1999; Smith & Thomson, 2014). While there is not a universal definition of alternative education, most agree that these programs are designed to meet academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of students who are not successful in traditional school (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Yet, even with a somewhat common understanding of what alternative education programs are designed to do, they continue to look very different in how they operate. Because the students in these programs have already experienced a negative emotional response to the traditional setting, it is imperative that alternative schools or programs create an environment that is different from the traditional school experience (Smith & Thomson, 2014).

When alternative education began in the 1960s and '70s, it was the result of students not being successful in the mainstream environment (Sagor, 1999). School boards and administrators were sympathetic to those students who were not successful and, along with public demand for order in the public schools, funding was allocated for alternative public schools (Sagor, 1999). Disruptive students were removed from the traditional setting without an understanding of how to educate them (Foley & Pang, 2006; Sagor, 1999). As the programs grew so did the negative association around the programs

and students in them. The programs were essentially segregated holding tanks that did not

provide the same academic options for students who were not successful in the traditional

school, creating a "separate and unequal educational experience" (Sagor, 1999, p. 73).

The students in the alternative programs were considered at-risk because of their inability

to succeed in mainstream education and for factors that deemed them possible school

drop-outs such as socio-economic status, personal factors such as substance abuse or

pregnancy, and/or school factors such as attendance and academic failure (Foley & Pang,

2006; Sagor, 1999; Smith & Thomson, 2014).

In more recent years, with the increased accountability in public schools,

alternative settings have diversified in that they operate to meet the needs of students who

cannot find success in the traditional classroom for one of many reasons (Edgar-Smith &

Palmer, 2015; Lind, 2013; Sagor, 1999). The students served by alternative programs

have unique needs that the alternative program must determine how to meet—one size

does not fit all in the world of education (Raywid, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Determining what alternative programs or schools look like is challenging because of this

diversity; however, Smith and Thomson (2014) contend that traits of effective alternative

programs can be placed into one of three categories: personal/affective, academic, and

structural. Foley and Pang (2006) describe alternative settings as having specific

structural and programming characteristics such as supportive environments,

individualized instruction, and small enrollment in which relationships are fostered.

Students attending alternative programs are not choosing to do so simply as a

result of their learning style (Sagor, 1999), so adding components of personal and

structural characteristics to the setting make sense. Alternative education settings must be

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designed to support youth with a variety of needs and challenges (Foley & Pang, 2006; Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). In fact, alternative education has evolved to embody a wide range of options to serve students with varying needs (Lange & Sletten, 2002). As school districts search for ways to keep students engaged in school and increase on-time graduation rates, the creation of alternative or non-traditional learning environments may prove beneficial. By providing another option for students to be educated, alternative education can help increase student achievement (Eichorn, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this program evaluation was to determine the extent to which students are meeting the intended short-term outcomes to include earning credits, passing end-of-course Standards of Learning (SOL) tests, and meeting their personal goals in the Non-Traditional Program. The Non-Traditional Program was created to provide an option for students not meeting with success in the traditional high school setting. Students who have been removed from school due to a disciplinary action (e.g., long-term suspension, expulsion) as well as students who have attendance issues for a variety of reasons (e.g., lack of interest in attending school, work hours interfere with school) attend the program in order to remain current in their education. With graduation rates being analyzed annually, school districts must find ways to help students continue their education despite any adverse situation they encounter throughout their high school career. Although the Non-Traditional Program presumes that it is successful for all students it serves, the program evaluation set out to determine if the program was more successful for one type of student compared to another. The findings of this evaluation study have and will

inform necessary program adjustments, making the evaluation formative in nature (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Program Description

The program that was evaluated in this study operates in a school district in which previous forms of alternative education have not been successful in the eyes of the decision-maker stakeholders, namely, the School Board. Alternative education has taken many forms in the district throughout the years. Over the past two decades there have been a few attempts to serve only high school students who have been removed from the traditional setting primarily as the result of disciplinary actions such as long-term suspension. These students were served in a run down house-style building away from the campus of any school. The program moved shortly thereafter to the campus of a mental hospital and served both middle and high school students removed from school for discipline reasons. This model lasted several years until a new administration decided to take a more proactive approach and offer an alternative setting for middle school students deemed at-risk. These were students who had a history of discipline issues in school, came from low-income families, or needed additional academic supports before beginning high school (according to the school). Students' families could also self-refer. There was an application process to attend. The alternative high school closed at that point and the middle school academy took its place. They offered not only academics, but behavioral instruction as well. As budgets became tighter, the program was cancelled after approximately five years, leaving the district without any type of alternative or non-traditional educational setting.

Although former iterations of alternative education had not been deemed successful in the district, the district administration determined there was a need not being met with regard to educational options for students not finding success in the traditional setting. With an increased accountability of graduating students within four years of entering ninth grade, this need became a priority. The Non-Traditional Program is an attempt to provide education to high school students who are not successful in the traditional classroom.

The district launched the program as a small pilot program in February 2015 and continued in the 2015-16 school year with slight changes such as the elimination of a blended learning approach and the implementation of fully online instruction through the district's own online courses. These changes were the result of lessons learned from the pilot program. The program employs two teacher facilitators to help students with content and technical issues, but they do not deliver group instruction. There is a part-time counselor as well as a part-time security officer present in the program. The program session ran for four hours in the afternoon and met Monday through Thursday for 2015-16.

Based on the numbers of students served in the program in 2015-16 and the amount of credits earned, it was determined that an additional session was warranted to accommodate student needs. As a result, in September 2016, the program became full-time, offering two sessions and employing two full-time teacher facilitators, a part-time counselor and a part-time security guard. The two sessions meet Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. or Monday through Thursday from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.. The

district also offers bus transportation for students who attend the Non-Traditional Program.

      The Non-Traditional Program Logic Model (Figure 1) provides a visual representation as a guide within which this program operates. The school district mission statement is offered at the top of the model. The strategic plan indicators are noted on the bottom of the logic model as well as the context within which this program operates. The model begins by showing the inputs necessary to make the program work. From staff to students to other essential resources, everything is represented on the far left. The next column designates the activities or outputs necessary for the program. Students are referred to the program, either by a school administrator or counselor, and agree to attend daily. There are two sessions in which the students may be placed. One session meets four days per week in the afternoon and the other meets five days per week in the morning. The placement decision is based on the individual needs of the student in terms of obligations outside of school and any need to be separated from another student. Transportation is provided to and from both sessions. The students receive an orientation on their first day of the program that delivers training on the online platform for the coursework, a review of program expectations, and development of their individualized goals.

Inputs

Students who are not meeting with success in traditional school

Daily attendance

Resources
- Online courses
- Space to operate
- Computers
- Calculators
- Transportation
- Budget

Staff
- Online teachers
- Part-time counselor
- Math teacher
- English teacher
- Part-time Security

A safe, caring, welcoming environment with accepting staff

Outputs/Activities

Referral of students to the program

Entry meeting for students and parents

Placement in appropriate courses

Online learning training to include orientation in organizational skills

Coaching of staff on dealing with social emotional needs of students

Progress monitoring and communication to stakeholders-parents and home schools

Outcomes

Short-term

Successful completion of 2 courses per 9 weeks and passing SOL tests

Students meet individual goals

Students meet personalized attendance goals weekly

Intermediate

Students successfully transition back to their home high school

Students continue to earn credits in the program

Long-term

Students graduate on time, within four years

Students successfully transition to post-secondary education or work

Context: This is a voluntary program for students who are not successful in the traditional classroom because of medical/social/emotional issues, attendance issues, or disciplinary action. The program could be a transition from being out of school back to the traditional classroom. The program serves high school students and all courses are taken online with teacher facilitators in the room to offer support.

Mission: The school district provides each and every student with the knowledge, skills and values to be a lifelong learner, communicate, think critically, work and live productively, and contribute constructively to the lives of others. The district is committed to providing the variety of programs necessary to address the range of students' interests and needs as they grow academically, socially and emotionally.

Figure 1. Logic Model

Students are required to attend the Non-Traditional Program daily; however, access to the online coursework is available outside of the Non-Traditional Program time as well. The online coursework is delivered through the online learning management platform, Canvas, which houses school district approved curriculum courses. Students complete two courses in the Non-Traditional Program each nine-week grading period allowing them to remain on track to earn four credits per semester like their traditional peers. Coursework is submitted and graded by the licensed teacher of that online course. Since the courses are delivered online, the teachers for the courses are not in the same location as the students and do not meet face-to-face. The online teachers are responsible for grading student work, providing feedback, communicating with the student and families, and reporting grades in the student management system. The online teachers may or may not have direct contact with the students. The Non-Traditional Program

teachers monitor student progress by maintaining records on each student and communicating with the online teachers. Meeting weekly with individual students also helps facilitate this progress monitoring. Overall student progress is communicated to parents and home schools on a regular basis via phone, email, and face-to-face meetings by either the Non-Traditional Program teachers or counselor to ensure all parties are aware of how students are progressing throughout the semester. Neither the online teachers nor the non-traditional teachers have specialized training in alternative education.

The coordination of the Standards of Learning (SOL) testing is organized with the three home high schools at the appropriate times during the semester. Careful consideration is given to the scheduling of SOL courses. For example, scheduling these courses during the nine-week period that corresponds to the testing window is helpful for students as opposed to having a gap in time before testing. Prior to any SOL testing, both online and Non-Traditional Program teachers help prepare students for the test by giving practice tests online.

A part-time counselor is employed in the program to provide services to the students. This position offers social-emotional counseling, course planning, in terms of counseling students on their required courses, post-secondary planning, and career planning for students. Before students leave the program, brief exit interviews are conducted by the part-time counselor to learn from the students what worked for them and what could be adjusted to better meet the needs of students like them. Finally, transition meetings are set up for students going back to their home school to ensure

scheduling needs are met and plans are in place for supporting the student returning to traditional school.

There are short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals for the program outlined in the logic model separately. These outcomes illustrate students remaining on-track in their coursework while in the program and meeting their individual goal of successfully transitioning back to their home high school, remaining in the program, or completing graduation requirements. The long-term goal is for students to graduate on time (within four years) and for the district to have a sustainable program for students who may need a non-traditional setting. The program operates under the premise that if these resources are available and the identified activities take place, then the outcomes will occur. The theory continues in that if the students are placed in the program, they will earn credits, could transition back their home high school successfully, and the students will ultimately graduate high school on time.

The stakeholders involved in this program consist of several groups. The School Board is one of the first groups to mention since they control the money to operate the program and they will be the group to determine ultimately the level of success in terms of whether the program is able to grow, continue as is, or be cut. The next stakeholder group, and most important, is the student body attending the program and being served in this capacity. These are the stakeholders that the program is designed to help remain engaged in school during personally adverse times. Along with the students are the parents/guardians of the students attending. The parents must support the program by giving consent for the students to attend and by supporting the overall mission of the program by encouraging daily attendance. The staff of the program (teacher facilitators,

counselor, and security guard) is another group directly involved with the implementation and the daily operation of the program. Finally, the Coordinator of Student Interventions oversees the daily operations of the program and reports to the Senior Director of Student Services. These two stakeholder positions are responsible for making recommends to the School Board regarding the direction of the program.

Context

The Non-Traditional Program operates in a medium-sized southeastern public school district in Virginia. The Non-Traditional Program is designed to help high school students stay on track to graduate within four years when circumstances take them outside of their regular high school environment. The district has fifteen schools, with three being high schools, and serves slightly over 11,000 students in grades K-12. The three high schools in the district are made up of approximately 3,700 students. This program is available only to students in Grades 9-12 who have a variety of needs not being met in the traditional school setting. In the 2015-16 school year, the program served 59 students. Through the first nine weeks of the 2016-17 school year, the program has served 41 students. Drop-out data has not been collected in the past years, but in the current school year 4 out of 41 students have dropped out of school completely.

The Non-Traditional Program was developed to meet the need of students who cannot be in the traditional classroom for a variety of reasons. For example, some students attend because of medical conditions (whether physical and/or social/emotional) precludes them from attending school and they would otherwise be truant or need homebound services. Some students are in the program as a result of being long-term suspended (anywhere from 11 days to 364 days) and needing educational services before

returning to their home-schools. Finally, there are some students using the Non-Traditional Program as a transition from being incarcerated before going back to the mainstream environment. Students may also self-select and apply to the program if attending a traditional high school is not meeting their current educational needs because of extenuating outside circumstances.

Until the opening of the Non-Traditional Program, all district high school students were either in traditional school full-time or out of school—there was nothing in between that could be offered in the district. The only alternative option for students in this district was a regional alternative school that only serves students against whom disciplinary action has been taken by the district hearing officer; however, the schedule at the regional school does not align with the high school schedule in this district and therefore it is not used for high school students who would attend less than a full school year.

Two years ago, the district elected to start a program in-house rather than contract for outside services for students needing alternative options. For severe disciplinary cases, (e.g., a second drug or alcohol offense, severe assault, weapon) students may still attend the regional alternative school, but this option is typically reserved for those students who may be out of school for the entire school year or in instances where the parent prefers a full-day, very structured program for the student.

Program Theory

The purpose of students attending a non-traditional learning environment is to continue their birthright of being educated (Sagor, 1999). Since traditional learning environments do not always meet the needs of all students, school districts must determine how to meet students' needs in a different fashion and keep them on track to

graduate with a high school diploma to meet the federal accountability measures by which districts and schools are judged (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], 2016; No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001). While there is still no universal definition of alternative or non-traditional education, there are parameters defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics. These are:

> 1. Addressing needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, 2. Providing non-traditional education, 3. Serving as an adjunct to a regular school, or 4. Falling outside the categories of regular, special education or vocation education.
>
> (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009, p. 61)

In addition to these parameters, the non-traditional setting must be tailored to meet the specific needs of the students being served and feel nothing like previous educational experiences (Cable, Plucker, & Spradin, 2009; Sagor, 1999; Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

Since the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* (NCLB, 2001) dictated that all schools be held accountable for student achievement, the academic integrity of non-traditional programs had to comply with state and federal requirements toward graduation. This new law helped move alternative or non-traditional settings beyond their reputation of being less-than conventional schools in terms of academic rigor (Goldenson, 2011). The *Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016* (ESEA, 2016) has continued these high stakes for schools by keeping graduation rates and academic achievement as indicators of success. However, the challenge for these programs remains to be finding the balance of meeting academic standards while doing so in a non-traditional format and meeting the various needs of the student population (Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011).

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While non-traditional programs operate differently across the nation, there are some identified characteristics of effective programs, such as providing instruction in a learning environment that is not like traditional school, providing one-on-one support for students, employing a staff with an underlying philosophy of acceptance and the ability to build meaningful relationships with students, and helping students make connections to the future (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Simonsen, & Sugai, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). Mills and McGregor (2010) further support these characteristics in a study that found students had very similar perspectives of what made their alternative setting a positive experience crediting the varied learning programs, relaxed learning environment, and the respect they felt from the teachers.

High school completion can be accessible to students who are not successful in traditional school settings by being provided a nurturing environment, an accessible curriculum (perhaps online), support with content and emotional needs, and an accepting staff (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Simonsen, & Sugai, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). This theory is illustrated in Figure 2 and is the theory to which the program being evaluated strives to adhere.
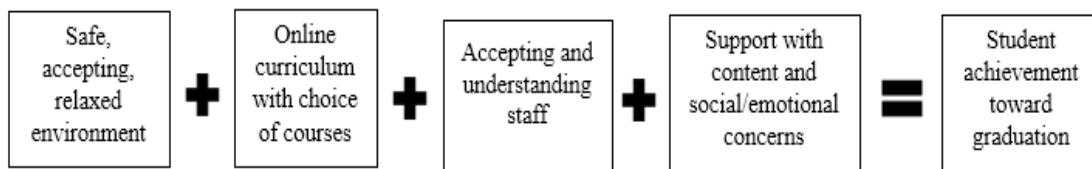
Figure 2. Program Theory for Program Evaluation of the Non-Traditional Program

The Non-Traditional Program evaluated in this study subscribes to this theory in its daily operation with students. Although students are referred to the program for a

variety of reasons ranging from long-term suspension to social anxiety, much like non-traditional programs across the nation, they are all welcomed and accepted unconditionally by the staff no matter the reason for their attendance—a key component to student achievement (Smith & Thomson, 2014). By employing a non-judgmental approach, positive relationships are able to form between teachers and students as well as among the students themselves, which sets the scene for success (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable & Tonelson, 2006; Rennie Center, 2014). Additionally, because this atmosphere is so different than what they are used to, most students are willing to give school another chance (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Kim & Taylor, 2008). With positive relationships as the foundation for learning, the students in the Non-Traditional Program are able to select online courses through which they work toward graduation requirements. By allowing some choice in the coursework and letting the students set the learning pace (within parameters of guidance from staff), the students feel even more support, which typically leads to success (Lind, 2013).

Program Evaluation Model

In order to inform different stakeholder groups about the Non-Traditional Program, this evaluation study employed the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) evaluation model, which is a comprehensive framework and can be both formative and summative (Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). "Evaluation is the systematic process of delineating, obtaining, reporting, and applying descriptive and judgmental information about some object's merit, worth, probity, feasibility, safety, significance, or equity" (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 698). The CIPP model evaluation was created as a result of other evaluation models being inefficient when

"evaluating emergent programs in dynamic social contexts" (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 328). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) contend that CIPP evaluations provide information that will help providers assess and improve their services to meet the needs of those being served. In fact, the fundamental tenet of the CIPP model is not "to prove, but to improve" (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 331).

The primary focus of the evaluation was formative as the evaluation provided a clearer picture as to what is happening in the program, what may be missing from the program, and why students attend the program. The purpose of the formative evaluation is to determine the extent to which the program is meeting its outcomes while informing any adjustments that may be necessary as a result (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). This evaluation fit within the CIPP model, primarily the product evaluation component created by Stufflebeam and presented by Mertens and Wilson (2012) in that it addressed both intended and unintended outcomes of the program. This helped the program address any needs that are not being met and recognize possible barriers that have been unintentionally created, while helping the program stay focused on achieving the desired program outcomes (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) note that "accomplishments, lack of accomplishments, and side effects command the attention of product evaluations, which ultimately issue judgments of outcomes and identify needs for achieving better results" (p. 332).

The CIPP evaluation model provided information valued by all stakeholder groups. "Both formative and summative evaluation are needed in the development of a product or service. . . . Too often, summative evaluation is carried out only for judging programs. . . . This restricts development processes" (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p.

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24). The information gathered by this evaluation was used to inform programmatic changes while also providing the decision makers useful data with which they may guide their discussions about the future of the Non-Traditional Program.

The evaluation was based in the pragmatic paradigm and use branch as its main goal was to gather information about what works and what may be missing from the program (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). While there were quantitative data points for the School Board stakeholders to consider (such as the number of credits earned and overall SOL pass rate), the evaluation was driven by the qualitative data gathered from student and staff stakeholder groups associated with the program..

Evaluation Questions

In order to assess the Non-Traditional Program formatively with the CIPP evaluation, the following evaluation questions were answered:

1. To what degree do students in the Non-Traditional Program meet the short-term outcomes of the program?

2. To what degree does meeting the short-term outcomes vary by the medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary reasons why students are in the Non-Traditional Program?

    a. Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and earned credits of the students who participated in a Non-Traditional Program?

    b. Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and passed SOLs of the students who participated in a Non-Traditional Program?

c. Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and met program goals of students who participated in a Non-Traditional Program?

3. What are the facilitating and inhibiting conditions for student success in the Non-Traditional Program?

Definition of Terms

Alternative Education – An educational setting that is located outside of the traditional school setting and offers an alternative to the regular school environment (Aron, 2006; Meyers, 1988; Porowski, O'Connor, & Luo, 2014; United States Department of Education, 2002).

CIPP Evaluation – an evaluation model created by Daniel Stufflebeam (1966) that stands for evaluations of an entity's context, inputs, processes, and products.

Non-Traditional Program – The program being evaluated; a non-traditional program for high school tudents to attend where online courses are offered; it is offered as an option to students who cannot attend the traditional classroom for a variety of reasons.

Logic Model – A visual representation of a program, its components and objectives, used in program planning and evaluation (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Non-traditional education – An interchangeable term with alternative education; an educational setting that is outside of the traditional school setting (Aron, 2006; Porowski et al., 2014).

SOL tests – Standards of Learning tests that are given at the end of certain core subjects

for high school students. These tests are required for graduation. (Virginia

Department of Education, 2017).

Traditional education – The regular high school environment that students attend. The

school location, curriculum, instructional practices, and daily schedule are

traditional.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Alternative or non-traditional education is an option for students who have not been successful in the traditional classroom. It is an equally important option for school districts to present to students since the districts are held accountable for the education of these students according to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—especially graduating students four years from the time they enter ninth grade (ESEA, 2016). By definition, non-traditional education encompasses any type of education that is not in the traditional setting to include gifted education, charter schooling, and education referred to as alternative, which serves students who have either been removed from their school due to disciplinary reasons or have become disengaged from school for other reasons (Aron, 2006; Meyers, 1988). For the purpose of this review of literature, the focus of non-traditional education will be on alternative settings that serve students who have become disenfranchised or marginalized for a variety of reasons to include home or family issues, behavioral issues at school, or have been academically unsuccessful in their traditional high school. This chapter will provide a description of what alternative education is, the students served, factors that have contributed to the success of alternative settings, and considerations for alternative education.

Historical Perspective of Alternative Education

Education in the 1960s and '70s was deemed the progressive education movement which spawned the launch of alternative programs and school (Meyers, 1988). It was a time when people wanted options beyond the public school because they considered the public schools to be unacceptable (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Meyers, 1988). The result was the development of two options: an alternative school within the public school system and one outside of the public school system (Hughes-Hassel, 2008). For example, Freedom Schools were alternative alternative schools outside the public system that provided a high quality education to minorities. Another example is Summerhill, which was a school developed by A. S. Neill to give children "the freedom to learn and the freedom from restrictions" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 3). Inside the public school system options were appearing as a consequence of the open school movement (Hughes-Hassell, 2008). Schools without walls, schools within schools, and magnet schools are examples of ways to provide alternatives. The premise behind this concept was to have a school that was child-centered, somewhat noncompetitive, and gave choice to parents, students, and teachers (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

As the '80s and '90s progressed, along with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, alternative education became a popular educational phrase. As the nation became focused on graduation rates and dropout rates and the societal costs associated with having uneducated citizens, efforts turned toward serving students who were at-risk of dropping out of school. Yet what alternative education did was provide a choice for schools to remove unsuccessful students, who typically had behavioral issues, from the

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traditional setting (Hughes-Hassell, 2008). However, removing students with disciplinary issues did not alleviate the need for public schools to educate those students in a non-traditional setting (Aron & Zweig, 2003). In fact, the pressure to provide a quality education to students unsuccessful in traditional schools became even greater as No Child Left Behind was enacted and followed by the Every Student Succeeds Act, which both call for proven student achievement and on-time graduation (ESSA, 2016; NCLB, 2001).

While alternative programs are still associated with students deemed at-risk, they have diversified greatly over the past two decades in that they serve students who are not only at-risk but they strive to meet a wide range of student needs to include those with social/emotional issues, teen parenting issues, and home life issues requiring students to have to work, for example (Hughes-Hassell, 2008; Meyers 1988; Quinn et al., 2006; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Smith &Thomson, 2014). Although alternative education programs developed and proliferated over the past several decades, a common definition of alternative education is elusive.

Definition of Alternative Education

A review of the literature reveals that no common definition exists for alternative/non-traditional education, despite the fact that by 2002, 48 states had some type of alternative education legislation, with 34 states having a formal definition (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2008). However, the language used in those formal definitions to describe alternative/non-traditional education varies greatly in everything from whether it is a program or a school, whom it serves, and what the structure of it look likes both physically and logistically. In several states alternative education is used solely for

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behavioral problems or disciplinary removal (Aron, 2006; Porowski et al., 2014), yet the United States Department of Education defined alternative education as a "public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides non-traditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (USDOE, 2002, p. 55). Porowski et al. (2014) note that the USDOE's definition of alternative education does not account for programs within schools. Porowski et al. (2014) broaden their definition to say that alternative or non-traditional education is defined as educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 curriculum—no matter where they occur. By interpretation, then, alternative education serves more students than simply those who have been removed from school for disciplinary reasons (Porowski et al., 2014).

District and State Definitions of Alternative Education

Since there are varying definitions of alternative education, researchers suggests that the most common view (or definition) of alternative education is one that delineates who the program serves, where it operates, what it offers, and how it is structured (Aron & Zweig, 2003). The presentation of alternative education can vary depending on whether it is a stand-alone school, a program that serves one school district's students, a school that serves regional students, or a school within a school model. In the end, the ability to define exactly what the program is lies within the rights of the states and even further down to the individual school districts (Aron, 2006).

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Since states and school districts are able to define and determine the features of their alternative education programs, programs across the nation most likely vary in characteristics (Porowski et al., 2014); however, there appear to be some common characteristics found among alternative programs. These commonalities include:

- having an attentive, supportive staff

- offering flexible scheduling

- providing a curriculum that is structured to include acceleration

- tracking of student progress

- offering non-academic support

- having high expectations (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Foley & Pang, 2006; Rennie Center, 2014).

Porowski et al. (2014) point out that due to the many facets of alternative programs it is difficult to incorporate all components into one definition thus the lack of one universal definition. Adding to the struggle to capture the look of alternative education in one definition, typically alternative programs are tailored to fit the academic, social, and behavioral needs of the students being served causing them to have very different foci (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Porowski et al., 2014). While the literature recognizes that one size does not fit all students needing alternative options (Raywid, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003), there would be a benefit to having a state definition to help the programs reach their goal of helping students succeed (Porowski et al., 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) offers a simpler definition of alternative education as "designed to address the

needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools" (Carver & Lewis, 2010, p. 1).

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, the definition points to §22.1-276.01 in the Code of Virginia stating "alternative education program includes night school, adult education, or any other education program designed to offer instruction to students for whom the regular program of instruction may be inappropriate" (Code of Virginia, 2016). This describes what specific programs could be considered alternative education in the Commonwealth, but does not clearly define the suggested key characteristics to include when defining such programs (Porowski et al., 2014). For example, important factors such as target population, setting, services, and structure should all be clear in the description of alternative programs (Porowski et al., 2014). Not only does a clear definition help clarify what alternative education is, it also elucidates the goals of the program, which help determine the level of effectiveness of the alternative education program (National Alternative Education Association, 2014; Porowski et al, 2014).

Typologies of Alternative Education

Raywid (1994) acknowledged there are many ambiguities in defining of alternative education; however, she states that there are two characteristics that define them:

1. They are designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program.

2. They have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization. (p. 26)

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Raywid continued to work to define alternative education as she developed a typology of alternative education. She looked at the various types of programs or schools offered outside of the traditional setting and categorized them in three ways. The first alternative is referred to as Type I, which harkens of magnet schooling (Raywid, 1994). These programs operate within the school, but are very different than traditional school in how they operate. They usually offer a programmatic theme and employ innovative pedagogical techniques within the program. These cost effective schools are attended by choice and are typically very popular as they engage their learners and see longer lasting successes.

Raywid's (1994) Type II alternative is the opposite of Type I in that it is not a school of choice, but a school to which students who are disruptive are "sentenced" (p. 27). These programs are considered to be a last-chance for students with behavioral concerns before expulsion. There is a component of behavior modification in the program, but the instructional pedagogy is not engaging as students typically continue with coursework they had prior to removal from school. Students in Type II programs do not thrive academically as a result nor do they see long-term behavior modifications (Raywid, 1994). These programs can include in-school suspension rooms in addition to long-term placements in an alternative setting.

Type III alternatives are those which offer a remedial focus and can be costly. The remediation is either academic, social/emotional, or a combination of the two (Raywid, 1994). The emphasis of this program is to remediate the identified areas of need and have the students improve behavior, attendance, and academics in order to transition back to

the traditional setting. While these programs are effective during the students' attendance in the program, the longer lasting results are disappointing when the students return to the traditional setting (Raywid, 1994).

Whereas this typology of alternative schools helps categorize what type of program is offered to whom, there remains conflicting research on the ability to capture an exact number of alternative schools and programs offered across the nation (Aron, 2006; Rennie Center, 2014). A potential explanation is the lack of a clear definition by which all districts articulate alternative education. Aron (2006) reports there is no precise number of alternative programs or schools in the literature, although the NCES reported that in the school year 2007-08 there were 10,300 district-administered alternative schools and programs for at-risk students (NCES, 2002). Regardless of how various organizations have defined alternative education or what the exact number offered is, what is revealed in the literature is that the use of alternative education has grown over the past decades (Quinn et al., 2006) and that districts may not be meeting student demand (Rennie Center, 2014).

Students Served in Alternative Education

Similar to defining alternative education, pinpointing the typology of students served is equally challenging. A review of the literature revealed that alternative education has historically been a student-characteristic created environment depending on the needs of those students being served (Cable et al., 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006) so knowing the needs of students being served is vital to the success of the programs (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). This is a shift in how alternative educational options

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were described in the 1990s by Raywid, whose typology was more about the type of school rather than type of student (Aron, 2006).

Rather than isolate the type of student who attends an alternative program or school, the review of literature revealed that the students who attend alternative schools or programs tend to exhibit similar characteristics. These characteristics tend to fall in the following categories: poor attendance, disciplinary issues, learning difficulties, social/emotional difficulties, pregnant or parenting, and other external stressors (Aron, 2006; Foley & Pang, 2006; Rennie Center, 2014). Consequently, meeting students' needs in an alternative setting can be challenging simply because of the diversity of the students in the school or program (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

Students with Social/Emotional Difficulties

Re-engaging students in school who experience social/emotional difficulties (e.g., anxiety toward school or school phobia) can be achieved by providing an environment that is very different than what they know in the traditional setting (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Edgar-Smith and Palmer (2015) conducted a repeated measure design study of 75 alternative education students when they entered the program and again four months into the program and 36 alternative education students when they entered the program and again eight months later. They found that the students perceived higher teacher support in the alternative setting and consequently maintained higher grade point averages. Further, the researchers attributed this sense of belonging and increased mental and behavioral health to higher academic achievement. One implication of this study is to hire staff that

believe in providing a caring and supportive environment of which students are comfortable being a part (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015).

Students with Attendance Issues

Students' school attendance is directly related to academic achievement (NCES, 2009). In order to maintain engagement in school, the environment must be such that the student wants to attend. For students not attending traditional school, providing an alternative environment that will re-engage them could include options such as allowing a flexible schedule or alternative pathways to earn credits toward a high school diploma (Smith & Thomson, 2014). By allowing students to work at their own pace, either in the classroom or online, and providing hours that may better meet the students' needs, Smith and Thomson (2014) contend that students feel more in charge of their education and are more likely to complete it.

Students with Disciplinary Concerns

Students who find themselves with disciplinary consequences (e.g., long-term suspension up to 364 days) and removed from school for several weeks are on track to become high school dropouts (Smith & Thomson, 2014). For students at risk of dropping out of school, alternative settings that focus on academics rather than corrective discipline are effective in keeping students engaged in school (Franklin, Streeter, Kim & Tripodi, 2007). In a quasi-experimental study with 85 students, 46 of whom attended alternative schools, Franklin et al. (2007) found that schools with a solution-focus, rather than a more negative, deficit approach, saw students continue in school and work toward graduation. The alternative setting supported the students with a strengths-based

approach toward earning credits and graduation through a lower student to teacher ratio. This allowed the opportunity for positive relationships to form between the teachers and students, which attributed to the students remaining in school (Franklin et al., 2007).

In a non-experimental research design, Quinn et al. (2006) surveyed 147 alternative education students and 135 teachers to assess school climate and find strengths of the alternative setting. The study resulted in students and teachers reporting that school climate is more positive in the alternative setting, with a fairness of rules, respect for students, and a focus on relationships. Smith and Thomson (2014) describe a 2002 survey conducted at Bear Lodge, an alternative school in Wyoming serving 650 students, where it was found that student achievement was attributed to feeling that teachers respected students, believed they could be successful and provided an overall strengths-based approach.

Students find themselves in an alternate environment for a reason, one of which is the fact that traditional school was not effective in meeting their needs (Izumi, Shen, & Xia, 2015; Raywid, 1994). By understanding the individual needs of the students being served and knowing how they see school from their own lens, educators in alternative settings can gain greater insight into how to help these students be successful (DuCloux, 2009). Raywid (1994) advocated that "more challenging students are just more dependent on a good education" (p. 27).

Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago (as cited in Aron, 2006) took a different approach to classifying alternative education than previous researchers by

placing the students' educational needs first. Roderick stated that alternative students' needs are captured as:

1. Students who have gotten into trouble and need short-term recovery to transition back to high school.

2. Students who have prematurely transitioned into adulthood by either parenting, coming out of the juvenile justice system, or working as immigrants.

3. Those students who have fallen substantially off track, but are older and need to obtain credits quickly.

4. Students who have fallen being educationally having significant problems, low reading, levels, and are over age. (Aron, 2006, pp. 5-6)

Roderick cautioned educators that even within these categories of students, there can be diverse educational needs and meeting those needs can be challenging (as cited in Aron, 2006); however, if alternatives are going to be successful, they must operate based on student need (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Success Factors in Alternative Education

Often students who are not meeting with success in the traditional school setting have limited options in terms of other school environments to help them achieve academic success (Rennie Center, 2014). Alternative schools or programs can be an effective strategy to keep students engaged in learning when they are properly funded, organized, and operated (Reimer & Cash, 2003), while supporting academic achievement and graduation accountability measures (ESEA, 2016). The literature supports some

common characteristics of a successful alternative program which are addressed in sections below. Smith and Thomson (2014) contend the traits of effective alternative programs fall into three categories: academic, personal/affective, and structural; however, emphasis should also be placed on the staffing (support staff included) of alternative programs since the relationship between the teachers and students has been contributed to the success of alternative programming (Foley & Pang, 2006; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacy, 2005; Rennie Center, 2014).

Academic Factors

Prior to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB, 2001), there was little to no accountability for alternative schools or programs; students attending alternative programs were held to a lower academic standard than their peers in traditional schools (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Since NCLB there has been support for developing high quality alternative education options for students focused on academics in addition to social and behavioral needs. This equates to increased accountability, proven education methods, and high expectations for achievement (Aron, 2006; NCLB, 2001; NGA, 2001, Schargel and Smink, 2001). The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) suggested that educators must figure out "how to introduce high academic standards in alternative education systems without sacrificing the elements that make alternative programs successful, and without compromising the integrity of the high standards" (NGA Center, 2001, p.1). Moreover, the NGA recommended the following best practices for alternative education settings:

- Links between the traditional and non-traditional school

- Resources to support the transition to high academic standards

- Early warning system improvements to catch students falling behind earlier

- Support for longer term alternative education programs

- Development of data-driven accountability measures

- Enhanced GED programs

- Collection of data (NGA, 2001, p.2)

These suggestions support both the student and schools in terms of offering rigor to the students and keeping the school accredited based on academic achievement.

In an evaluation of alternative education in the state of North Carolina, evaluators found that the academic curriculum must be "compelling, challenging, and inviting" if the alternative setting is to be successful (Aron & Zweig, 2003, p.34). A supporting study conducted by Tobin and Sprague (2000) found that high academic instruction is a key characteristic of alternative programs for the youth they serve. This instruction should include direct instruction, differentiated instruction, small group instruction, and questioning of students (Aron & Zweig, 2003; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Using computers to support the learning (not replace it) is also found to be successful in the Twilight Academy in southeastern Pennsylvania (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Within the academic offerings, alternative schools should also provide a learning program that is specific to the students' learning style and the students' expectations (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Because students find themselves needing non-traditional environments for a variety of reasons, offering a flexible schedule and in some cases community support is a necessity (Quinn et al., 2006; Rennie Center, 2014; Schargel &

Smink, 2001). Sagor (1999) reminded educators that "it should be our number one priority to get young people to the starting line of adulthood with all the hope and confidence they can muster" (p. 75). By providing a quality academic education in alternative settings, school and community leaders can fulfill their legal responsibility to provide an equal access to education for all students (Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Personal/Affective Factors

Although individual states and/or districts determine the features of their alternative programs causing each program to differ in characteristics (Porowski et al., 2014), one common trait noted throughout the literature is lower student to teacher ratios (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Foley & Pang, 2006; Raywid, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014). This small size allows for a more student-centered culture, giving students a sense of belonging (Duggan, 2007). Further, the smaller ratio allows teachers to get to know the students and their needs, consequently equipping the teachers with the ability to better support each student (Rennie Center, 2014; Schargel & Smink, 2001). D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) report that smaller class sizes at the Twilight Academy, an alternative school in urban Southeastern Pennsylvania, also lend themselves to teachers having time to "think outside of the box" when it comes to helping students learn when they have not been successful in the traditional environment (p. 215).

In an action research study conducted with students attending an alternative program, Lind (2013) found that a smaller environment helped students feel more accepted and willing to try new things. The students reported being treated with respect and when given the ability to participate in a democratic process in the school

environment, the students felt they had a voice in how their school was run. A similar study that surveyed 147 alternative education students and 135 teachers in alternative settings with the Effective School Battery (ESB) survey validated that the school climate in alternative education settings tend to be more positive (Quinn et al., 2006). The findings of the study determined that students in alternative settings had more belief in the rules and the fairness of those rules and felt overall that there was more respect for the students. The Twilight Academy found that giving respect equated to getting respect from students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). While these results are not generalizable to all alternative education environments, they speak to the benefit of a smaller environment where alternative education students tend to thrive and experience more success than they have in the past (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Rennie Center, 2014).

In a study conducted in 1977, Hoy and Diebert found that openness and humanism in school climate facilitate positive student outcomes. Hoy (2012) agreed that schools that exhibit these characteristics are less alienating and produce more self-actualized students. Due to their smaller size, alternative schools and programs are in a position to offer climates like this, making them an effective strategy to keep students engaged in learning (Reimer & Cash, 2003).

Furthermore, many students attending alternative programs are in need of supports aside from academic supports to which a smaller program lends itself. Alternative environments that support both behavioral and mental health in students see higher overall achievement (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Goldenson, 2011; Foley &

Pang, 2006). The Twilight Academy found success by offering weekly group counseling sessions for their students (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Going back to the fact that there is not a blueprint or complete definition for alternative schools or programs, it cannot be inferred that all alternatives offer such academic or social/emotional supports to students, however. Goldenson (2011) found throughout a literature review that there is a need for school/community collaboration to help meet the comprehensive needs of alternative program students. By providing wrap-around services (community resources to support students) through school psychologists or using school psychologists to help determine appropriate resources students are able to move from a punitive stance to a rehabilitative one (Goldenson, 2011). Foley and Pang (2006) conducted a survey of 50 alternative program directors in Illinois that supports the fact that there is a need for wrap-around services for students with social-emotional characteristics.

Structural Factors

The structural environment, to include the physical building and use of time, is another another important characteristic of alternative schools or programs (Porowski et al., 2014; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014). There are several points to consider when determining the location of an alternative school or program (Wilson et al., 2011). A review of studies suggests the location of the program be within the community where the students reside in order to keep those students engaged in their own communities (Tobin & Sprague, 2000; Wilson et al., 2011). In a review of alternative settings in Queensland, Australia, Wilson et al. (2011) determined that keeping students

in their community they are able to maintain jobs and use community resources as needed. Additionally, consideration must be given to access to public transportation for those students needing access and finally, locating the program in a neutral territory to avoid favoring one location over another (Porowski et al., 2014). The physical look of the building is another concern when operating an alternative school or program—the building cannot be less-than, but should be attractive and inviting (Aron, 2006; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014).

The schedule of the students' day is another factor that contributes to successful alternative programs (Foley & Pang, 2006; Porowski et al., 2014; Rennie Center, 2014). Allowing flexibility is critical for the students attending alternative programs for a couple key reasons: the traditional schedule did not work for them and they may have outside obligations such as the need to work or finding childcare which hinder their school attendance (Cable et al., 2009; Porowski et al., 2014; Schargel & Smink, 2001). This is where offering multiple means to earn credits, personalized learning plans, and differentiated instruction can assist students in alternative programs giving them options to stay on track to graduate from high school (Rennie Center, 2014).

Teacher Qualities

Staffing alternative programs with teachers who understand students' needs is vital to student success. Discussions in the literature about staffing alternative settings reveal that relationships with teachers is a key component for student success in all settings, but especially in a setting where students have previously had negative experiences (Foley & Pang, 2006; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacy, 2005; Rennie Center, 2014). "Hiring the right

people is key to the functioning of the alternative school" (Rennie Center, 2014, p.7). In the study referenced earlier, Quinn et al. (2006) found through student surveys that relationships were important in keeping students in school. "Students can overcome bad teaching but they may never recover from a bad teacher who fails to project a true sense of caring and concern" (Reimer & Cash, 2003, p. 19). Duggan (2007) proclaimed that there is a link to positive student-teacher relationships having an impact on student success in alternative schools based on surveys of 104 alternative education students in Louisiana and Mississippi in her dissertation study. The Rennie Center (2014) supported Duggan's dissertation study by stating the following about students in alternative settings: Creating caring, non-authoritarian learning environments and populating them with adults who are sympathetic to the special needs of these students and their families is likely a key success for these students (p. 16). This is likely a factor that was not present for the students when they attended traditional schooling, therefore an important one to have in place in the non-traditional setting. Students have reported that the relationships with teachers in alternative settings contributed to their success in the program (Lind, 2013).

Duggan (2007) recommended providing professional development for teachers of non-traditional settings that is specific to their needs because teachers in non-traditional or alternative settings have different needs than those in traditional environments (Rennie Center, 2014). Teachers in alternative settings need to focus their professional development in the areas of building trust with students and using positive reinforcements to encourage them (Duggan, 2007). Further, Simonsen and Sugai (2013) suggest that a

more positive approach to student discipline (e.g., Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies [PBIS]) can be more effective with alternative education populations than reactive responses and removal from school. PBIS takes the punitive nature away and makes the setting more positive and supportive as a result by setting expectations with student input and teaching expected behavior in the school setting rather than assuming students understand how to act (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Keeping students engaged in the educational process is important and PBIS supports that initiative by giving students a voice in what behavior is appropriate. Reimer and Cash (2003) state that "it is easy to throw students out of school, but it is much harder to help them redirect their energy to become successful in school" (p. 36).

Another area that benefits teachers (and ultimately, students) in alternative settings is to provide additional training for the teachers in the area of special education (Foley & Pang, 2006). Foley and Pang surveyed 50 alternative education directors and principals and found, as a result, that training in special education gave teachers in alternative settings a better understanding of how to work more successfully with a diverse population and display more positive attitudes toward their students (Foley & Pang, 2006). Knowing how to differentiate instruction, specifically, is a skill that helps teachers in alternative settings better help students achieve success academically. Foley and Pang (2006) also suggest that special education training helps teachers meet studetns where they are accept students unconditionally.

Considerations for Alternative Education Settings

In offering alternatives for students to complete their education, school districts should consider incorporating characteristics that have been proven effective for the population they serve (Porowski et al., 2014; Rennie Center, 2014). Raywid's (1994) two characteristics of alternative schools are supported by the literature as considerations for districts implementing alternative options for students. The literature further supports additional characteristics that have been found to be effective in the operation of alternative schools based on observations of successful schools (Rennie Center, 2014), which are addressed in the following section.

First and foremost, it is recommended that alternative settings keep their focus on academics, with a priority on the rigor of the academic instruction (Porowski et al., 2014). There should be choice of curriculum in terms of types of courses offered, levels offered, and mode of delivery (Porowski et al., 2014). And depending on the population, the students could have the option of applied learning (i.e.,working for credit) (Reimer & Cash, 2003). Students should also have the ability to accelerate as much as the opportunity to recover credits (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Moreover, the authors have proposed that alternative options have a small student base, not to exceed 250 students (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Maintaining a low teacher to student ratio has been found to be effective with the alternative education students because it allows for individualized attention and individualization of programming (Porowski et al., 2014; Rennie Center, 2014; Schargel & Smink, 2001). The Rennie

Center (2014) suggests that students thrive in the small, personalized environments and ultimately experience higher levels of success than in the past.

Having the right staff in place is an important consideration for any alternative program or school (Porowski et al., 2014; Rennie Center, 2014). The staff should choose to work in the alternative environment as opposed being placed in an alternative setting. These teachers should also be trained appropriately in classroom management strategies, such as positive behavior techniques, rather than employing only punitive measures with students, and the staff should have the ability to develop rapport with a challenging population (NAEA, 2014). Similar to traditional classroom teachers, the alternative setting staff should also be charged with establishing high expectations for students both academically and behaviorally and clearly stating expectations for students (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Additionally, following up on student absences is key as is assisting students in transition in and out of the alternative setting (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Porowski et al., 2014; Rennie Center, 2014).

Further consideration for districts implementing alternative education programs (or schools) is to determine the focus of the program based on student needs and define the goal of the program clearly (Rennie Center, 2014; Smith & Thomson, 2014). From this clear definition/goal of the program or school, the district can determine things such as location of the program and whether or not outsourcing is appropriate (Rennie Center, 2014). The Rennie Center (2014) reported that most districts use a program model, which allows them to keep the ownership with the students' home school. With a clear vision for alternative programs, the needs of a broad range of students can be met. By aligning

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the program with student needs and offering flexible schedules under the facilitation of a nurturing staff, districts can help students remain on track to earn credits and complete high school (Rennie Center, 2014).

Additional considerations for school districts when it comes to implementing an alternative setting are funding and reporting outcomes (Aron, 2006; Rennie Center, 2014). Districts must be committed to the mission of the program and support it financially. Deciding whether funding will be local or whether the program will be grant funded is important in looking at long-term sustainability (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Moreover, underfunding the program can set it up for failure (Rennie Center, 2014). Having proper facilities, curriculum, staff, and support services will set the program up for success with students (Rennie Center, 2014).

Determining accountability measures is equally important as this is how the perception of the program is formed by all stakeholder groups involved (Aron, 2006; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014). Over the years, accountability measures have been difficult to determine due to the variety of types of programs offered and the lack of definition of what must be consistently tracked (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014). With the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2016) it is clear to school districts that any public educational setting, be it traditional or non-traditional is accountable in terms of graduation rates and academic achievement of students. Due to this policy, any non-traditional setting must track its outcomes, both short-term and long-term to determine effectiveness (Aron & Zweig, 2003). The outcome measures of alternative programming should maintain an academic focus (Aron, 2006).

This will support that the setting is a pivotal part of dropout prevention (Rennie Center, 2014).

How to Measure Success in Alternative Schools or Programs

Reimer and Cash (2003) contend that measuring the success of alternative programs is challenging because success looks different at each location. The researchers also caution that oftentimes the effects of some alternative programs may not manifest for several years after the students have left the program, making outcomes even more difficult to track. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network developed what they referred to as a level one analysis evaluation instrument that Reimer and Cash (2003) included in their work. This instrument looked at 10 areas:

- Accountability measures

- Administrative structure and policies

- Curriculum and instruction

- Faculty and staff

- Facilities and grounds

- School leadership

- Student support services

- Learning community

- Program funding

- School climate

While these areas give school districts a starting point for areas to evaluate, there are no indicators included to give programs detailed information on each area.

In 2014, the National Alternative Education Association (NAEA) adopted 15 exemplary practices for creating, implementing, and sustaining high-quality non-traditional and alternative schools (NAEA, 2014). The NAEA (2014) provides detailed indicators of quality programming under each of their 15 standards by which organizations can evaluate themselves. They used a standards-based approach to program evaluation and when all 15 practices are incorporated into the alternative design, high quality services can be assured (Eichorn, 2015). In Prince William County, Virginia, an alternative program adopted these standards (practices) and found their graduation rate increased by 19% over four years (Eichorn, 2015).

Under each of the 15 exemplary practices, the NAEA (2014) gives a brief overview of the topic followed by indicators of quality programming by which non-traditional or alternative programs can evaluate themselves or be evaluated. Not only do these practices give alternative programs a way by which they can be evaluated, they give guidelines on how to operate effectively and they inform future policy around non-traditional learning programs (NAEA, 2014). The 15 practices, which are research-based and field tested fall under the following topics:

- Vision and mission: clearly articulated to all stakeholders; identifies target student population; exhibits high expectations;
- Leadership: employs experienced and passionate leadership; superintendent allocates resources to support implementation;

- Climate and culture: a positive climate is maintained; collegial relationships among staff, students, and families are promoted;

- Staffing and professional development: staff is trained in effective teaching methods that promote learning;

- Curriculum and instruction: instructional practices and curriculum are inclusive and support all students;

- Student assessment: both formative and summative assessment is used in the program;

- Transitional planning and support: transition is a priority in and out of the alternative program to include post-secondary planning with a school counselor;

- Parent/guardian involvement: the program partners with parents to support student achievement;

- Collaboration: the program has relationships with community agencies to help students performance in and out of the school setting;

- Program evaluation: surveys, student data, and implementation ratings are used to continuously improve the program;

- School counseling: the program exhibits a school counseling program to support student academic achievement;

- School social work: the school social work program supports educational equity;

- Digital and virtual learning: courses are offered virtually and are rigorous, employing best virtual learning practices;

- Policies and procedures: policies and procedures support the vision and mission and are reviewed annually; and

- Non-traditional education plan: each student has an individualized learning plan. (NAEA, 2014)

Summary

By providing non-traditional pathways to graduation for any student not meeting with success in the traditional setting, school districts can continue helping students achieve while meeting accountability measures dictated by ESEA. Having options for students who are not successful in the traditional school setting is vital in education today. Sagor (1999) stated that "the strategic use of educational alternatives has the promise to be one of the better ways for us to provide every American child access to his or her birthright" (p. 75). Providing a rigorous curriculum with social/emotional support by a caring staff can provide this needed option.

Although there is not a universal definition for alternative education, successful programs have contributed to the defining of key characteristics of alternative programs. A review of the literature found that there are commonalities that have proven effective. First and foremost alternative programs must have a student-centered focus with a clear mission. Another factor that contributes to successful alternatives is maintaining a low student to teacher ratio. This is one component that allows students to form positive relationships with their teachers and get more individualized attention. Hiring staff that

want to work in the alternative setting is another critical consideration when working

with alternative programs (Porowski et al., 2014). Allowing students to have choice in

curriculum, offering flexible scheduling, and providing support services with social-

emotional issues are other fruitful components to consider (Rennie Center, 2014). By

providing students with an option that caters to their needs and feels different than the

traditional setting, alternative or non-traditional programs can support the mission of

school districts by providing quality education to those with unique needs. This will not

only help the students and schools maintain a positive image, but it will help cancel out

the negative connotation that alternative education has acquired over the years. Perhaps

the definition that Morley (1991) used for alternative education better captures what it is

that public education is trying to accomplish by offering alternative/non-traditional

programs. He stated that alternative education is "a perspective, not a procedure or

program. This is based on the belief that there are many ways to become educated, as

well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur" (p. 8).

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter presents the design of the evaluation study that was conducted. The evaluation questions that guided the study are presented. Then, the mixed-methods that the researcher employed to gather data are discssed. The evaluation model used is detailed; data sources that informed the study, data collection methods, and finally, the data analysis that the researcher used are explicated, with references to appendices for more detailed information.

Non-traditional education settings are designed to meet the needs of students who are not successful in the traditional classroom (Aron, 2006; Reimer & Cash, 2003). Because the traditional setting proves to be unsuccessful for some students, it is imperative that the non-traditional environment available to these students offer something unique and very different than its traditional counterpart (Cable et al., 2009; Izumi et al., 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014). The Non-Traditional Program that was evaluated is designed to provide an option for high school students in a medium sized school district who seek a different setting to continue working toward and/or complete requirements for graduation. The attendance requirement is less than traditional school in that students attend approximately three hours per day and the coursework is completed online,. Furthermore, there is no direct instruction. Rather, teacher facilitators are present to support students when needed and to monitor progress; however, the teacher

facilitators are capable of instructing the students if they need additional explanations of specific concepts. The physical environment is also very different than traditional classrooms—presenting as one large classroom with individual work stations and laptops. The combination of these different variables contribute to the students' success in meeting the short term goals of the Non-Traditional Program which were evaluated in this study.

Evaluation Questions

This mixed-methods evaluation was designed to be formative and focused on the short-term outcomes of the Non-Traditional Program. Although the intent was to inform programmatic changes, the evaluation information could be used summatively if needed (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). The following evaluation questions were designed to determine the extent to which the short-term outcomes of the program are met:

1. To what degree do students in the Non-Traditional Program meet the short term outcomes of the program?

2. To what degree does meeting the short term outcomes vary by the medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary reasons why students are in the Non-Traditional Program?

    a. Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and earned credits of the students who participated in a Non-Traditional Program?

b. Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and passed SOLs of the students who participated in a Non-Traditional Program?

c. Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and met program goals of students who participated in a Non-Traditional Program?

3. What are the facilitating and inhibiting conditions for student success in the Non-Traditional Program?

Method

To evaluate the Non-Traditional Program, the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) evaluation model was used. Zhang et al. (2011) contend that "the CIPP evaluation model has been used to evaluate numerous education projects and entities" (p. 61). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) describe the CIPP model as a "comprehensive framework for conducting formative and summative evaluations of projects, personnel, products, organizations, and evaluation systems" (p. 325). Although the purpose of this evaluation was formative in nature, the information gathered has the potential to be used in a summative nature as well by one stakeholder group, the School Board. This capability to be used both formatively and summatively made the CIPP model suitable for this evaluation study. The ultimate purpose of the evaluation was not only to "prove, but improve" the program evaluated (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. 199).

Product evaluations within the CIPP model are used to decide whether a program is worth continuing, repeating, or extending to other settings (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield,

2007). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) defined the product evaluation as one that identifies and assess outcomes—intended and unintended, short-term and long-term—to help an enterprise remain focused on achieving its outcomes (p. 326). The product evaluation component, specifically, can serve three purposes: summative information can be used to judge the merits and impacts of the program; formative information can be used to make adjustments and improvements for future implementation; and insights can be gleaned on sustainability and transportability of the program. (Zhang et al., 2011). The product evaluation fit the purpose of this study as it helped the researcher determine the extent to which the program was meeting the needs of the students needing it (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). By focusing on the short-term outcomes in this product evaluation, the information gleaned can be used to determine if the intended goals of the Non-Traditional Program are being met and inform any necessary adjustments to the program by elaborating on any found unintended outcomes, as evaluators should search for unanticipated outcomes (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Participants

While the purpose of a product evaluation is to measure, interpret, and judge outcomes, its main intent is to determine the extent to which the needs of all stakeholders are met (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). This evaluation was conducted to determine the extent to which the needs of the students are being met by this program. The results of this product evaluation may be used formatively by the program director and have the potential to be used both formatively and summatively by the decision making stakeholder group.

Non-Traditional Program participants. The primary group of participants in the product evaluation were the students in the program. Not all students were included in the evaluation; instead they were purposefully selected by the researcher based on the reason for enrolling in the program and the amount of time spent in the program. It should be noted that not all students spend the same amount of time in the program therefore not all students have a solid base from which to judge the program. While many students begin the Non-Traditional Program at the beginning of a semester, students joined the program throughout the semester as the need presented itself. In this school year 12 students joined the program during the month after school began, but before the end of the first marking period. Four students started the program at the beginning of the second marking period with two more joining half way through the second marking period, leaving approximately six weeks to complete coursework (including school breaks). The students who were in the program for a shorter amount of time (less than nine weeks) were not selected because their input may not have been as valuable as the students who have participated much longer.

Students were purposely sampled to be interviewed individually (Creswell, 2013). The selection of the students was representative of the three reasons for attendance that were evaluated with two students per reason of attendance included. The selection of six total students was to maintain feasibility in the study while also sampling the population. The purpose of the interviews was to gain knowledge of the student perspective on their own success and that of the program. By selecting specific students there was a better chance of gaining substantive knowledge (Saldaña, 2011). The purpose of selecting two

per reason was "to elucidate the specific" information and not try to generalize (Creswell, 2013). The interview was a semi-structured interview. A set of questions (or interview protocol) was used with the selected students which allowed the researcher the opportunity to ask additional, follow-up questions for more information (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2011). The interviews served to inform the evaluator about both intended and unintended outcomes of the program.

Non-Traditional Program staff. The second group of participants was the staff of the Non-Traditional Program which consisted of two teacher facilitators, the school counselor, and the part-time security officer who work in the program. Three of the four staff members participated in a focus-group interview. The part-time security officer was not available at the time of the interview and offered his comments in writing. Mertens and Wilson (2012) contend that focus groups are an effective way to discuss a topic when it is possible to get all parties together. Focus groups are similar to individual interviews but obtain information in a group format rather than individually (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011). Because the staff was small in number, sampling was not necessary. The semi-structured focus group interview followed a protocol, as well, which standardized the format, thus increasing the reliability of the interview (Creswell, 2013). The semi-structured focus group interview allowed for rich discussion among the participants (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). The focus group also allowed for more follow-up questioning for clarity about perceptions of the program and the outcomes when deemed necessary by the researcher.

Data Sources

There were several data sources used to determine the extent to which the Non-Traditional Program short-term outcomes are being met. By using a mixed-methods approach triangulation of the data allowed for increased validity (Craig, 2009). The sources that were readily available to the evaluator were: the students' credits earned, verified credits earned (SOL tests passed), and student program goals (e.g., whether the student planned to return to the traditional setting, remain in the non-traditional setting, or graduate by completing remaining requirements). These sources were concrete sources that informed evaluation questions #1 and #2. These data informed the level of success based on measurable outcomes for the program. Along with these concrete data sources, focus group interviews with program staff and individual interviews with selected students in the program served as data sources for the purpose of gathering information about benefits (both intended and unintended) of the program being evaluated (Creswell, 2013; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Obtaining information from all parties involved with the program about their perceptions of the success of the program was important in gathering information about the program (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Document review. Each student in the program worked on two courses during a nine-week period, which allowed them to earn four credits in a semester. This was the equivalent of a regular high school student's course load in this district. Thus the number of credits a student earned in the Non-Traditional Program informed the success of the program in terms of keeping students current on credits and on track for on-time graduation. The SOL tests passed (verified credits earned) was another measure that was

used to determine the short-term success of the program. These tests corresponded with certain courses and were required at the end of those courses, but were only offered at the end of the semester period. Depending on the type of diploma a student is pursuing, the number of verified credits needed to graduate varies. Because grades were determined by the online instructors and not the teacher facilitators in the program, they were reliable and void of any discrepancy based on bias. These data were basic in terms of courses and SOLs passed or not.

Another data point in the form of an extant document was the student goal plan. Student goal plans were developed with the student and school counselor in the Non-Traditional Program upon entering the program. The goal plans address the student's academic goals, personal goals, and future goals to include whether the student prefers to remain in the program for the year, transition back to the traditional setting, or complete graduation requirements. The measure for this study was whether or not the student met his/her goal of remaining in the program to earn credits, returning to the traditional school, or graduating by finishing up the few necessary courses. This measure was another one of the short-term outcomes evaluated in the program.

Finally, the results of all short-term outcomes (credits earned, SOLs passed, and goals met) were evaluated by category of student. For the purpose of the chi-square test of independence, the data were captured as such: all credits earned, some credits earned, or no credits earned; all SOLs passed, some SOLs passed, or none passed; and program goal met or not met. Students were tracked by their purpose for attending the Non-Traditional Program as one of three reasons: medical/social/emotional, attendance issues

at their home school, and/or as a result of a disciplinary action. This evaluation of data points and category of students informed the evaluator about situations in which students were most successful in the program. The data were compiled and analyzed with a chi-square test of independence to determine if there was a relationship between the variables and if so, to what level of statistical significance.

Staff focus group interview. Another important data source in the evaluation study was the focus group interview of the Non-Traditional Program staff. These interviews were conducted as a semi-structured interview which allowed for the process to deviate from the prescribed questions and become a conversation among the interviewees (Creswell, 2013). These interviews allowed the evaluator to see the program outcomes through the lens of those who work with it intimately (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). With a staff of four, this style of interviewing afforded the group the opportunity to collaborate in responding while the interviewer determined issues and questions that were critical to helping inform program decisions (Craig, 2009). These interviews were coded for themes (Craig, 2009) that further informed the level of success of the daily operation of the program. The focus group interview was audio-recorded for transcription and underwent several iterations of coding which are described in greater detail later in this chapter.

The focus group protocol was developed after a review of other interview protocols provided in previous studies (Highland, 2015; Wagner, 2014). The open-ended questions, were based on the evaluation questions and were designed to elicit conversational responses to determine the success of the program through the lens of the

staff (Creswell, 2013). The preamble reminded participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without penalty at any point. This information was also presented in the informed consent. The staff focus group interview protocol is provided in Appendix A and the informed consent is provided in Appendix B.

Student interviews. A primary data source in this evaluation was individual student interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to help inform the program in areas such as daily procedures, the function of the online courses, the use of the teachers and of facilitators, the schedule, and other characteristics of the program that contribute to the student's success (e.g., personal supports offered during the transition to and from the program). The questions asked of the students were open-ended, general, and focused on the short-term outcomes of the Non-Traditional Program (Creswell, 2013). An interview protocol was followed and the interviews were audio-recorded for transcription for data analysis.

The one-on-one interviews with selected students gave the students an opportunity to share what worked well for them and what else could have been done to help them be more successful. This focus was a large portion of the interview protocol to give students ample occasion to give honest responses. While a formal set of questions was followed with the students, there was allowance to deviate from the prescribed questions if the evaluator found it relevant to the evaluation question being addressed in the interview (Craig, 2009; Creswell, 2013). This semi-structured interview helped the researcher ask follow up questions or ask other clarifying questions during the interview (Creswell, 2013). This ability to have conversation within the interview allowed for more

meaningful data as students shared their personal experiences (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Student interviews were conducted to learn more about what works in the day to day operation of the Non-Traditional Program and whether the students felt the program helped them during their transitional time. Interviews were conducted with two students per reason for attending the program (medical reasons, attendance issues, or disciplinary) for a total of six student interviews. Six students were purposely selected for feasibility while still allowing the evaluator the opportunity to obtain rich data collection (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2011). The amount of time in the program, for example, was given priority when considering subjects. The interview protocol allowed for a prescribed sequence of questions to be asked of all students and each interview was recorded. However, depending on the responses given, a more conversational approach was possible in order to gain valuable data, making the interviews semi-structured (Creswell, 2013; Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

The student interview protocol (Appendix C) was developed using the program theory as a guide. Each question was created to learn from the student perspective whether or not the Non-Traditional Program is successful. The preamble was based on interview protocols from previous studies (Highland, 2015; Wagner, 2014). In addition, the protocol was reviewed by an outside consultant who is proficient in program evaluation for assurance that questions aligned with the program theory. Prior to the interview scheduling a letter to parents (Appendix D) of selected interviewees was mailed home explaining the study, along with the informed consent provided by the school system in which the students are enrolled (Appendix E). An envelope was provided for

return of the signed consent form. The interview protocol reminded students of the parent-signed informed consent, reiterating the point that the student may withdraw from the interview without penalty at any point in the process. This point was made clear prior to the interview.

The interview protocol did undergo an alignment process to provide evidence for validity (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The interview questions were checked against the program theory to ensure the questions were obtaining the intended information about the Non-Traditional Program. This process allowed the researcher to edit questions prior to the interview (Craig, 2009). Additionally, the interview protocol was reviewed by an outside expert in the field of program evaluation for increased validity. Further, a table of specifications was created to help see the alignment of each interview question with the program theory (see Appendix G).

Prior to conducting the interviews, a coding scheme was created to help with recording the interviewees' responses (Craig, 2009). These a priori codes were: online learning, online teachers, scheduling, and relationships with staff. In addition to the a priori codes, the evaluator allowed for emerging codes (Creswell, 2013). These emerging codes allowed the researcher to be open to any themes that were not considered originally (Saldaña, 2011). The preamble to the interview protocol was developed to explain to the interviewee the purpose of the interview and how the measure would be used. The evaluator followed a script for the interviews and allowed any participant to withdraw at any time in the process without consequence (Creswell, 2013).

The questions asked about the following key areas with opportunity for open-ended responses (see Appendix C):

- Length of time in the program

- Perception of the program

- Structure and format of online courses

- Level of support from online teachers

- Level of support from lab facilitators

- Level of support on developing personal goals

- Level of support during transition to and from the program

- Achievement of personal goals

- Overall strength of the program

- What else could have been done to help

The teacher facilitators and school counselor working in the program were also interviewed in a focus group. The security guard was unable to attend and provided a written statement. Just like the student process, a priori codes were developed prior to analyzing the data. The responses were gathered around the following key areas (see Appendix A):

- Perceived success of overall program

- Perceived success of structure of daily program

- Perceived best student fit for the program

- What makes this setting more or less successful than traditional school

- What element(s) help(s) students succeed

- Elements not provided that may be needed to help support non-traditional students

Data Collection

Students identified to be interviewed and who provided parental consent were interviewed around their time in the Non-Traditional Program. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The teachers, counselor, and security guard in the program had the same opportunity to participate in a focus group interview. A separate consent form was provided to the staff being interviewed to ensure full-disclosure of the process and acknowledgement of confidentiality. The security guard was unable to attend the interview and provided the evaluator a written narrative. Securing access to the extant information, such as the number of courses completed, SOL tests passed, and student goals for the program was part of the document review which helped validate data points. This permission was granted through the school district. Table 1 illustrates the evaluation questions along with the data sources and analysis. The data analysis is explained in further detail in the following section.

Table 1

Evaluation Questions, Data, and Analysis

Evaluation Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1.To what degree do students in the Non-Traditional Program meet the short-term outcomes of the program?	Credits earned SOL scores Student goal plans	Quantitative analysis of credits earned and SOL pass rate; frequency count
2.To what degree does meeting the short-term outcomes vary by the medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary reasons why students are in the the Non-Traditional Program?	Credits earned SOL scores Student goal plans	Quantitative statistical analysis of data to understand what type of student had success by category of attendance; chi-square test
3.What are the facilitating and inhibiting conditions for student success in the Non-Traditional Program?	Interviews with students Interviews with staff	Qualitative analysis of interviews to determine positive and negative conditions

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively in this mixed-methods evaluation. Qualitative analysis of the student interviews and the staff focus group interview was completed, while document reviews of grade reports and SOL achievement data provided quantitative analysis allowing the researcher to triangulate the data for further validation (Craig, 2009). Statistical analysis was conducted in a chi-square test of

independence to determine relational values between the variables. Further details about the chi-square test of independence are discussed later in this chapter.

Document reviews. Extant data were used for the evaluation of credits each student earned, the number of SOL tests passed, and student goal achievement. These data were quantitative data points that were matched with students to help determine what a successful student profile looked like for the future of referring students to the program.

In order to evaluate these data quantitatively, a spreadsheet was developed in which the researcher documented frequency counts of the three short-term outcomes (see Appendix F). These data were obtained from school year 2015-16 and the first semester of 2016-17 to show three semesters of data for a total of 91 students. Attention was given to the time at which the students entered the program so they were not erroneously identified as not meeting the short-term outcomes, if it was not possible. For example, if a student was only able to earn three credits and he earned two, it was counted as two out of a possible three and not two out of four per semester. From these raw numbers, percentages of credits earned and SOL pass rates were calculated while also providing a mean for credits earned.

A second table was created to illustrate the number of students who attended the Non-Traditional Program by category (medical reasons, attendance issues, or discipline) who met the criteria for each of the short-term outcomes (e.g., earning full credits, partial credits, or no credits; passing all SOLs, partial SOLs, or no SOLs; and meeting program goals or not). These data were used to determine if there was a relationship between the

variables in a chi-square test of independence. By giving values to full, partial, or no

credits/SOLs, the data accounted for accomplishing partial outcomes. A null hypothesis

and alternative hypothesis were created prior to the chi-square test being run on the data.

The null hypothesis stated that there was not a relationship between the reason of

attendance and the outcomes; the alternative hypothesis stated that there was a

relationship between the reason of attendance and the outcomes. The results were stated

in a Pearson chi-square value as well as a p-value from the testing in Excel and SPSS.

A chi-square was an appropriate statistical test since the variables were

categorical and the data were nominal (Hoy, 2010). The chi-square is a non-parametric

measure used to analyze differences in categorical data when the variables are measured

in nominal values (McHugh, 2013). A data table captured the categorical frequencies to

inform the chi-square test. The statistical test indicated the likelihood of a relationship

between the categories or if they were unrelated and strictly by chance by producing an

effect size (Hoy, 2010). The key assumptions of using a chi-square were: there were more

than five data in the sample size, the subjects were reported in only one cell or category,

and the groups were independent (McHugh, 2013).

Interview data. In the interviews of the two groups, data were analyzed using a

coding scheme created going into the interviews (Craig, 2009). A priori codes (Creswell,

2013) were established prior to coding the interview transcripts which matched the

program theory described in Chapter 1. However, the evaluator was not limited to only

these codes as additional codes emerged from the interviews upon further analysis

(Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2011). The coding process went through several stages, to

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include the use of the coding tool, Nvivo, for organizing and analyzing. Nvivo is a tool

used to standardize the coding process and helps ensure reliability and validity. A priori

codes that were created before the interviews were online learning, online teachers,

scheduling, environment, and relationships with staff, based on characteristics of

alternative education from the program theory on which the Non-Traditional Program

operates. Through the coding process, the evaluator made notes and used these memos to

streamline the a priori codes, which is referred to as "lean coding" (Creswell, 2013, p.

184). From these codes, themes or broad categories emerged in the classification analysis

of the interview data (Creswell, 2013).

Two additional steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data collection

and analysis. First, the researcher developed a positionality statement (see Appendix I) to

address her position in relation to the evaluand. This statement provided an opportunity

for the researcher to explore any potential biases that could have evolved during the

evaluation as a result of current or past positions held in the school distict (Creswell,

2013). In addition, the researcher consulted with an outside educational program

evaluator to check the coding of the interview data. This process known as peer review or

debriefing helped to ensure the researcher was remaining objective and was not injecting

any bias (Creswell, 2013).

Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions

Program evaluations investigate a specific program that has its own context

within which it operates (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Mertens &Wilson, 2012). The

limitations included in this program evaluation study were:

1. The results are not generalizable.

2. The evaluation examined short-term outcomes and therefore the results do not speak to the long-term success of the program.

3. Students were not as forthcoming in the individual interviews, possibly due to the evaluator's role in the program.

Delimitations of the study included the following:

1. The students that were selected to participate in interviews were not representative of the entire Non-Traditional Program population.

2. The amount of time the selected students have spent in the program limited the information they had to share.

3. The evaluation focused on the short-term outcomes of the program only.

As with any research, there are assumptions made. The following assumptions should be noted:

1. The students' parents were willing to consent to the interviews.

2. The Non-Traditional Program students and staff felt comfortable enough to give honest responses in the interviews given the researcher's role in the program.

Ethical Considerations

The evaluation plan was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the College of William and Mary and determined to be exempt from formal review. In addition, because interviews were conducted with students and staff, a similar process was followed with the school district within which the program is located. Permission

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was granted by the school district for the interviews as well as the review of the extant data. Informed consent was given to all participants and parents of minor students prior to the interview process and each participant was given op-out provisions.

Because the researcher works closely with the program being evaluated, the evaluation study plan was reviewed by an outside evaluator prior to implementation to reduce any potential bias by the researcher. Final results were also shared with the outside expert after the study was conducted. This external audit was an additional step to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Evaluation Standards

Four areas of the Joint Committee Program Evaluation Standards (2011) must also be addressed prior to the evaluation beginning. These standards drive the evaluation process and should be revisited during the process (Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). A description of these standards is provided in the section below.

Propriety. This evaluation will be performed for the School Board to determine the level of success the program is having and whether the program will be funded to grow, remain the same, or be changed completely. The evaluation will be conducted by the Coordinator of Student Interventions who is intimately involved in the program daily and is invested in the success of the program overall. Although it would be easy to inject bias in the evaluation, the measures by which the School Board will make decisions are straightforward. They will be interested in knowing the number of credits the students

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earned while in the program and the pass rate of the SOL tests, yet open to the anecdotal information collected and suggested improvements that come as a result.

Utility. The program evaluation will be undertaken to determine the level of student success, the best type of student served, and therefore inform the program's need for change. That, in turn, may impact funding in upcoming years. The program director will use the evaluation results to inform changes within the program to make it even more successful for students in the nontraditional setting.

Feasibility. This evaluation is possible because there are some measurable objectives in terms of credits earned and SOL tests passed. There are also students participating in the program with whom interviews can be conducted for formative assessment purposes to see what could be tweaked in the program to better serve future students. Additionally the staff will participate in focus group interview to inform the success of the program as it currently exists. There will be ample data sources to determine the short-term outcomes.

Accuracy. This program evaluation will ascribe to the pragmatic paradigm or use branch. The overall purpose is to determine the merit and worth of the program in the eyes of the School Board stakeholder group. This evaluation will be a formative evaluation, informing necessary changes to the program, with the possibility of being used as a summative evaluation to determine continuation of the program. While it is noted that the qualitative data collected is not being vetted externally and the evaluator is not an expertise in the method of creating interview protocols, all interviewees will be given the same script and asked the same questions so the data will be consistent.

Meta-evaluation. Surrounding all of these four broad standards is the meta-evaluation standard by which the evaluator will judge her work throughout the process. As Mertens & Wilson (2012) mention, the meta-evaluation is best done at the beginning of the process, before implementation, midway through the evaluation, and toward the end of the evaluation process. This will be the schedule for reviewing the process throughout the evaluation.

Practical Standards for Evaluators

The American Evaluation Association (AEA) recommends five guiding principles which are intended to guide the evaluator's professional practice. Evaluators should:

conduct systematic inquiry to ensure their methods are valid and credible; be competent, having the necessary education and skills to conduct the evaluation appropriately; ensure the integrity and honesty of the entire evaluation process as well as within their own lives; demonstrate respect for the people involved in the process (all stakeholder groups); and take into account the general and public welfare with consideration to all interests in the evaluation. (AEA, 2004)

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the Non-Traditional Program is meeting its short-term outcomes. In order to measure the extent to which the program is meeting its short-term outcomes a formative, mixed-methods program evaluation was utilized by employing the product evaluation of the CIPP model. Data sources used in this evaluation study included a review of extant documents (e.g., student transcripts, test scores, and goals), individual student interviews, and a staff focus group interview. This program evaluation afforded the evaluator the ability to provide validity to the findings by triangulating the data sources to determine the level of performance in the Non-Traditional Program (Creswell, 2013).

Document Review

A review of student transcripts and end-of-course test scores provided data related to the extent to which students earned credits and passed SOL tests toward graduation requirements through their participation in the Non-Traditional Program. Students participating in the program attempt to earn four credits per semester, comparable to their traditional peers, but rather than earning four at one time, the students take two courses per 9-week period. The transcript shows the posted final grades at the end of each semester. In addition, the appropriate end-of-course tests (SOLs) are eventually noted as verified credits on the transcript, but are available from the testing administrator prior to

posting on the transcript. Students taking specific courses which have end-of-course tests

must take these tests and must pass a specific number to meet graduation requirements

depending on the type of diploma they are earning.

Along with the student transcripts, the student goal plan was used as a data point

to help determine the success of students in the Non-Traditional Program. The student

goal plans are developed with the student and school counselor upon entry to the

program. The measure used in this study was whether the student met the goal of either

remaining in the program for another semester, returning to the traditional school

environment, or graduating by completing requirements in the program. The data were

captured as either meeting the goal or not meeting the goal. The transcripts and student

goal plans were the primary data sources for evaluation question one: *To what degree do*

students in the Non-Traditional Program meet the short-term outcomes of the program?

In order to determine whether the program results vary by category of student, the

same extant documents were reviewed. Students were categorized by reason of

participation in the program: medical concerns, attendance issues, or the result of a

disciplinary action. The results for each category of students was taken from the

documents after three semesters of the program. The students participating in the

program over three semesters were divided into the three categories. The breakdown of

categories is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Reason for Student Attendance in Non-Traditional Program

Reason for Attendance	Frequency	Percentage
Disciplinary	30	32.9
Attendance	43	47.3
Medical	18	19.8

Descriptive statistics were used to gather data to determine if students within a particular category performed better than another. These data provided information pertaining to evaluation question two: *To what degree does meeting the short-term outcomes vary by the medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary reasons why students are in the Non-Traditional Program?*

Individual and Focus Group Interviews

Individual student interviews were conducted, along with a staff focus group interview, to elicit responses about factors that contribute and inhibit student success. The student interviews followed a protocol that allowed for follow-up questions, if the researcher felt it was needed for clarification. Six students were interviewed representing two from each category of reason for attendance in the Non-Traditional Program. The staff focus group interview included two full-time teachers in the program, a part-time counselor, and the security officer in the program. The protocol for the focus group was different than the student interview protocol and allowed for discussion among the participants to elicit their view on the factors that contribute to or inhibit students' success in the Non-Traditional Program. The individual interviews and the focus group

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were the primary data sources for evaluation question three: *What are the facilitating and inhibiting conditions for students' success in the Non-Traditional Program?*

Question 1: To what degree do students in the Non-Traditional Program meet the short-term outcomes of the program?

Indicators for this question included the total number of credits students earned, along with passing any SOL tests that accompany the courses taken, and whether or not students met their program goal. Given that all students do not enter the program at the same time during the semester, not every student has the ability to earn four credits per semester. The number of credits students earned were compared to the possible number each student was capable of earning. The number of credits earned is provided in Table 3. Whereas the students attending the program for attendance issues had the ability to earn the greatest number of credits, this group earned the smallest percentage. Students attending for medical reasons earned the highest percentage of credits. The students attending for disciplinary reasons earned a slightly higher percentage of credits than the students with attendance issues. The average percentage of credits earned was 64% with a mean of 1.79 credits earned.

Table 3

Distribution of Credits Earned

	Total Students	Students Who Earned Credits	Credits Earned	Possible Credits	Percentage of Earned Credits	Mean Number of Credits Earned
Category						
Disciplinary	30	19	52	86	61%	1.73
Attendance	43	27	59	108	55%	1.37
Medical	18	16	52	59	88%	2.89
Total	91	62	163	253	64%	1.79

The SOL pass rate was figured as a percent pass rate, rather than a raw number. This reporting is consistent with how traditional schools report SOL rates. The results indicated that students in the program for medical reasons performed higher than their peers on SOLs. The students with medical concerns passed the end-of-course tests at a rate of 94% whereas the other two categories were significantly lower at 59% and 47% pass rates. The SOL pass rates by category are provided in Table 4. The overall pass rate for the entire sample was 65%.

Table 4

Distribution of Standards of Learning Pass Rates

		Frequency		Percentage
		SOLs passed	Total Possible SOLs	
Category	*n*			
Disciplinary	30	9	19	47%
Attendance	43	17	29	59%
Medical	18	16	17	94%
Total	91	42	65	65%

Finally, a review of the student goal plans provided data for the number of students who

met their goal of remaining in the program, returning to traditional school, or graduating

was captured as simply meeting the goal or not. These student goals are documented on a

goal plan that is created between the student and the school counselor in the program.

These data are provided in Table 5. Students attending for disciplinary reasons reflected

the lowest percentage of meeting the program goal with the students attending for

medical reasons meeting program goals with highest success. The average percent of

students meeting the program goal was 67%.

Table 5

Distribution of Goals Met

		n	Goal Met	Percentage Met
Category	Disciplinary	30	19	63%
	Attendance	43	28	65%
	Medical	18	14	78%
	Total	91	61	67%

The extent to which the program is meeting its short-term goals varies by indicator; however, the percentages of overall completion for each outcome are similar at 64% of credits earned, 65% SOL pass rate and 67% of goals met. Further analysis is discussed in Chapter 5. These results are illustrated below in Table 6.

Table 6

Frequency Count Chart for Short-Term Outcomes

	% Credits Earned	% Verified Credits	% Goal Met
Medical/Social-Emotional Issues	88	94	78
Attendance	55	59	65
Discipline	61	47	63

Question 2: To what degree does meeting the short-term outcomes vary by the medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary reasons why students are in the Non-Traditional Program?

Indicators for the second question were similar to the first question: the number of credits earned, the SOL pass rate, and whether or not students met program goals; however the indicators for this question were applied to the students' categories of attendance in the Non-Traditional Program. The different categories for reason of attendance performed at different rates within each indicator. Students attending the program for medical reasons performed at a higher rate in all areas than their peers attending for attendance or disciplinary issues. Students with medical concerns earned 88% of their credits compared to students in the other categories who earned 61% (disciplinary reasons) and 55% (attendance reasons) of their credits. The students attending for medical reasons experienced a 94% pass rate on their SOLs compared to 59% and 47% respectively. Finally, the students with medical issues met their programmatic goals at a rate of 78% as compared to their peers attending for attendance (65%) and disciplinary issues (63%). Figure 3 illustrates the students' performance over the past three semesters with results reported in percentages. Overall, students attending the program for medical reasons met each of the short-term outcomes at a higher rate than their peers in the disciplinary and attendance categories.

Percentages of Indicators Met
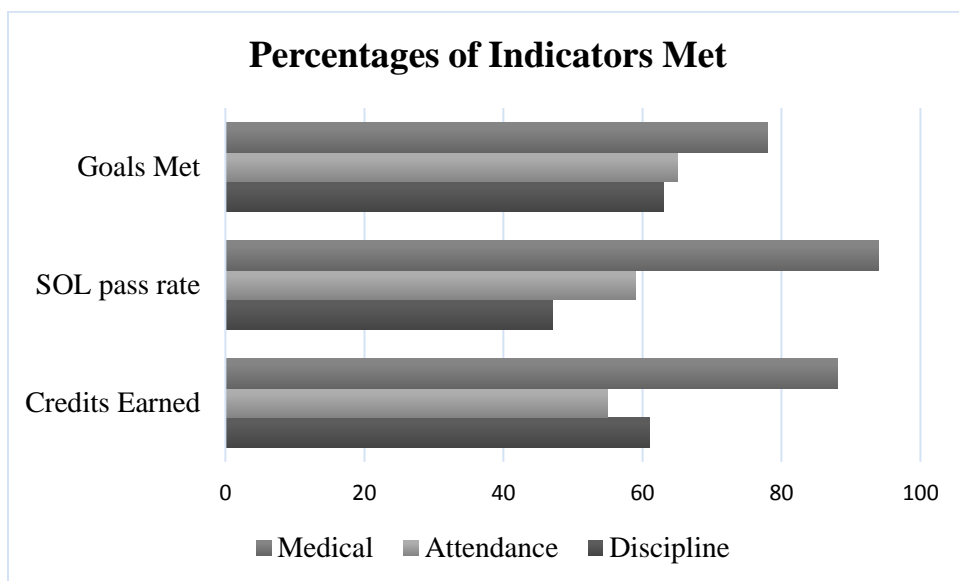
Figure 3. Percentage of indicators earned by students in various categories of attendance in the Non-Traditional Program.

A review of extant documents provided the necessary information; however, further analysis of the information was conducted to determine whether or not the outcomes varied by reason for attendance in the program. To determine the degree to which the different categories of students met the outcomes, three sub-questions were provided to guide the data collection and analysis. For each of the three sub-questions a null hypothesis and alternate hypothesis were created and tested using a chi-square test of independence. The chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine if there was a relationship between the students' reason for attendance and the outcomes.

Sub-question one: Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and earned credits of the students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program? To determine if there was a relationship between the two variables (reason of attendance and

earned credits), a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The null hypothesis for this question was: There is no relationship between the type of attendance reason and earned credits for students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program. The alternate hypothesis was: There is a relationship between the type of attendance reason and earned credits for students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program. The chi-square test of independence results indicated that there was not a statistically significant relationship between the reason for attendance and earning credits in the Non-Traditional Program, Pearson χ^2 (4, $N = 91$) = 7.124, $p = .129$. There was insufficient evidence at the alpha level ($p < .05$) to reject the null hypothesis. There was no relationship between the variables.

Sub-question two: Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and passed SOL tests of the students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program? To determine whether there was a relationship between the SOL pass rate and the reason for attendance in the Non-Traditional Program, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. The null hypothesis was: There is no relationship between the type of attendance reason and passed SOL tests for students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program. The alternate hypothesis was: There is a relationship between the type of attendance reason and passed SOL tests for students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program. The chi-square test of independence indicated that there was not a statistically significant relationship between the reason for attendance and passing SOLs. The Pearson χ^2 (6, $N =$

91) = 10.483, p = .106. There was insufficient evidence at the alpha level ($p < .05$) to reject the null hypothesis. There was no relationship between the variables.

Sub-question three: Is there a relationship between the type of attendance reason (e.g., medical/social/emotional, attendance, and disciplinary) and met program goals of the students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program?
For this sub-question, another chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine if there was a relationship between students meeting program goals and their reason for attendance. The null hypothesis for this question was: There is no relationship between the type of attendance reason and met program goals for students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program. The alternate hypothesis was: There is a relationship between the type of attendance reason and met program goals for students who participated in the Non-Traditional Program. The chi-square of independence results indicated that there is no statistically significant relationship between the students' reason for attendance and their met program goals, Pearson χ^2 (2, N = 91) = 1.198, p = .549. There was insufficient evidence at the alpha level ($p < .05$) to reject the null hypothesis. There was not a relationship between the variables.

Question 3: What are the facilitating and inhibiting conditions for students' success in the Non-Traditional Program?
Indicators for this question were derived from the emerging codes or themes that resulted from individual student interviews and a staff focus group interview. The interview questions used to address this question were designed to elicit responses from

students and staff about factors that help students succeed as well as highlight any factors that may be missing from the Non-Traditional Program.

Student interviews. Six selected students, based on their reason for attending the Non-Traditional Program, were interviewed individually. Table 7 provides a list of students and their reason for attending the program.

Table 7

Names of Students and Reasons for Attending the Non-Traditional Program

Name	Reason
Carol	Medical
Claire	Attendance
John	Medical
Nancy	Discipline
Stacy	Attendance
Steven	Discipline

Note. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the students.

Qualitative analysis of the student interviews revealed factors that contribute to students' success in the Non-Traditional Program from the student perspective. Through the interview process, students were able to share examples of factors that contributed to their own success in the Non-Traditional Program. Factors that contribute to the success of the students in the Non-Traditional Program fell into the following three categories:

- Supportive environment to include the staff;

- individualization of student programming; and

- online pacing.

Table 8 illustrates the frequency count for the number of times each of the three codes was mentioned by all students and gives a detailed description.

Table 8

Contributing and Inhibiting Factors of Student Success According to Students

Frequency	Code	Description
19	Supportive Environment	The Non-Traditional Program environment supports students by offering a smaller setting. The students feel supported by the online staff in particular.
18	Individualization	Students in the program have an individualized plan for success. Teachers work out a course plan for each student and take into account what issue brought them to the program in doing so.
16	Online Pacing	Students believe online courses provide them the flexibility to succeed outside of the traditional classroom. They have choice in what courses to take as well as feel the pacing is within their control.

Supportive environment. All six students indicated that the environment of the Non-Traditional Program plays a role in the success of the program. Two contributing factors, with regards to the program environment, that were revealed in the interviews, were not having the distractions of a traditional classroom and being in a smaller

environment. The following quotes illustrate some students' perceptions of the environment in the Non-Traditional Program:

Steven: *"I mean I've actually been able to do my work. The other thing is the fact that I'm not distracted by a classroom full of people."*

John: *"I really feel like I've been successful especially with a new experience with a different school. My grades were a lot better. They are a lot better than they were at traditional classroom. Because I'm able to focus on just myself and my grades and the school that I'm doing. No distractions."*

Claire: *". . . especially if they need help with schoolwork and stuff and to focus on just one on one school instead of people around them."*

The program facilitators offer support while the students are in attendance and serve as an extension of the online program. The facilitators support students with content as well as organization. For example, one student reported that "sometimes the [program] teachers make a plan for you if you're falling behind and that is helpful." When asked about the level of support from both the online teachers and the facilitators in the program, students felt both parties were "helpful" and "supportive" as well as "understanding about what's going on" [with students personally]. During the interviews students stated that "it's pretty easy to talk to them [lab facilitators] and come to them if I need any help". Further description of interactions with online teachers revealed that students "can get in touch with them . . . and can meet with them" if needed. One student reported that "Almost all of my teachers have responded to me within the next couple hours or the next couple days, which is really great."

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While the students mentioned the program facilitators' role in their interviews, the level of support provided by the facilitators did not prevail. When students referred to teachers supporting them academically or otherwise, the reference was made to the online teachers in terms of working with the student on truncating assignments or extending deadlines. Because of the lack of responses about the support of the program staff, the supportive staff code was dropped in this part of the interview coding.

Individualization. Each of the students interviewed attributed success in the Non-Traditional Program to individualization of the program to meet their needs including some differentiated online learning. By completing coursework online students felt they were able to pace themselves while still remaining on the pre-determined 9-week pace set by the program guidelines while learning differently than students in the traditional classroom. Several quotes show students' perspectives of program individualization:

Nancy: *"Instead it's just me and the class. It's just easier to read the information and from that information ask one of the teachers in the lab, okay, I don't understand this, to further explain it instead of having someone tell you all about it."*

Claire: *"Other classes that are like, "This class is supposed to teach you how to take notes," but they're not really helpful because they're like this is specifically how you have to take notes, but no, you kind of need to do it your own way so it's most effective for you, which is why I have a problem with other school because everything has to be their way, but I need to learn it my way."*

Carol: *"Because this takes it at your pace. Yes, it's paced. You still go at your speed."*

Stacy: *"The difference is there's someone there who is physically like nope, we should be here right now. Instead of the whole classroom being like okay, I hope everyone's there. You might be behind, you might not be there."*

Steven: *"It's self-paced, you can manage your work on your own--whatever class that you want to work on at that moment."*

John: *"I could move at my own speed and it's all online so I can do it from anywhere."*

Carol: *"The online teachers can make another plan for you…..they can take out all the unimportant things."*

While the online courses are paced by the program and the online teachers to be completed in a 9-week period, the students interviewed recognized the online courses as being "at their own pace". The students attributed this to their own success in the Non-Traditional Program because they saw the online instruction as a way to make the program individualized for each student. One student reported that the individualized instruction in the online setting allowed her to learn how to take notes her own way rather than how a classroom teacher might have an entire class take notes. Another student reported that the online teachers are able to differentiate the coursework for the individual students, allowing the student to complete "important" assignments.

 Online Pacing. Taking online coursework is a vital part of the Non-Traditional Program. All students receive instruction through the school district's virtual learning program. Students in the program are set up to complete courses on a 9-week pace, requiring some time management and organizational skills on the part of the students. Students felt that the online courses worked for them, even helping them become more

organized. By taking online courses students felt they were more in control of their own learning although one student stated that it is important to know how you learn in order to be successful. The following quotes address the students' perceptions about online courses and organization:

Claire: *"The learning lab in general and taking online classes has really helped me take good notes, which I did not have that skill before."*

Claire: *"This is the way I can still be part of the curriculum while still getting it done my way."*

Carol: *"You have the time to catch yourself up. You have the time to actually understand what you're doing instead of just being like oh well the whole class is moving on so here I have to go, too."*

John: *"It's a little bit more difficult, but it's more my own speed, and easier to understand and focus on."*

Nancy: *"If I'm behind, I'm able to do my work at home if I need to."*

John: *"Towards the end of the semester is the hardest. A lot of work is put on top of me……..the fear of not being able to finish the course on time."*

All six students reported that the online coursework was positive for their learning style. Three of the students mentioned specific strategies they use with online learning to help them complete the work, such as printing out materials to make notes or highlight and using a USB to keep track of assignments. While most students (5 of 6) felt the pacing was "manageable," one student reported a sense of being overwhelmed at the end of the 9-week period because there was pressure to complete the course. When asked about

interactions with online teachers, all six students reported positive, timely interactions

online with one student describing meeting her teacher in person.

   Staff focus group interview. Qualitative analysis of the focus group interview

with staff members provided additional information related to conditions that contribute

to or inhibit student success in the Non-Traditional Program. Codes were developed from

the responses given in the focus group interview with the program staff members. Table 9

details the codes, frequency count of codes, and a description of the code. Three of the

four codes represent factors that contribute to the success of students in the program.

However, online skills is a code that emerged as a factor currently inhibiting student

success in the program. Staff members recognize that assumptions are made about

students' ability to transition from the traditional classroom to online coursework. The

staff felt students need specific training upon entering the program to improve students'

future success in online learning.

Table 9

Contributing and Inhibiting Factors of Student Success According to Staff

Frequency	Code	Description
11	Supportive Environment	The Non-Traditional Program environment supports students holistically. The academic progress as well as the emotional well-being is considered by the staff when working with the students in the program.
9	Individualization	Students in the program have an individualized plan for success. Teachers work out a course plan for each student and take into account what issue brought them to the program in doing so. No two students are treated exactly the same because they all have very different needs.
6	Organizational Skills	Students need training on how to manage time and organize themselves within an online course and produce work assignments within a given timeframe. Assumptions are made that students have these skills coming into the program and they do not.
5	Accepting and Caring Staff	Staff within the program are unconditionally accepting of all students. The staff understands that the students are going through normal developmental mood swings and in many cases have additional stressors that have brought them to a non-traditional environment.

Supportive environment. While the primary focus of the Non-Traditional

Program is to keep students on track academically, the staff focus group interview

revealed that the staff members see providing a supportive environment as an important

factor to helping students achieve. Some examples of staff comments about the

importance of a supportive environment are:

"Because there are days where you need the one on one, whether for emotional reasons

or just academic reasons, but then there are days where you just kind of want to hide in

the classroom and that's okay. I feel like this environment allows for no matter what kind

of day you're having."

"I feel like we also have students who are here not just for behavior or attendance issues,

but just wanting to get away from the peer pressure or the stresses that are opposed upon

them at school to where they can kind of start finding out who they are and they don't

have to struggle through the day to day in the big traditional classes."

"I've seen also, with the roller coaster of teenage emotions there are days where Elise

will come in and talk to me and then there are some days where she comes in and she

doesn't say anything. But from day to day, how she treats me on Tuesday isn't going to

change I treat her on Wednesday. Then they know that you're not holding the previous

day over their head."

"There's less pressure on them to be . . . they're allowed to change who they are . . . they

don't have to be that person that people know them as."

All four staff members reported the Non-Traditional Program as an "opportunity" for

students who are not successful in the traditional setting for any reason. The staff

described the environment as welcoming and "unconditionally accepting" of all students. By building relationships with the students, the teachers stated that students were more likely to remain engaged in their schooling.

   Individualization. The focus group interview revealed that staff believe that providing individualized learning plans for each student is important in a non-traditional setting. Currently the program is flexible for students in that they can choose the time of day they attend and they have a voice in the courses they take, but the staff expressed a need for a more formalized plan for each student in the program. Quotes that exemplify individualization are:

"It's going to depend on the student. Like, Georgia, she might not need something as in-depth as some of the other ones. Peter, he needs some hand-holding."

"I think that we get students that have arrived here for a variety of reasons and taking that into consideration, they might have various good reasons why they are not working to their potential on that particular day. Whether that's anxiety, or health issues or whatever. The flexibility is a good bonus."

"I think you have to take it with the individual student. Set a hard deadline, but knowing this ... like Kate, we have to give her the extension because of life."

"Getting to know the students is important because then you'll know what the teaching/learning] strategy is."

"I think you almost have to . . . individualize it."

"It seems crazy but it almost feels like every single person in here, when they get here, on that day that they're doing their orientation for time management, we build an IEP."

"Then you would have it individualized . . . but whatever we set in place for that individual is for their own specific plan."

Although students currently receive an individualized plan when they enter the Non-Traditional Program, the staff indicated that a more formal plan would better suit the students need for individualization. They described the students all having different needs on different days that require some flexibility in terms of work completion and accountability. The staff reported the need to have a written plan for work completion that can be reviewed regularly and be adjusted accordingly.

Organizational skills. Upon entering the Non-traditional Program, the students receive a brief orientation to acclimate to the setting and online platform through which the courses are taken. After the basic expectations are explained to the student and the student has successfully logged into his courses, the student is left to begin work. The teachers remain in the classroom for support at that point. One theme that came out of the focus group was the need to have a more detailed transition into the program that focuses on organization and time management. The transition should include a lesson on time management, organizational skills, and successful online course-taking skills such as notetaking, pacing, and communicating with the teacher. Examples of quotes from the staff that support this need are:

"They always look like they're so busy and their organizational skills must be zilch because they get nothing done. But they're always working."

"Something we may consider in the future is similar to when a student begins community college, they take college success skills, or student success skills, or some kind of skills class."

"Because it feels like now when we get a new student coming in, we're trying to get them into the class and getting them starting to do class stuff."

[The students need] *"a certain level of maturity and organizational skills. They have to manage their own time."*

"They're always working, but there's no product."

"Offer some mini version of organizational skills, time management skills. This is what it's going to be like when you're working in an online environment."

The staff focus group revealed some frustrations on the part of the teachers supporting student work in the program. Three of the staff members reported that monitoring progress can be challenging, but more importantly the students "seem to struggle with time management". The staff indicated that many assumptions are made about students' abilities to self-regulate coming into the program, but those abilities may not necessarily be sufficient to navigate online learning. As a result of the dialogue the teachers reported considering offering students a more thorough orientation into the program that encompasses the organizational skills they currently see lacking.

Accepting and caring staff. The focus group interview revealed the staff felt building relationships with students contributes to the students' academic success. By providing students with unconditional acceptance and helping those students understand

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that the staff cares about their success contributes to student engagement in school and ultimately academic achievement. Some quotes that support this theme are:

"When I interviewed for this, one of the things that I think I really talked about was I thought it was important to build relationships with students. Once you are able to do that, they trusted you and then would open up if they were having a bad day, or something was going on, or what was going on outside of school that may be affecting why they're not performing so well when they're in here."

"They'll come back still wanting that [relationship]*, knowing that they can trust you."*

"I think sometimes that has been the missing piece for them in a traditional setting is that they haven't had that connection with someone. And when they get here they're able connect with someone, it keeps them engaged."

"I think it's really nice that the focus here is for the kids."

"Well, it's a nice out for the kids who felt like they could never finish [high school] *and they were so far behind that they might as well quit."*

All four staff members reported that relationship building with non-traditional students is the keystone for success of the program. All indicated how this acceptance may be what was missing in the traditional setting for a number of reasons, but that embracing each student is the first step at helping them succeed. Staff described the relationships with students as being the "hook" that keeps them coming to school and seeing graduation come to fruition.

Summary

A combination of quantitative and qualitative data provided indicators for the three evaluation questions and sub-questions. These data provided evidence to support the extent to which the Non-Traditional Program is meeting short-term outcomes of students earning credits, passing SOL tests, and meeting their program goals while participating in the program. These data also provided factors that contribute and possibly inhibit students' success in the program. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

As K-12 educators seek ways to keep students engaged in school who may not be successful in traditional education, non-traditional alternatives have become options for students (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Lind, 2013; Sagor, 1999). Non-traditional programs serve students of a diverse population with a variety of needs and operate to provide these students with another option for completing their high school diploma requirements (Raywid, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003). An important feature of the Non-Traditional Program is that it operates to serve students who feel they need a unique setting that is different from what they have previously experienced (Smith & Thomson, 2014). By providing students with a flexible schedule, a different mode for earning credits, a supportive staff, and a welcoming environment, students have the non-traditional setting to remain in school, earn credits, pass SOLs, and ultimately graduate with a diploma (Foley & Pang, 2006; Smith & Thomson, 2014).

Discussion of Results

The fundamental goal of any alternative school setting is to provide students with an opportunity to continue their education in an environment that provides them the structures necessary given the students' circumstance (Reimer & Cash, 2003). In alignment with the program theory described in Chapter 1, Figure 2, the Non-Traditional Program under evaluation in this study provides students with a safe, accepting

environment, a catalog of online courses from which to choose, staff members who accept students unconditionally, and support with emotional and social concerns. The findings from the perspective of the students support the program theory. Based on the findings, the program theory was not challenged and therefore was not amended. The logic model, however, was adjusted to include developing an attendance goal for students as well as providing a more thorough orientation to the program and online learning strategies. These factors are key components that help support students (Foley & Pang, 2006; Smith & Thomson, 2014) as they continue working toward on-time graduation, the long-term goal of the Non-Traditional Program. For this evaluation study, the focus was on the extent to which the program is meeting its short-term outcomes. The findings are presented below.

Meeting Short-Term Outcomes

Quantitative indicators provided evidence of the extent to which the short-term outcomes of the Non-Traditional Program were met. A review of students' transcripts and test data showed the number of credits each student earned while in the program and the pass rate of the corresponding SOL tests. A review of the student goal plans that were created between the students and the school counselor provided evidence of the level to which students met their own goals in the program. Frequency counts were provided for each of the three short-term outcomes.

Based on the findings of this evaluation, the short-term outcomes are being met with some success. The results from this study are validated by the findings in the literature suggesting that a smaller environment is one of the success factors in alternative

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settings (Foley & Pang, 2006; Reimer & Cash, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014). In Duggan's (2007) dissertation study it was found that a smaller class size allows for a more student-centered culture and gives the students a sense of belonging. The Rennie Center (2014) suggested that smaller environments lend themselves to students being able to forge relationships with teachers thus equipping teachers with the ability to better support the students. In the Non-Traditional Program, teachers are able to support the smaller number of students individually while keeping the focus of the program on academics. Providing students with access to a rigorous academic program is a key characteristic of non-traditional settings, as found in a study by Tobin and Sprague (2000). However, the results of this evaluation also indicate that not all students thrive in a virtual learning environment. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) found similar results in their study of the Twighlight Academy and cautioned that instruction should not be completely replaced by computer-based learning, but supported by computer-based learning. The two academic indicators in this evaluation of credits earned and SOL pass rate showed there is a need to consider different modes of instructional delivery other than online for those students not earning credits, as suggested by D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009).

Credits earned. Student transcripts provided quantitative data for the number of credits earned by each student in the program. These data were categorized by the reason for which the student attended the program (e.g., disciplinary reasons, attendance issues, or medical conerns) and further analyzed for any possible significance or trends. The students who attended the program for medical reasons earned the highest percentage of possible credits. These students earned 88% of their total possible credits as compared to

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the students who attended the program due to low attendance in the traditional

environment who earned 55% of their possible credits. The students in the program for

disciplinary reasons earned 61% of their possible credits. These percentages equated to

the following mean number of credits per category: disciplinary reasons, 1.73 credits;

attendance reasons, 1.37 credits; and medical reasons, 2.89 credits. Based on the

frequency counts of this indicator, the program appears to be more successful with

students who attend for medical purposes than students attending for other reasons;

however, these results were not statistically significant. The overall percentage at which

students in the program earned the total possible credits was 64% with a mean of 1.79

credits.

Based on the program theory presented in Chapter 1 and the factors that

contribute to student success in non-traditional environments, the results indicate that

there may be a missing element of the program that may hinder students' ability to earn

more credits. The program currently offers the same program for all types of students,

regardless of their reason for attendance, yet similar studies indicated that alternative

programs should cater to the students they serve and their needs (Cable et al., 2009; Foley

& Pang, 2006). D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) also found that students in non-

traditional learning environments benefit from other modes of instructional delivery,

including the option of applied learning in the form of working for school credit

depending on their individual needs.

SOL pass rate. Test scores provided quantitative data to support the extent to

which the SOL indicator was met. Similar to the credits earned, the students in the

program for medical reasons showed a pass rate higher than the other two categories. Students with medical issues passed the SOLs at a rate of 94% while the students with attendance concerns passed at a rate of 59%. The lowest performing group was students in the program for disciplinary reasons. Their pass rate was 47%. Although there was a difference in the performance of the groups of students, there was no statistical significance in these results. This finding provides evidence that the program is not meeting the needs of students who are removed from the traditional setting for disciplinary reasons and runs counter to the results found by Franklin et al. (2007) in which students attending an alternative program with an academic focus were successful in working toward graduation. The overall average pass rate for all students in the three semesters evaluated was 65%. These percentages accounted for any retakes that students were allowed within a given testing window. The pass rate also includes any alternate test that students are allowed to use in place of a state end-of-course test.

Students in the traditional classroom who take SOLs for a subject area are given opportunities to practice the test before the actual testing occurs. Students in the Non-Traditional Program are not guaranteed that opportunity in their online coursework; it is dependent on the teacher of the course to provide. Informal discussions with the staff indicated that there has been some test preparation done in the past, but it has not been consistent. For example, if several students are taking the same course, a small group may be convened by a lab facilitator prior to testing; however, single students in SOL courses are not necessarily prepared by a lab facilitator. The online teachers may prepare the students for the testing, but that component was not part of this particular evaluation

and therefore not fully known. Based on this finding, it again appears that there may be a missing component to the Non-Traditional Program that contributes to a lower SOL pass rate than the 70% benchmark of the traditional setting.

Meeting goals. Student goal plans were reviewed to determine the level of success (e.g., goal being achieved) met by the students in the program. The indicator was counted as either being met or not met by the students. For this evaluation study, the indicator was based on the goal options for the students of whether the student planned to return to the traditional high school, remain in the program another semester, or graduate from the program in the current semester. Results were evenly distributed across the categories of students for meeting program goals. The overall rate at which students met their goals was 67%. The highest percentage was 78% met by the students attending for medical purposes and the lowest was 63% for students attending for disciplinary reasons. Further analysis of the individual student goals provided evidence of which goals were being met with more consistency. Table 10 provides the frequency counts for the student goals.

Table 10

Frequency Count of Student Goals

	Graduate	Remain in Program	Return to School	Total
Goal Met	13	20	28	61
Not Met	16	5	9	30

Based on these results, the Non-Traditional Program setting is equally successful with all types of students meeting program goals.

Relationship between Short-Term Outcomes and Reason for Attendance

Further analysis of the short-term outcome data was conducted to determine if the reason for students participating in the Non-Traditional Program was relational to meeting the short-term outcome variables. A chi-square test of independence was conducted on each of the three short-term outcomes and compared to the three categories of attendance, providing a 3 x 3 table for the chi-square test. The null hypothesis for each category stated there was no relationship between the variables and it was failed to be rejected for each chi-square test meaning there was not a statistically significant relationship between the variables. Students attending the program for disciplinary reasons, attendance issues, and medical reasons have the same potential to earn credits, pass SOLs, and meet program goals based on these findings. These findings illustrate the success factors for non-traditional learning environments reviewed in the literature, specifically the recommendation of Porowski et al. (2014) that programs outside of the traditional classroom maintain a rigorous academic focus to keep students on-track for graduation.

Although analysis of the categories of participation in the program and meeting short-term outcomes proved not statistically significant, it is important to note that students with medical concerns performed at a higher rate than their peers in two categories. These students earned 88% of their total possible credits and passed SOLs at a rate of 94% indicating a trend that the program is more favorable to students with

medical needs. This trend may also indicate that there is a missing component in the Non-Traditional Program for students with discipline or attendance issues who need more interventions to be successful. Similar studies indicated that tailoring non-traditional programs specifically to individual needs of students is successful (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Porowski et al., 2014). Franklin et al. (2007) found that personalizing programming for non-traditional students based on the students' strengths keeps them on-track toward graduation. Further research is needed to determine what supports may increase the number of credits earned and SOLs passed for students with discipline and attendance issues.

Factors Contributing to Student Success

A priori codes which were set going into the student interviews and the staff focus group were: online courses, supportive environment, and supportive staff. While the interviews with the students yielded results in each of these categories, one theme that emerged as a factor that contributed to the success of the students, based on the students' perspective, was individualization of student programming in the Non-Traditional Program. Each student who was interviewed reported that having a plan that suited their individual needs while in the program helped them reach success in their coursework. Individualization is a characteristic of non-traditional learning that is supported in the literature. The Rennie Center (2014) reported that students thrive in an environment which is personalized to meet their needs. Porowski et al. (2014) also contended that the smaller environment lends itself to a tailored learning program in which non-traditional students experience higher levels of success than in other environments. The focus group

with the program staff indicated that individualization is important, however the staff

considered individualizing for students in a slightly different context than the students.

Students' interpretation of individualization was in the context of taking online

coursework while the staff used the term to mean considering circumstantial factors for

each student when working with them. Both interpretations support allowing students to

work at an individualized pace which Smith and Thomson (2014) contend help students

feel more in charge of their learning and more likely to complete it.

     Online coursework. The online instructional delivery was reported by all six

students as being beneficial as they felt they were able to "pace themselves". Each

student reported having the ability to work at their "own pace" even though the course

was designed to be completed in nine weeks. Students reported feeling a sense of

individualization in their coursework by not having to follow the pace of an entire

classroom full of students. Offering students the ability to take online coursework allows

the Non-Traditional Program to tailor students' learning program to their individual

needs (Schargel & Smink, 2001) meaning students can select the combination of courses

they take at one time and can work within the 9-week period at "their own pace". One

student reported that she was able to "do it [the coursework]; you read the instructions,

you get it done and if it's right, it's right and if not your teacher will comment". In

addition, students felt the benefit of having online coursework because it allowed

students access to courses from home if they fell behind their initial pace.

     One student credited online learning for her ability to take good notes, reporting

that online learning forced her to learn how to take good notes, in her own style, and

organize herself the best possible way for her learning. Five students felt they were organized in their approach to the online coursework. One student pointed out that it is important to know your own learning style in order to be successful. She indicated that she printed a lot of materials in order to mark the text with notes and use it to study the content. She was the only student who reported using that particular strategy approaching her work. All students reported communication with the online teachers as an important strategy for success in the program. The communication took the form of questioning content, inquiring about grades, and asking technical questions. All students reported that online teachers responded in an appropriate amount of time.

The staff focus group yielded slightly different responses about online learning. While the staff reported the online platform as useful for students in a non-traditional setting, the teachers believed there some considerations that must be taken when working with students online. The non-traditional teachers reported a need to partner with the online teachers to understand the pacing of the course in order to help facilitate the students completing the courses on time. However, one challenge that emerged in discussing online learning was the students' general inability to manage time efficiently, which is discussed later in this chapter. The program teachers reported that when students attend the program daily and manage their time, the 9-week pacing is appropriate; however, in the current operation of the program students are struggling to maintain an appropriate pace in the coursework. Further evaluation of the virtual learning program would be needed to find detailed results of the program's effectiveness.

Supportive environment. Staff members reported the supportive environment as an important factor contributing to the program's success. This finding is supported in the research as well as in the program theory presented in Chapter 1. A safe and welcoming environment in which students are met by an accepting and supportive staff is the foundation for any non-traditional program (Aron, 2006; Raywid, 1994; Reimer & Cash, 2003). The staff members in the Non-Traditional Program stated that the program "works for many students" because of the fact that it is "smaller" and "less intimidating" than traditional school. One staff member described the program as giving the students "a new beginning." The whole staff viewed the Non-Traditional Program as being more supportive than a traditional school setting of students who were not finding success in the traditional environment (Aron & Zweig, 2003). The staff attributed this to the smaller number of students with whom they are able to establish relationships (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Foley & Pang, 2006; Rennie Center, 2014).

Students reported that the staff in the program were "helpful" and "supportive", yet they did not indicate this as being a reason for their success. Several students indicated that due to the smaller size they felt more comfortable in the program's environment and had no distractions compared to the traditional setting (Reimer & Cash, 2003). The more flexible schedule was another positive factor for students. One student reported that she would not be able to graduate if she did not "have this schedule as an option." She attributed this to the reduced hours of attendance made a difference in conjunction with the online courses.

Individualization. Through the coding process of the student interviews and staff

focus group, individualization was a theme emerged. From the students' perspective, the

Non-Traditional Program provided an individualized plan for each student in the

program. Students reported that they may have been "left behind" in the traditional

setting, whereas in the Non-Traditional Program there was a "team of people"

encompassing the student and helping them succeed (Rennie Center, 2014). This

individualized plan included what courses the student would take, the length of time they

may remain in the program, and other supports the student may need to be successful.

Staff recognized that students in the program were there for a variety of reasons.

Because of this point, no two students are alike and thus an individualized plan must be

made for each. In order to know how to help students plan for success, relationships must

be forged and the staff must get to know the needs of the students they serve (D'Angelo

& Zemanick, 2009). The staff went further to explain that getting to know the students is

important because "you'll know what [learning] strategy works". Staff within the

program as well as the online teachers are then able to accommodate the students' goals

by individualizing instruction.

The program staff reported that remaining flexible with the students in the

program is important to balance with accountability for completion of coursework. The

teachers felt that this flexibility is vital to the individualization that the students feel in the

program (Aron & Zweig, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014). For example, the staff described

one student who has experienced the death of a close family member causing her

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workflow to slow down, while another student who is working equally as slow has no excuse. The staff reports having to handle each situation on a "case-by-case basis."

Factors Inhibiting Student Success

Student and staff interviews revealed positive factors that contribute to the success of the Non-Traditional Program; however, both groups also noted an area that appears to be missing from the program which inhibits student success to a degree. While students reported individualization as contributing to their success in terms of pacing in the online coursework, the staff reported this as an inhibiting factor in that the program operates under the premise of completing work within a 9-week period and at the end of that period there are many incomplete grades to be finalized. The focus group revealed that staff make assumptions about students' ability to manage online learning without explicit instruction on how to do so. Assumptions are made about computer skills as well as organizational skills and time management or executive functioning skills (Harvard, 2017). The Non-Traditional staff determined that the program may be lacking in the area of transitioning students into the program more thoroughly, an area that was not reviewed in the literature.

Virtual learning skills. Students who enter a non-traditional setting to continue their education have not been successful in the traditional classroom. By offering a non-traditional option for students, while maintaining an academic focus, the Non-Traditional Program offers online courses to its students with instruction delivered virtually. These online courses support the district curriculum and offer students a rigorous option to completing graduation requirements, a success factor for any alternative setting (NGA

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Center, 2001). While most students interviewed stated that online learning "worked" for

them, one student described the learning environment as "lonely" and wished she could

"collaborate with other students taking the same course." Borup, Graham, and Davies

(2012) contend that students require interaction while taking online courses—in fact, they

crave it. This interaction comes in the form of a relationship with the teacher, with the

content, and with peers and serves to keep the student motivated and willing to ask for

help (Journell, 2010). While continuing to offer students rigorous courses in the program,

the literature supports instruction more aligned to the traditional setting. Direct

instruction, small group instruction, and differentiated instruction remain critical to

helping students learn (Aron & Zweig, 2003; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). No matter

the setting, the learning program should be specific to the students' learning style

(Schargel & Smink, 2001).

Executive functioning skills. Executive functioning and self-regulation are

defined by Harvard University (2017) as processes that help people plan, focus,

remember instructions, and perform many tasks on a daily basis. Adolescents have these

skills, but they are not yet developed to the adult level. Throughout high school, teens are

required to perform as though these executive skills are fully developed. Harvard (2017)

describes a teen as needing to practice these skills as they communicate in different

contexts, manage school activities (including extracurricular), and complete complicated

projects. In the Non-Traditional Program, the focus group indicated that there are

assumptions made by the staff that students have fully developed executive functioning

skills and perhaps there is a gap in the onboarding process of the program. Staff

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expressed frustration over students appearing to be working, yet seemingly generating little product which led to a discussion about how to increase the training when students enter the program.

The evaluation yielded evidence that a more detailed orientation could support students earning credits in the time frame suggested by the program. Currently this is missing from the program. In the Non-Traditional Program currently, students are given a brief orientation to navigating the online platform, Canvas, and shown how to communicate with the online teacher through the system. Students are given a lesson on how to upload work that must be submitted for grading and how to open assessments. After this brief orientation, the students are set to begin working in the courses, knowing that each course is set to a 9-week pace. The focus group indicated that many students need more orienting to the virtual learning program. Teachers reported that students "always look like they're busy" yet they often need extended time to complete coursework. Another staff member described the students as "always working, but often have no product." Providing this support when students enter the program will support the program goals as well as help students develop their own self-regulatory skills (Center on the Developing Child, 2017; Rennie Center, 2014). Based on the discovery of this missing orientation to the program, the logic model, Figure 1, was revised in Chapter 1 to reflect this activity.

Recommendations for the Non-Traditional Program

As a result of the findings in this evaluation there are several recommendations for the Non-Traditional Program which are outlined in Table 11.

Table 11

Program Findings and Recommendations

Findings	Recommendations for the Program
1. 1.79 mean credits were earned by students in the program with students attending for discipline and attendance reasons being the lowest.	1. Offer a proactive support system for students with discipline and attendance issues to see if additional social/emotional support helps achievement (Smith & Thomson, 2014). 2. Provide an organizational skills orientation in addition to the online course navigation training. 3. Provide different modes of instruction within the program (Aron & Zweig, 2003; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009)
2. Students passed SOL tests at a rate of 65%.	4. Provide a test preparation session in the program prior to the test. 5. Assess the online content to determine if the course is aligned to the test (Journell, 2010).
3. Students met their program goals at a rate of 67%.	6. Set individualized goals for each student and progress monitor throughout the semester (Aron, 2006; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). (e.g., create specific attendance goals to be reviewed every two weeks)
4. Students report a sense of individualization in the program as contributing to their success.	7. Continue to look at individual student needs and serve individual students (Rennie Center, 2014). (e.g., offer different modes of instruction, counseling support) 8. Maintain a longitudinal database to track outcomes by student (e.g., do students with discipline issues manage behavior appropriately in the mainstream setting; do students with medical issues have success in the traditional setting; are students graduating on time).

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Maintaining the academic focus is not only a key component of any non-traditional setting, but it supports the short and long-term outcomes of the program (Schargel & Smink, 2001). While this element is in place in the program, one recommendation for the program would be to consider the differing needs and learning styles of the types of students in the program. For example, the students attending for medical purposes met the outcomes much higher than their peers. This indicates that there is a missing piece for other categories of students. Learning more about individual student needs and supporting those proactively may contribute to a higher outcome for all students in the program. This proactive support may be in the form of individual counseling or small group counseling to address needs outside of the academic realm. By supporting the whole student, academic achievement will be impacted (Foley & Pang, 2006; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Consideration of different learning styles may lead the program to offer other modes of instruction. Aron and Zweig (2003) and D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) found that students respond to small group instruction, differentiated instruction, and even working for credit as successful modes of earning credit toward graduation. Computer-based learning should come in the form of support and not replace instruction (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Based on the results of the SOL testing, the Non-Traditional Program should consider a test preparation session with students who have to take SOL tests at the end of each semester. Offering a small group preparation session on test taking strategies and a review of content will support student success on the tests. While this was not a component of this evaluation, it was reported that test preparation does not typically

occur prior to testing. Another consideration, which is more of a future research recommendation, is to evaluate the online courses to determine the level of alignment with the tests.

Finally, as the Non-Traditional Program grows, maintaining a longitudinal data collection would benefit the district in learning more about how effective the program is for different students. In this evaluation the difference of achievement among the three different categories of students was not statistically significant; however, in looking at the raw numbers it appeared that the students with medical concerns performed at a higher level. Before making any programmatic changes student achievement would have to be tracked over a longer period of time to determine the level of success with different types of students.

Implications for Practice

School districts must consider factors that contribute to helping students who are not successful in traditional settings remain in school and graduate. By offering a non-traditional setting in which students may continue to work toward graduation, districts can continue to support student achievement while reaching their own accountability measures (ESSA, 2016). The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 supported programs in which students attend a separate location with a smaller enrollment (Porowski et al., 2014; Rennie Center, 2014). In this smaller environment staff members are able to develop individualized programming for students and help students achieve success (Rennie Center, 2014). By keeping the program small in total number of students, teachers will be better able to meet the diverse needs of the students being served (Aron,

2006). In the Non-Traditional Program, staff members were able to build relationships with students while supporting their academic endeavors; however, in order to help them manage time more effectively, the need for students to further develop executive functioning skills emerged.

Based on the results of the evaluation of the short-term outcomes of the Non-Traditional Program, districts should consider offering students an alternative option outside of the traditional setting to continue progress toward graduation. Without options outside of the traditional classroom, students do not have access to supports to continue earning credits and taking SOLs with teacher and school counselor support. Online learning affords students the opportunity to self-pace (within reason) while working toward graduation requirements giving them a feeling of personalization. In addition, online learning supports non-traditional settings in maintaining the high academic focus that is necessary for student achievement (Aron, 2006; NGA, 2001; Schargel & Smink, 2001). Districts must, however, consider that students need training on how to be successful in online courses. Assumptions about students managing time effectively and navigating online platforms should be taken into consideration and training should be planned prior to students launching an online course.

Recommendations for Future Evaluation

As a result of this evaluation there are four recommendations for future evaluations of non-traditional education programs.

1. While this evaluation tracked short-term outcomes of the program, it is important to continue to track students when they leave the program to

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determine their success in transitioning back to the traditional setting. This will inform district programs on how to help students transfer skills gained in a non-traditional setting to a traditional setting.

2. Non-traditional settings will benefit from further evaluation on how different categories of students in attendance perform academically and socially. This evaluation will inform districts on how to tailor programs to individual student needs.

3. Student engagement is dependent on relationships with staff. Further evaluation on building rapport with students and the outcomes in students' achievement will inform the connection between student-staff relationships and achievement.

4. Finally, it is important to determine the extent to which the program is meeting its long-term goal of graduating students. Therefore tracking student success after transition out of program should measure the level of success the students have in earning credits and passing SOLs toward graduating on-time in the setting to which they transition.

Summary

Providing students an option outside of the traditional classroom similar to the Non-Traditional Program is worthy of consideration by other school districts (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Simonsen & Sugai, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). Although the results of a program evaluation cannot be generalized, the findings of this evaluation are consistent with the review of the literature in what factors support a successful non-

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traditional program. The students in the program are successful in earning credits and passing SOLs toward graduation in a smaller environment, with support from classroom facilitators (Reimer & Cash, 2003; Rennie Center, 2014). In addition, the individualized learning further supports the students toward achieving academically (Porowski et al., 2014).

The purpose of this product evaluation was to determine the extent to which short-term outcomes of the Non-Traditional Program were met. The evaluation also set out to learn if the program was more or less successful with different types of students being served and determining what factors were contributing or inhibiting student success. The findings showed that students are earning credits, passing SOLs, and meeting program goals with some success. Although it was not statistically significant, students attending the program for medical reasons earn higher numbers of credits and pass SOLs with a higher rate than their peers. The program provides students in need of an alternative option an opportunity to continue working on graduation requirements outside of the traditional setting with support from teachers and a school counselor. Without this option, students may lose hope toward graduating leading the district to experience lower graduation rates.

Appendix A

Focus Group Interview with Staff

Thank you for taking the time today to speak with me about the Learning Lab. The primary goal of the lab is to help students have nontraditional options and stay on track for on-time graduation.

Today, I would like to ask you questions about your work and observations in the Learning Lab. Your responses will become part of my doctoral research of program outcomes. Our conversation today should take no more than one hour. I am audio-recording our session for transcription and analysis. All of your responses will remain confidential and identifying information will be redacted in the transcript. You may withdraw from this interview at any time without penalty.

Before we begin, I'd like you to maintain several group norms:

• Respect everyone's point of view. There are no right or wrong answers.
• Please do not identify other people by name. You may refer to them instead as "a student" or "a teacher."
• Due to the audio recording, I need only one person at a time to speak.
• In order to maintain our group confidentiality, please do not share or discuss specific ideas or information shared in this session with others.

The researcher developed focused group interview questions for the staff interviews. The questions included the following:

1. How would you describe the Non-Traditional Program?
2. How is this environment different from the traditional school?
3. What is it about this program that you think helps students remain in school?
4. Describe a successful student profile for this non-traditional setting.
5. What do you like best about this program? Why?
6. What do you think could improve the program?

Appendix B

Staff Consent to Participate in Research

Program Evaluation of the Non-Traditional Program Staff Interview

Introduction and Purpose
My name is Anne Neve and I am a graduate student in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary, working with my faculty advisor, Dr. Leslie Grant. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, as part of my doctoral program, which concerns the Non-Traditional Program in which you work.

Procedures
If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct a focus group interview with you and your colleagues at your work site after work hours. The interview will involve questions about components of the Non-Traditional Program and how, if at all, you view it as successful. The interview should last about one hour. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

I expect to conduct only one interview; however, follow-ups may be needed for added clarification. If so, I will contact you by phone to request this.

Benefits
There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will inform any needed programmatic adjustments to the Non-Traditional Program.

Confidentiality
Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. Individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used

Compensation
You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Rights
Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in this evaluation. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the evaluation and

whether or not you choose to answer a question or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions
If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact Dr. Leslie Grant at 757-221-2411 or at lwgran@wm.edu.

****

CONSENT

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

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below.

_____
Participant's Name *(please print)*

_____   _____

Participant's Signature   Date

Appendix C

Student Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time today to speak with me about the Non-Traditional Program. As you are aware, the primary goal of the lab is to help students have nontraditional options and stay on track for on-time graduation.

Today, I would like to ask you questions about your personal experience in the Non-Traditional Program. Your responses will become part of my doctoral research of program outcomes. Our conversation today should take no more than thirty minutes. I am audio-recording our session for transcription and analysis. All of your responses will remain confidential and any identifying information will be redacted in the transcript. If at any time you decide you do not want to participate, you may withdraw from this interview without penalty.

1. Tell me how you came to the Non-Traditional Program.
2. Tell me about your Non-Traditional Program experience so far:
   a. How would you describe the online learning?
   b. Describe your interactions with the online teachers.
   c. How would you describe your interactions with the Non-Traditional Program facilitators?
3. Based on your plan for the end of the semester, do you see yourself being successful? Why or why not?
4. What strategies, if any, have worked for you in the Non-Traditional Program?
5. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in the Non-Traditional Program?
6. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest and 1 the lowest, how would you rate your experience in the Non-Traditional Program?
7. Based on what you told me about how you came to the Non-Traditional Program, did we meet your needs?
8. What do you think could have been done better and helped you even more?

   Just one final question:

9. Would you recommend the Non-Traditional Program to a friend?

Appendix D

Letter Requesting Participation in Student Interview

Date

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Anne Neve and in addition to serving as the Coordinator of Student Intervention Systems for Williams-burg-James City County Schools, I am also a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary. My dissertation proposal is to evaluate the effectiveness of our Learning Lab Program to include level of student success experienced in the program. As a method for collecting this information, I am conducting interviews of selected students in the Learning Lab program. Student responses are crucial in providing the necessary information to formulate useful programs to support students who may benefit from nontraditional learning environments.

Student responses will not be identified personally. Please know that participation is voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating. You may also withdraw from this study at any time. Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Leslie Grant at (757) 221- 2411 or lwgran@wm.edu or Dr. Ray McCoy, the chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at The College of William and Mary at (757) 221-2783 or rwmcco@wm.edu.

Enclosed you will find a self-addressed, stamped envelope to use when returning the signed consent form for your student to participate in the interview. The interview will be scheduled after school hours and will take no more than 30 minutes.

Your response and your student's time is greatly appreciated. Thank you, in advance.

Sincerely,

Anne Neve
Coordinator of Student Intervention Systems

Appendix E

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

TITLE of STUDY: An Evaluation of a Non-Traditional Program for High School Students

Researcher(s): Anne Neve, Principal Investigator and Dr. Leslie Grant, Faculty Sponsor, College of W&M

Contact Information: Anne Neve: 757-603-6528 Dr. Grant: 757-221-2411

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in the aforementioned research study. This form provides you with information about this study, the researcher(s), and contact information for the researchers to answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without any penalty or loss of benefits to your child. If you decide to let your child participate, you are free to withdraw your participation at any time during the study without any adverse consequences. If your child participates, you can get information about the project by contacting   A copy of this signed agreement will remain in your child's permanent school folder.

Name of Child _____ Grade _____

School _____Teacher's Name _____

Signature _____

Parent/Guardian Printed Name and Date
Signature _____

Principal Investigator/Researcher Printed Name and Date
Signature _____

Faculty Sponsor (if any) Printed Name and Date
_____

Appendix F

Frequency Count of Student Data

Students	Attendance Code	Credits Earned	Possible Credits	Credits Code	SOLs passed	Possible SOLs	SOL Pass Code	Goal Met
1	1	1	5	2	0	0	4	2
2	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
3	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
4	1	2	2	1	0	0	4	1
5	1	3	4	2	0	2	3	1
6	2	1	2	2	0	1	3	1
7	3	4	4	1	2	2	1	1
8	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
9	2	3	3	1	0	1	3	1
10	3	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
11	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
12	2	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
13	1	3	3	1	3	3	1	1
14	2	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
15	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
16	3	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
17	3	4	4	1	2	2	1	1
18	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1
19	2	1	1	1	0	0	4	1
1	3	2	2	1	2	2	1	1
2	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
3	2	0	1	3	0	0	4	1
4	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	1
5	2	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
6	3	4	4	1	2	2	1	1
7	3	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
8	2	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
9	2	0	2	3	0	0	4	1
10	2	1	1	1	0	0	4	1
11	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	1
12	1	2	2	1	0	0	4	1
13	1	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
14	1	2	2	1	0	0	4	1
15	2	2	3	2	2	2	1	1
16	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	1
17	1	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
18	3	4	4	1	1	1	1	1
19	2	1	2	2	0	1	3	1
20	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
21	2	1	3	2	0	0	4	2
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25	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	1
26	1	2	4	2	2	2	1	1
27	1	4	4	1	0	0	4	1
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29	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
30	2	0	3	3	1	2	2	1
31	2	1	3	2	0	0	4	1
32	2	0	1	3	0	0	4	1
33	2	0	1	3	0	0	4	2
34	3	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
35	1	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
36	1	0	4	3	0	0	4	2
37	2	0	4	3	0	0	4	2
1	3	2	2	1	0	0	4	1
2	3	2	2	1	0	0	4	2
3	2	5	5	1	0	1	3	1
4	1	4	4	1	0	1	3	1
5	2	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
6	3	4	4	1	2	3	2	2
7	1	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
8	3	3	4	2	2	2	1	1
9	2	5	5	1	2	2	1	1
10	1	4	4	1	0	3	3	1
11	1	4	4	1	0	2	3	2
12	2	2	2	1	2	3	2	2
13	3	5	5	1	1	1	1	1
14	2	2	2	1	0	0	4	1
15	2	4	4	1	1	1	1	1
16	3	4	4	1	2	2	1	1
17	1	4	4	1	1	2	2	1
18	2	2	3	2	0	0	4	1
19	3	2	4	2	0	0	4	1
20	1	2	4	2	2	2	1	2
21	2	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
22	2	1	4	2	0	0	4	2
23	2	2	4	2	0	3	3	1
24	2	0	4	3	0	0	4	2
25	2	0	4	3	0	0	4	2
26	2	1	2	3	1	1	1	2
27	2	0	2	3	0	0	4	2
28	2	4	4	1	2	4	2	1
29	3	2	2	1	0	0	4	1
30	2	2	2	1	0	1	3	1
31	2	3	3	1	1	1	4	1
32	2	3	3	1	0	0	4	1
33	2	2	2	1	0	0	4	1
34	1	0	2	3	0	0	4	2

35	2	1	1	1	0	0	4	1

Atttendance Code		Credits Earned Key		Goal Key		SOL Key	
Discipline	1	All	1	YES	1	All	1
Attendance	2	Partial	2	NO	2	Partial	2
Med/Soc/Em	3	None	3			None	3
						N/A	4

Appendix G

Table of Specifications for Student Interview Questions

Program Theory	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Safe, accepting, relaxed environment				x	x	x		x	x
Online curriculum with choice of courses		x	x	x				x	x
Accepting and understanding staff		x						x	x
Support with content and social/emotional concerns	x		x	x			x	x	x

Appendix H

Positionality Statement

My career in education began 25 years ago as a French teacher. I acutally never thought I would become a teacher because I wanted to use my French speaking skills to translate or be an interpreter. It was my sophomore year in college that my mother suggested I consider getting my teaching license while in school—just to have it. Although I did not feel it was my area of interest, I signed up for an education course the next semester. They say that mother knows best and in this situation it rang true. Apparently my mother saw in me something that I had not yet seen in myself because I loved that class!

As my college career progressed, so did my love for teaching. The idea of working with students, sharing my passion for learning French, and simply helping students grow emotionally inspired me to pursue a career in the teaching immediately following graduation. Little did I realize at that point in time, it was only the beginning of a very long career in teaching and learning.

My first teaching job was in a private, Catholic school where I was responsible for teaching all levels of French to students in grades eight through twelve. As if that task was not challenging enough for a brand new teacher, I was also given opportunities to sponsor the student government and coach two sports. Throughout these experiences I enjoyed getting to know students and helping them through their high school experiences. In particular I enjoyed helping students manage the college process—exploring ideas,

applying, and transitioning out of high school. This prompted me to consider going back to school to work on my master's degree to become a school counselor.

At the same time I applied to and was accepted into the school counseling program at The College of William and Mary, I switched jobs. I took a position in a public middle school in ████████████ teaching French and Spanish (for which I was not certified). After one year, my position was cut to half-time forcing me to pursue another job in ████████████████████████. I spent the next two years teaching middle school French in WJCC while finishing my counseling degree. I was fortunate enough to transition to a counselor position in the same school in which I was a teacher. Three years later I moved to a high school within the division as a counselor.

Transitioning to a high school counseling position was challenging and just what I craved at that time in my career. As a fun aside, I was able to follow some of the middle school students I counseled from 6th grade until graduation. Two years in to the high school position, I applied to be the lead counselor and was awarded that position. During this time I worked with a department of four counselors and three support staff to build a team of adults willing and able to support a variety of student needs. I also worked with the one other high school in the division along with the counselor at the alternative school in which we placed students removed from school for disciplinary matters such as fighting, having a weapon at school, or a drug violation.

What I was not prepared for was the demanding parent population for whom we worked. After another two years in the lead position, I began to feel completely burned out and wanted to experience a career outside of education altogether. I began to seek

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employment outside of the school system and spent the next three years as a human resources manager for a construction company. This was an experience that gave me time to reflect, build even more interpersonal skills, and ultimately realize I wanted to be back in education. That moment hit when my son transitioned to sixth grade. I attended his sixth grade orientation, a decision I made at the last minute, without him. He had a basketball game and could not attend. After that orientation I went home and told my husband that I was going back into the schools as a counselor. It could have been the less-than presentation given by the counselors that I sat through that spawned this idea, but for whatever reason, it was crystal clear that I wanted to go back.

My journey took me into two interviews with the very school division in which I had spent the majority of my working life. I did not receive offers from either of those two interviews, one of which was with the alternative school that served middle school students. As it turned out, that was the best thing that could have happened to me because I ended up working for the next four years in ███████ at an urban high school as the director of school counseling where I gained valuable experiences. While in this position I was able to work with school leadership teams to develop programs to help struggling students, attend conferences about reaching at-risk students who come from poverty, and work with colleagues who strived to make a difference for students in need.

In addition to being able to serve students who did not have the same resources that students with whom I had previously worked, I gained administrative experience working with master scheduling, implementing new student management systems, and managing a team of 13 professionals. When one of the assistant principals was out for

medical reasons for three months, I was able to step in and support the administrative team on her behalf because I had the knowledge and skills to do so. That experience of managing two demanding positions prompted me to pursue my administrative endorsement. Seeking this endorsement led me back to William and Mary, but not for another master's degree. I decided if I was going to have to take more coursework, I would challenge myself to earn a doctorate.

Since the beginning of my doctoral journey I have switched jobs twice. I was hired as the coordinator of school counseling for ███ three years ago—a position that I was not convinced I wanted, yet felt compelled to take. During the two years I worked in this capacity, I became privy to a new position being created in the division that would oversee all interventions offered to students. This would include the high school GED program and a non-traditional program that was being piloted by the division for students who were not finding success in the traditional setting. The minute I heard about the position I knew I was the right fit for it. It would afford me the opportunity to remain at the district administrative level, yet have some hands on experiences working with students and families again. That was a large void in the coordinator of counseling position. This is my second year in the position and I could not have personally developed a more fitting position for myself.

Throughout my career I feel I have always worked from the stance of doing what is best for students. This continues in my current position. I work with three high schools to determine options for students who are not successful in the traditional setting. We are able to consider a student's current situation and brainstorm solutions that may work

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better for the student. Our solutions do not always work, in which case we come back to the table and discuss additional options. It is rewarding work for me. I am able to help students find success, help parents feel better about their child's educational opportunities, help schools find ways to keep students in school, and work with staff who are accepting and accommodating to some challenging students.

With regard to the non-traditional program in which I work, I am passionate about the success of both the students and the program. Having lived through some previous iterations of alternative education in the district, I am committed to making this different. And while I want to be able to show the success of the program, I am also open to the fact that through evaluation comes the illumination of factors that are either not present or are not working. As part of my commitment to making this program successful, I want to see what those factors are so they can be addressed and added, if necessary. While I feel personally connected to the program, I recognize that I must remain objective in its operation. I am the spokesperson for the program and I need data, along with the personal student stories, to continue to support the work we do. As a result of the great work in non-traditional settings, I am hopeful that one day the approach we take in non-traditional environments might transfer to traditional settings. Smaller class sizes, stronger student-teacher relationships, supports for all students, curricula that meet students where they are….these are just some ideas of what could make school work for more students. To me, that would be the ideal. In the meantime, I will continue to support my team and students with whom we work on a daily basis to help them be the best they can be at this time in their lives.

Appendix I

Institutional Review Board Approval

Subject:
STATUS OF PROTOCOL EDIRC-2016-12-23-11648-lwgran set to active

Message:
This is to notify you on behalf of the Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC) that protocol EDIRC-2016-12-23-11648-lwgran titled An Evaluation of a Non-Traditional Program for High School Students has been EXEMPTED from formal review because it falls under the following category(ies) defined by DHHS Federal Regulations: 45CFR46.101.b.1.

Work on this protocol may begin on 2017-01-15 and must be discontinued on 2018-01-15.

Should there be any changes to this protocol, please submit these changes to the committee for determination of continuing exemption using the Protocol and Compliance Management application (https://compliance.wm.edu).

Please add the following statement to the footer of all consent forms, cover letters, etc.:

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2017-01-15 AND EXPIRES ON 2018-01-15.

You are required to notify Dr. Ward, chair of the EDIRC, at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) and Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Chair of the PHSC at 757-221-3862 (jastev@wm.edu) if any issues arise during this study.

Good luck with your study.

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