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November 13, 2009

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A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF AN ALTERNATIVE INTERVENTION PROGRAM ON IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, ATTENDANCE, AND DISCIPLINE

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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# Dedications

My dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Mrs. Willie Mae Barnett. You continue to be the glue that holds me together. I love you dearly!

To the loving memory of my daddy, Arthur Philip Betts. I experience the power of your spirit every day! I kept my promise…

And to my awesome son, Aaron Keith Allen, I cannot put into words my love for you. I am honored and humbled that God loves me so dearly, that He entrusted me with his very, very best.

I pass the doctoral baton to you!

*Jeremiah 29:11*

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

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# Abstract

A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF AN ALTERNATIVE INTERVENTION PROGRAM ON IMPROVING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, ATTENDANCE, AND DISCIPLINE

By Beverly B. Allen-Hardy, Ph.D.

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

Major Director: Maike I. Philipsen, Ph.D.
Professor, School of Education

This mixed methods study sought to examine student perceptions of the impact of an alternative intervention program (AIP), and provide a framework meant to inspire programs in other locations. Focusing on attendance, discipline, and academic achievement data, this study examined what factors motivate successful alternative education students to succeed upon their return to the comprehensive setting, and identify support factors that foster resiliency. Qualitative data were collected through three focus groups of students who were either new to the program, enrolled in the program for at least a nine-week period, and students who successfully completed a nine-week placement. Six adult students who completed the program and received a high school diploma were in-depth interview participants. Quantitative data were collected using student records.

Results indicated differences in the students' perception of grades earned and the actual grades received. Students were able to maintain their attendance, grades, and discipline during the alternative program enrollment, but scored lower in English and Mathematics after leaving the program than they did prior to attending the program. The fast pace and rigor of a standards-based curriculum in a comprehensive setting proved challenging for students in need of a caring, nurturing environment that offered individualized instruction. Students overwhelmingly attribute their success in the alternative program to a caring staff, and flexible scheduling within a structured environment.

This study revealed the need for a more structured process to transition students from the alternative to comprehensive settings. Students could literally be in the alternative setting today and in the comprehensive setting tomorrow, with very little support or guidance. This led to repeated disciplinary offenses and for some students, their return to the alternative setting.

# CHAPTER 1

## Background

Alternative education is based upon the premise that all students can learn when given the right environment and structure. Additionally, it recognizes that it is in the best interest of society to ensure education for all. To accomplish this, a variety of programs and environments must be incorporated into the educational setting to meet the needs of each person (Morley, 1991).

Zero-tolerance policies, the rise of youth violence, the decline of school success, and changes in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are just a few of the reasons for the growth of alternative education programs. These programs vary greatly in diversity, population, and location, making succinct data collection and program evaluation a difficult task (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Zero-tolerance policies are administrative rules designed to address specific problems associated with school safety and discipline. Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994, requiring states to legislate zero-tolerance laws or risk losing federal funds (Martin 2000).

In recent years, anxious educators have relied increasingly on zero tolerance policies as a simple response to student threats of violence that relieved them of the need to exercise judgment and make reasoned decisions in response to student infractions (Virginia Youth Violence Project, 2001). The results of a 2002 elementary and

secondary school survey conducted by the Office for Civil Rights indicated that more than three million students were suspended and another 89,000 were expelled during the 2002-2003 school year. Additionally, the Advancement Project & The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University reported that African American students represent 17% of public school enrollment, but 33% of suspensions that removed them from school for at least one day. Principals responded that the three student discipline issues most frequently rated as serious or moderate problems at the elementary and secondary levels were tardiness, absenteeism, and physical conflicts. Research shows that students of color are most often referred and suspended for non-violent conduct such as disrespect of authority, defiance of authority, and disobedience (Skiba et. al., 2000).

Although the purpose of exclusionary school discipline policies is to ensure safe, productive learning environments, student learning is severely disrupted when students are removed from school. And, there is little scientific evidence to support the effectiveness of suspension and expulsion in reducing school violence or increasing school safety (Office for Civil Rights, 2002).

A student's decision to drop out of school has devastating consequences that can lead to juvenile delinquency, welfare dependency, or, in the worst cases, prison. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) approximately four of every 100 students who were enrolled in high school in October 2004 left school before October 2005 without completing a high school program. In 2005, the event dropout rate for students living in low–income families was 8.9 percent, approximately six times greater than the 1.5 percent rate of their peers from high–income families (NCES, 2007).

The Child Trends Bank indicates five trends among youth. First, young people who drop out of high school are unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials necessary to function in today's increasingly complex society and technological workplace. The completion of high school is required for accessing post-secondary education and is a minimum requirement for most jobs. Second, high school dropouts are more likely than high school completers to be unemployed. Third, studies have found that young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty and to receive government assistance. Fourth, high school dropouts are likely to stay on public assistance longer than those with at least a high school degree. Lastly, high school dropouts are more likely to become involved in crime (Child Trends Data Bank, 2007) The U.S. Department of Justice estimates from the most recent data available that approximately 30 percent of federal inmates, 40 percent of state prison inmates, and 50 percent of persons on death row are high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000, 2002).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) strengthens academic expectations and accountability for the nation’s 5.8 million children with disabilities, and bridges the gap that has too often existed between what children with disabilities learn and what is required in a regular curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). With the 1997 amendments to IDEA, the mission of alternative programs has expanded from the education of youth who have dropped out, or who were at risk for dropping out, to students with disabilities whose behavior warrants special attention outside the regular education setting. Alternative programs now provide alternative programming, including

flexible curricula that can address the unique social, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and vocational needs of the individual student (Quinn, Rutherford & Osher, 1999).

Alternative education is based upon the premise that all students can learn when given the right environment and structure. Additionally, it recognizes that it is in the best interest of society to ensure education for all. To accomplish this, a variety of programs and environments must be incorporated to meet the needs of each person (Morley, 1991).

The Alternative Intervention Program is one of several alternative education programs located on the complex of a school division in a central Virginia county. The campus is centrally located to accommodate students from each school district. It is one of the few locations where students needing an alternative, or non-traditional approach to learning, can attend school on a daily basis. During segregation, the campus housed the only school where Black students could receive an education. Students would travel for miles in order to attend school. For the alternative education student, the same holds true today, as the alternative high school serves the entire county. The former minority school is now the county's only alternative high school located on the complex. The school offers vocational programs as well as academic classes (McKinney, 2004).

In addition to the alternative high school, the campus provides a special education center, a vocational assessment center, General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, adult education classes, a drug-free schools program, a suspension/intervention program, a center for diversified studies, and the Department of Non-Traditional Programs. It is designed to meet the needs of non-traditional learners as well as the general community.

The campus is named after a nationally recognized pioneer educator, leader, and humanitarian in the education field. The educator, who was the daughter of former slaves, became a teacher at the age of sixteen. She secured a teaching position with the division's school board and opened a school in 1892, where she taught woodworking, sewing, cooking, and gardening, as well as academics. Her innovative practices and ideas in education led her to being appointed as the county's first Jeanes teacher. Jeanes teachers were highly respected educators in states throughout the South. She believed that every student had the ability to succeed, and if not academically, then through gaining a marketable skill, a notion that continues to be the focus of the alternative campus (Smith, 1997).

Until the middle of the twentieth century, few efforts were made to educate African-Americans. The Peabody Fund, set up in 1867 as the first philanthropic organization, provided a model for the Jeanes Fund, one of the most significant efforts (Jones, 1937).

Miss Jeanes, a Quaker from Philadelphia, asked Booker T. Washington and a colleague from Hampton Institute to develop a board of trustees and to spend her money in the rural areas where most African-Americans lived. She wanted to provide supervisors for rural schools. They would serve as consultants and assistants to the teachers, most of whom had little training. Many of the Jeanes Supervisors themselves were sent to the traditionally black colleges such as Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes for in-service training. Washington was the African-American leader who believed that the way for blacks to succeed was through vocational education and a willingness to focus

their efforts on improving their economic rather than their political status. Miss Jeanes had insisted that Booker T. Washington sit on the board, and that he have the authority to pick other members. He selected other African-American men to serve who favored industrial education for blacks, rather than educating blacks for the professions, which might challenge the social and economic status quo (Smith, 1997).

A former home economics cottage on the campus has been transformed into a museum honoring the first Jeanes teacher, which provides a rich history for students. The teacher died in 1958, and was later reinterred on the campus near the museum. In 1976, the museum was named a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of Interior, National Park Service. The Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission designated the museum a State Historic Landmark.

The Alternative Intervention Program (AIP) began in a mobile unit in 1993, providing educational services to high school special education students in accordance with IDEA. This federal mandate established the continuation of educational services for long-term suspended and expelled students. Local stakeholders encouraged the implementation of the AIP as a means to educate students and keep them off the streets. The possibility of becoming juvenile offenders is less likely if students are in school (Black, 2005).

Before AIP, the alternative high school was the only long-term alternative placement facility in the county for high school students. The need to address middle school alternatives led to the purchase of two churches. Both buildings were renovated to serve middle school students needing long-term alternative placements. The schools

were located on opposite geographic ends of the county. Students who were unsuccessful in the alternative settings could be placed in AIP in-lieu of long-term suspension or expulsion from school.

As the need for educating expelled special education and regular education students grew, so did AIP. In 1998, the program was moved from the mobile unit into an adjacent three-classroom building. Fresh Start, the middle school program, was added, with two additional teachers and clerical staff assigned. Each teacher was given an instructional aide, and a school counselor provided individual and group counseling services to all students. Merging both the middle and high school programs created AIP.

The disciplinary hearing officer and the special education staff placed students into the AIP program. A condensed version of the comprehensive school curriculum was established, which proved challenging. The middle school teacher was expected to teach the four core subject areas across three grade levels, while the high school teacher had a greater challenge to teach all core subjects across four grade levels. Since AIP was established as a program and not a school, the academic component, although critical, was not the basis for placement into the program.

At the onset, AIP established a “boot-camp” style in handling student discipline. The highly structured program mandated a student/parent orientation before enrollment. School uniforms, behavior contracts, and strict rules for disruptive behavior were explained in full detail. Students often rebelled and exhibited similar behaviors displayed in the comprehensive setting.

The structure of the program has remained intact since its inception. However, changes exist in the delivery of discipline procedures and treatment of students. A more student-centered, nurturing environment is provided for students. A servant leadership approach is taken with students, meaning that serving the basic needs of students is critical in determining their academic success.

**Statement of the Problem**

The AIP program is comprised of approximately 45 students, grades 6 – 12, who were not successful in a comprehensive educational setting. These students represent the school division's most challenging population. The program has a "revolving door" concept, as the disciplinary hearing officer randomly places students in AIP for a period of 9 weeks to 36 weeks, depending on their infractions. The goal of the program is to offer students coping, social, and academic skills by placing them in a smaller and more structured environment. The end result is to successfully transition students to the comprehensive setting.

Unfortunately, there is no specific method for comprehensive data collection relative to the AIP. As a result, the actual impacts of the program, and the success rate of program completers, are unknown. Students who are placed in the AIP come with a wide array of discipline infractions. Most students have achieved habitual offender status by exhibiting such extreme behaviors that they are not allowed to return to their comprehensive setting. Other students come to the AIP because they have been released from a juvenile correctional facility, or are new to the school division via another

alternative setting. Quite often, students return to the comprehensive setting and their initial disciplinary problems re-surface and prevail.

Upon entering the program, students “test the waters” to see if they can successfully manage to upset the tone of the program, but quickly find there is no reason to prove anything. The program structure leaves little reason for students to fight the staff, the structure, or other students.

Students have disrupted the comprehensive setting to the point of habitual offender status; yet thrive in AIP without incident. The components of AIP must be explored to determine the relationship to student success.

**Alternative Education**

According to The Virginia Administrative Code 8VAC20-330-10**,** defined in the broadest sense, alternative education involves learning experiences that offer educational choices that meet the needs of students with varying interests and abilities. Alternative education offers choices in terms of time, location, staffing, and programs.

The Code further indicates that alternative education programs must be designed to help students acquire the knowledge and develop the skills and attitudes reflected in the goals of education for Virginia's public schools. Alternative education programs already exist in many schools in the state. Among them are programs for students with disabilities, for gifted and talented students, and for students enrolled in vocational education classes; however, alternative education, in the broadest sense, is not limited to these programs (Va. Administrative Code 8VAC20-330-10).

The Code of Virginia § 22.1-276.01 indicates an "alternative education program" shall include, but shall not be limited to, 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.

Parents and students can choose some alternative education programs, such as charter, language immersion, private schools, school-to-work, and vocational or professional technical education programs that emphasize school-to-work transitions. In contrast, alternative education programs provide educational opportunities for violent students and keep expelled and habitual offenders in school. For these students alternative education is a requirement. Special education students with serious discipline problems have generated interest in alternative education programs. The 1997 amendments to the IDEA mandate educational opportunities for expelled special education students. Alternative educational programs could be more effective than the common resort to homebound placements with tutoring and other restrictive placements (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Alternative education programs in the school division serve as a “safety net for students experiencing difficulties in the comprehensive setting, or who may be at risk for dropping out of school” (Henrico County Public Schools, p.10) The district provides “focused alternative programs to help these students experience success, stay in school, and complete their high school requirements” (p.11).

## Historical Perspective

Public education alternatives have existed since the very beginning of American education (Young, 1990). Many of the first alternative education programs opposed the existing educational system. Earlier programs varied based on gender, race, and social class. To address inequity in education, the *Free School Movement* emphasized individual child-centered education, while *Freedom Schools* offered educational opportunities to poor and minority students (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

The mainstream public educational system of the late 1950s and early 1960s was perceived as being racist and exclusively designed for a select few. Raywid (1981) describes these schools as being "cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions, largely indifferent to the humanity and the 'personhood' of those within them" (p. 551). Critics of the public school system believed that excellence was defined "solely in narrow cognitive terms at the expense of equity" (Young, 1990, p.9). During this time, America was attempting to defeat poverty, and President Johnson named the public school system as the spear header in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Excellence was replaced by equity, and government funding provided a new wave of alternatives offering increased equal and significant educational opportunities to disadvantaged and minority students. By the late sixties, the line was drawn to divide alternatives outside of public education and those within the public school system (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Alternative education designed within the public schools used an Open Schools approach. These schools were characterized by parent, student, and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; non-competitive evaluation and children-centered.

The Open Schools led to the creation of public alternatives at all levels of education, including the following:

Schools without Walls – emphasized community-based learning with community members brought in to teach students.

Schools within a School – individual groups were designed to meet educational needs and interests of students, with the intent of making large high schools into smaller, nurturing communities.

Multi-cultural Schools – designed to integrate culture and ethnicity into the curriculum; some had a diverse student body and some catered to a specific ethnic group.

Continuation Schools – schools that were less competitive than the comprehensive setting; provided an option for students failing due to such issues as dropout, pregnancy, and failing grades.

Learning Centers –student needs met by including special resources, such as vocational education, in the school setting.

Fundamental Schools – emphasized a back-to-basics approach in reaction to the lack of academic rigor perceived in the Free Schools.

Magnet Schools – developed to address racial integration; attempted to attract diverse groups of students from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds by incorporating a thematic-based curriculum (Young, 1990).

In the 1970s, the International Consortium on Options in Public Education, under the leadership of Robert Barr, Daniel Burke, and Vernon Smith "became a major voice for alternatives and options systems" in the public sector (Raywid, 1981, p. 552). According to Raywid, within their first decade of existence, public alternatives exploded from 100 to more than 10,000.

The definition of alternative schools began to narrow in scope through the 1980s. Young (1990) indicates that throughout the 1980s, a growing number of alternatives were initiated to address the educational needs of disruptive or failing students. Raywid (1981) supports this account and suggests that during this time, alternative schools increased their interest in teaching basics in a more structured environment with less collective decision-making.

Alternative education has evolved over the years to provide variety and appeal to teaching and learning. With estimates of over 20,000 alternative programs and institutions operating within the public education system, a "one size fits all" description is nearly impossible. The many definitions of alternative education are as varied as the definitions of alternative programs. Home-schools, correctional institutions, public and private alternative programs, all creative in scope and characteristics, have obscured the effort to capture succinct data.

## Brief Overview of the Literature

**Need for Alternative Education Programs.** A primary goal of alternative programs within communities has been to provide parents and children with choices to receive the

best possible education available. The ultimate goal of alternative schools and programs is to educate individuals to become productive members and contributors in society. Alternatives within education are a useful means to restructure schools. Because children learn in various ways and on different time schedules, the alternative setting provides the ability to design learning environments tailored to different learning styles and needs (Morley, 1991).

Thousands of children leave school each year without a high school diploma. These children may become functionally illiterate adults. Many older students experience a number of issues that hinder their success, including multiple grade retentions, lack of job opportunities, and encounters with the juvenile justice system. Many of these students are not old enough for military service, and most are not prepared to be productive citizens (Pallas, Natriello & Dill, 1989).

In the past, alternative education has served the needs of adolescents but now is reaching younger students. Young students are displaying more dangerous behaviors. At the beginning of the 1990s, about 450,000 delinquent youth were being placed in detention centers or training schools each year and another 300,000 were sent to adult jails (Leone, Rutherford & Nelson, 1991). However, juvenile courts handled 1.6 million delinquency cases in 2002 – up from 1.1 million in 1985 (Synder, 2000). In 2003, law enforcement agencies made 2.2 million arrests of persons under the age of eighteen (Synder, 2000). The Federal Bureau of Investigation crime statistics indicate 91,100 youth between the ages of ten and seventeen committed such violent crimes as murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (Puzzanchera et. al., 2006). Schools and community

agencies must develop educational programs and services due to significant financial costs of maintaining incarcerated juveniles (Dryfoos, 1997; Howell, 1995).

**Alternative Education Program Settings.** The literature indicates that to date, the exact numbers or types of alternative schools or programs in the United States are unknown. Available estimates indicate that there are over 20,000 alternative schools and programs currently operating to reach students at risk for school failure (Lange & Sletten, 2002). According to a study by the University of Minnesota, there were 1,023,260 students enrolled in alternative schools/programs across the country in 2001-2002 (Lehr, Moreau, Lange & Lanners, 2004).

The distinctive character and diversity of alternative programs have made accurate assessment very problematic. The effectiveness of alternative programs has been measured through limited studies. The results of these studies need to be replicated in current settings. Available information indicates that at-risk students who are unsuccessful in the comprehensive setting could benefit from well-designed alternative education programs (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

A review of research by Tobin and Sprague (2000) on effective school-based interventions identified the best and preferred practices for alternative education of at-risk students as having low ratios of students to teachers, highly structured classrooms with behavioral classroom management, positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management, adult mentors at school, individualized behavioral interventions based on functional behavior assessment, social skills instruction, high-quality academic instruction, and parent involvement.

Research indicates that student enrollment in the nation's public alternative schools is highly transient (Raywid, 2001). A "revolving door" arrangement transitions students from, and returns them to, regular schools on an individual and daily basis for a variety of reasons. A goal of many public alternative schools and programs is to return at-risk students to the comprehensive setting. However, many remain in an alternative school or program for the duration of their education (Raywid, 2001).

The results of a 2001 survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) indicates that thirty-nine percent of public school districts had at least one alternative program for students in grades 1 through 12, representing 10,900 such programs during the 2000-01 school year. Results of a nationally representative sample of 2,534 public school districts show that there does not appear to be enough alternative school slots for the number of students requiring them. Urban school districts with high minority student populations and districts with high poverty rates were more likely than other districts to have alternative programs. Over half of these programs were conducted in facilities separate from the regular school buildings, four percent were in juvenile detention centers, three percent were in community centers, and one percent was charter schools. a nationally representative sample of 1,534 public school districts (Aron, 2006).

Findings in Virginia from a state survey and site visits indicated that numerous independent programs serve the population of students needing alternative education (Virginia Department of Education, 1994). These programs are not coordinated at the state level, fostering duplication of effort and taxing limited state and federal resources. The survey also indicated that the program models most frequently used are school-within-a-

school and a separate school program (Virginia Department of Education, 1994). A school-within-a-school setting is a separate, autonomous unit located on a host school campus, and formally authorized by the board of education. It plans and runs its own program, has its own staff, and receives its own separate budget. The school-within-a-school reports to a district official instead of being responsible to the building principal (Raywid, 1995). A key organizational characteristic of the school-within-a-school is that the program and individual classes remain small (Sicoli 2000). This model seems to hold promise especially for disadvantaged students, who are affected positively by smaller schools but are more likely to attend larger schools (Lee & Smith, 1997). A separate school program is detached from the regular school and has different academic and social adjustment programs. Like the school-within-a-school, a separate school has its own unit, staff, and funding. Examples of separate schools are gifted schools, charter schools, and expulsion schools, and schools of choice (Garrison, 1987).

**Students in Alternative Education Programs**. The alternative education student is generally described as being an at-risk student who, on the basis of numerous risk factors, is unlikely to graduate from high school. High school dropouts generally have lower academic skills than students who graduate which greatly impact their quality of life (Pallas, Natriello & Dill, 1989).

Aside from academic deficiencies, other risk factors related to alternative education students include health problems, substance abuse, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and other behaviors. Pallas, Natriello, and Dill (1989), include having a single parent family,

being a member of a racial or ethnic minority group, or having parents with low educational attainment as additional risk factors.

Wald and Martinez (2003) suggest that a large number of youth who have not successfully transitioned into independent adulthood by age 25 fall into one of the following overlapping groups: (1) those that do not complete high school; (2) youth deeply involved in the juvenile justice system; (3) young, unmarried mothers; and (4) adolescents in the child welfare system. They estimate based on data from 1997 to 2001, that at any given point in time, about one million youth ages 14 to 17 (or six percent of all youth of this age) fall in one of these 'high-risk' groups. Barton (2005) reports that in 2003, 1.1 million youth aged 16 to 19 lacked a high school diploma (or GED) and were not enrolled in school, and another 2.4 million youth age 20 to 24 were in the same situation, for a total of 3.5 million youth.

The Virginia Department of Education indicates that during the 2005-06 academic years, 10,608 students in grades 7 – 12 dropped out of school. This represents 1.8% of the total school population of 563,403. In the central Virginia county, 678 of the 22, 196 student population dropped out of school. This represents 3.5% of the total student population. Black males and females displayed the largest numbers, with 220 males and 111 females dropping out of school (Virginia Department of Education, 2007).

**Components of Alternative Education Programs.** Best practices indicate that an effective alternative school is based on a strong academic program that is creative and flexible. Caring teachers who provide rigor and high expectations characterize effective programs. The coursework is primarily hands-on, meaningful, and engaging to students.

Class size is limited to approximately ten students per teacher. Other components include accessible technology and applicable software, an encouraging teaching and learning environment, various assessment methods, extracurricular activities, enrichment activities through service learning and work experience/career exploration (Reimer & Cash, 2003).

The AIP is comprised of numerous components similar to those indicated in alternative education research. These components include a mandatory student/parent orientation process, school uniforms, small class sizes, a nurturing staff, a structured program with a thematic curriculum, one-on-one instruction and hands-on learning, technology usage, life skills lessons, individual and group counseling, career exploration, weekly parent contact, breakfast and lunch served daily, a positive, inviting environment, Boys Club for male participants, and Girl Talk for female students. In Boys Club and Girl Talk, students are free to discuss issues relevant to them. The only stipulation is no profanity or disrespect. School counselors facilitate both groups.

The AIP curriculum consists of thematic units based on the Virginia Standards of Learning. Each classroom has an instructional assistant and a classroom teacher. The assistant provides individualized instruction to students, while the classroom teacher provides whole class instruction. Students are assigned homework and issued report cards similar to the comprehensive setting. When students transition to the regular setting, their grades, attendance, and discipline records transition as well. Grades earned in the AIP are averaged with previously attained grades, so that students who were failing when entering the program can actually receive passing grades upon transition.

**Resiliency and the Alternative Education Student**

Krovetz (1999) indicates that resilient children and adolescents consistently have been defined in the psychological literature as having four primary attributes: 1) social competence, including the ability to seek help and elicit positive responses from peers and adults; 2) problem-solving skills and confidence in oneself and one's ability to plan; 3) autonomy; and 4) a sense of purpose and belief in the future. Krovetz (1999) maintains that the real power of these personal characteristics is determined by the extent to which the child's environment is defined by key protective factors, such as a caring environment, positive expectations, and meaningful participation. Researchers argue that children are much more likely to develop and maintain a positive, proactive stance toward life if they live in an environment in which people care about them; have high expectations, offer purposeful, positive support, and value them (Krovetz, 1999).

Members of the general public – and many educators, as well – often define the students in alternative schools by the difficulties they face rather than by their ability to overcome those. There is a tendency to see potential dropouts not as "turned off" but rather as disruptive, deviant, and dysfunctional students who are a detriment to the traditional school (McGee, 2001).

Parese (1999) has documented the serious crises in the lives of many students that literally overwhelm their ability to cope. Students who import problems from turbulent backgrounds need school environments that provide a sanctuary from the storm and opportunities to begin rebuilding their lives. But, since many alternative schools are not terminal programs, students often will return to their regular settings. As they return to the

schools where they previously have failed, their outcomes will hinge on whether they have the inner strengths and external supports to maintain their fledgling success (McCall, 2003).

**Purpose of Study**

The AIP program is an alternative program for students who have been long-term suspended or expelled from the comprehensive setting. The program has met with much undocumented success over the past eighteen months. The purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions of the impact of the AIP and provide a framework to inspire programs in other locations. Focusing on attendance, discipline, and academic achievement data, this study examined what factors motivated successful alternative education students to succeed upon their return to the comprehensive setting, and identified support factors that foster resiliency.

For purposes of this study, success in the three focus areas is defined in accordance with the school division's policy manual (2007). A student considered in good attendance standing has 1) not violated the county's compulsory attendance policy, and has not been referred to the school social worker for truancy. A student has achieved academically when 2) grades are at or above the minimum passing grade for graduation. The manual indicates that a grade of D (70-76 passing) is the minimum grade for graduation. A student displaying appropriate discipline has 3) neither been determined to be a habitual offender nor has been referred to the disciplinary hearing officer.

**Rationale for Study**

To be effective, alternative education must adapt to the uniqueness of the setting, the transitory nature of the population, and the characteristics of the youth. For this purpose, effective alternative education responds to the unique needs of groups of students in unusual surroundings (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

The rationale for this study was based on the literature on alternative education and two to determine the effectiveness of the AIP program from the student perspective with respect to improving student discipline, attendance, and academic achievement. Alternative education programs in the locality have recently fallen under the auspices of a newly created Department of Non-Traditional Programs. The purpose of this move was to provide support and stability to alternative education. Previously, the Department of Career and Technical Education maintained alternative education programs. There has been a departmental separation of career and technical education and alternative education, since the two areas are not related in scope. No comprehensive data exist to show the effectiveness of AIP since its inception in 1993. The school system sought to establish the validity and viability of the program, and to reveal positive areas of success, and to show areas needing improvement or restructuring.

**Settings/Regulations**

Most states now have laws that govern alternative education programs. In 1994, the Virginia Board of Education adopted Resolution Number 1994-5, where the Board of Education urged the Governor and the General Assembly to include significant increased funding for supplemental and alternative education programs as part of any attack on crime. It was noted that 90.0% of prisoners cannot read above the fifth grade level and that 85.5% of prisoners did not graduate from high school. The General Assembly has recognized the importance of alternative education programs and directed the Board of Education to develop a program to target students who have been expelled or suspended from school or who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Interestingly, building additional prison space under consideration by the General Assembly was estimated to cost between $1 billion and $2 billion dollars, while at the same time only $1.2 million was appropriated for the Board's alternative education program.

Additionally, the 2006 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of the Public Schools in Virginia, the Virginia Board of Education indicates the most pressing challenges confronting Virginia’s Public Schools. These areas of need present challenges to alternative education. All students need to have ever-increasing levels of skills and knowledge, including career and technical skills. School divisions are challenged to meet the needs of students who lack the academic skill necessary to meet graduation requirements. These needs are prominent in children of poverty, students with limited English proficiency, and students at-risk of academic failure. Furthermore, there is a need

to help schools that are struggling to improve student achievement, and schools needing additional help to use classroom instructional time effectively. Schools need assistance in monitoring the implementation of effective programs.

Section 22.1-209.1:2 of the Virginia Code requires that the Board of Education provide an annual report to the Governor and the General Assembly on the effectiveness of the regional alternative education programs (Jay, 2006). Other states have established clear direction on alternative education settings and determined the criteria for student placement. The laws vary from state to state. For example, Arkansas states that grade-level/subject-matter teacher certifications requirements do not apply to licensed teachers teaching in alternative learning environments (Ark. Senate Bill 1044). Maryland operates a Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program whereby the county board is required to pay the program the current per pupil expenses for each student transferred to the program from the county's schools (MD. CODE ANN. EDUC. § 7-305.1). North Carolina established structured day programs as non-residential programs that provide intervention services to youth who are expelled, suspended, or sanctioned by the courts (N.C GEN. STAT. §7B-2506(16). In Tennessee, local boards are required to establish alternative schools for students in grades 7-12 who have been suspended or expelled. For grades 1-6, establishing such a school is optional (TENN. CODE ANN. § 49-6-3403).

## The Alternative Intervention Program Setting

**The AIP.** One of the gaps in research regarding the AIP is the lack of succinct data. Conversations with former and current school division personnel have generated the narrative background information on the program. Personnel include a former school division superintendent, assistant superintendent, educational specialist for exceptional education, and a former AIP instructional assistant.

**Need for the AIP.** The AIP is one of two alternative intervention programs within the central Virginia school division. The program is located on the campus of a central Virginia alternative high school, and is named after an African-American pioneer in education for minority students. She was the daughter of former slaves, and started her school in what is now the alternative high school. She secured a teaching position with the school division and opened the school in 1892, where she taught woodworking, sewing, cooking, and gardening, as well as academics. She became a teacher at the age of sixteen (McKinney, 2004).

The educator was named the first Jeanes Supervisor Industrial Teacher, and oversaw 23 schools in the county, training rural black teachers and improving the curriculum at each school. In 1915, her school expanded to include dormitories. The school is now the alternative high school (McKinney, 2004).

The need to establish an alternative intervention was formulated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ( IDEA). Prior to this law, expelled students receiving special education services in the school division were removed from school for 365 days.

These students received no educational benefits. However, IDEA mandated the continuation of education for expelled students.

The name of the AIP program changed as more services were implemented into the program. The AIP program began providing educational services to high school special education students in 1993. A classroom teacher with approximately eight students offered teaching in the four core academic subject areas (English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies). As the need grew to educate regular education students who had been expelled, so did the AIP program to accommodate these students. Also during this time, discussion developed on educational opportunities for expelled middle school students.

In 1998, the AIP program moved from the trailer to an adjacent three-classroom building. A middle school component was added and named “Fresh Start”. The two names were joined to form the AIP program – The AIP for high school students in grades 9 – 12, and Fresh Start for middle school students in grades 6 - 8. Each classroom consisted of a classroom teacher and an instructional aide. A full time school counselor and clerical staff were added.

Currently, the AIP continues to serve the needs of students who are long-term suspended, expelled, or returning from a juvenile justice facility. Educational, emotional, and coping skills are provided to middle and high school students in regular and special education.

A disciplinary hearing officer assigns students to the AIP. Based on discipline offenses and a meeting with both the student and parent, the Hearing Officer determines the length of the placement.

Before the student can attend the program, the parent must call the AIP office to schedule an orientation. The student is required to attend the orientation with the parent. Paperwork is completed during a meeting with the program administrator. The program rules are reviewed, as well as program specifics. These specifics are addressed within the section on program components.

Every nine weeks, a transition team meets in the AIP building. The hearing officer, along with the AIP staff, school counselors, social workers, and special education staff, listen to a review of each student's record. The hearing officer looks for improvement in the three areas of attendance, discipline, and grades, and also considers the amount of time the student has been in the program. Although all members have input into the decision, only the hearing officer can make the final recommendation to transition to the traditional setting, or to remain in the program.

Consideration for transition can happen only during the transition meeting. Students not able to transition must remain in the AIP for an additional nine -week period, and be reviewed at the next transition meeting.

**The AIP Setting**. Three classrooms make up the AIP program. The AIP middle school class is created for middle school regular education students. The classroom serves approximately twelve students who transition in and out of the program on a quarterly basis. A licensed teacher and an instructional aide provide academic support. Students are taught only the four core subject areas for their grade level.

The design of the AIP middle school special education classroom is similar to the regular education classroom. Each student has an active Individualized Educational Plan

(IEP) that is maintained by the classroom teacher. The teacher is also responsible for chairing and facilitating IEP meetings.

The AIP high school classroom is comprised of two groups of students in grades nine to twelve. Nearly twenty-five students in regular and special education are served within a single classroom. Two teachers, one in regular education and one in special education, provide instruction to all students. Two instructional aides also serve the needs of students and teachers. High school special education students have IEP's that are maintained by the AIP special education teacher. Students are not aware of each other's educational status in terms of being a regular education or special education student.

**Students in the AIP**. Students in the Alternative Intervention Program come from a variety of schools, juvenile facilities, group homes, alternative programs, or other placement facilities. In the past year, the program has served students from therapeutic facilities. These students present a challenge due to mental health needs that the AIP is not equipped to address. For most students, a long list of discipline offenses follows them to the program. Many students enter the AIP by moving from one city or county to the school division. Parents and students believe that the former discipline concerns will disappear once they move, but quickly discover that expulsions carry over to new environments. Parents show their frustration in dealing with their students. Several parents have indicated that they are afraid of their children, do not want their children, or are just plain sick of their children. Parents indicate a history of disruptive behaviors dating back to early elementary years. The negative behaviors displayed as young children do not appear to be "cute" anymore. Parents who bring students to the AIP for orientation

indicate that they are worn out, angry, depressed, and some are even violent. They expect the AIP to "fix" the problem.

On the other hand, some parents simply refuse to accept their students' behavior as being accurate. They blame the school system and the teachers. A few parents indicate that they were exactly like their children when they were growing up.

Students who come to the AIP enter for a wide variety of reasons. The majority are disruptive, disrespectful, truant, drug users, violent, abusive, and criminal. Some students wear ankle monitors due to probation issues, others have assaulted school staff, were involved in gang activity, hacked into unauthorized computer systems and web sites, and committed sexual offenses against other students and/or family members, incited riots, or have reached habitual offender status. In general, these students have failed one or more grade levels, have truancy concerns, display a lack of respect for authority, and have basically destroyed their ability to function in the traditional setting. These students represent the school division's most challenging population.

**The AIP Components.** At the onset, the AIP modeled a "boot camp" style of behavior management. A review of student data indicates a large number of disruptions, suspensions, and several incidences of police involvement due to disruptive behavior. Most students were unsuccessful in transitioning out of the program due to discipline issues during their placement. In addition to managing the AIP, the program administrator held other duties and responsibilities that required being away from the building for extended periods of time.

Most of the program components have remained intact since its inception. These components include a school uniform requirement, a caring environment, a servant leadership approach to discipline, regular use of technology, breakfast and lunch served daily, outdoor time for activity, access to school counselors, girls and boys groups, shortened school day, tutoring and one-on-one instruction, career training and goal setting, school bus transportation, and credit bearing coursework.

Additionally, students must adhere to the school division's Code of Student Conduct, bus rules and regulations, and the AIP guidelines. Students face stiff disciplinary penalties for constant defiance, but are given several opportunities for self-corrected behavior. The goal is to keep students in school and teach proper behavior through modeling, one-on-one counseling, and discussion.

Program information is provided to parents attending orientation and to visitors from other school divisions who inquire about the AIP. This information is comprised of a program description and requirements. Complete guidelines can be found in Appendix A.

As indicated by the AIP program description, the AIP components vary greatly from the comprehensive setting in general. Four research questions were designed to capture feedback on student success in the AIP and in other educational settings.

**Research Questions**

1. In what ways, if any, do students perceive that their participation in the AIP has influenced them in the comprehensive setting in the areas of academics, achievement, and discipline?

2. What are student perceptions of the differences and/or similarities between the AIP and other educational settings?
3. How successful have students been before, during, and after their placement in the AIP, as defined in the areas of academics, attendance, and discipline?
4. What are the consistent resilience factors?

**Design and Methods**

To answer these questions, a mixed methods design was appropriate. Three focus groups were formulated to explore student perspectives of the AIP. The three groups consisted of high school regular and exceptional education students who were new to the AIP, students who completed a quarter the AIP, and students who have completed a quarter in the AIP and transitioned back to the comprehensive setting. A group of no more than five students from a similar setting met for approximately one hour to answer interview questions. Groups met either in the AIP building or in the comprehensive setting. In-depth interviews were conducted with six adult program completers. These adults transitioned to the comprehensive, where they received a high school diploma or GED.

Secondary data retrieved from the school district's Research and Planning Office were analyzed to triangulate the qualitative research. Demographic data such as ethnicity, age, and gender, along with attendance, achievement, and discipline, were analyzed using SPSS15 statistical software. Attendance was tracked using the district's data on student

attendance. Discipline was measured by the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Report cards and transcripts indicated academic performance.

**Definition of Terms**

At-risk – Conditions perceived to be characteristics of the individual, or situations of the context they are a part of, that are believed to create higher likelihoods of undesirable life outcomes (e.g., completing high school, avoiding premarital births), or to impact overall quality of life. The 'personal' conditions are presence of a disability, grade retention, and poor command of English. The 'familial' conditions are either one or both parents absent from the household, at least one foreign-born parent of recent immigration, low family income, and no employed parent (Kominski, Jamieson & Martinez, 2001).

Autonomy – a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently (Bernard, 1993).

Resiliency – Students who succeed in school despite adverse conditions (Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2002).

Jeanes Teacher – Teachers who traveled throughout the south to rural schools to help the regular teachers with their duties. They also taught simple industrial skills, raised money for building needs, school materials and salary supplements, held meetings, distributed supplies and generally promoted the welfare of the African Americans in the school and in their larger communities (Jones, 1937).

# CHAPTER 2

## Review of Literature

The review of literature addresses five areas of alternative education. They include 1) the need for alternative education programs, 2) effective alternative education program settings, 3) students in alternative education programs, 4) components of alternative education programs, and 5) resiliency and the alternative education student.

## Need for Alternative Education Programs

Research indicates that nearly 25.0 percent of all students nationwide drop out of school before graduation (Kaufman et. al., 2000). Alternative education programs provide educational opportunities to these students. Interestingly, while graduation rates from comprehensive high schools have decreased over the past decade, the number of students obtaining academic credentials via alternative means doubled (Kaufman et. al., 2000).

Alternative education promoters believe that it can radically improve the academic achievement and behavior of students at-risk of dropping out. The following research reports and practices echo these perceptions.

A 1996 study by the U.S. Department of Education indicates an increase in alternative education programs due to concern among the public, educators, and policymakers about students who bring weapons, drugs, and violence to school campuses. There is also concern that the students who commit such offenses are expelled

to the streets. These students are potentially dangerous, violent, and uneducated (Kleiner et. al., 2002).

Research by Lange & Sletten (2002) concludes that alternative programs have evolved to take on the responsibility of educating all students, regardless of circumstances or educational issues. These programs have the potential to provide a caring, nurturing environment for student success. Noddings (2003) and Blum & Libbey (2004) conclude that a caring environment separates the alternative setting from other school settings and contributes significantly to student success.

Aron and Zwieg (2003) indicate that alternative education programs recognize the individual needs of students and serve as service providers. Alternative programs can reach out to vulnerable students to help meet their needs, whether family, education, or health related.

Aron and Zweig (2003) further indicate that although there are no precise estimates of the need for alternative education programs, very rough calculations using census and other available data confirm that the scope of the problem is indeed large. Students between the ages of 16 to 24 who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma or GED are most disconnected. These students have little motivation and engagement toward school. They also experience no sense of belonging (Osterman, 2002). Calculations suggest that 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds may fall into this category.

Morley (1991) offers this description of alternative education:

> Alternative education is a means of ensuring that every young person may find a path to the educational goals of the community. Alternative education is a means of accommodating our cultural plurism making available a multitude of options. Alternative education is a means of providing choices to enable each person to succeed and be productive. Alternative education is a means of recognizing the strengths and values of each individual by seeking and providing the best available options for all students. Alternative education is a sign of excellence in any public school system and community. Alternative education is a means for addressing the transformation of our schools (p. 8).

The first public study of alternative schools and programs for at-risk youth was conducted in 2001. The "District Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs," conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, reported that during the 2001-2002 academic year, a total of 91,380 students were at-risk of failing or dropping out of traditional U.S. schools. These students were usually placed in an alternative program. Data show that as of October 1, 2000, approximately 1.3% of students nationwide were enrolled in alternative programs (Kleiner, Porch & Farris, 2002).

A 1990 survey of Iowa's alternative school graduates (dropouts who returned and graduated from an alternative school) yielded very positive outcomes on the productivity of alternative school graduates in the community (Morley, 1991). The study assessed eight measures of productivity, as well as behaviors deemed vital in the workforce. Results indicate that compared to the long term potential costs of dropouts, financial investment in alternative education does benefit the state. Alternative school graduates are productive citizens who positively contribute to society (Morley, 1991).

Additionally, the study showed that alternative school graduates are represented across all levels of employment, are involved in community volunteerism, do participate in the voting process, are breaking free of public assistance, and are not overly represented in the juvenile justice system (Morley, 1991).

Table 1 reveals data for public elementary and secondary schools and districts from 1993 to 2002. The data show a fairly steady rise in the number of alternative schools and the student population with the exception of the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 academic years. These years show a decrease in the number of student placements. According to NCES, the unexplainable decrease may be caused by missing data, since collection and reporting procedures vary from state to state (NCES, 2003).

Existing research implies that education programs tend to serve as an umbrella for dropout prevention, special education, and at-risk youth. The essential program elements remain relatively stable, despite the inconsistency in program definitions (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Kleiner et. al., 2002).

The "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" requires that all students are afforded equal protection and opportunities under the law for equitable education in safe and academically sound surroundings (Powell, 2003). States are challenged to develop programs and strategies to address academic, social, and emotional needs of students at risk of failure. The concept of alternative education was introduced to respond to the needs of expelled and suspended students, and students whose behavioral issues have excluded them from general education (Powell, 2003).

Educational alternatives can offer both remediation and eagerness in learning for students failing in the traditional setting. Alternatives can increase the likelihood that students will become diligent learners by providing options that sustain individual needs, interests, and learning styles (Hartzler & Diver, 2002). More students might successfully complete school if alternative educational strategies were more widely used (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Research shows that students in alternative settings indeed perform well academically (Aronson, 1995). Kleiner, et al. (2002) indicates that 54.0% of school districts with alternative education programs had cases where the demand exceeded the capacity. Educators and policy makers need to be aware of the need for alternative education programs, and cognizant of overcrowding in existing programs.

Negative factors outside of school provide strong influences and challenge many students to make tough decisions. Educators are often faced with the overwhelming task of helping students reverse negative behavior, or assist them in managing the stresses in their lives (The Children's Defense Fund, 2005). In addition, for some students, school may be the only place that provides structure, safety, food, shelter, and protection from society, gangs and even family members. School is the only stable environment for many students where they feel most comfortable (Hensley & Brumeister, 2006; Owens & Konkol, 2004).

Although educational demands have been well met for the past century, our rapidly changing, pluralistic society is placing extraordinary demands on the educational structure. Large numbers of people have been trained to work in industry, particularly those who have not been successful in the educational setting. In the past, on-the-job training was sufficient for industrial workers. A high school diploma was not a prerequisite for

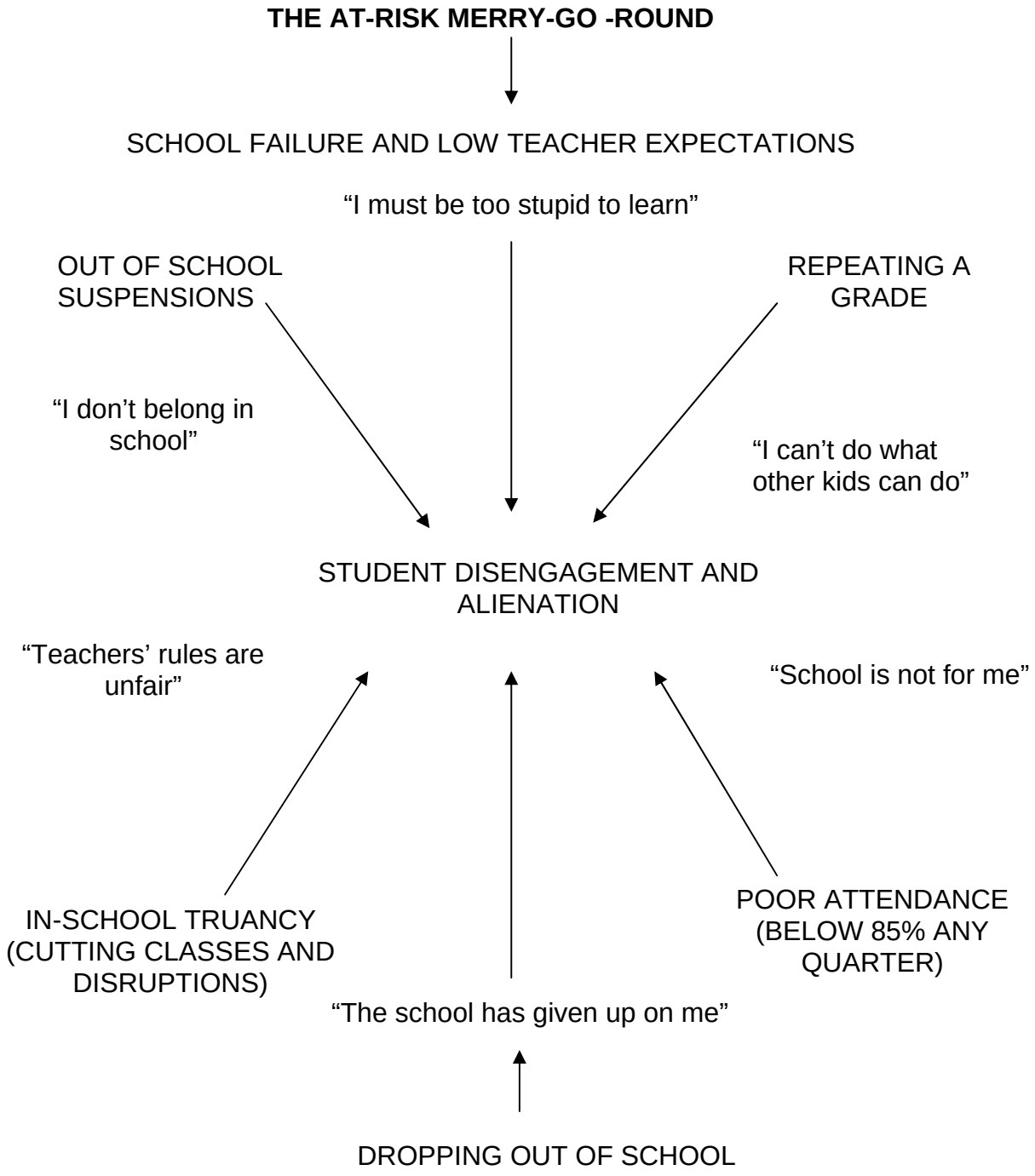
employment. However, education must follow suit in an ever-changing world (Caine & Caine, 1997). Currently, a high school diploma is a requirement for most minimum wage positions, which is hardly enough income to achieve a substantial quality of life.

The size and location of the workforce is changing markedly, due to greater pluralism and technological gains. Employees should expect several career changes in their lives. It is no longer sufficient to provide students with educational training for one job or career. There are more opportunities for employment growth across the nation due to technological strides and societal changes. Students must learn to be critical thinkers and master new skills to be self-sufficient in the global job market (Mottaz, 2002).

According to Mottaz (2002), dropping out of school is currently a major socio-economic concern, and one of the major issues in schools. Truancy and absenteeism pose devastating results for students and families (DeKalb, 1999; Huizinga et. al., 2000). In previous years, there was no pre-conception of dropping out. It was acceptable practice to have both dropouts and successful academic students. High school graduates became high level skilled workers, while dropouts worked in unskilled positions. Jobs for unskilled and moderately skilled workers were adequate and plentiful. However, technological advancements have made many of these jobs disappear from the labor market. Mottaz further indicates that employers prefer highly qualified employees, skilled in reading, writing, and Mathematics. Employers believe that the current work force lacks critical thinking skills, and that public education has decreased the competitive edge of the United States workforce. Businesses will be forced to hire unskilled workers unless educational systems can provide employees with the necessary basic educational needs (Mottaz, 2002).

Research indicates that people feel a sense of hopelessness handling the social and emotional stigma of dropping out of school. They do not strive to fail, but face humiliation and isolation by the school or their peers (Mottaz, 2002). Figure 1, Anne Wheelock's "At-Risk Merry-Go-Round" shows the factors that lead to student disengagement and alienation. For the at-risk student, the negative factors continue through a maze of disappointments that eventually lead to dropping out, due to the inability to cope with and maneuver through difficult situations and circumstances. Robins & Ratcliff (1978) conducted a longitudinal study connecting elementary school truancy to dropping out of high school years later. Alternative education can provide these students with the support and structure necessary for success (Wheelock, 1986).

Findings from a Virginia study of alternative education options were reported in November 2006. The data show that there is a shortage of school-based prevention programs that address issues such as violence prevention, anger management, conflict resolution, and other behavioral health needs. Such programs reduce suspensions and expulsions by offering valuable prevention services for youth who may be considered "at-risk". Reductions to the federal Safe and Drug-Free School grants have negatively impacted these programs. In 2006, the level of funding for prevention programs has decreased by 21% with an anticipated additional 11% reduction in 2007 (Hamaker, 2006).




Anne Wheelock (1986) Permission to Reprint

Figure 1: The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round

Although not comprehensive, research suggests that students in alternative education programs do indeed perform well academically. Oklahoma conducted a major research project indicating that students in alternative education programs improved on a variety of academic measures, including grades, attendance, course failures, and discipline. Additionally, the alternative education students outperformed students in traditional settings on similar measures (Aronson, 1995). A variety of rural and urban settings in California, Michigan, New York, and Oregon reported similar improvements on several academic measures, including attendance, drop-out, grades and test scores (Aronson, 1995).

In 2001, Oregon surveyed its school districts and found that approximately 18,000 students were enrolled in 868 alternative programs and schools. Of this total, 13,000 were enrolled in high school, and 2,800 were enrolled in alternative middle schools (The Oregonian, 2001).

The Michigan Alternative Education Organization web site indicates that there are approximately 369 alternative education programs serving 25,000 students. The state consists of more than 700 school districts. The state has a choice policy for alternative programs and ensures a racial/ethnic balance reflective of the community (Michigan Alternative Education Association website, http://www.maeo.org).

In 2007-08, over 500 alternative programs operate at better than 600 sites in Minnesota. These are also choice programs to help at-risk students who may not graduate from traditional settings. Many of the programs are year-round, providing educational services to students, kindergarten through adult (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning website, http://cfl.state.mn.us, 2008).

The small sample of states reviewed indicates a wide variety of accessibility and programming in alternative schools across the country. Programs exist to meet the needs of elementary students and adults. The limited review suggests that most alternative programs are designed for secondary students at risk of school failure.

As states begin to collect more accurate, comprehensive information on alternative education enrollments, the numbers indicate the apparent need for alternative education programs. The information collected has spurred efforts to develop legislation requiring school divisions to evaluate the quality of alternative programs (NGA Center for Best Practices, 2001).

In Virginia, an evaluation of the state's 29 regional alternative education programs was conducted during the 2005-2006 school year. A total of 114 school divisions worked in collaboration to form these 29 programs. They were established by the General Assembly in 1993-94 to involve collaboration between two or more school divisions to provide educational options for students who have a pending violation of school board policy. Collaboration would also include students who have been expelled or long-term suspended, or are returning to school from a correctional center (Jay, 2006).

These regional alternative education programs were designed to meet the specific individual needs of students assigned to the programs. The legislation outlines the following components: An intensive, accelerated instructional program with rigorous standards for academic achievement and student behavior; a low pupil-teacher ratio to promote a high level of interaction between the student and teacher; a plan for transitioning the enrolled students into the relevant school division's regular program; a current program of staff development and training; a procedure for obtaining the participation and support from parents as well as community outreach to build school, business, and community partnerships; measurable goals and objectives, and an evaluation component to determine the program's effectiveness (Jay, 2006).

The number of students enrolled in Virginia alternative education programs has increased from 217 in 1993-94 to 4,155 in 2005-06. This represents a 358 percent increase in the number of students served. Table 2 on the previous page shows the trends in regional alternative education programs in Virginia.

**Effective Alternative Education Program Settings**

According to Raywid (1995) alternative programs can be grouped into three distinctive types and functions: Type I (educational) alternative programs provide special needs students with challenging, innovative choices. Type I programs favor magnet schools, and typically enroll students with prior issues of truancy, pregnancy, and substance abuse. Students may have special education needs, or require a gifted curriculum.

Type II alternative programs provide educational opportunities for students with extreme behaviors and challenges. These disciplinary programs provide the support needed to help those most disconnected from the school system (Sagor, 1999).

Type II schools are considered “last chance schools”, meaning they are the last opportunity for students to receive an education before expulsion, long-term suspension, or placement in a juvenile justice facility. These schools are usually not choice-based, but offer behavior interventions for disruptive students. They tend to focus on reeducating students in pro-social behaviors, behavior modification, behavior management, self-control, and coping skills (Raywid, 1994).

An Illinois study on alternative education programming by Foley and Pang (2006) indicates that the alternative setting provides the proper environment and structure to meet the needs of at-risk students. The ten most frequently reported criteria for referral to an alternative program included referral by home school, social-emotional/behavioral concerns, truancy, expulsion from the comprehensive setting, suspension from the comprehensive setting, academic underachievement within the designated age range, dropout, potential dropout, and teen parent. The three criteria mainly identified were social-emotional problems, truancy, and referral by the home school.

Mottaz (2002) indicates that the need to belong is a tremendous force that drives behavior. Students who have a history of rejection tend to expect rejection. Students in alternative education programs must feel nurtured and supported to overcome their issues and concerns. In addition, students must feel physically and emotionally safe. It is

disheartening to view an alternative program as being a “last chance” for students. This is in total opposition of the caring environment required for at-risk student success.

The Type III alternative settings are short-term programs providing academic and social skills in a therapeutic environment. The literature suggests that most alternative programs include components from all three approaches (Sagor, 1999).

Alternative programs, particularly Type II programs, often endure negative stigmas, receive little funding and less political support than comprehensive settings. Within school districts, alternative programs are misunderstood. Consequently, alternative programs receive little exposure and maintain a low profile. The concept of “fear of success” is prevalent where comprehensive schools feel that alternative programs should know their place. For these reasons, alternative programs may choose to maintain a low profile and to work hard not to make waves (Gregory, 2001).

Alternatives provide a solution for the comprehensive schools to educate youths whose only option is expulsion. Successful alternative schools engage and nurture students to the point that they want to remain in alternative education (Gregory, 2001). If a student is unsuccessful in one school setting, another school setting is needed. Scholars contend that we must change the experience of school – the way it looks, tastes, and smells, and the reactions it produces in those who are there. A positive alternative setting has a unique personality – one that feels different – and a program that strikes the student as a clear departure from the one he or she left (Raywid, 2001; Gregory, 2001).

Alternative program settings must be addressed organizationally and academically. Alternative settings should be inviting and well maintained. Students and parents should

feel comfortable and important, not imprisoned or warehoused from the comprehensive setting. The school should provide ample space to meet student and program needs. Alternative education students tend to thrive in a smaller, family-like environment. Most students have felt overwhelmed in the larger traditional setting. (Mottaz, 2002).

Many successful alternative education settings are identified as either programs or schools. Programs are short-term interventions to help students focus on a specific problem or situation hindering their academic success (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Furthermore, the goal of programs is to help the student resolve the problem and transition back to the regular school setting. In contrast, schools are designed for students who will meet with better success in completing their education while removed from the regular setting. Often, these students are able to meet high academic standards, but must work to care for themselves and families, or need specialized services and interventions (Aron & Zweig, 2003).

In Virginia, school systems with multiple alternative programs usually offer students access to one or more school-within-a-school programs, a stand-alone district alternative school, a regional alternative program, and an evening alternative school for General Education Diploma (GED) students. Residential alternative school or a home-based option is provided by some districts. Programs vary based on student age, magnitude of conduct violations, the likelihood that students can earn a regular diploma, and whether students are assigned to or choose to attend the alternative school (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999).

**Students In Alternative Education Programs**

Based on literature and research, a low estimate of about 13 percent to a high estimate of nearly 30 percent of youths are considered high risk or vulnerable. Numbers suggest that 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds may be vulnerable, about evenly split between 16 to 19 year olds and 20 to 24 year olds (Aron & Zwieg, 2003).

All of these students could possibly benefit from an alternative program. However, research indicates that only a small number of these students are receiving alternative education, particularly among the older group of students (Aron & Zwieg, 2003).

Table 3 (Aron & Zweig, 2003) indicates rough estimates of the number of at-risk youth in alternative education programs. Findings suggest that less than 1 million (10 to 20 percent) of the 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds who might be considered "high-risk" are currently enrolled in alternative education programs or schools.

McCall (2003) indicates that many factors have contributed to the ever-broadening group of students who are at risk of dropping out or "disengaging" and subsequently becoming non-contributors within their communities. An analysis of a national sample of high schools in 1989 found that 5 percent of males and 37 percent of females gave "family-related problems" as the reason for dropping out of school. Eight percent of young women had to help support their families, 31 percent left to get married, and 23 percent left because they were pregnant (Mottaz, 2002).

Reasons for leaving school vary greatly. Research shows that many students from disadvantaged homes are never able to catch up, and many others come to school with physical and emotional problems so severe as to make learning impossible. By fourth

grade the average grades of early grade dropouts are significantly lower than those of their classmates, and over half of the students have been retained. Student grades often decline significantly when they transition from one school to another (Roderick, 1993).

According to Michelle Fine (1991), most of the dropout literature focuses on characteristics of students who dropout rather than on the schools from which they attend. She further indicates that the research shows that student achievement drops as teacher turnover increases, and schools where students report a lack of faculty interest, unfair discipline procedures, and widespread truancy, rigid retention policies, and competency examinations, report relatively high dropout rates.

Alternative school educators have often been able to engage many students who had marked problems in comprehensive school settings. McCall (2003) gives principal reasons for referral to an alternative program. These reasons are given in Table 4 below. While just one of the factors would meet the criterion for admission to an alternative program, many students bring multiple problems. It is not uncommon for a student with behavioral and academic concerns to also experience problems in the family and community. Parese (1999) has documented the serious crises in the lives of many students that literally overwhelm their ability to cope.

Students in alternative settings are among the most difficult to teach. In addition, they are also likely to have weak natural advocacy systems in place because many come from dysfunctional families, have been abused as children, and have difficulty establishing trust with adults (Wolf, Braukmann, & Ramp, 1987).

Many alternative schools serve students who have freely chosen to attend them, but many others serve students who were sent there by someone else. Usually it is the comprehensive school that determines who should attend the alternative school. The students they send are not their good students or even their average ones. They are young people that conventional high schools have given up on (Gregory, 2001). These are the students who rarely attend school, and when they do, they cut classes or are tardy, and are typically not prepared for school (Gregory, 2001). Teachers find dealing with these students difficult. Most educators find these students lack a personal commitment to learning. They need an environment where their individual needs are met at a different level, and they need to be motivated to remain in school and become productive citizens (Frediani, 2002).

The results of a study completed on a Michigan alternative education program for at-risk youth indicated that when asked what the alternative program could have done to prevent dropping out, the most common answers were “nothing” and “keep me in the alternative program.” Parents shed more light on this by overwhelmingly indicating that their children thrived in the alternative setting due to individual attention and highly supportive teachers. Like their offspring, most parents would change nothing about the alternative program (McCall, 2003).

Mottaz (2002) contends that “the true” alternative education student is a “different breed of cat.” Lack of skills, support structure and coping strategies make these students easy prey to a cycle of dejection and failure within the mainstream setting. These students desperately need small school size, small class size, extended roles for teachers,

cooperative roles for students, voluntary membership, student involvement in governance, and an absence or minimization of tracking, ability grouping or other kinds of labeling.

In general, students report that their experience in alternative programs has been absolutely positive. When asked if their self-esteem improved during a year of participation in a Minnesota alternative program, twenty-nine of forty students responded positively. The twenty-nine students indicated that they learned about responsibility, liked attending school, learned to respect others, displayed self-control, and felt safer about self-expression (McGee, 2001).

In Virginia, students are typically assigned to regional alternative education programs because they have received long-term suspensions, are returning from juvenile correctional centers, or are otherwise identified by the school divisions to be best served by these in the alternative education setting. Table 5 shows the primary reasons for student enrollment into alternative programs during the 2005-2006 school years. Without any academic, social, or emotional support through alternative education programs, these students would likely be subjected to the streets (Jay, 2006).

Administrators indicate that Virginia's alternative programs strive to meet the specific individual needs of assigned students. They define those needs as building self-esteem and responsibility; return students to high school to graduate; identify career interests; correct dysfunctional or dangerous behavior; and reduce the dropout rate.

**Components of Alternative Education Programs**

The literature reveals five common components of alternative education settings, which include small class size (Morley, 1991) individualized instruction (Barr, 1981) a supportive setting (Young, 1990) opportunities for student success aligned with future goals (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990) and flexible structure and focus on student decision making (Lehr, 2004).

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE, 1996) defines successful alternative programs based on research indicating the shared characteristics of successful alternative education programs and schools. The success of alternative programs has been measured by improvement in grades, school attendance, graduation rates, decreases in violent behaviors and suspensions, and increases in self-esteem and self-worth. According to the NASBE Policy Update on Alternative Education for Students At-Risk (1996), these shared characteristics include 1) High academic standards and expectations for all students; 2)High standards for interpersonal and social interactions; 3) Student-centered education and intervention plans; 4) Low pupil/teacher ratio; 5) Site-based management and flexibility with strong accountability; 6) Parent and community involvement; 7) A program versus a school; and 8) Location.

Research indicates that successful programs have a clear focus on academic learning combined with engaging and creative instruction and a culture of high expectations for all students. Learning must be relevant and applicable to life outside of school and to future learning and work opportunities. Applied learning is an important component of the academic program. The curricula must address the education and career

interests of the students (Mottaz, 2002). Instruction is academically rigorous and tied to state and federal standards and accountability systems. Together, alternative and home schools carefully monitor graduation requirements and academic credit counts. Students, staff, and parents are cognizant of the learning goals. Students have personalized learning plans and set learning goals based on their individual plans. There are opportunities for students to catch up and accelerate knowledge and skills. A mixture of instructional approaches is available to assist students in achieving academic objectives (Aron, 2006).

Much of the literature on alternative education focuses on determining best practices of programs. Lange and Sletten (2002) posit that there are many lists of essential elements of alternative education programs. Variety in elements is necessary to accommodate the needs of specific populations. Nevertheless, the elements indicate the attributes of the best managed programs.

There are several general elements necessary in successful alternative programs, such as culture or climate, curriculum and instruction, connections to outside programs and services, and organizational structure. Best practices indicate that a variety of these elements are tailored to individual student needs. A "one size fits all" program is literally impossible to develop (Mottaz, 2002). Authentic learning in small, personalized environments is critical in meeting academic needs (Raywid, 2001).

An important feature of an alternative school program is that curriculum is approached in a different manner than the comprehensive setting. The curriculum is driven by the mission and vision of the program, and by meeting the students' academic needs. A different manner could mean differentiated instruction, different methods of evaluation, or

different materials (Mottaz, 2002). The academic curriculum is supported by academic and career counseling, remedial instruction, opportunity for self-paced instruction, and crisis/behavioral intervention (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In Virginia's comprehensive setting, the curriculum is driven by the Standards of Learning. The Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools describe the Commonwealth's expectations for student learning and achievement in grades K-12 in English, Mathematics, science, history and social science, technology, the fine arts, foreign language, health and physical education, and driver education (Virginia Department of Education, 2006). Pacing guides and curriculum frameworks set the standard for teachers to determine what, how, and when to teach subject matter in order to prepare students for testing.

A second important feature is that the curriculum must hold meaning for students. These same students did not find a connection between their success and the comprehensive setting. Constructivist theory encourages students to become personally engaged in the academic subject matter and that the instruction is delivered in a meaningful manner (Mottaz, 2002). Researchers Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, and Rasmussen indicate that the most powerful models of instruction are interactive. This method of instruction actively engages the learner. They further acknowledge that in engaged learning settings, students are responsible for their own learning; they take charge and are self-regulated. They define learning goals and problems that are meaningful to them, and have alternative routes or strategies for attaining goals (Jones et. al., 1995). The comprehensive setting does not always lend itself to interactive, real-life experiences as a means of instruction. However, the Virginia Department of Education specifies characteristics of regional

alternative programs as providing educational (core subject instruction, vocational, remediation, tutoring), counseling (individual, group, family), social skills training, career counseling (work adjustment, job shadowing, mentoring, work/study agreements), technology education (direct instruction, networking, internet, research), field trips, conflict resolution and mediation, and drug prevention education. These options as a daily means of instruction are not necessarily provided in the comprehensive setting.

A consistent vision must be articulated to all stakeholders with rules, expectations, and logical consequences made known to all students and staff. The presentation of instructional materials must be developmentally appropriate and culturally congruent, reflective of the unique learning needs of the students enrolled. Students must receive counseling and transitions must be monitored. Curricula such as "Aggression Replacement Training", "Paths", and "Life Skills Training", must be an essential component of the functional curriculum (Powell, 2003).

Mottaz (2002) indicates that there are a number of things to take into account when designing curriculum and instruction. There should be an early diagnosis of ability levels to detect both strengths and weaknesses. There should also be an early diagnosis of learning style. Students who are deficient in reading, writing, Mathematics or technology should be provided remediation in these areas. Information about strengths and weaknesses in academic areas, along with a determinant of learning style, can be powerful tools when developing a continuous learning plan.

Mottaz (2002) also indicates that quality alternative programs offer a variety of innovative classes that are designed in such a way as to accommodate different

intelligences, including emotional intelligence. The program should also provide cultural awareness and sensitivity classes for all students.

Elective classes often prove to be challenging for the alternative setting. Choices such as software programs, on-line classes, guest speakers, and school-to-work programs offer opportunity for students to explore elective options. Students should have input in elective classes that interest them. For students who are not as academically deficient, independent study provides the means to earn academic credit and independent learning (Mottaz, 2002).

Mottaz (2002) further indicates that assessment is a critical component of an alternative education program. As a whole, alternative school students do not perform well on standardized achievement tests. This may be due to several reasons. Poor attendance is hard on developmentally sequential subjects, such as Mathematics and reading. Kinesthetic learners do not excel in lecture-type classes. Students find little value in rote learning today (Mottaz, 2002).

Research shows that assessment tools should be as varied as alternative programs. Tools such as student portfolios, demonstrations, speeches, role -play, and presentations are a viable means of assessing student learning (Mottaz, 2002).

In addition to curriculum and assessment, many alternative programs are known for their innovation and creativity. Programs of high quality adhere to student development such as: physical and psychological safety, including safe facilities and environment; structured program setting clear limits, rules and expectations; supportive relationships with adults and peers, including a warm, nurturing atmosphere; the chance to belong and

be included; Support for efficacy and empowerment by challenging students to be leaders; opportunities to develop skills in communication, good habits and decisions, and self-talk; and collaboration with family, school, and the community (Aron, 2006).

Additionally, high quality programs address the specific needs of children from diverse backgrounds, including racial, ethnic, and special needs (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Examples of racial and ethnic needs are the role of eye contact in interacting with adults, the amount of time a student considers appropriate before responding, and the sharing of information in a group. Some cultures discourage calling attention to oneself and showing knowledge. Children from this type of background may not participate verbally in classroom activities (Quintero, 1994). When teachers validate student cultures, they provide a much richer and more effective approach to culturally sensitive instruction (McLaughlin, 1995). Other best practices include flexible scheduling, a link to the world of work, and training and support for teachers who work with at-risk populations (Krovetz, 1999).

An intense, accelerated instructional program with rigorous standards for academic achievement and student behavior is a legislative requirement of Virginia's regional alternative education programs. The range of students served and academic approaches used produce a wide spectrum of course offerings, academic initiatives, and student services. All 28 programs that serve high school students offer standard diploma courses. About 75 percent of these programs offer GED preparatory courses, 59 percent offer vocational coursework, 38 percent offer independent study, and 28 percent offer work study components. Administrators indicate a need for more career and technical courses,

more electives, a greater focus on literacy, and additional teachers to teach electives, advanced placement courses, and English courses. Student services offered in the regional alternative programs include conflict resolution, anger management, career counseling, drug awareness/prevention, career counseling, individual tutoring, computer training, mental health services, placement services, and probation services (Jay, 2006).

**Resiliency and the Alternative Education Student**

Resiliency research indicates that despite the lack of a secure home environment, schools are capable of playing a major role in resiliency development. Jenson and Fraser (2005) indicate that America's youngsters and families face huge developmental challenges in society. Never before in the country's history have young people and their parents been faced with such a wide array of positive and negative influences and opportunities. Due to the adversities they face, the hope of a successful future is often uncertain and bleak.

Research studies of resilient children and youth identify crucial protective factors for human development (Matsen, 1994; Matsen et al., 1990). The most important protective factor for development is a strong relationship with a capable, caring, positive adult. Other protective factors indicated in resiliency literature include connections to positive role models, feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy, talents valued by others, faith and religious affiliations, socioeconomic advantages, good schools, and opportunities to be successful in society (Matsen, 1994). Additionally, Payne (et al., 2003) indicate that

students who perceive that they are cared for and valued in school experience fewer problem behaviors.

Waxman (et al., 2002) indicate that resiliency for the educational improvement of at-risk students is critical in their success. Furthermore, resilience can provide a framework to help determine why some students are successful in school, while others from similar backgrounds are not.

Garbarino (1995) identifies seven themes of successful coping and resilience.

1) Personal Anchors – children need stable, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or other adult.
2) Cognitive competence – Being of at least average intelligence helps in coping behavior. Smarter children are more resilient.
3) Success – Children who have had successes in their lives believe in their own ability for continued success.
4) Active Coping – Children who actively seek to solve their problems or overcome challenges are more resilient.
5) Positive Temperament – those children who are more active and social tend to cope better and be more resilient
6) Social Climate – children do best in an open and supportive educational climate, both at home and at school.
7) Additional support – People in the child's neighborhood and community also play a part in fostering resilience.

The converse of the At-Risk-Merry-Go-Round is The Resiliency Wheel. Researcher Nan Henderson (1997) developed The Resiliency Wheel to serve as a framework for responding to at-risk students. The wheel consists of six components as a basis to fostering resiliency.

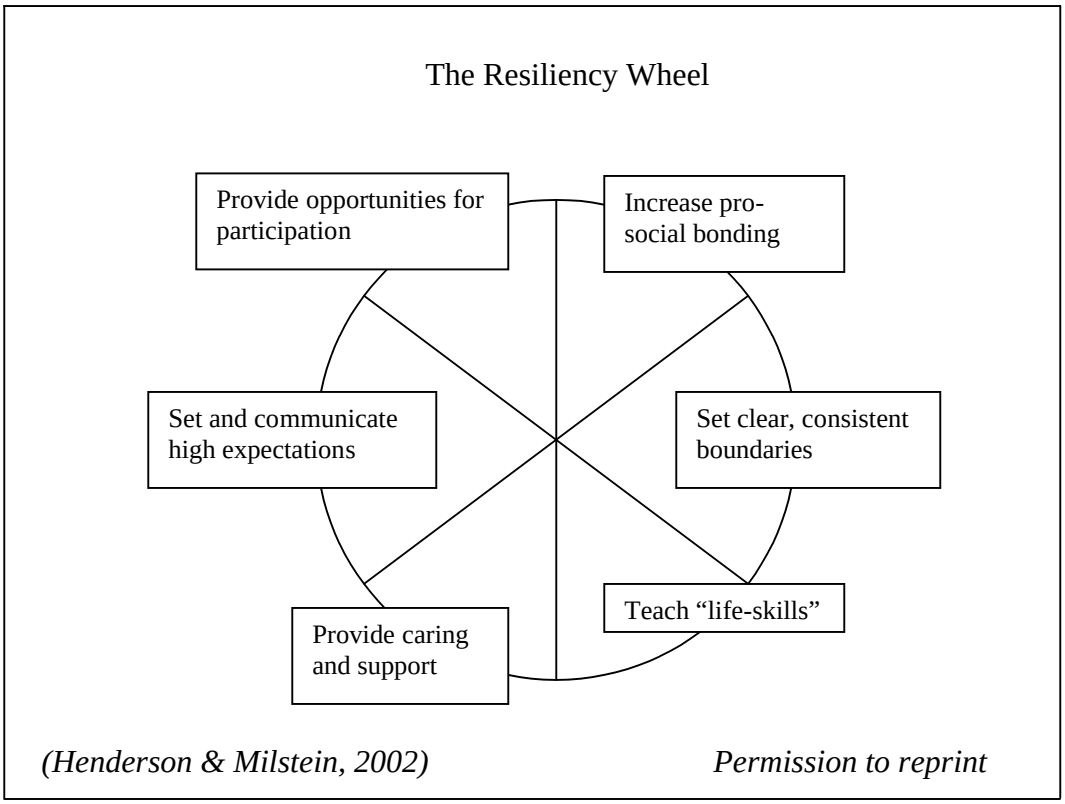



Figure 2. The Resiliency Wheel

The Tucson Resiliency Initiative (2002) provides an explanation of each component. A caring and supportive environment offers students the opportunity to be heard and to have their concerns addressed in a direct, factual manner. Students should be encouraged with high expectations and expressions of certainty from adults that they can

cope. Providing opportunities for participation empowers students to solve problems, make decisions, and seek solutions. Teamwork and pro-social bonding helps students learn to work together to master a situation. Establishing routines and rules for students, and providing clear, consistent boundaries teaches students how to stay focused. Lastly, a life-skills component brings “real life” situations to the forefront in teaching students to manage daily issues.

Educational resilience is not viewed as a fixed attribute, but rather an alterable process that can be developed and nurtured. Educational resilience does not focus on such attributes as ability, because ability is not a determinant of resilient students (Bernard, 1993). However, several characteristics have, in fact, been found to be associated with resiliency in children. Bernard (1993) found that resilient children typically display at least four attributes, namely social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. McMillan and Reed (1994) determined four other factors that could be related to resiliency. These factors include personal characteristics, motivation, aspirations, and goals; positive use of time; family life; and school atmosphere.

It is possible for some students to be subjected to inadequate educational experiences within their schools, communities, or families (Pallas, Natriello & Dill, 1989). Although educators cannot control community and family situations, they can modify educational policy and practice to improve learning for at-risk youth (Comer, 1987). School personnel and parents need to understand why some students are resilient and motivated to do well in school, while others with similar backgrounds and ability levels, and even from the same schools and classrooms, do not fare as well. Studying factors such

as family life, personal characteristics, and school environment will assist in determining circumstances that place students at-risk (Waxman et al., 2002).

Doll (et al., 2004) believes that the majority of chronically deprived children are successful despite the odds, but not due to overcoming the risk. Instead, they are "truly vulnerable children who benefited from the caring, sustenance, and guidance of a community" (p.1). They further indicate that school classrooms can become the resilient community and provide the needed guidance and support for vulnerable students.

In schools, both teachers and administrators can play a vital role in developing resiliency in at-risk students. Schools help foster resiliency by providing positive and safe learning environments, setting high, yet achievable, academic and social expectations, and facilitating academic and social success. Students in schools that provide opportunities for students to belong to school sponsored social groups and clubs are less likely to demonstrate aggression and/or violence (Catalano et al., 1999).

Vulnerable students need social and emotional support but are not receiving it through community resources. School divisions cannot furnish the number of mental health counselors and school counselors to meet the demand. This gap implores schools to find creative ways to support the social and emotional needs of students. This can be done through the creation of resilient classrooms (Doll et al., 2004).

Doll (et al., 2004) indicates six characteristics necessary for creating resilient classrooms:

*Academic Efficacy* – an indication that students believe in their ability to learn and be successful in the classroom. Students expecting success will take steps in that direction

to ensure success. Students who expect to fail behave in ways that almost ensure failure. Students with high academic efficacy make better grades, complete assignments, do better on tests, and are more strategic in their learning.

*Behavioral Self-Control* – Display of the classroom behaviors essential for learning, including active engagement in academic work, positive peer interaction, and successfully transitioning from one learning activity to the next. Negative behaviors include constant disruption toward peers and teachers, inability to sit still, and being inattentive to the teacher or the lesson.

*Academic Self-Determination* – Students are self-determined when they have established their own personal goals for success. They take responsibility for their own learning and credit for their success. Resilient classrooms foster academic self-determination by teaching students to set goals, make decisions, solve problems, and receive feedback.

*Effective Teacher-Student Relationships* – The most effective teacher-student relationships are warm, engaged, responsive, and characterized by high demands and expectations. Teacher-student relationships contribute to learning by reassuring students in the face of failure, and engaging them in active learning with new knowledge.

*Effective Peer Relationships* – Students have supportive peer friendships when classmates realize how to resolve conflicts quickly and without disruption. Peer relationships are important in the development of social competence.

*Effective Home-School Relationships* – Teachers define parent involvement as family attendance at conferences, school assemblies, or classroom events. At home,

parents monitor television viewing, provide appropriate study areas, check homework, and reinforce classroom rules. When parents are involved in school, student grades and test scores improve, students stay in school longer, have higher attendance, and lower suspensions.

Research indicates the six aforementioned characteristics can be taught within the classroom community. Evidence shows that class routines and practices hold great influence over the emergence of these characteristics for students in a classroom (Doll, et. al., 2004).

A servant leadership approach is taken with regard to discipline. Teachers are taught the techniques of servant leadership during staff development training. Every student is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their circumstances. Although the program is built on a structured environment and used a “boot-camp” style of discipline, such an environment often mirrors the comprehensive setting. The AIP must offer a different approach to ensure student success.

The servant leadership approach is connected to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Until students achieve safety, security, food, and shelter from the storm, they have a very slim chance of moving up the hierarchy to the point of self-efficacy.

Servant leadership is a term usually associated with the corporate or religious sector. Robert Greenleaf, the spear header of the servant leadership theory, indicates that a servant leader is a servant first, then a leader. The goal of the servant leader is to ensure that the least privileged in society will benefit or at least not be further deprived (Greenleaf, 2002). The students in the AIP are served dignity, compassion, nurturing,

caring, emotional, and academic skills in a safe environment on a daily basis. Every student is afforded two meals per day, whether or not they have the money. Staff members have purchased uniform clothing for students who live in poverty. Celebrations acknowledging birthdays, special dates, or special events in students' lives are meaningful to students and staff. Likewise, death, sickness, personal concerns, and other issues that drain students are equally as meaningful and acknowledged.

It is important to teach students to care for themselves and for others. The AIP staff models caring and respect to students, and expect their efforts to be returned by students. The learning environment is safe for students, a place where they can thrive and grow. A sense of calm is a key component in a possibly volatile environment. Students are taught to handle situations in a respectful manner.

When students transition from the AIP to the comprehensive setting, there are no means to track their whereabouts or their success. This information is important in determining the success of the program, and to determine if any modifications need to take place. My study of this program will help gather pertinent data to determine program effectiveness.

During the 2006-2007 academic year, staff members traveled to the comprehensive schools to visit former students. They collected data on how well the students are doing, particularly in the three areas of attendance, discipline, and academics. The staff also motivated students to stay in school and make positive strides. Each student is visited in the comprehensive setting at least three times during the year. The AIP works in

conjunction with the school counselors in each school to ensure a smooth transition and permission to visit with students.

Staff members indicate that most students are still in school and have experienced minor discipline problems. Counselors indicate that students appear motivated to learn knowing that the AIP staff will visit them. However, several students have not been successful since their return, and are either in juvenile detention or on the streets – whereabouts unknown. Some are unhappy, and miss the AIP setting. Some students are overwhelmed in the comprehensive setting, and have not adjusted to the size and magnitude of the traditional school. It is indeed difficult for some students to move from a classroom of eight to ten students to a class size of more than thirty students. Making their way from one class period to another, getting lost in the crowd, no connection to an adult, and no one who understands – all sentiments expressed by transitioned students.

After perusing several sources for a definition of alternative education, this Michigan Department of Education definition best suits the objectives of the AIP. Virginia defines alternative education only in reference to the regional alternative programs. Best practice indicators are listed within the definition, but interestingly, none address meeting the needs of students (Jay, 2006).

The Michigan Department of Education defines alternative education as:

> "A separate program within a K-12 public school district or charter school established to serve and provide youth a choice or option whose needs are not being met in the traditional setting" (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.).

This definition so adequately captures the mission and vision of the AIP program. Although a major component of any quality educational program is to educate, the word is not used in Michigan's alternative education definition.

Despite the lack of a succinct definition of alternative education, several research projects on alternative programs yield results reflective of the literature on alternative education. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) conducted a survey to determine the effectiveness of fifteen alternative programs. The programs were selected based on geographic location, student population, types of educational services offered, and program components. Results from student surveys indicate a variety of life situations that affect program participation and success. The key to success for students is the ability of the alternative program to accommodate these challenges.

Ruzzi and Kraemer's 2006 study shows the strengths of the fifteen programs surveyed include small class size, computer-based instruction, self-paced curricula, flexible scheduling, meaningful curriculum, performance-based assessment, and academic counseling and support. Weaknesses include a lack of connection with continuing education options, lack of data collection procedures, a lack of effective curriculum to address basic skills for older students, inability to find and retain highly qualified teachers, and a lack of strategies for teaching in multi-level classrooms.

Quinn and Poirer's 2006 study of effective alternative education programs determined that "students identified as troubled or troubling tend to flourish in alternative learning environments where they believe that their teachers, staff, and administrators care

about and respect them, value their opinion, establish rules that they support, are flexible in trying to solve problems, and take a non-authoritarian approach to teaching.

Successful alternative programs are those whose major focus is to develop teacher and staff involvement in the lives of the students served (De La Rosa, 1998).

Saunders and Saunders (2001) conducted a research study on whether students valued the features of alternative programs. The students studied had previously attended a comprehensive school setting. The study sought to identify the value of student-staff relationships, and whether these relationships contributed to student success.

Students in the study completed two questionnaires, one prior to and during their enrollment in the alternative program. Results indicated that the majority of students did not feel that teachers in their last school understood them, treated them fairly, cared about them, tried to make schoolwork interesting, or were helpful when schoolwork was difficult. Forty-eight percent did not feel the counselor in their previous school helped them to solve problems or manage family problems. Fifty-five percent of students did not feel administrators in the prior school treated them fairly, and 70% did not feel administrators cared about them or listened to them. Sixty-two percent of students rated their prior school experience as poor.

On the other hand, the majority of students felt that their teachers, counselors, and administrators in the alternative program understood them, treated them fairly, helped them solve problems in school, helped them manage personal problems. Students felt a strong sense of caring among counselors. Only 20% of students in the alternative program

thought the rules and policies were too rigid, compared to 57% who thought the regular school rules were too rigid.

The alternative program in this study was developed to respond to the pastoral needs of students in achieving educational objectives. A major strength of the program is that it is able to create a supportive, caring environment for students. Saunders and Saunders (2001) indicate that alternative programs of this type will play a vital role in the community in meeting the needs of students and achieving academic success.

# CHAPTER 3

## Introduction

The overall purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine student perceptions of the impact of an alternative intervention program (AIP), and provide a framework meant to inspire programs in other locations. Focusing on attendance, discipline, and academic achievement data, this study examined what factors motivated successful alternative education students to succeed upon their return to the comprehensive setting, and identified support factors that foster resiliency.

The research design, methodologies, data collection, student participants, selection process, research questions, and ethical issues and addressed in this chapter.

## Research Questions

There were four research questions designed for this study.

1. In what ways, if any, do students perceive that their participation in the AIP has influenced them in the comprehensive setting in the areas of academics, achievement, and discipline?
2. What are student perceptions of the differences and/or similarities between the AIP and other educational settings?
3. How successful have students been before, during, and after their placement in the AIP, as defined in the areas of academics, attendance, and discipline?

4. What are the consistent resilience factors?

**Research Design**

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used for this phenomenological study. Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) indicate there is no question that there are definite strengths in mixed methods designs. A more complete picture of a situation is given when both qualitative and quantitative data are used. A mixed methods approach enhances the understanding of the phenomenon that is studied. Along the same lines, Creswell (2001) indicates that the mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and "mixing" both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to understand a research phenomenon. Quantitative and qualitative data together provide a better understanding of a research problem than either type individually. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) describe four types of mixed-methods designs: Explanatory, exploratory, and embedded, and triangulation. The Embedded Design is a mixed methods design in which one data set offers a supportive, secondary role in a study based primarily on the other data type. The basis of the embedded design is that one data set is not adequate. There may be different questions to be answered where quantitative or qualitative data alone is not sufficient. This design is particularly useful to embed a quantitative component within a qualitative design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

In this study, the embedded design was the method of choice. Qualitative data were collected from the responses of three student focus groups and ten to fifteen in-depth individual student interviews. Descriptive quantitative data were used to support the

qualitative analysis and to help others understand the scope of the program. Secondary quantitative data were analyzed to provide a summation of the alternative intervention program with regard to academics, attendance, and discipline. Samples of demographic data included gender, age, and ethnicity.

**Qualitative Research**

Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) indicate that qualitative research is useful when determining a more complete picture of what goes on in a particular classroom or school. They further indicate that a phenomenology study is used to gain insight into the world of the study participants and to describe their perceptions and reactions. Data are usually collected by means of in-depth interviewing, whereby the "researcher attempts to identify and describe aspects of each individual's perceptions and reactions to their experience in some detail" (p. 436-37).

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) describe five features of qualitative research. The first feature indicates that the natural setting is the direct source of data, and the researcher is the key instrument in qualitative research. Conducting research in the natural environment means that students may be relatively comfortable given that they find themselves in familiar surroundings. This, in turn, establishes trust which enables students to speak freely. Second, qualitative data are descriptive, and are collected in the form of words or pictures that take shape as the various pieces are collected. Third, qualitative research emphasizes process rather than outcomes or products. Next, qualitative researchers usually do not seek to test out a hypothesis but rather analyze data inductively. Lastly, qualitative

researchers are mainly concerned with how people make sense of their lives. The authors denote that "meaning" is of essential concern to the qualitative approach (p. 4-7). There has been no hypothesis formulated for this study. The researcher seeks student input to establish how the AIP has impacted their lives.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology seeks to describe basic lived experience. As a research method, phenomenology is concerned with the qualities, values, and impressions of our experiences rather than with the what, when and why characteristic of empirical methods (van Manen, 1990). According to Keen (1975) the goal of phenomenological research is to understand human experience from the individual's perspective. To accomplish this task, the researcher must set aside any preconceptions about the meaning of the experience and remain neutral to the phenomenon as it presents itself. Keen (1975) describes phenomenology as an approach, an attitude, and an "investigative posture" with specific goals.

The operative word in a phenomenological study is 'describe'. The goal of the phenomenological researcher is to describe as clearly as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-conceived notions, but remaining true to the facts. Welman and Kruger (1999) point out that "phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved" (p. 189).

Phenomenology was initially developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). He introduced phenomenology in his book, *Ideas: A General Introduction to Pure*

*Phenomenology* in 1913. The German Mathematician considered his work to be an alternative to the natural scientific method. He described phenomenology as a method that allows us to contact phenomena as we live and experience them (Valle & King, 1978). Phenomenology began for Husserl as a study of the truths according to the observer. This involves direct reflection on a subject while blocking out any other thoughts.

Phenomenological concerns are frequently researched using qualitative methods (Bogdan & Taylor 1975; Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 1998). Phenomenological researchers frequently undertake analyses of small groups, social situations, and organizations using face-to-face techniques of participant observation (Psathas & Ten Have, 1994). The task of the phenomenological interview is to gain access to the meanings that particular objects, events, and situations have for the interviewees by encouraging them to reconstruct their experience and reflect on the meaning they make of it (Seldman, 1985). Kvale (1983) affirms that such an interview seeks detailed "description and understanding of the meaning of themes in the life-world of the interviewee" (p. 174). Gordon (1987) indicates that the interview is semi-structured, being neither a free conversation nor a highly structured survey type questionnaire. Rather, the conversation is developed through following an interview guide that focuses on certain themes.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups help paint the picture of the AIP from the student's perspective. Qualitative research is concerned with process, which is particularly important because student input could serve as a change agent not only for the AIP.

A focus group interview is usually conducted with a small group of people on a specific topic. Groups are typically six to ten people with similar backgrounds (Patton 2002). In the case of this study, each group member was either participating in or had completed the alternative intervention program. A series of different focus groups were conducted to obtain varied perspectives and increase confidence in emerging patterns.

There are several advantages to using focus group interviews for qualitative inquiry. Krueger and Casey (2000) indicate that interactions among participants enhance data quality by weeding out false or extreme views. Patton (2002) points out that data collection is cost-effective. Sample size is significantly increased when information is gathered from a larger number of people rather than just one.

Three focus groups of regular education students and one exceptional education high school students were interviewed in this study. Each group consisted of at least six to eight participants. High school students represent the largest population attending the AIP and offer the best chance to obtain the greatest number of participants. Students ranged in age from 14 to 18 years, and represented all districts within the school division. The groups met in the comprehensive setting or the AIP mobile unit. The mobile unit is a separate facility adjacent to the AIP building. This served as a familiar surrounding for students, and also provided a safe atmosphere where students felt comfortable. Students are accustomed to and enjoy group activities in the mobile unit, as this is the method of interaction most widely used by the school counselor in teaching life skills and art. Focus groups were asked seven to ten questions, which are located in Appendix B.

**The Newbies.** The first group (Newbies) consisted of newly enrolled high school students in the AIP. The group met at the start of a nine-week enrollment period, after a sufficient number of eligible students had been enrolled in the AIP, but not more than two weeks into the program. In other words, a newly enrolled student who had participated in the AIP for more than two weeks was not be eligible to participate in the group.

The focus of the Newbies was to discuss their prior placement with regard to academics, attendance, and discipline. This group met on the AIP campus in the mobile unit to talk about their prior educational experiences, successes and/or failures, discipline concerns, and expectations for the AIP.

**The Pros.** The second group (Pros) met in the AIP setting after completing a nine-week period in the AIP. This group also focused on academics, attendance, and discipline, and discuss their experiences in the AIP and their concerns with attending a larger educational setting. Students were asked questions about their ability to communicate with other students, their relationships with school faculty and staff, opportunities for student participation and growth, and their ability to be resilient. Students were also asked about the AIP and its impact on their schooling.

**The Champions.** The third group (Champions) met in the comprehensive setting. This group consisted of students who were in their second nine-week period of transitioning back to the comprehensive setting. This group focused on academics, attendance, and discipline, and discussed their challenges in completing a semester in high school. This group was asked to voice their perceptions of the impact of the AIP on their attendance, academic achievement, and discipline.

The first two groups met in the AIP mobile unit. For purposes of safety and security, the third group met in their comprehensive setting. Permission to interview students during school hours was obtained from the building administrator.

**In-Depth Interviews**

In addition to focus groups, ten to fifteen additional students were selected for in-depth interviewing. Interview questions were used to collect information regarding students' perceptions about their AIP and comprehensive school experience. These adult students, age 18 or older, had participated in the AIP for at least nine weeks during their high school tenure during the 2005-2006, or 2006-2007 school years. They had received either a high school diploma or a general educational development (GED) diploma. School records were used to determine whether the high school diploma or GED has been obtained. Each student fitting this category was contacted to participate in the study.

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative method of data collection that involves interpreting phenomena through the eyes of the informants (Creswell, 1998). There are key characteristics that differentiate an in-depth, research interview from a regular interview. Rubin (2004) reveals that in-depth interviews usually consist of opened-ended questions where respondents must respond with more information than a yes or no answer. In-depth interview questions are semi-structured, without specific questions in a specific order. The flow of the conversation dictates the order of the questions asked or omitted. The researcher must attempt to interpret what is heard, as well as seek clarity and understanding from the respondent throughout the interview. Rubin further indicates that

in order to achieve richness and depth of understanding, the researcher listens for and then focuses on key words, ideas, and themes. Follow-up questions are used to encourage the interviewee to expand on what he or she has said that the researcher feels is valuable to the research. The primary goal is that of a listener. There should be smooth transitions from one topic to the next. Lastly, the interview is recorded to accurately account the responses, observations, and reflections of the interview. Unlike focus group interviews, in-depth interviews occur with one individual at a time to set the stage for deep discovery. According to Rubin (2004) "Qualitative research is not only learning about a topic, but also learning what is important to those being studied" (p. 15).

In comparing in-depth interviewing to a regular interview, Gubrium and Holstein (2002), give the following account of qualitative and in-depth interviewing:

> *"…in-depth interviewing is more exploratory and collaborative. The interviewer has greater freedom to raise topics, formulate questions, and move in new directions. The interviewer sees his or her relationship with the interviewee as an extended, open-ended exchange, focused on particular topics and the related subject matter that emerges during the interview process. The exchange is designed not so much to collect the facts, as it is to gather information that meaningfully frames the configuration and salience of those facts in the interviewee's life"* (p.57).

Mitchell and Jolley (2004) suggest that interviewing provides more interaction with the participant that a written instrument. Due to this interaction, the researcher can clarify

questions or follow up on ambiguous or interesting responses. They further indicate that interviewing may increase the researcher's response rate due to a more personal touch (p. 189).

**Pilot Study**

Focus group questions were piloted with seven high school students. The group consisted of two female and five male students. Five of the students were Black and two were White. Three students were enrolled in special education with current Individualized Education Plans (IEP's). Two of the students were identified as having an emotional disability and one student was identified as having a learning disability. Four were enrolled in regular education.

The students met in the AIP trailer during break time and were asked to review focus group questions based on the following criteria:

1- Do you understand the meaning of each question?

2- Are there words that you do not understand?

3- Could you answer the questions if asked to do so?

4- What changes or improvements would you recommend?

Based upon their review of the questions, the students recommended that the words *comprehensive setting* be changed to *home school* or *last school*. Students did not understand what AIP meant, and suggested that the words *alternative program* be used instead. Lastly, the students recommended that *in the community* should be added to a question for the Newbies (What have been your biggest challenges, at home, at school, and in the community?)

The in-depth interview questions were piloted with six high school students. These students also met in the AIP trailer during break time on the day following the focus group pilot. All six of the students were Black. Two of the students were female, four were male, and five were enrolled in regular education classes. One student was identified as in need of exceptional education services.

The students were asked to review the questions using the same criteria as the focus group pilot. Students made the following suggestions:

1) Question 1F - How would you describe your high school experience? How did you perform academically? Students suggested that *in your classes* replace the word *academically*.

2) Question 2 - Did you get any help or support during your high school years? From who? Question 4 - If you stayed, from who did you receive help or support, and in what ways did they help you? Students suggested questions 2 and 4 should be combined because they ask for similar information.

3) Question 3 - Were there times when you felt it was hard for you to continue/stay in school or when you wanted to drop out? Students recommended that the slash mark be replaced with the word *or*.

4) Question 9 - How did you respond to questions about your whereabouts during the time you were in the alternative program? Students questioned the meaning of *whereabouts* and suggested *where you were* be used instead.

**Quantitative Research**

Quantitative data served to support findings from the qualitative analysis. Quantitative research reduces data to numerical scores. It breaks down complex phenomena into specific parts for analysis (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). For this study, the Department of Research and Planning and the Department of Data Services gave this researcher access to AIP student demographic data, as well as data in the areas of attendance, discipline, and academic achievement. The participants included in the research database were concurrently enrolled in the comprehensive and the alternative settings. The comprehensive setting enrollment is coded as an "E" enrollment that begins the first day of the school year. The "$E_1$" code indicates that the student is concurrently enrolled in an alternative placement. Once the student returns to the comprehensive setting, the "$E_1$" code is removed but the enrollment data remain intact. The school system maintains a database of each alternative program and its enrollees. Data were retrieved only for those students coded as being enrolled in both regular and alternative education programs.

Student conduct infractions were coded into separate categories based on the infraction. Samples of various category codes include DOC2-Defiance/Refuses Request; DOC1-Disrespect/Walking Away; FA1-Fighting-Serious Injury; FA2-Fighting-No/Minor Injury; AT03-Attend-Leaving w/o Perm; TRN1-Misbehavior on Bus; and INT1-Cheating. These codes are aligned with state reporting requirements for school safety infractions. Only discipline codes applicable to the AIP were reported.

Attendance included year-end attendance data. The number of excused and unexcused absences were reported, along with incidences of truancy. Attendance data were separated during the AIP enrollment from the comprehensive setting because the AIP attendance is recorded as the "$E_1$" code – totally separate from the comprehensive setting code of "E". The researcher has the ability to view both codes in the database. Any absences coded with the "E" code will have been made in the student's comprehensive setting. Any absences coded with "$E_1$" will have resulted in the alternative setting.

Grades were measured by using report card data to capture grades for each subject. According to the division's Policy Manual, a student with a grade above 69 is considered passing. For this study, grades were used to identify pass/fail rates across students. Additionally, demographic data were collected, including age, ethnicity, gender, and special education status.

## Instrumentation

**Focus Group Questions.** Upon identifying students to participate in the study, the required consent forms were discussed with parents or adult students. Focus groups were asked to respond to seven or nine interview questions in a group setting. What follows is a sample of focus group interview questions.

1. Tell me about your first nine weeks in your last educational setting, especially in academics, attendance, and discipline.
2. What have been your biggest challenges, at home and at school?
3. Did the program help you improve? If so, how? If not, what could have been done?

**In-depth Interview Questions.** In-depth interviews consist of fourteen questions. Two sample questions are included. The full interview protocols for focus groups and in-depth interviews can be found in Appendix B and C.

1. How would you describe your high school experience? *Probes:* What was it like for you? What successes do you remember? What problems did you face?

2. What was it like to leave a large educational setting to come to the alternative program? *Probes:* What were your feelings having to attend the alternative setting? How did you adjust?

## Sampling

Miles and Huberman (1994) point out that purposive sampling in qualitative research usually requires in-depth study with small groups. Sampling in qualitative research involves defining the aspects of a case that can be studied within the constraints of time and means that they directly connect with the research questions. Miles and Huberman give this advice:

> *"Just thinking in sampling-frame terms is good for your study's health. If you are talking with one kind of informant, you need to consider why this kind of informant is important and, from there, who else should be interviewed or observed. This is also a good exercise for controlling bias" (p. 33).*

Purposive sampling was the method used to select ten to fifteen students from the initial sample. Five students were selected for the Newbies group, two students for the

Pros, and five for the Champions groups. This ensured variety in ethnic and gender backgrounds. The informed consent process affected student selection. Only students with signed consent forms were selected to participate in this study.

Patton (2002) indicates that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth because they provide "a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 230).

Hycner (1999) believed that "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-cersa) including even the type of participants" (p. 156). According to Welman and Kruger (1999), purposive sampling is considered to be the most important type of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants. The purpose of the research sample is to "look for those who have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (p. 150).

As is the case with all forms of data collection, there are limitations to focus group interviews. Patton (2002) specifies that the group setting restricts the number of questions asked, and that individual responses could be strained in order to hear from everyone in the group.

**Selection Process**

In order to enroll a student in the alternative program, a parent must contact the program office to schedule an orientation. At the end of the orientation, parents were given the parent information letter and an explanation of the study. All high school students were eligible to participate, but not necessarily selected. Parents had the

opportunity to address any concerns about their child's participation in the study. Students were also involved in the decision making process, and were asked whether or not they choose to participate. Once concerns were addressed, both the parent and student were asked to sign the consent form giving permission for student participation. It was expressly noted to parents and students that participation was voluntary and in no way affected the student's placement in the alternative intervention program. The student could choose to opt-out at any point during the study, and completion of a consent form did not guarantee participation.

Parents were contacted via telephone to request permission for students in the third group. These students had completed the AIP and attend the comprehensive setting. Parents were asked to meet in the comprehensive setting or a public setting such as a library, to receive information on the study and sign the required consent forms. Every effort was made to provide convenient arrangements for parents. If the student was eighteen years of age or older, parental consent is not required.

Ten to fifteen adult students were identified using school records to confirm school completion status or current GED enrollment. Records also determined when the student was enrolled in the AIP. School records were used to determine graduation or completion status. Every student fitting the criteria was contacted to see if they were interested in participating in this study. From the pool of interested candidates, ten to fifteen students were purposively selected based on diverse demographics and backgrounds. Their current status in such areas as employment, continuing education, and residence location was considered in the selection process to ensure diversity in these areas.

Once the willingness to participate had been confirmed, each student was asked to complete the required consent forms. The location and time of the interviews was discussed as well. Interviews took place in a public facility, such as a school, library, or county government building.

## Population

**Demographics.** The school division in this study is located in the metropolitan area of a central Virginia county. The county is one of the oldest counties in the United States. Data collected from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that in 2005, the county's population was 280,581. The ethnic makeup of the county is 66.1% White, 27.4% Black, 4% American Indian, and 4.9% Asian. 86.6% of persons over the age of 25 have a high school diploma.

During the 2006-2007 school year, the Virginia Department of Education reported that the school system had a student population of 47,680 in 64 elementary, middle, and high schools. The division has made great strides in the progress of raising student achievement and enhancing the learning environment. The Virginia Department of Education also indicates that all 44 elementary schools and 8 high schools are fully accredited, six of the 10 middle schools are fully accredited (4 are accredited with warning). Two alternative middle schools had accreditation withheld. The division made annual yearly progress during the 2005-2006 school year.

According to the Virginia Department of Education's report card for the school division, over the past three years, the school division has shown an increase in the number

of safety infractions, including fights, firearm violations, other weapons violations, and serious incidents. The number of fights rose from 372 in 2003-2004 to 598 in 2005-2006. Serious incidents increased from 88 in 2003-2004 to 170 in 2005-2006. Some of these students implicated in those infractions have been placed in alternative education programs such as the AIP, in lieu of long-term suspension or expulsion.

**The AIP.** Students who are currently participating or have previously participated in the alternative intervention program were the subjects of this study. The AIP is an alternative intervention program for long-term suspended or expelled students in both regular and special education. The disciplinary hearing officer placed students in the program after a hearing with students and parents. The hearing officer also determined the length of the placement. Characteristics of students included habitual offenders, potential dropouts, juvenile offenders, and a few students who were strong academically but are poor decision makers.

A student can be placed in the program for one quarter of the academic year or until the end of the academic year. If success is not met with regard to attendance, discipline, and academics, a student may remain in the program for an additional quarter. Any student assigned for an additional quarter will be excluded from the study. The goal of the program is to provide students the necessary academic, emotional, and coping skills to function in the comprehensive setting. Some students are resilient upon their return, while others revert back to negative behaviors. The students in focus groups for this study will either participate or will have participated in the AIP for a period of at least nine weeks.

Additionally, students selected for in-depth interviewing will have participated in the AIP program and either graduated from high school or obtained a GED.

During the 2005-2006 school year, the AIP served 86 middle and high school students in regular and exceptional education. The exceptional education class consisted of both middle and high school students in the same classroom. The two groups were separated during the 2006-2007 school year due to enrollment growth. Classroom teachers managed Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) for 29 exceptional education students. Thirty-four of the 86 students received free or reduced lunch.

The AIP served 77 students during the 2006-2007 school year. This is a slight decline from the previous year, and a slight increase in the exceptional education student population. Thirty-nine middle school students and 38 high school students were enrolled in the program, with thirty-one students enrolled in exceptional education classes. Black males continue to dominate minority enrollment, comprising 58% of the total AIP population. Thirty-three students received free or reduced lunch.

Tables 6, 7 and 8 give the breakdown of enrollees by gender, ethnicity, and educational status for the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years. Minority students represented the largest single student population, while high school and middle school students were equally represented.

**Procedures**

Qualitative data were collected via focus group and in-depth interviews. All focus group and in-depth interviews were recorded via a digital voice recorder. The interview

data were downloaded into Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software program for transcription. Coding of student responses into categories revealed emerging themes, patterns, and relationships among categories. Matrices of various data sets were developed to depict the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that a matrix is an excellent way to both find and show a relationship in qualitative data. Cross-case and within-case analysis was used to reduce data and analyze conclusions. A peer-debriefer was used to provide a fresh perspective for analysis and critique. The peer-debriefer was knowledgeable of the method and content of this study and had the ability to challenge the researcher's assumptions of the findings.

Secondary data included AIP demographic information. These data were entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a data analysis software program. Descriptive statistics with regard to attendance, grades, and discipline were calculated. Attendance data were separated during the AIP enrollment from the comprehensive setting because the AIP attendance is recorded as the "$E_1$" code – totally separate from the comprehensive setting code of "E". The database software will make the distinction. The researcher has the ability to view both codes in the database. Any absences coded with the "E" code would have been made in the student's comprehensive setting. Any absences coded with "$E_1$" would have resulted in the alternative setting.

Other variables analyzed were gender, ethnicity, age, and grade level. The quantitative data were analyzed to investigate how it supports or contradicts student focus group and individual interview responses. SPSS also served as a means of data storage in case other statistical analyses are required.

## Limitations

This researcher only examined data on students who were enrolled in the school division. Although there were other alternative programs in the county, only middle and high school students who participated in the AIP program were included in this study.

Students who had been placed in juvenile facilities or had moved from the area were not included in this study. The school division would not be able to provide data on students who fall into any of the three aforementioned categories.

This study included only high school students in focus groups. Students in grades nine through twelve represented the largest population in the AIP. In the school division studied, high school students entered the program with the most serious disciplinary infractions, and were usually the most prone to dropping out of school.

## Institutional Review Board

Confidentiality and privacy are ensured through provisions of Virginia Commonwealth University's IRB. Any IRB permission forms or documentation can be found in the appendix. The course in the protection of human research subjects (CITI) has been completed.

# CHAPTER 4

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine student perceptions of an alternative program, and provide a framework to inform programs in other locations. Through focus groups, in-depth interviews, and quantitative data, this study sought to reveal student perceptions of what factors motivated them to succeed upon their return to the comprehensive setting, and identified support factors that fostered resiliency. Focusing on attendance, discipline, and academic achievement data, this study sought to reveal the scope and magnitude of the program and the students served, and whether the AIP program impacted their success.

A total of 18 participants were interviewed (12 in focus groups, six in individual interviews) for this study. This chapter includes the guiding questions that were used during each focus group session. Demographic descriptions for each of the three focus groups are included, in addition to the presentation of the results.

Descriptive quantitative data were used to support the qualitative analysis. A total of one-hundred sixty two students (eighty-one middle and eighty-one high school students) were enrolled in the AIP during the 2005-2007 school years. Data collected included age, ethnicity, and gender data, as well as attendance, discipline, and academic data. Special education exceptionalities were also reported.

**Focus Groups**

Three different groups of students were chosen to participate in the three focus groups. The Newbies are students who were newly enrolled in the AIP. They appeared before a hearing officer who determined that their educational, emotional, or social needs were not being met in their regular school, or students are transitioning from a previous alternative environment. The Pros are students who successfully completed a nine-week period in the AIP and were ready to transition to a larger school setting. The Champions are students who have successfully completed a nine-week period in the AIP, transitioned to a larger setting where they were enrolled for at least a nine-week period.

Newbies were asked to participate in the study after their initial orientation into the program took place. The study was explained to both students and their parents, and upon consent, the appropriate paperwork was signed. The first five students to consent to participating were selected for the study. The two Pros were also informed of the study and their parents were contacted. The parents came to the AIP to complete the paperwork. The Champions were informed about the study in their regular setting, and asked whether or not they wanted to participate. All five students agreed and parents were contacted. The students returned the signed consent forms. The Champions were selected based on their availability in one school location. All participants were given copies of consent forms. It was explicitly expressed to all students and parents that participation was not mandatory and in no way affected the AIP placement. The decision to place students in the program lies solely with a hearing officer. All focus groups met in their school setting. A total of twelve students participated in focus groups.

**Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted to determine the clarity and appropriateness of focus group and in-depth interview questions. Seven students participated in the focus group pilot. The group consisted of two females and five males. Five students were African-American and two were Caucasian. Three students received special education services.

The pilot group for the in-depth interview questions consisted of six African-American students; two females and four males. In addition, two of these students received special education services. In the pilot group interviews, students were asked to read and respond to each interview question. They were then asked to highlight any words, phrases, or sentences they did not understand. After receiving meaningful feedback from the pilot group, the questions were revised. Member checking was used to ensure accuracy of student responses by having students read the revised questions and restate each question in their own words. As a result of the pilot study, the following questions were used to guide the focus group discussions:

*Newbies*

1. Tell me about your first nine weeks in your last educational setting, especially in academics, attendance, and discipline.
2. What did you like and dislike about your last school?
3. What do you think are your biggest successes?
4. What have been your biggest challenges, at home and at school?
5. How have you managed your challenges?
6. What do you expect from the AIP? How can the program help you improve?

7. What skills and knowledge do you hope to learn in the AIP that will help you to be successful once you transition?

*Pros*

1. Tell me about your nine weeks in the alternative program, especially in academics, attendance, and discipline. How do you feel now that you are done?
2. What did you like and dislike about the program?
3. What do you think were your biggest successes in the alternative program?
4. What were your biggest challenges at home and in the community, during your time in the program?
5. How have you managed your challenges? Has the AIP helped?
6. Did the program help you improve? If so, how? If not, what could have been done?
7. What skills and knowledge did you learn in the AIP that will help you to be successful in your transition?

*Champions*

1. Tell me about your first nine weeks in your comprehensive setting, especially in academics, attendance, and discipline.
2. What declined, improved, or remained the same?
3. What do you like and dislike about your last school?
4. What do you think have been your biggest successes in the new setting?
5. What have been your biggest challenges, at home and at school during the past nine weeks?

6. How have you managed your challenges?

7. Do you believe that the alternative program helped you improve?

8. What skills and knowledge did you learn in the AIP that have helped you to be successful in your new setting?

Focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by hand. Copies of the transcriptions were cut into individual chunks and color coded by apparent themes. This cutting and sorting process, which was completed several times, revealed themes and categories. Word repetitions and pawing (circling or underlining words, using color highlighters) were also used to identify themes and codes.

Through subsequent readings of interview data, nineteen categories emerged. To further reduce redundancies, the nineteen categories were clustered into eleven categories using constant comparison. This requires constantly comparing passages of text to similar responses. Comparisons showed how phenomenon in data can vary and be treated and seen differently. For example, when respondents speak of the many ways that they received support from teachers, this was compared to other ways in which respondents were supported. This helps to explore all dimensions of the data. After further analysis and input from two debriefers, coupled with numerous readings of the data, five codes materialized. This section of data analysis will begin with a description of each focus group, followed by responses based on coded data.

**Newbies descriptions.** The Newbies were students who were newly enrolled in the AIP. This group of five students met in early September of the school year, which was

their first nine-week enrollment period. All participants were high school students who had been placed in the alternative program for at least a nine-week period. The all male group consisted of three freshmen and two sophomore students. One Caucasian student participated in the group, and the other four students were African-American. As a collective group, the students had experienced being shot, stabbed, charged with arson, assault and battery, and disorderly conduct. These students had also participated in gang activity which led to them being assigned to probation and parole officers after incarceration.

The Newbies were assigned to the alternative intervention program for a variety of reasons, from drugs and fighting, to assault and battery against students, and injuring school staff. Some students moved into the district from other localities where they had been required to serve a specific amount of time in another alternative placement. As a result some of these students spent additional time in the AIP beyond the typical/standard nine-week placement to meet previous placement requirements.

Previous discipline infractions were extensive for this group. Collectively, the Newbies had thirty-four violations in their previous placement. Most infractions consisted of disruptive and defiant behaviors. For example, all Newbies received a discipline referral for disrespecting staff by using profanity or refusing to comply with teacher requests. Students were also involved in more serious infractions including things such as vandalism, assault and battery, and gang activity. Four of the five students had received some type of discipline offense for excessive truancy. Collectively, the Newbies were suspended from school for forty-five days prior to the AIP.

As a group, these students failed a total of fifteen academic classes in their school placement during the academic year immediately prior to their placement in AIP. Two students failed every class. Three of the students also received exceptional education services.

After a nine-week enrollment in the program, a hearing officer determined that four of the five students were not ready to transition to the regular setting. Despite a history of low academic achievement, these four students experienced first time success in school. Two of the students faced brief suspensions while in the program for minor offenses that were not severe enough to keep them out of the program but warranted an out-of-school suspension. The Hearing Officer and the transition team felt these students could benefit from additional time in the program to strengthen academics and increase self-esteem.

**Newbies responses.** Initially, group members were hesitant to reveal much information. Not knowing any of their past history or previous relationships with each other, the researcher did not know what to expect. However, participants quickly reached a comfort level with each other and spoke freely, sharing intimate details about their lives. The young men were appropriately and neatly dressed in uniform. As they quietly entered the room, the most outspoken of the group sat at the head of the table. They were excited that it was approaching lunchtime for them, as they chatted about their food selections.

After explaining the purpose of the meeting, each student selected a pseudonym. This researcher was surprised at the amount of time and effort each student took to select the perfect name. It appeared that most students selected names that represented how others address them in their communities, such as “Lil Mikey,” “Big Boy”, “Double A,”

and “H”. Some students thought of three names and had the difficult task of selecting one. It appeared to this researcher that the carefully chosen name was a “right of passage” in the students’ eyes, because the name is somehow associated with power and strength. This is a name to be revered in the community, and when spoken, people had better pay attention. They seemed to think that this carefully chosen, exclusive name would tell everything about them and give them some type of celebrity status. Throughout the group process, the students addressed each other by their pseudonym. No one forgot.

Students were reminded that since their responses were being recorded, they needed to speak clearly and with good volume. Two students were obviously ready to talk and appeared comfortable with the group process. Other students were initially shy, but talked more as their comfort level increased.

The initial discussion centered on past school experiences. All five students spoke of negative experiences in previous educational settings. Students believed that schools have somehow wronged or mistreated them. They revealed that their dislike for school, and lack of respect for staff members, administrators, and peers led to their educational demise. Impassioned words such as “hate” and “racists” were used to describe school experiences. A student responded, “Some teachers are racist,” while another student said, “I hated my last school.” Several students indicated that they did not remember any successes in school due to constant suspensions. From their perspective, school was a place where no one understood and no one cared. One student indicated, “I just went to school to see my friends, but school itself was not a good thing.” Few Newbies had any responses to questions about their biggest successes in school. One

indicated that his biggest success in school was that he "Got the ladies, if that counts." Two students said they could not remember any successes at all in school. Yet, another student attributed his negative behavior to "just doing the things I wanted to." Another student thought his biggest success was getting out of jail.

Students believed out-of-school suspensions coupled with a lack of motivation to go to school led to attendance issues. Some students went to school, but did not go to class. Yet, some students did not want to attend school, and others just simply did not attend. Students experienced failure due to disengagement from school. One student stated, "I just didn't want to do nothing because of the way I was treated." Interestingly, most students indicated that when they did attend, their grades were good. Some students believed attendance was their downfall, not academics.

Negative experiences in the community also led to student disengagement. Students spoke freely of their involvement in criminal activity and eventual incarceration. They felt that defending themselves is a major obstacle because fighting usually leads to more serious infractions. Students gave the impression that participating in illegal activity was a rite of passage, and were enthralled with talk of violence, bodily harm, and detention. They believed "If you can take a bullet, you can take anything." As a group, these students seemed to seek and find acceptance of negative behavior from their peers. At one point, the group had to be redirected from discussions surrounding shooting, stabbing, and pain. It occurred to this researcher that students were talking about what they know – life in their neighborhoods with their friends and families. However, communities also appeared to be protective sects in neighborhoods where venturing is not

allowed and strangers are unwelcome. One student pointed out, “Whenever you leave the community, people just start stuff. Then you have to fight, shoot, and get locked up again.”

Being a follower was also a concern. Students felt they would be challenged by people who talked negatively about them. Students referred to peers as “childish” but still showed concern that these former friends would get them into trouble. They also pondered their responses to friends who wanted to leave class to get a smoke. One student talked about loyalty to his brothers, saying “If they want me to go somewhere with them, I ain’t going to school.” Students appeared to struggle over making positive decisions for their own benefit, or negative decisions for the benefit of others.

Based on their responses it was evident students embraced the notion that respect comes from self-defense. As Nathan McCall (1994) stated, “The best way to guarantee respect was simply to be able to thump. Then, nobody disrespected you. If they did, they paid a price” (p. 58). No one was willing to back down or walk away from a confrontation. Participants revealed that they really do not want to fight, but will settle things in the manner others want to settle them. From the students’ perspective, “If we fight, we fight.” Some students expressed this notion of respect coming from self-defense, also extended to interactions with females. Participants suggested that if challenged by a female, violence such as “slapping them up”, “slamming” or “slaughtering” was an acceptable response. According to one student, “I will fight girls if they come at me. If they swing first, I have the right to swing back. They need to take their beating like anybody else.”

Students expressed that they find it difficult to walk away from trouble. Their perception is that males are expected to fight. When asked about sitting down and talking problems out, all students gave a resounding "No!" Another student said, "We don't sit and talk it out – that's what grown people do." The difficulty in walking away, explained "Big Mikey", is that somebody may creep up behind you and "steal" [hit] you. When it comes to that point, fighting is not an option. As one student said, "If you are going to shoot me, then you are going to shoot me. But if I live, I'll get my revenge." As students continued to talk about being shot, stabbed, and inflicting pain on others, it became obvious that in school and in the community, these students have experienced life far beyond their years. The students show no obvious signs of abuse, spoke without using profanity, and appeared calm and collected; however this is not the case once they go home. These same students are well versed in a type of "street" culture known only to them and their world. They bring remnants of that culture to school each day, only to find no place there to tolerate it.

In his book *Makes me wanna holler: A young black man in America*, author Nathan McCall (1995) discusses his challenges of growing up in the projects, where poor choices were a means of survival. He also comments on how his parents raised him and his siblings:

> *My folks were typical of their generation of parents: Their idea of raising children was making sure we were clothed, fed, and protected. They didn't focus much on us unless we were sick or had done something wrong. They didn't hold conversations with us. Love was understood rather than expressed,*

*and values were transmitted by example, not word of mouth (p. 38).*

When initially asked about supporters, none of the students mentioned their mother. Older siblings and friends offered the most support to students. When the researcher asked about maternal support, comments ranged from "Mom goes without saying – that's a given", to "I don't even be paying attention to my momma and what she does. Momma takes stuff to the extreme."

None of the students spoke of a nurturing relationship where their needs were a priority. A student said that he could not remember a time when he and his family went to a restaurant together because they could not get along with each other. Another said that he never shared a Thanksgiving meal with his family. Thanksgiving was "just another day of burgers and fries, or Oodles of Noodles."

Despite these experiences and negative perceptions of school, students expressed they were certain that they could manage their behavior well enough to transition to a regular educational setting. All looked forward to leaving the AIP and starting fresh in a new environment. However, during the course of placement, one student left the program for criminal activity, and two students were suspended out of school. All of the students blamed the school for their failure, from the school administrators to the classroom teachers. These students also held their peers responsible for their out of school suspensions, skipped classes, and truancy. In every conversation with the Newbies, they believed that it was always someone else liable for their behaviors except them.

**Revisit**

Data analysis of the Newbies group meeting revealed several striking observations. The group was revisited at the end of their second nine-week placement in the AIP to further examine students' perceptions of prior responses.

Based on the initial analysis, follow-up questions were asked to see if perceptions had changed, progressed, regressed, or remained the same. Permission was sought from the Institutional Review Board to reconvene the group to respond to these questions.

After receiving IRB permission to proceed with second interviews, the Newbies met a second time prior to their second nine-week enrollment in the AIP. These students were to remain in the program for an additional nine week period, at the request of the hearing officer and transition team. During the second nine-week period, two of the five students were not enrolled in the program due to incarceration.

The three remaining "Newbies turned Pros" met in the AIP mobile unit. The students remembered their pseudonyms from the previous meeting. This researcher explained the purpose of the revisit, reminded students that their responses would be audio recorded, and provided the opportunity to address any questions or concerns.

Student responses were coded by hand.

Four questions were posed to this group based on responses from the previous focus group meeting. Students gave these responses to the following questions:

1) The last time we talked, there was a great deal of conversation about participating in risky activities that led to you being suspended or expelled from school. You also voiced your involvement in unsafe community issues with negative consequences. There

appeared to be a sense of pride in participating in such activities. What are your thoughts about that conversation?

One student indicated that although he did not seek trouble at school or in the community, he always tried to be prepared for anything. Another said that participating in the activity was not the issue, but "Being a follower was what got me into trouble. I knew what we did was wrong, but I followed right along." Two students talked about showing peers that backing down was not an option, and sometimes "you have to let people know that you're no joke", even if it means doing the wrong thing. Students said that there was no pride involved in their actions, and a student said that he would "react without thinking, especially when I'm mad." All three students expressed regret for their actions. One student spoke of friends that had been killed in gun violence, and said that he learned his lesson when a young family member died in a senseless killing. The student also made a point to say that his family member "didn't do nothing to hurt nobody and still got killed." During the first focus group meeting, this student spoke of revenge for anyone who would harm him. When asked if he wanted revenge for his family member's death, his response was a quick resounding "Yeah!" When asked how he would get his revenge, it appeared as though the student pondered his response and after a long pause, said "I just want to chill and be able to help my momma. I don't want to end up like any of them." This researcher believes this is a perfect example of what a group member stated earlier about "reacting before thinking." This student's initial response was an immediate "yes" to vengeance, but after some careful thought, the student decided that there were more important priorities, such as helping his mother.

2) When we talked about negative experiences, all of you mentioned issues at school with teachers, administrators, and peers. Is there any way you contributed to your negative experiences?

One student began the discussion by admitting to making a bad decision, but also displayed harsh feelings for the person who "snitched" on him. The student said that although he did something that he should not have done, his downfall was telling a peer about his mistake. Another student talked about going to school while already suspended to fight a peer. Initially, the student blamed the peer for "running his mouth," but later admitted that both students were wrong in their actions. The student replied, "Dude was wrong for running his mouth, and I was wrong for acting on it."

The third student told his story of being escorted out of class by an administrator, refusing to comply with her requests, and eventually being "slammed to the floor by a policeman for no reason." Then the student said, "Well, maybe for running my mouth too much." The student further stated, "At first, they were going to just let me go home, but after the police got involved, that turned into detention time." When the student left detention, he was placed in the AIP.

All three students appeared to have a difficult time admitting to wrongdoing. They all started their conversations by blaming the other parties involved, but eventually owned up to their negative contributions. This was a change from the previous focus group meeting, where students blamed others and held strongly to that opinion. During the first meeting, students did not discuss their behaviors in detail, but in the second meeting they appeared to have come to grips with their behaviors and consequences. They were able to

not only reveal their behavior at the time of the incidents, but also talk about how they could have handled situations differently. This researcher noticed that the Newbies appeared more relaxed and settled during the second meeting, compared to the initial meeting where their expressions led this researcher to believe students were disgruntled and discontented. The students also indicated that had they been enrolled in the AIP when their negative behaviors occurred, the incidences would have been handled differently. Two students said that they probably would not have gotten into trouble from the start. One student said that it was difficult to get into trouble in the AIP because there was "less space to roam around, and eyes on you all the time."

Students were asked if their dislike for school had anything to do with the way they felt that they were treated. Students replied that school is really okay, it "just depends on what classes you have." A student said, "Some classes are boring and you just don't want to be there." Another student revealed that his dislike for school did not apply just to the regular school, but the AIP as well. The student said, "Sometimes I don't like coming here either. I just don't like wearing that uniform. I want to dress my own way." The other two students agreed, and said that their issues with school could not be pinpointed to one particular issue. "It could be the class, the teachers, or the students," said one student.

A student told his story of how he felt he was "suspended for nothing." He admitted to singing a song that was overheard by a teacher, and the lyrics suggested that the student was going to "blow up the school." Interestingly, when this researcher asked the student if he used those words, he said "Yes, but they weren't the lyrics to the song."

Despite his comments, the student still believed the school was wrong in suspending him. He felt that his remark was "what they wanted to hear so they could put me out." Another student said that he had experienced that type of treatment before, and was suspended for throwing a piece of paper into the trash can. When asked why the school would want them out of school, a student replied, "It was a plot from the beginning to get me out." Again, the student was asked why he thought the school would want him out, he said, "I really don't know." When this researcher asked if there was more to the story than was being told, the student sighed said, "Well, probably yes, maybe I was wrong too." It was interesting to hear students insist that they were not at fault, but through further discussion and reasoning, they began to understand the seriousness of their wrongdoings. Their demeanor seemed to say, "What can I say, you've got me."

3) When asked who supported you, no one said mother offers support until I asked whether you felt that your mother supported you. Some of you also talked about negative experiences with females and that you would fight females if necessary. Yet you said, "It's all about respect." Please talk about your respect for females, including your mother.

One student said, "I would never hit a female because that's a woman, and I wouldn't hit a woman." The student also reminded this researcher that even in the initial group meeting, he indicated that he would not hit females. Another student chimed in with "I wouldn't hit a female, but I feel that if she keeps asking for it, I would slap her up a little bit." When asked why a female would asked to be slapped up, the student further responded, "Some females think they are dudes these days, and some dudes ain't gonna have that. Some dudes will just knock their heads off to turn them in the other direction."

When this researcher asked the students if they would slap their mothers, they all replied with an emphatic, “No!” This researcher asked why not, since their mothers were females too. There was momentary silence in the room. This researcher could sense the students’ discomfort with the question, possibly due to my role as a female administrator and mother figure. The students seemed frustrated that this researcher would draw no distinction between females as younger girlfriends or older mothers. Then a student commented that “You just don’t understand how boys function. You should see how females come at us and try to fight us. The only thing you can do is try to push them away.” Students seemed a bit embarrassed, yet proud to teach an older female a few things about boys. A student recounted a time when he slapped a female and the police were called. “The police lied on me and said that I hit her.” When this researcher reminded the student that he had just admitted to hitting her, he replied, “No, I didn’t hit her, I just slapped her. And a punch is worse than a slap.” On this particular subject, this student’s views had not changed from the previous meeting. Another student held to his position of not hitting females. The third student was silent through most of the conversation on this subject and appeared preoccupied with other thoughts.

4) You all said that you could definitely hold your behavior together for the remainder of your time in the program. However, one of you is no longer in the program and two of you demonstrated behaviors that led to suspensions. What happened?

A student made the comment “See….”, as though he was about to give a profound answer. After a long sigh, he said, “I don’t know.” The same student said, “When I got suspended, I don’t know what was going on with me that day. That’s why I came back to

the building when I walked out." He indicated that he was in a bad mood and did not want to be in school that day. The student further stated that he was mad because his teacher made him stand outside in the cold to cool off. "I just didn't want to be here," the student replied. Another student said, "I just spoke without thinking and said a really stupid thing. I do that a lot, but it's gotten better since I've been here." The student further stated, "I didn't see anything wrong with it at the time. But when I saw how everybody reacted to it, I figured it was a problem."

When asked how would they manage their behaviors now that they were about to leave the program, the students began to discuss obstacles that they may face. One student said, "There will be more students, more places to hide, and more teachers." Another student said that his problem with the regular setting was that there was too much freedom. "I could go to a couple of classes, and decide that I was tired and leave school for the rest of the day. Sometimes I would hide out at school with my boys." The student further stated, "But in this program, there's one classroom, no bells ringing, and nowhere to hide. That's a good thing for me. It's not good to be in a place where you can run around." Another student replied, "I feel like I should stay in school and get myself together. I need to grow up and do what I need to do." A student said, "This is a good place to be if you want to get your education and graduate. For me, it's like help." The three students indicated that they liked the teaching staff, despite the large amounts of work that they give. They believed that the teachers cared more about them instead of whether or not they passed a class.

When asked how they planned to manage their behaviors in the comprehensive setting, students gave a variety of answers. A student said, “I will focus on my work and not play around until playtime.” Another responded, “I will make sure that my work is done first so that I can pass my classes.” One student said, “I will ignore stuff and stay out of trouble.” This researcher asked the students if they really believed they could do all of that. After sighs and hesitation, the students gave a half-hearted “Yes.” This researcher pondered whether or not they were trying to convince me, or themselves.

The Newbies experienced very little success in the comprehensive setting. The group appeared very “rough around the edges” when initially visited. But this researcher noticed a slight improvement in their dispositions. In the first meeting, the Newbies seemed to speak out of frustration with home, school, and the community. Although initially steadfast in their thinking, the students appeared more receptive to understanding the consequences of negative behaviors during the second interview. Now that the Newbies are Pros, the challenge will be whether or not they can continue their receptiveness to redirection without creating incidences that will hinder their success.

**Pros descriptions.** The Pros were students who had completed a nine-week in the AIP but had not yet transitioned back to a traditional setting. Due to the small number of students enrolled in the program, and the number of parents who signed consent forms, two students comprised the Pros focus group. Despite the small number, the students participated in in-depth discussion regarding their experiences in the AIP.

As a pair these students failed four classes and successfully completed nine classes during the academic year immediately prior to their placement in AIP. Pros accumulated

twenty-two discipline infractions. There were nine instances of defiance, five discipline referrals for disrespect. Their infractions ranged from minor insubordination, such as refusing teacher requests, to incidences of fighting and assault and battery of students. The Pros were suspended from school fifteen days prior to attending the AIP. Collectively, the students were cited for excessive absences, tardies, and skipped classes; and applauded for missing only three days from school.

One of the students expressed that she was extremely angry when first enrolled. Both students were angry over the loss of a close friend or a family member. They believed that their feelings led to discipline problems in school and at home. The students admitted to being quick tempered and said that fighting was the only way they knew to settle disputes.

During the course of their nine-week placement, the two students, one African-American male and one African-American female, indicated that they had become good friends. One of the students receives exceptional education services and one is an honor student who takes advanced classes. Both expressed relief that they were placed in the AIP to complete their education. Otherwise, the alternative would have been expulsion.

**Pros responses.** The two students entered the conference room laughing and joking with each other and chatted about how they used to act before entering the program. It appeared that these two students had a new outlook about them since completing their nine-week AIP placement. Compared to their dispositions when this researcher conducted their program orientations, the anger and bitterness appeared to be slowly chiseled away.

They were now laughing, which was something that was not often seen when they had first entered the program.

After discussing the purpose of the interview and reminding them that their responses would be recorded, we began with pseudonym selection. The two students made their choices quickly, and the questions began immediately. Students talked about obstacles they may face upon return to the comprehensive school setting. One student was very concerned about reverting to negative behaviors upon transitioning back to the comprehensive setting. The student appeared to understand the importance of attending school but admits that he does not know how to handle friends who solicit negative behavior. These are the same friends with whom the student participated in wrongful activities in the past. The student expressed uncertainty about saying "no when my friends will want to leave class to get a smoke," and is also worried about perception – what these friends may think. Both students also mentioned responding to people who talk negatively about them, or try to rope them into inappropriate conversations. McCall (1994) believes that if you do not know and believe fully in yourself, others will sense it, despite your best efforts to conceal it. At the time of the interview, both students were preparing to attend large high schools with enrollments topping 1,500 students. This transition would represent their first high school experience, since they both entered the alternative program at the beginning of their freshmen year. They talked about leaving a classroom of ten to return to a class size of possibly forty or more students. One student said, "It's easy to get lost."

Despite their concerns, both students were surprised that they remained in the program for the entire nine weeks. They reminisced about numerous suspensions in their previous setting for fighting and disrespecting school staff. However, neither student was suspended in the AIP. They stated that their behavior was much better in the program. When asked about the differences in the two settings, the students indicated that they had no reason to fight in the AIP. They expressed that adults in the classroom handled any discipline situations quickly, and disagreements never escalated to the point of fighting. "Teachers don't point out every little bad thing that you do, and they give you a chance to get it right," said one student. This student further explained, "They would tell me what I did wrong, but wouldn't write me up unless I made the same mistake again." Teachers helped students with class work so that they could understand. Students perceived teachers to be good listeners with whom they could trust and confide in. They talked about family members who offered support during their time in the program, but indicated that most of their support came from teachers. The students believed that they could "go to anyone in the building for help," and that they "always get more than one chance in the program."

Because of what they perceived as fair treatment in the AIP program, the students indicated they felt teachers genuinely cared about them and were not "out to get them." As a result, students reported improved attendance, academics, and discipline. A student said, "My attendance was better here than in my last school." Another student responded, "My behavior has changed a lot. It is much better than in my last school." One student explained, "My biggest success has been the positive change in my attitude. I made it through and stayed in school this long." They both indicated that they did not want to

leave the program. One student spoke of being "spoiled." They especially liked the counseling lessons and guest speakers. Both students spoke positively about the amount of information on career opportunities made available to them. Several military organizations, community colleges, technical and trade schools, and local businesses made weekly presentations. The students stated that this was the first time anyone had talked to them about their future.

Although students spoke highly of the staff and the program positives, they also had much to say about their concerns and dislikes. One student was not academically challenged and did not like being in class with different high school grade levels. Since everyone was taught the same material, the student questioned whether the work was freshman or senior level. From this student's perspective, some students in the program were weaker than others to grasp concepts and complete assignments. Therefore, the more proficient students were retained to keep everyone on the same pace. According to this student, "The program had no academic challenge. There were too many learning levels in one class." Another student said, "I don't see how 9$^{th}$ grade students and 12$^{th}$ grade students can do the same work." This student felt that the grade levels should be split into separate classrooms. The student further stated, "Some students worked at a slower pace, but I couldn't say anything because I didn't want to make them feel bad." Yet, one student thought that it was "cool" to be a 9$^{th}$ grader doing 12$^{th}$ grade work, and liked all high school students being together. Both students believed that there should be opportunities for students to move around. In the regular setting, they would change classes or

participate in some type of physical education class. In the AIP, they sat for five hours, and only received two fifteen-minute breaks.

Students were also concerned that the program offered no elective classes for credit. Staff members volunteer their time to teach Spanish, art, and music. In the AIP, these are not credit bearing courses. As a result, students come up short on the electives required to participate in certain extracurricular activities, such as sports. Some students go to summer school to replace the missed credit. However, all students cannot afford that opportunity. The focus group participants did not think that they should have to pay for an elective class in summer school, and felt that they were being blamed for something beyond their control.

Uniforms are required in the alternative program. The great majority of students balk at the notion. However, the rule is strictly enforced and could result in an out of school suspension. When asked about wearing uniforms, both students indicated that was not a problem for them. One student wore a uniform in a previous setting. The other student said the uniforms were an adjustment, but not a problem. However, both indicated that they looked forward to wearing their own personal clothing in the regular setting, and not the AIP uniform.

The last part of our discussion was about lessons learned. After spending nine weeks in the AIP, students were asked to reflect on their time in the program, and share any final thoughts. Students said that when facing adversity, it does not work to holler and scream. What works is to be quiet and let the other person talk. They also expressed that they learned to let things go and just move on because “You give other people too much

power when you end up in trouble for losing your cool." If you can't just walk away from trouble, as one student stated, then "You have to make a choice and deal with the consequences." Despite their concerns about leaving the AIP, both students were ready to go. Students indicated that their biggest success in the program was being able to proudly leave the program. They were reassured to know that the AIP staff will come to visit them in their new setting and want to offer only positive reports.

The Pros have shown positive growth during their AIP enrollment. Data from school records show their improvement in attendance, academics, and discipline (refer to appendix tables). Students indicated their ability to reflect on the behaviors that placed them in the AIP, and discussed their concerns with transitioning to larger schools. Armed with the strategies learned in the AIP regarding self-control and positive thinking, the Pros appear ready to embark upon the comprehensive school setting.

**Champions descriptions.** The Champions were students who had successfully completed the AIP and had spent at least a nine-week period in the regular setting. Five students participated in the Champions focus group. All five were African-American, three females and two males. The Champions attended the alternative intervention program after accumulating a total of twenty-nine discipline infractions during the school year prior to attending the AIP. Students assaulted staff members, participated in gang activity, disrespected school staff, fought other students, and defied adult authority. Collectively, the Champions were suspended from school for a total of forty-eight days prior to the AIP. They also accumulated sixty days of unexcused absences, and thirty-seven unexcused tardies. Prior to the AIP, none of the Champions made grades above a C. They failed

fifteen classes, passed seven classes with a D, and six with a C. Two students received exceptional education services for a learning disability and emotional disturbance. The Champions' educational goals included high school graduation and GED preparation.

**Champions responses.** The five students randomly entered the conference room. They were glad to see each other, and the three females chatted about classes and hairstyles. The two males sat and listened unresponsively. This researcher explained the purpose of the meeting and reminded students that their responses would be recorded.

Two of the students nervously walked around the room during certain questions, returning to their seats after responding. When asked if there was a problem, one student indicated that he was tired of sitting. One student played with another's hair, while another doodled on a piece of paper. It was apparent that the bonds these students had formed in the AIP were still strong in the regular setting. The students indicated that they are all friends and "keep each other motivated." They consider themselves to be well-behaved in school and expressed surprised with regard to the behaviors of their peers.

The students were excited to talk and quickly selected pseudonyms that this researcher could not pronounce, particularly the female names. They laughed as the researcher attempted to say the names, and one student volunteered to help with pronunciations. Listening to the researcher mispronounce the names was a constant source of chuckles around the table. There were more female participants in the Champion group than the Newbies or Pros. The males in the three groups were very matter-of-fact with name selections and showed little emotion. However, the females in the group, particularly the Champions, showed excitement in selecting names by giggling and telling

each other how much they liked the names. The eagerness to talk and share perceptions was more pronounced with the Champions than with the other two groups. The Champions appeared happier and well-adjusted to school, and seemed to have found their niche. They were proud to share their accomplishments, and appeared to talk with this researcher as though they were giving a parent a good progress report.

One student experienced difficulties remembering the questions, and had problems focusing. If the student was not the first to respond, the question had to be repeated. However, when asked first, the student could not formulate an answer. The other students in the group provided assistance and helped the student through the process. This researcher was touched by the amount of attention the group showed toward the student. The student was comfortable and relaxed during the group process.

Before we began discussion of the current educational setting, this researcher asked students to reflect on their time spent in the AIP. All tried to speak at once. We began the process of addressing each other by pseudonym. Every student's response was equally important and vital to the discussion. Therefore students were asked to give everyone a chance for uninterrupted dialog. They all agreed and some students offered apologies.

When the discussion resumed, all students spoke of positive experiences during their time in the AIP. They expressed how the program helped them learn to stay focused and pay attention in class. A student described the AIP as "one, big happy family." Students talked about learning how to ask for help when needed, learning ways to adapt to others, and also learning how to respect themselves and others. The smaller program was more conducive to learning for some students because, as a student noted, "there were few

disruptions and the classrooms were not so big." A few students expressed the desire to return to the program. When asked about the program staff, a student said, "One of my teachers was so real that I couldn't listen to him." Another chimed in with "I didn't want to hear what my teacher had to say either, but he kept telling me." The teachers told the students exactly what they needed to know.

Despite success in the AIP, students had several concerns about the program. They all said that they did not like sitting in the same classroom all day and looking at the same faces. The students also stated that they needed more basic skills. When the researcher asked them to talk more about this, they indicated that the program could have taught more about what happens when students are out on their own. They expressed that the program could have done a better job teaching them how to take care of themselves, instead of focusing so much on the academics. "We should have learned more basic stuff," one student said.

Students thought it would benefit them if the program offered electives. One student believed "the program should have offered a music class." Another said that the program did not help her at all because she had no problems anyway.

When asked about their first nine weeks in their new placement, a student said that everything was "good so far." The group stated that they were passing all classes. One student said that her grades were great and that she had straight A's. Another student said that he was doing well with a 3.5 grade point average. One student's grades were not quite where she wanted them to be, but they were "just alright." Three of the five students had perfect attendance, one student had a couple of absences, while one student continued to

struggle with attendance. The student indicated that attendance was an issue in the AIP as well, and had been for most of her schooling. Attendance records indicate that in middle school, the student accumulated over twenty unexcused absences, and skipped class more than ninety-two times. Freshman and sophomore years showed fewer skipped classes, but the student missed fifty-seven days of school. The student attributes this to a lack of interest in school and an unemployed adult companion who encouraged truancy.

The conversation then shifted to how they had been faring with discipline since returning to a regular school setting. None of the students received an out of school suspension, as supported by their school records. They liked being in a new setting because the student population is larger and the people are "different." One student said that she liked the fact that her friends are not in her school so "I won't be easily distracted." Students spoke of improved attitudes, no arguing with peers, no fighting or fussing, more respect for teachers, and very good behavior. They were all smiles as they talked of their successes.

Two students admitted that they still have areas that need improvement. One student said that she still had issues with yelling out and misbehavior on the bus. She said that it is mainly her mouth that gets her into trouble, and that she speaks before thinking. The student has to make a conscious effort to choose her words carefully. She also admits to being a follower. Another student has problems with attendance and has missed many days. The student was disinterested in school and was more concerned with negative happenings in the neighborhood. Poor attendance has begun to affect academics, and while the student is passing all classes now, she fears that her grades will start to

deteriorate soon. Both students realize that it is just a matter of time before their issues become school issues requiring some type of consequence.

Students have faced many obstacles and challenges during their first nine weeks in the regular setting, both at school and at home. Students had trouble balancing work with school, trying not to sleep in class, dealing with parents and "baby daddies", and managing feelings over teachers who show favoritism to other students. One student had problems coming home at night to get ready for school the next day. She would rather hang out with friends until the early morning hours, and was too exhausted to attend school.

School challenges dealt mainly with school staff. Students expressed they do not understand why teachers show favoritism to certain students, and seem to have to please some students before they can please the class. But one student said that she has a teacher who favors her, and that all the teachers have students who leans on them for support. Some students believe that teachers and administrators play mind games with them that they must learn to manage. For example, a student was failing a class and asked the teacher for extra work to improve his grade. The teacher complied and the student returned the completed assignments. However, when the student received a grade report, he realized that he did indeed fail the class. When he questioned the grade with the teacher, he was told that although he completed the assignments, they were not completed correctly. The student said that he felt betrayed. One student is easily distracted, and when the classroom goes awry, the student tends to go with them. One student dislikes discrimination, and they all agree that they do not like the cafeteria food.

Although students spoke of concerns with school staff, it appeared that most problems were generated at home with family. Some students manage their problems by taking them on as personal challenges, indicating "My parents think I'm going to be incarcerated like my brother, but I'm going to stay in school and prove them wrong," or "I manage my family challenges by ignoring certain family members." Although students receive support from family members, no one spoke of unconditional support, or talked about an enriching, inspirational relationship with anyone. Some students denied needing help, saying "Ain't nothing helping me, I'm still the same," "I don't need anybody's help," and "I do everything on my own independently." Some students seemed to have a "me against the world" perspective when talking about family.

There was a wide range of discussion on lessons learned. Students believe that the best way to live life is to take it one day at a time, and that there are certain things you have to do in order to stay alive. At the top of their list of things to do to survive is to get an education. Some students talked about difficulties in selecting friends because they have experienced the negative side of friendship. Students agreed that their peers must "learn how to be themselves and stop being fake." Another student said that no one should go places seeking friends because that is how you get into trouble. "Let your friends find you, then it's easier to observe and know who is fake." One student was concerned about the huge amount of gang activity and said, "We're in high school now – we don't need to know all that stuff about gangs. I've gotten to the point where I'm too old to be feeding into childish stuff."

At the end of our discussion the students thanked the researcher for being asked to participate in the group. The researcher indicated how proud she was of them and their accomplishments. The Champions have grown tremendously, and it appears that the AIP helped students build self-esteem and understand the importance of an education. The students are able to realize their areas of weakness and continue to strive for success. They have made great strides in the comprehensive setting, compared to their time prior to the AIP. Three of the Champions are eligible to graduate from high school, and one student has been accepted into a four-year university. They appear to be encouraged to see just how far they have come in a few short years.

**Cross-group Analysis – Focus Groups**

The three focus groups revealed many common factors. Students responded to questions that generated eleven codes. Certain codes do not apply to all groups. For instance, Newbies could not talk about prior experiences in the alternative intervention program because they are newly enrolled. The Pros could not talk about college life because they are transitioning to a regular high school setting. Consequently, the cross-analysis will consist of codes applicable to all three groups. Further data analysis of emerging patterns combined the eleven codes into five themes – *challenges to success, experiences, the alternative school environment, support,* and *outlook on life*.

*Challenges to success* include numerous instances of disengagement from school family, community, and self. These challenges presented major obstacles for most students. As with challenges, *positive and negative experiences* also related to school,

family, community, and self. Interestingly, the Newbies, who had spent less than two weeks in the AIP prior to the focus group meeting, expressed more negative experiences than any other group, while the Champions, who completed the AIP and spent the most time in the regular setting than any other group, presented the most positive experiences.

Focus group participants gave positive and negative feedback regarding their *alternative school experience*. Responses were generated from Pros and Champions only, as the Newbies are newly enrolled in the program. All participants discussed *support* from the family and school perspective. There were varied between groups in responses to *outlook on life*. These responses included student attitudes and points of view on family, school, and self-perception. Student responses to each theme will follow.

**Challenges to success.** *Challenges to success* were obstacles that led to home, school, and community disengagement. According to students, there were numerous obstacles that hindered their success. Students believed that once they were labeled as troublemakers, they were constant targets to blame for discipline incidences, regardless of their involvement. They indicate that overcoming negative perceptions of them was a challenge as well.

As mentioned earlier, students placed education at the top of their list of survival needs. The lack of an education challenged not only their success, but also their survival. Even so, students lacked the ability to overcome the obstacles that led to their disconnection from school, which ultimately affects their survival. A review of student responses indicated disengagement from school for various reasons, including boring classes, challenging teachers, hanging with the wrong crowd, and negative peers. Some

students indicated that they were easily distracted and could not stay awake in class. One student had problems balancing work and school. The Newbies displayed the greatest degree of disengagement from school with comments such as, “I went to school because I had to go,” “I skipped class a lot,” and “I just went to school to see my friends, but school itself was not good for me.” Students from each group commented on teachers being a major challenge for them. They indicated that teachers showed favoritism to certain students, lacked classroom management skills, and never had extra time for them. None of the Pros or Champions indicated an aversion to school. However, they indicated issues with large class sizes, a larger school setting, and too many students in one building.

The majority of their challenges were self-inflicted or family related. For example, a student said, “I have a hard time dealing with people who talk negatively about me. I don’t like when people talk trash.” Another student indicated challenges with parents and a boyfriend. Some students indicated that family played a role in their disconnection from school by creating challenges at home. One student said, “I have a hard time ignoring my challenges at home.” Those challenges included negative comments from parents about the student’s ability to succeed, and arguments over curfew violations. The student said that she leaves home and does not like to return because she knows that arguing will take place. Yet she does not understand that the arguing occurs because she does not come home when instructed to do so. The student believes that “since my mom knows where I am, the time shouldn’t be a problem. It’s not that serious.” The sixteen year old announced to the group, “I’m a grown woman. I can take care of myself.”

Students expressed a variety of challenging issues in managing school, peers, and family. These challenging issues jeopardize student success and survival.

**Experiences.** By far, the Champions revealed the most positive experiences of any group. They were pleased with their current school setting and professed improved grades, attitudes, and discipline. Two students boasted about "no in-school suspensions, fighting, fussing, or arguing." A student said, "My behavior has changed a lot. It is much better than in my last school." Another student revealed, "In my other school I had problems with yelling out and misbehaving on the bus. But now I'm doing really good!" Despite a few obstacles at home, they appear to take on barriers as personal challenges. This perspective is much different from the Newbies, who blamed their barriers on others. Being new to the AIP, with discipline infractions that have been more recently experienced, the Newbies may need time to come to grips with their issues. However, the Champions appear to have matured from their experiences, having had the time to ponder their behaviors. They appear to be resilient in their quest for success regardless of naysayers. The Pros indicated that their attendance and behavior had also improved, and their most positive experience was a positive change in attitude. One student commented, "I made it through and stayed in school this long." Another student said his biggest success was "being able to leave this program." The Pros, having recently transitioned to the comprehensive setting, will have the opportunity to mature by using previous discipline incidences as a deterrent to disruptive behavior.

Prior to attending the AIP, all students indicated mainly negative experiences, but most could recant positive experiences in the AIP and subsequent placements. Students

liked the small class sizes, a nurturing staff, the smaller enrollment numbers, and the individualized instruction. The Newbies could not recall any school related positive experiences prior to the AIP, but mentioned employment and getting out of jail as positives for them.

Most negative experiences for the Pros and Champions were school related. One student said, “Most of the time I was suspended out of school.” Another person said, “I spent a lot of time in in-school suspension.” The Newbies, however, related most of their negative experiences to incarceration. Another student expressed, “Teachers were annoying and stupid.” The Newbies were the only group to speak of criminal issues as negative issues. A student said, “I was stabbed once,” another was “shot twice’, a student was “charged with arson when I was twelve”, and another student talked about having no choice but to “fight in jail.” Neither the Pros nor the Champions mentioned criminal behavior or past participation in criminal issues. These groups appeared more eager to discuss positive behavior.

All three of the groups spoke of negative school experiences prior to the AIP, especially the Newbies. Members of the three groups endured out-of-school suspensions and trouble with teachers. They all agreed that at some point, none of them liked school. A student said, “My last school experience sucked.” The Newbies could not recall a single instance of school success, and struggled with bouts of incarceration. One student pointed out, “I misbehaved and was sent to in-school suspension. Then the next day they suspended me out of school for ten days. Can you believe that?”

In conclusion, the Pros and Champions appear to have grown considerably since their pre-AIP enrollment. Most students progressed from numerous discipline infractions and attendance issues that led to their AIP placement, to achieving honor roll and perfect attendance status. They are able to recognize positive changes in their behaviors and attitudes, and understand the consequences of negative behaviors. Not only could they realize their challenges, but appear to have developed ways to confront them. They were proud that they had the ability to make positive choices. Students noted that even though the challenges have not changed, they have changed their ability to manage the challenges.

Initially, the Newbies could not remember one positive school encounter, yet indicated non-school related issues such as employment and getting out of jail as positives. However, during the revisit with Newbies, their responses yielded more positive attitudes to their family, school, and community experiences.

**The alternative school environment.** The Newbies were new to the alternative school environment. All of the Newbies indicated that the AIP was their first alternative school experience. The Newbies were revisited after their initial group meeting based on their responses. During the second visit, the students indicated that the AIP "is a good place to be if you want to get your education and graduate." They made positive comments regarding the teaching staff and the amount of care they received in the program. The Pros and Champions expressed positive experiences in the AIP as well. A student indicated, "My attitude has improved and I have no discipline problems at all." Both of the groups liked the program and said they would return if given the opportunity, but one student said, "I believe that I am ready to return to my home school." They believed that the program

taught them self-control, life lessons, and self-respect. The Champions and the Pros also expressed that they learned to stay focused and pay attention, and to ask for help when needed. Both groups felt that the school counseling presentations gave them something to look forward to and hope for a future.

The Pros' and Champions' responses revealed the most positive aspects of the AIP from their perspectives were caring teachers, a nurturing environment, and a structured program designed for self-improvement. Students made comments such as, "I learned to ask for help when I needed it," and "I miss the small setting because I learned much better." A student said, "I met some nice teachers who did a lot for me." Another said, "I wasn't successful until I got to the alternative program." Students also talked about what they considered to be the small things that were important in the program. One student said, "The alternative program didn't have hallways, which are distracting." Another student commented, "I'm glad we got to eat breakfast every morning!" One student described the environment as being "real peaceful," while another student mentioned, "It was better for me to concentrate because there weren't a lot of kids."

Some students credited the AIP with salvaging their high school careers, making statements such as, "I probably would not be able to graduate if I hadn't gone to this program," and "If I stayed in a regular school, I would have been locked up."

The Pros and Champions agreed that the AIP could have done a better job in teaching "basic life skills" and offering "credit bearing elective classes." Students expressed concern about missing elective credits once they returned to their regular school, and believed that they may have to attend summer school to recover credits. They

indicated that the program was boring, and felt there should be more opportunities to move around in the classroom. Several students said that they had difficulty sitting in one place for five hours a day. A student said, “There was no academic challenge.” Most students thought the classroom should be divided to reflect a variety of students in different grades and academic levels. They were concerned with “too many students with different ability levels in one classroom”, leaving some Pros and Champions feeling that they were “not academically challenged.”

Several Champions commented that the program in general did not benefit them at all, and attending was a waste of their time. A student revealed that his only reason for attending the program was because he had no choice. The student was attending the program after being released from a juvenile justice facility in another state, and viewed the alternative placement as more punishment. One student said, “I didn’t have any problems anyway. I just made one mistake.” However, the one mistake was serious enough to warrant an alternative placement. Despite their concerns with the program, both students successfully completed the program.

Wearing uniforms is a requirement of every student in the AIP. Generally, students are not happy with the idea and want to wear their own clothes. However, it is explained to them that the disruptive behavior that led to an AIP placement also led to wearing uniforms. The vast majority of students in all three groups were against uniforms. A few students wore uniforms in a previous school setting and did not have a problem adjusting to wearing them again. However, none of the students spoke positively about the uniforms. The males disliked having to wear their pants at the waist with their shirts

tucked in. A few students felt the uniforms should be “changed to different colors” or “made in a different style.” Students expressed their displeasure that everyone “looked the same.”

The Newbies, Pros, and Champions gave informative views regarding the AIP. Most responses were positive. Students articulated their delight with school staff members, and their satisfaction with the care and nurturing provided. Students were pleased with counseling services and visits from outside sources, such as armed forces representatives, various agencies, and career resources. Most students expressed their approval in attending a highly structured program, and agreed that the structure was exactly what they needed to be successful. Several students mentioned that they did not want to leave the program.

Students revealed numerous areas of improvement for the program. They stated their dislike with wearing school uniforms. Student expressed their displeasure over remaining in one classroom all day, and attending class with students in various grade and ability levels. They were also concerned about the lack of elective class offerings, and believed that they suffered upon return to the comprehensive setting due to a shortage of credits. Student responses should be strongly considered if a program restructuring is in order.

**Support.** All students received some type of support from friends or family members. They all spoke of friends and siblings being there for them. Other students noted that they received support from parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, friends, and girlfriends. Although the Champions mentioned some family support, they

also revealed the greatest lack of family support. One person said, “I ignore my family, “and “Dealing with my family just makes me mad.” Another student said, “There is so much drama in my family.”

None of the Newbies indicated that they received support from school staff. Conversely, the Pros and Champions indicate that their support came mainly from teachers and counselors in the AIP. One student said, “Teachers in the program care about what you do.” Students believed that teachers helped them with work and “stuff.” One student said, “I could go to my teacher for anything. My teacher would tell me when I was wrong.” A student from each group said, “I don’t need any support because I don’t have a problem.” Some students said that their strength comes from viewing the negative opinions of supporters as personal challenges, while others are motivated to succeed by the negative outcomes of other family members. One student said, “I am going to prove my parents wrong and stay in school.” Another student responded, “My mom thinks I’m going to be locked up just like my brother.” Students have witnessed others involved in unconstructive situations and have decided that they do not want to experience a similar fate. Therefore, students in each group believed that they have learned from negative behavior. One student said, “If my brother can graduate, so can I.” Most students have been able to draw on their inner-strengths for self-motivation. However, the inner-strengths could formulate and grow through the pessimism of others. Some students have taken on the challenge of proving the naysayers wrong. They have learned from the mistakes of others, and from those who have doubted them. Students admit that they want

to be successful to show others, and themselves, that they have the ability. They have gained strength from skepticism of others.

**Outlook on life.** The Pros and Champions had similar outlooks on life. Members of both groups expressed interest in attending college. They indicated a desire to stay in school, learn to manage the inner urge to fight, and to realize that it is okay to walk away from trouble. Students said that fighting is a waste of time and now they believed that the best way to live life is one day at a time, and that everybody will not love everyone all the time. They also revealed that they realize there are times to bite the tongue and if there is a time to fight, consequences will surely follow. A student said, "I've learned to be quiet and let the other person talk." One person responded, "Sometimes you can turn your back and walk away. I learned to let things go and just move on." The bottom line is, as one student said, "I need to come to school because I need to get my education." This researcher believes that this reality helps the students understand that those consequences may hamper their ability to be successful.

Interestingly, the Newbies appeared to hold a more militant stance on fighting and violence. They did not see a problem with combative and aggressive behavior in support of their cause. Only one of the Newbies indicated that he wanted to complete the AIP and graduate from high school. None of the other students' responses related to education, but all referenced fighting or violence. They appeared to have a totally different perspective on life because they indicated self-defense is a must, regardless of the situation. Students agreed that fighting is not about who wins or loses, but about demanding and maintaining respect. The Newbies indicated that fighting is a given if you are a male, and walking

away is rarely an option. They stated that they do not sit and talk things out because "that is what grown people do." Taking a bullet, from their perspective, was not viewed as a serious issue. One student said, "If you can take a bullet, you can take anything." The Newbies expressed more concerned with revenge than with injury or death.

Initially, there were differences in the Newbies responses and the responses of the Pros and Champions. More similar responses existed between the Pros and Champions. When first interviewed, the Newbies spoke about past negative behaviors and their disconnection from school. They revealed few positive responses and blamed others for their issues. However, the Newbies were revisited at the start of their second nine-week placement. As mentioned earlier, the Newbies did not transition at the end of the first nine-week period because the hearing officer felt that due to their progress, they could benefit from additional time in the AIP. A few students continued to struggle academically. The hearing officer thought that transition to a comprehensive setting could prove disastrous for students with behavioral and academic issues. Their responses to follow up questions showed noticeable changes in their demeanor. The group was able to identify their own contributions to their behavioral issues, and expressed remorse for not making better decisions.

The Pros and Champions made more positive statements and because they had completed a nine-week period in the AIP, could compare and contrast the AIP and the comprehensive setting. The Pros and Champions chose to focus on the positives because they had experienced positives, compared to the Newbies who initially recalled no positive

experiences at all. However, after spending extended time in the AIP, the Newbies' responses began to sound more like the Pros and Champions.

Participants' discussions of their experiences suggest that the more time students spent in the AIP, the better equipped they were to recognize and take responsibility for their actions, as well as their successes. The AIP provided the opportunity for positives for most students who had no previous connection to school.

**In-Depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews were conducted with six former alternative program completers. These former students are now adults who have spent more than one year out of school upon completion of the program. This group added richness to this study by providing responses from the adult perspective. They brought a wealth of knowledge and experience that high school students could not yet provide. The group is comprised of college students, full time employees, future armed services members, and adults undecided on a career goal. They are parents, foster care participants, and products of upper middle class, two-parent households. Two participants were GED recipients, while eleven received a high school diploma.

The participant pool was comprised of thirteen adults. This researcher contacted eight of the thirteen adults by telephone. Six adults agreed to participate in the study, signed the required consent forms. Two adults chose not to participate in the study. The interview group was comprised of three females and three males, one GED recipient and five high school graduates. All six students are African-American. Two interviews took

place in public libraries, two occurred in a local school, and two took place in a local mall. Of the five adults who were not contacted, one was incarcerated, two could not be located, and two moved from the area.

Adults were asked sixteen questions regarding their experiences before, during, and after attending the alternative program. They also discussed their current employment and educational status. Questions are located in the appendix section.

## Data Analysis

In-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed using Atlas.ti qualitative software to reveal emerging themes and patterns. Prior to each interview, adult participants signed the required consent forms and selected a pseudonym. For purposes of member checking, all participants received a copy of the transcript either through email or U.S. Mail. Participants were asked to respond if there were changes or corrections that needed to be made; or if they desired to provide any feedback on their experience. Only one participant responded to indicate that the transcript was received.

Based on participant responses, five themes emerged – *successes*, *challenges to success*, *support*, *the alternative environment*, and *outlook on life*. For the adult participants, challenges to success received the most responses.

## Narrative Description of Respondents

*Interviewee 1: Stacy Jones*

Stacy Lee Jones is an African-American sophomore at the University of Virginia. He is a Broadcasting major and upon graduation, wants to pursue a career in the sales and marketing department for a national television station. Stacy has a job on campus, and "enjoys the college scene." He attended the alternative intervention program during his junior year in high school. Stacy was actively involved in service learning organizations during high school, and especially liked extracurricular activities. Stacy, who grew up in a two-parent family, indicated that he rarely got into trouble in school and considered himself to be academically sound. One costly mistake led to an alternative placement.

*Interviewee 2: Jeff Anderson*

Jeff is an African American male student who recently graduated from high school. He wanted to attend a four-year institution, but found it overwhelming. Jeff decided to attend the community college instead, but said he would consider transferring during his junior year. Jeff indicated that he had numerous problems in high school and was surprised that he did as well as he did. He has been in and out of group homes in various states and has not seen his family in years. It was through one of his group home placements that he attended the alternative program. Jeff had difficulties handling his anger, and would fight to get kicked out of school. He only passed the classes he liked, and found it difficult to stay in school until he learned to manage his anger by journaling; and now is very proud that he is a high school graduate. His aspiration is to pursue a career in journalism. Jeff has held a number of part-time jobs, and is currently employed.

*Interviewee 3: James Allen, Jr. (JJ)*

James Allen Jr., called "JJ" by his friends, enjoyed his high school experience. He is an African-American male who is very proud of his academic success, and that he skipped his ninth grade year. He excelled in sports, particularly baseball. James indicates that he is a loner, who kept his emotions bottled inside and felt that he learned to deal with his issues and did not need help from anyone else. When the issues became overwhelming, James released his anger with violence. His explosive temper led to incarceration. James indicated that although he attended the alternative program, it did not change him in any way. He felt it was a waste of time, with no impact on his life, education, or emotions. James wants to join the military, but has not finalized his plans as of yet, with the intent to continue working until he decides which route to take.

*Interviewee 4: Troy Jessup*

Troy Jessup is an African-American male with a history of incarceration. Troy moved to the area from New York. He attended several different schools, and admitted that he had a difficult time getting on track because he was bored. Troy believes that he experienced academic failure because he lacked study skills. He enjoyed the closeness of the alternative setting and thinks that the program was exactly what he needed. However, Troy was incarcerated during his attendance in the AIP. When he returned to the program after serving his time in detention, Troy decided that the GED was the best route for him. Troy appreciated the people who supported him to ensure his success and plans to enter a

technical program to pursue his commercial driver's license. He is currently employed and is very proud of his success.

*Interviewee 5: Patricia Deerfield*

Patricia Deerfield is a African-American female who recently graduated from high school and is undecided on a career goal. Patricia indicated that she has always had discipline problems in school and did not like people telling her what to do, especially adults. She did not do well in school because she had difficulties remembering the material and was placed in the alternative intervention program due to numerous disciplinary referrals. Patricia said that she did not like going to class, and thought a good day was any day where she did not have to be in school. She spent many school days at home with her friends. Now she realizes how her behavior affected her education. Patricia is currently unemployed.

*Interviewee 6: Shirley Wilson*

Shirley is an African-American, single parent and high school graduate. She wants to be a nurse and is taking classes toward her goal. She admits to being fully responsible for her severe and destructive behaviors. Shirley has been incarcerated numerous times and indicates that her behavior was so vile that it changed her actual physical appearance. Her light complexion and flattering facial features turned dark and insipid. Shirley comes from a dysfunctional family unit. The family matriarch was hospitalized days before Shirley's high school graduation, and passed away the day after her graduation. Shirley

believes promises made to her grandmother, coupled with the birth of her daughter, have changed her life for the better. However, she is afraid that she will be incarcerated and miss the chance to raise her child. Shirley works full time to support herself and her daughter, and continues to feel that life is a constant, day-to-day struggle to stay focused, and to stay out of trouble.

## Participant Responses

**Successes.** The six interviewees responded to sixteen open ended questions. Initial questions focused on the respondent's high school experiences prior to attending the AIP. Respondents described their best high school experiences as being challenging, fun, self-motivating, and positive. Most remembered successes in school, with only a few school related problems. They experienced the most success from participating in extracurricular activities, sports, and social events. One respondent performed well enough to skip a grade, while another said that the only positive experiences were anything that had to do with not going to class.

**Challenges to success.** Despite school successes, questions about the most difficult challenges generated a variety of responses. A large number of adult respondents admitted that obstacles were self-inflicted. While some respondents had no discipline issues, others would fight to get kicked out of school. Some could not handle a large number of students in class, and further stated that this was a problem during their entire high school careers. Two respondents could not remember any successes in school.

Out-of-school suspensions led to academic concerns. Patricia said her grades were not amazing, but they were good enough to pass the class. Academic failure was attributed to a lack of study skills and truancy issues after being suspended from school. A respondent moved more than three times, which led to academic collapse. Shirley described herself as a "nut head" and "just didn't care and was not successful." Patricia had major communication problems with students, teachers, or anyone with authority, and "didn't like being told what to do."

The majority of participants had challenging attendance issues, ranging from truancy to constant tardiness. Attendance concerns also led to academic failure. When respondents did attend class, they failed a few classes, slept in class, or only passed a favorite class. If the subject was not interesting, Jeff replied, "The teacher could expect disrespect." Individuals expressed feelings of remorse for not doing a better job in school. Patricia wishes that she could have done better in school. When not in school, the routine would be to either stay in the house, or go to a relative's house with friends who were also skipping school.

**Support.** Participants received support from teachers, counselors, family, friends, classmates, and the AIP. A few participants indicated they received no educational or emotional support. Some stayed after school for help, while others did not ask for help because they believed it was not needed or wanted. They indicated that they tried to handle situations on their own and felt that help was offered only when they got into trouble. They felt that at that point, it was too late. Patricia said, "Help was offered as I was walking out the door to go home for ten days."

A participant said that some issues actually changed her physical appearance. Shirley said, “My friends were afraid to approach me because I was crazy.” Respondents revealed they had a difficult time telling others about their struggles, and kept problems bottled inside until they were unbearable. Two respondents indicated they would explode out of anger. Stacy said, “I would curse teachers and snap on the counselors.” Without a change, some believed they would face certain incarceration. Friends were willing to help but were afraid to contend with such anger. Jeff used journaling as a means of stress release.

After becoming a parent, Shirley reached out to a counselor whom she credits with turning her life around. The counselor encouraged her, and “Honestly, everything she told me, I just ran with it,” meaning that the participant said she was open to listening and receiving the counselor’s help. She followed the counselor’s suggestions and now believes that the counselor saved her life.

Most respondents recalled a time when they wanted to drop out of school. They were tired of school, bored, experienced challenging classes, and suffered from laziness. For some participants, dropping out was never an option. Jeff felt obligated to finish as a promise to a deceased family member. During feelings of hopelessness, respondents said that teachers, school counselors, and parents gave them the encouragement to continue. Stacy noted that he received inspirational quotes, messages, and prayers from family, saying that his mom was “big on that religious thing.” Patricia had a school counselor who always seemed to know the right thing to say. Patricia said, “Sometimes I didn’t need to say anything. My counselor would already know I needed her.” Shirley spoke of a

supportive grandmother, who passed away just before her graduation. Shirley said, “She told me just before she died that she wanted me to finish school.” Stacy and Troy said they hung around friends that pushed them and helped them along, while others tried to work out their problems themselves. They did not want encouragement from anyone because they believed they had everything under control. James said, “Teachers tried to work with me, but I didn’t want anyone’s help,” and “I just didn’t care about anything.” Patricia said she did not want to go to school because so much was going on at home, yet, not to be outdone by a sibling, graduated “for my grandmother and my mother.” When asked about graduating for self-fulfillment, she said, “It really didn’t matter to me.”

Now that these students are adults and no longer in high school, most of their supporters have not changed. Parents, girlfriends, group home staff, and other family members still offer support. However, students believe that the perception of supporters now is that students are adults with responsibilities. Troy said, “They congratulated me, but said I had to keep moving on.” Students said that this gentle push helped them to stay on track and forge ahead with their education, careers, and aspirations.

**The alternative school environment.** Most respondents spoke highly of the AIP. It gave them a second chance to receive an education in their regular school. Their main focus was to graduate, attend college, or seek employment. Participants liked the program size, activities, projects, and the one-on-one interaction with staff. Participants indicated that it was gratifying to see that there are people who care about them and want them to be successful. Fewer disruptions and distractions created a positive school experience. Respondents needed the program because they were not focused in the regular setting

because there was too much going on. A person wanted to attend a college with a small student population, believing that he would not get the attention and one-on-one time with an instructor in a larger university. Seeking an experience similar to the AIP, he indicated that he opted for the smaller school to bond with teachers.

The AIP was perceived to be a good program to help individuals get back on track. The program, as Jeff described, was "bigger than teaching the four academic subjects." Participants believed strongly in the life skills and emotional support offered by the program staff and said they "give more advice than a regular school could ever give." Stacy said the program was all about life's responsibilities, focusing on world events, and talking about "real stuff." According to respondents, guest speaker presentations sponsored by the school counselor were beneficial. Participants felt they were treated as young adults and the program was not very strict because enrollees already knew why they were placed there. It was a good opportunity for them to learn how to act appropriately and responsibly.

Most participants disliked wearing uniforms. Troy suggested a variety of colors and styles of uniforms. However, Jeff liked wearing uniforms because it is difficult to get into trouble wearing a uniform. He believed it is bad for your image to look good and get into trouble. Although Jeff was not used to wearing uniforms, he indicated that he liked the professional look so much that he wore button up shirts and khaki pants to the regular school.

James said the program did not make a difference, and attending was unnecessary. He felt that the program was good for those needing to attend, but he did not believe that

he was one who needed to do so. He thought that there was no benefit whatsoever, and completing the program was a formality to get to the regular high school. James had just been released from a juvenile detention center in another state, and felt that he had already served his time for his mistakes. He believed that the alternative education placement was more punishment. James successfully completed the program with high marks, and never received a discipline referral.

James and Stacy preferred more lecturing and less book and computer work. They also indicated preferences for elective classes, students separated by grade level, and more opportunity to change classes during the day because participants found it was challenging for them to sit quietly for five hours.

Participants were also concerned with the inability to earn elective credits. They did not pay attention to the electives until they returned to the regular setting. Patricia realized that she did not have enough credits and had to attend summer school, while another person attended "early bird" high school classes to earn a credit.

There were mixed emotions about returning to the regular school setting. Several students were able to find success, while others reverted back to negative behaviors. One student went to detention and said he was "back to the same old thing – I just came out of a program where I was in trouble and now I'm back." Most participants felt a sense of accomplishment because they finally completed something, and felt that it "made no sense to go in the opposite direction when people helped me to move forward." Students learned to cope by using self-control, ignoring negative influences, staying to themselves, and constantly reflecting on the opportunity to return to school. Most participants missed the

program but were ready to leave. Patricia said, “I was glad that I accomplished the alternative program, and that someone cared and they still do.”

Some participants were hesitant to discuss their AIP experience with peers. Feelings of discomfort were disguised by joking about the program, or by saying they had been on vacation. Troy said that others already knew he was in the program. Others felt that although they attended the AIP, they were still in school.

Jeff described his job search experience while attending the AIP. During the interview, the employer asked about school. Jeff reluctantly responded that he attended an alternative school. The employer took a second look, like okay, I am about to hire a troublemaker. But Jeff said he explained that he was getting his education and learning to control himself at the same time. He was offered the job.

Despite their concerns with revealing their whereabouts, all respondents were well received in their regular schools. They indicated that people were glad to see and embraced them. Stacy said, “friends were just happy to see that I’m still alive.” A couple of teachers welcomed students back to school and encouraged them to do well. They believed that everything appeared to be back to normal.

**Outlook on life.** Although the journey was tough for some, most participants were resilient in their return to high school. According to school records, most students were still enrolled in school, attended school regularly, passed their classes, and had very few discipline incidences. When asked about their decisions to finish school, Stacy replied, “When I first stepped into high school, I knew I would graduate.” Jeff said that he had to finish because he would be the first in his family to graduate. Shirley wanted to

finish school for her child. Jeff responded with "I can't go to college without finishing high school." Respondents said they always knew they would graduate, but the road to getting there was hard. Incarceration was a motivator to at least get a GED, and participating in the alternative program helped one person decide to graduate. Learning from the experiences of incarcerated siblings helped reinforce the need for a high school diploma.

There were many driving forces that led to high school graduation. Participants wanted to go to college, make money, and work a decent job to take care of family. Jeff and Troy said that they were motivated to finish because the alternative program helped them catch up on grades and give them a second chance at success. They felt that they could not pass up another opportunity.

Respondents were very proud of their accomplishments. Shirley, Jeff, and Troy are working, while James and Stacy are preparing to enter or have enrolled in college. James has hopes of joining the Armed Forces, while Troy wants to own his own business. All participants expressed pride in completing school, making positive life changes, and handling pressured situations. Jeff said, "I won't let anything break me down." James believes, "If you think you're going to fail, then you're going to fail." Participants increased their self-esteem and self-control. They have arrived at a good point in life. Troy said, "I deserve a pat on the back."

Participants are motivated by past experiences. Motivation according to Patricia is the difference between being seventeen and being an eighteen-year old adult. She explained, "When you're seventeen and you get into trouble, you get a warning. When

you’re eighteen, you go to jail.” She believes that facing the possibility of jail as an adult is enough motivation to stay out of trouble.

In reflecting on the impact of the AIP, participants learned to think before acting and to be responsible for their actions. Respondents learned good study skills, and believe that they needed the discipline of an alternative program. Some respondents felt that the program should be expanded with more teachers and classes. They missed the small setting because it better suited their learning styles.

Jeff said that the best thing that happened to him was when a teacher gave him a copy of the book, Makes Me Wanna Holler by Nathan McCall. The book inspired him because, despite the numerous obstacles the author encountered, he graduated from college and became a successful journalist. Jeff could relate because his career goal is to become a journalist. If the author could be successful in spite of his adversities, then Jeff believed he could be successful as well. Jeff explained:

> *In my old program, I really wasn’t enthusiastic about going there – but the AIP, I just loved it so much that I would get up early and prepare myself in the morning, just to get out to catch that bus and get to school.*

James said that the program made him not want to ever come back again. He believes that the program did not do anything for him. The program had no impact on his life or his character. He motivates himself to do well in any setting, and his stay in the program was unnecessary. Patricia believes the program changed her, and feels that the

AIP does not need to be changed. "The program is just fine. It helps other students just like it helped me."

**Cross Group Analysis – Focus Groups and Individual Interviews**

A cross analysis of responses from the three focus groups and six in-depth interviewees yielded both differences and similarities. Most responses reflected attendance issues in school, including tardies, truancy, and skipped classes. Eight of the eighteen respondents reported good attendance records, indicating better attendance in the AIP than in a previous school setting.

Although a majority of individuals commented that they earned passing academic grades, several respondents believed their grades improved because the AIP curriculum was not challenging. Participants attribute their failure to what they perceive to be the school's lack of interest in them, coupled with their lack of interest in the subject matter. Most responses reveal academic success prior to high school, but the freshman year appears to have been a difficult experience. Respondents talked about "finding their way" through high school. They were faced not only with a larger facility that housed hundreds of students, but larger class sizes, more hallways, more teachers, and tremendous peer pressure. A respondent said, "Every year, there seemed to be fewer familiar faces."

As the years progressed, the academic successes regressed. Some participants were overwhelmed with school as the curricula became increasingly difficult. As one student said, "I needed to master the Algebra I skills before I could take Algebra II, and I really struggled in Algebra I. Passing Algebra II seemed impossible."

Interestingly, negative experiences of the Newbies far outnumbered any other group. They all expressed a strong dislike for school, where most of their negativity occurred. The Newbies were the only group to experience no school success. The Pros and in-depth interviewees expressed the fewest negative experiences. The in-depth interviewees had the most varied responses, with less than half being school related. All negative experiences expressed by the Champions were school related. Collectively, the groups and interviewees believed that their most negative school-related experiences occurred with teachers in the regular setting, and the most positive experiences happened with the AIP teachers. The Champions and in-depth interviewees related their most positive experiences to school success. An overwhelming number of respondents cited positive strides in school after completing the AIP.

Resiliency is reflected in responses related to perseverance, attitude, and behavior. Resiliency is "the ability to bounce back successfully despite exposure to severe risks" (Benard, 1994, p. 4). These participants have shown their ability to overcome obstacles, and learn about themselves in the process. Shirley, for example, had to overcome incarceration, the challenges of single parenthood as a teenager, and the death of a close relative. Yet she endured to graduate from high school, maintain employment, and increase her self-esteem. Shirley articulated that she wants to be a good role model for her child, and cannot do so without making good choices.

The general public, as well as many educators, often characterize the students in alternative programs by their challenges rather than by their ability to overcome challenges. There is a tendency to view students not as "turned off" but rather as

disruptive, deviant, dysfunctional, and detrimental to the traditional school (McGee, 2001). However, researchers contend that children are much more likely to develop and maintain a positive, proactive outlook toward life if they live in an environment in which people care about them, have high expectations, offer purposeful, positive support, and value them (Krovetz, 1999). Participant responses show the AIP as being an environment where participants are treated with dignity and respect. At some point in their educational careers, participants were "turned off" to school, which led to disruptive behavior both in and out of school. Respondents pointed out obstacles they faced with family, school, and the community, many that they characterize as being self-inflicted. Respondents admit that they were lazy, stressed, bored, uncaring, and obstinate, which led to school failure, criminal behavior, and family feuds.

According to interview responses, students experienced the greatest success in a small, nurturing environment where they felt they were cared about and supported. Most participants recalled a teacher or counselor who made a difference in their lives. AIP teachers set high standards and students excelled to meet or surpass teacher expectations. Students were challenged to work to their potential, and were appreciative that the AIP offered more than academics.

Despite high marks in school success, very few interviewees mentioned academics or grades as being positive experiences in the regular setting. In-depth interviewees revealed a sense of accomplishment in receiving the high school diploma, and look forward to the possibility of college, vocational training, military, and employment. Six interviewees yielded fifteen responses related to college preparation. The two participants who are

attending college say that there is a lot of studying involved and sometimes too much pressure. One person felt overwhelmed because there is only one semester to complete a course, instead of the regular high school year. Two people indicated times when they wanted to quit, but did not because they want to succeed either for themselves or someone else. One participant talked about attending a smaller community college to be able to communicate frequently with the instructors. He believes that would not be possible at a large university. Two respondents want to use their degrees to work in their chosen fields or to become entrepreneurs.

The AIP proved to be a strong fortress for struggling students. According to respondents, the AIP was a chance for self-improvement in a nurturing environment. They attribute their success overwhelmingly to teachers. They described the teaching staff as caring, loving, and accessible. All but two respondents indicated positive changes in attitude, behavior, character, communication skills, self-respect, and respect for others. Several individuals expressed that they would not have graduated without the program. All interviewees liked the small class sizes, the individualized instruction, the counseling program, and the ability to just be themselves. They believe that they received fair treatment, and most indicate that they miss the program.

Both focus group and individual interview participants indicated three areas of the AIP that should be considered for change. The program was boring, and it was difficult to sit in one classroom five hours per day. They felt that more breaks were needed, or at least the opportunity for physical activity.

Participants expressed concern that there were too many students with different learning levels in one class, and everyone could not work at the same pace. This caused some students to lag behind and nearly fail, while others were ready to forge ahead and skillfully master the curriculum. Several interviewees said that although the program posed no academic challenge, it did help to improve their grades.

Several individuals felt that the program should offer elective classes, and ran into problems at graduation due to a lack of credits. Had the program offered a credit, the ability to graduate would not have been an issue. Some students had to attend summer school to earn the extra credit, at their own expense. Those who could not afford to go would double up on credits by taking early bird or evening classes. This negatively impacted working students.

Participants did not like wearing uniforms. Some adjusted more easily than others, while some just wanted more choices in colors and styles. Some interviewees were used to wearing uniforms in a previous setting. Yet, some respondents admitted to being constantly asked to pull up their pants, or tuck in a shirt. For some students, uniforms were a huge adjustment.

Uniforms were not the only obstacles students had to overcome. The in-depth interviewees gave a tremendous number of responses regarding obstacles. They tried to manage their own problems while experiencing serious family issues. They were influenced by negativity and lacked school success. They also indicated that the majority of their obstacles were self-inflicted. Respondents talked about how their obstacles changed them, even changed their appearance, to the point that friends were afraid to

approach them. They admit to being followers, crazy, lazy, out of control, self-destructive, and stressed beyond belief. Some respondents were parents, who were concerned that with all the issues they faced themselves, how in the world would they ever raise a child. Several respondents never showed emotion because they believed it was a sign of weakness. They acquired a cold disposition while incarcerated, and never lost it.

Although the focus group participants mentioned fewer obstacles than the in-depth interviewees, their statements were equally remarkable. A few respondents spoke of home issues, but the majority of the focus group members faced the most difficulty in school. They also recalled bouts of criminal behavior, and problems getting along with peers. School issues mainly involved teachers, who students perceived as being racist, boring, showing favoritism, and perpetuating student suspensions.

Obstacles led to total disengagement from school. Many respondents tried to cope with their anger by keeping feelings bottled inside. Repressed feelings caused students to act out in school or in the community. For some, being disruptive, sleeping in class, skipping school, and hanging with precarious friends were tools for self-destruction.

In hindsight, a small number of respondents wished they had been more studious in school and felt regret over discipline issues. They were also remorseful over failing grades and not asking for help when needed. Interviewees believed that they learned from their mistakes, and despite obstacles and challenges, persevered over stressful circumstances.

The overwhelming majority of respondents received the most support from teachers and counselors. Two respondents believe that a caring counselor saved their lives. Others spoke of motivating teachers who saw potential in students. They refer to teachers

as mentors and extended family members who were truly concerned about students. Students also mentioned the AIP teachers as being caring, trusting, and supportive. They believe that they could return to the program at any time and find the same nurturing environment. One successful program completer said, “The teachers in the alternative program cared, and they still do.”

Most responses indicate family support, but roughly half of the responses show dysfunctional family relationships. Respondents receive support from their children, parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and uncles. Respondents recalled how parents encourage them to do well, pray for them, and send them inspirational notes.

Some participants used the antics of family members to positively motivate them. Participants indicated that incarcerated siblings had the most impact on their lives, particularly siblings who were resilient in being successful despite obstacles. Some participants are on personal missions to keep promises made to deceased grandparents. Others are motivated because they believe that family members have no faith in their success. Relatives believe that incarceration, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse are bound to happen. Participants wanted to prove them wrong.

A few participants indicated that they received no support in school, particularly the Newbies. The in-depth interviewees indicated that they were offered help but did not take advantage of it. Two interviewees said they did not need support because they are independent and do not have any problems. A student in the Champions group said, “I do everything on my own independently. I don’t need anybody’s help.” They motivate and support themselves.

Respondents have demonstrated various levels of maturation and perseverance. The Newbies equated maturity with respect, and are willing to do whatever it takes to get respect. One person said, “You have to defend yourself. It’s all about respect.” All group members appear to believe that respect is earned by winning the fight. They do not believe in communication to resolve issues, and indicate, “That’s what grown people do.” This group solves problems by fighting, or by whatever means necessary.

The Pros and Champions offered many more positive responses to their outlook on life. They indicate noticeable growth and improvement in attitude and self-control. Both of these groups also believe in their success, understand the consequences of violent behavior, and look forward to graduation. A group member learned to fight with words, not fists. Another learned to let things go and just move on with life because sometimes you can turn your back and walk away. More responses were related to education and life after high school.

The in-depth interviewees revealed the largest strides in maturity and perseverance. One participant said, “I feel more secure about myself, I trust myself more, and I believe that storms don’t last forever.” An interviewee persevered through childbirth and said, “I was just a child myself. I had to make a change!” Another participant said, “I feel alright about myself. I deserve a great big pat on the back!” Their responses indicate a sense of responsibility and self-actualization, and reveal a commitment to education, employment, and success. They have persevered uncertain situations, and although not unscathed, have survived.

## Quantitative Results

In this study, quantitative data were used to support and contrast findings in the qualitative analysis. Quantitative data were collected using student records, state reports, and school division data to capture academic, attendance, and discipline data. District data and AIP data are compared to show similarities and/or differences between students in the AIP program and the broader student population. For purposes of this study, district data was obtained through the division's research and planning department. The purpose of this information is to provide a comparison for the reader to realize the overall school population.

**Student characteristics.** Table 9 provides a description of the AIP participants. A total of 163 students participated in the program during the 2005-2007 school years. For the purpose of these analyses, one student was omitted on the basis of race, for a final *N* of 162.[1]

Eighty-one participants were middle school students in grades 6 – 8, with an equal number of high school students in grades 9 – 12. Of the 162 students, 53 students (32.7%) received exceptional education services. Students with emotional disabilities represented the largest group to receive services at 13.0%, while 11.0% received services under learning disabled (LD) and specific learning disabled (SLD) classifications. Five percent of the students were classified as mentally retarded.

[1] The student omitted was the only student of Asian background in the data set.

In terms of gender, 75.0 percent of AIP participants were male, while 25.0 percent were female. Males also make up the largest percentage of students to receive exceptional education services (35.7%). Seven percent of the females in the sample were classified as needing exceptional education services, with students with emotional disabilities comprising the largest group to receive services (11.9%). In general, females displayed the smallest percentages in all exceptionalities.

African-Americans represented the largest AIP population with 135 students (83.3%). However, African-American students only comprised 36.0 percent of the entire school division population during the 2005-06 school year, and 35.8% of the entire school division population for the 2006-07 school year. Of the 135 African-American students, thirty-five students (24.4%) received exceptional education services. Fourteen students (10.3%) were classified as having an emotional disability and 13 students (0.9%) were classified as having a learning or learning/specific disability. Twenty-seven Caucasian students participated in the program, representing 16.6% of the total AIP population. Of this group, 25.9% were classified as emotionally disabled. Caucasian students also had the largest percentage of students with other health impairments, mental retardation, or an undefined specific need, compared to African-American students who had less than 5.0 of students with similar classifications. Despite the large disparity in enrollments by ethnicity, the percentage of Caucasian students receiving exceptional education services supercedes that of African-Americans. Twice as many Caucasian students were classified as having an emotional, learning disabled/specific learning, or other health impairments.

More Caucasian students were identified as having mental retardation than African-American students.

According to the Virginia Department of Education's Special Education Performance Report (2007), during the 2005-06 school year, of the total school district population of 47,747 students, 6,956 (14.5%) of students received exceptional education services. During the same school year, 28 (32.9%) of the 85 AIP enrollees received exceptional education services. The report also indicates that during the 2006-07 school year, 7,026 (14.7%) students from the district's 47,680 total student population received exceptional education services. With regard to the AIP, 25 (32.4%) of the 77 participants received exceptional education services. The total percentages of AIP exceptional education enrollments more than doubled the district percentages for both school years reported in this study.

**Overview of AIP enrollments.** Table 10 shows the percentages of students who completed the program and the status of their current school enrollments. Fifty-two middle school and 54 high school students, comprising more than half (65.4%) of the AIP student population, were still enrolled in school during at least the nine week period immediately after completing their placement. Fifty-six students (34.5%) were not enrolled in the school division.[2] Nineteen (11.7%) program completers received a high school diploma

[2] Not enrolled means the student was incarcerated or moved from the district.

upon return to the comprehensive setting, while six students (3.8%) received a General Educational Development certificate (GED).

During the 2005-07 school years, 6,034 (6.3%) students of the 6,415 (6.5%) possible completers met the requirements to complete school, representing 94.0 percent of eligible school completers. These students received an advanced, standard, modified standard, special diploma, or GED. Nineteen of the 162 AIP participants met the requirements to complete high school, and six participants received a GED. (Virginia Department of Education, 2007).

**Academics – English.** Table 11 shows percentages for AIP students who passed or failed English for three time periods - before, during, and after participating in the program. Enrollments were based on the immediate nine-weeks before and after AIP enrollments.

Prior to attending the AIP, over half (61.2%) of all students passed English. The pass rate increased during AIP attendance, with 152 (93.8%) of students passing the class. However, upon transition to the comprehensive setting, student pass rates dropped to 46.9%. This researcher presumes that students may have experienced academic difficulties when transitioning to the comprehensive setting. Students had to contend with massive student populations, larger educational facilities, overwhelmed teachers, and as one student noted, more places to get lost. Of the 162 students who completed the AIP, 35.2% were classified as "not enrolled" in the school division category[3].

[3] Not enrolled is defined as moved, incarcerated, or not enrolled in school.

During their participation in the AIP, exceptional education students were the only group with 100.0% pass rates in English. Only one exceptional education student failed English in the AIP. Students with Other Health Impairments/Undefined disabilities were also the only group to have all students enrolled in school nine weeks after completing the AIP. Students with emotionally disabilities represented the largest group in the "not enrolled" category.

In terms of race, Caucasian students showed the largest passing percentages before the AIP, with 88.9% of students passing. All students excelled during their time in the AIP, again showing high passing rates (96.3%). Eleven percent of Caucasian students made up the "not enrolled" category, while 40.0% of African-American students were not enrolled in school.

With regard to gender, similar percentages of male and female participants passed English, 61.6% vs. 59.5% respectively. During the AIP, pass rates were in the mid nineties and failure percentages in the single digits. Once completing the AIP, pass rates decreased and failure rates increased, as did the number of students in the "not enrolled" category. This could be due in part to an unchallenging curriculum in the AIP.

With regard to grade level, over half of middle school students (58.0%) and high school students (64.0%) passed English. The percentages increased during AIP participation, with middle and high school students showing percentages in the mid nineties. Seventy-five of 81 middle school students (92.6%) and seventy-seven high school students (95.0%) passed English in the AIP.

After completing the program, pass rates varied between middle and high school students. High school students showed the greatest amount of success after the AIP with 49.3% of students passing. Over 40 percent of middle school students passed English upon their return to the regular setting. The striking data fall under the category of "not enrolled". The enrollment status of approximately 40 percent of high school and 30 percent of middle school participants in the AIP is unknown because they cannot be located.

To further examine pass/fail rates before and during placement for the full AIP sample, the McNemar 's Symmetry Chi-Square test was used. The results can be found in Table 14. From Table 14, the McNemar test for the comparison of English pass/fail rates *before* and *during* AIP placement ($\chi^2 = 47.439$, $p < 001$). Eight (5.0%) students failed English before and during their placement, while 97 (59.9%) received consistent passing grades in English before and during the AIP. Fifty-five (33.9%) students failed before but passed during the AIP, and two (1.2%) students passed before but failed during the AIP. This researcher suggests that students were more successful in passing English during their AIP placement for several reasons. Students attributed their success to the differences in the alternative and comprehensive settings. The AIP offered smaller classrooms, smaller class sizes, additional staff to offer individualized support, and teachers who fostered student success.

**Academics – Mathematics.** Table 12 shows percentages for AIP students who passed or failed mathematics for time periods before and during AIP participation. Prior to attending the AIP, 61.2% of students passed mathematics. The pass rate increased during

AIP attendance, with 153 (94.5%) of students passing the class. Once the students transitioned to the comprehensive setting, the pass rates dropped to 50.0%. Thirty-four percent of program completers comprised the "Not enrolled" category. This researcher presumes that mathematics rates dropped for the same reasons as English rates. Students may have experienced academic difficulties in making the transition to the comprehensive setting. Larger student populations and educational facilities, coupled with new teachers and administrators, create challenging situations for students.

Exceptional education students presented a wide range of pass/fail rates prior to attending the AIP. Thirty-three percent of emotionally disabled students showed the passed mathematics. Students with mental retardation showed the largest pass rate, with 75.0% of passing. During their participation in the AIP, exceptional education students were again the only group with100.0% pass rates in mathematics. Students with Other Health Impairments/Undefined disabilities were also the only group to have all students enrolled in school nine weeks after completing the AIP.

Sixty percent of African-American students passed mathematics prior to the AIP, while 77.7% of Caucasian students passed the class. During their AIP enrollment, 94.1% of African-Americans students and 96.3 % of Caucasian students passed mathematics. A larger percentage of Caucasian students passed mathematics after leaving the program. Thirty-nine percent of African-Americans comprised the "not enrolled" category. Passing and failing rates for both male and female students were equal before and during AIP enrollment. Percentages differed by only one or two percentage points, 63.4% vs. 61.9% respectively. Percentage margins were small after leaving the AIP. It is interesting to note

that only 11.0% of Caucasian students fell into the “not enrolled” category, compared to 39.0% of African-American students.

To further examine mathematics pass/fail rates before and during placement for the full AIP sample, the McNemar‘s Symmetry Chi-Square test was used. The results can be found in Table 15. The McNemar’s test for the comparison of mathematics pass/fail rates before and during AIP placement revealed a significant difference between students who passed mathematics before the AIP and students who passed mathematics during their AIP participation ($\chi^2 = 43.860$, $p < .001$). Six (3.7%) students failed mathematics before and during their placement, while 99 (61.2%) received consistent passing grades in mathematics before and during the AIP. Fifty-four (33.3%) students failed before but passed during the AIP, and 3 (1.8%) students passed before but failed during the AIP. This researcher suggests that students were more successful in passing mathematics during their AIP placement for several reasons. This researcher supposes that students were more successful in passing mathematics during their AIP placement for the same reasons why they passed English. Differences in the alternative and comprehensive settings helped contribute to student success. The AIP offered smaller classrooms, smaller class sizes, additional staff to offer individualized support, and teachers who fostered student success.

**Student Discipline.** Table 13 shows discipline infractions by conduct classifications for students enrolled in the AIP during 2005-2007 for three time points – before, during, and after placement. Data were collected in several categories of discipline. Students accumulated the largest number of discipline infractions in the area of

disruptive behavior. According to the school division's *Code of Student Conduct*[*], this label is the umbrella for insubordination, defiance, disruptive demonstrations, disrespect, obscene or inappropriate language or gestures, and classroom disruption. Prior to enrolling in the AIP, students committed a total of 326 infractions encompassing disruptive behavior. During their participation in the AIP, the number was reduced to 116, representing a 35.5% decrease in disruptive behavior infractions. After transitioning to the regular setting, students committed 156 disruptive behavior infractions, an increase of 12.3% from their AIP enrollment. Students showed a dramatic decrease in number of threats, from 15 infractions in previous settings, down to two infractions during their AIP enrollment. Students committed three threat infractions after leaving the AIP. Possession of tobacco or tobacco products were the only incidences that increased both during and after AIP enrollment. Tobacco incidences increased from one prior to AIP enrollment, to six during the AIP placement, and to eight upon transition from the AIP.

Students displayed a large number of attendance infractions prior to their AIP attendance. However, these infractions decreased from 72 to only 3 in the AIP (14.4% to 1.6%). The numbers increased dramatically after the AIP placements to 65 infractions (25.4%).

Several areas of infractions showed a steady decline from the previous AIP placement until return to the comprehensive setting. For example, there were six (2.2%) incidences relating to drugs. The numbers decreased to 4 during the AIP and 2 after the AIP enrollment (.80.0%). Incidences of vandalism occurred six times prior to the AIP

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[*] *Note.* Data provided directly but school division asked not to be identified

(1.2%), three times during the AIP, and no incidences occurred after leaving the AIP. There were similar patterns in the areas of assault and battery, fighting, and other violations including arson, property theft, and trespassing.

One interesting area of infractions is gang activity. Prior to the AIP, students incurred two (0.42%) incidences of gang activity. During the AIP, the numbers increased to six (3.3%). This researcher attributes this to the AIP serving students in the entire division. Students from opposing neighborhoods attend the program, and rival gang members tend to bring their community issues with them to school.

**Attendance.** Data in Table 16 includes absentee rates for the 2005 through 2007 school years. Attendance details for some students are difficult to determine due to inaccurate school records and truancy concerns. Students who are new to the division may have attendance records from other localities. Other students may have no attendance records because they did not attend school. For purposes of this study, attendance data used were based on one school division's records. This was done to ensure the accuracy and consistency of student records during the time that they were enrolled in the AIP school division. Attendance rates were calculated based on the average number of days absent before, during, and after AIP enrollment. The total number of days absent was divided by the 180 days in each school year. The results yielded the average number of absences per school year before, during, and after enrollment. The after-AIP absentee rate was calculated only for those students who were enrolled in school after the AIP placement. The data show that students who were enrolled in school prior to the AIP missed an average of 22.59 days. During their AIP enrollment, students missed an average

of 2.60 days. After transitioning from the program to a comprehensive setting, student absences averaged 31.41 days. Students missed more days of school after the AIP enrollment than prior to the enrollment. This finding is consistent with pass/fail rates before and during AIP enrollment, where students pass rate percentages were higher during the AIP than before or after the AIP placement.

**Conclusions**

Based on the data in this study, it appears that students performed well in the three areas of academics, attendance, and discipline during their time in the AIP. Most students were successful in passing English and mathematics, missed fewer days from school, and accumulated less out-of-school suspension days that in previous placements. Quantitative data support student responses in all areas except academics. Although students responded favorably to passing English and mathematics, data show that academic pass rates were lower than those rates achieved prior to attending the AIP. In other words, overall student performance in English and mathematics was worse after their AIP enrollment than before.

Students spoke of concerns with the program, such as wearing uniforms, the lack of a challenging curriculum for some, and too many students with a wide range of ability levels in one classroom. Two students indicated that they received no benefit from participating in the program, and viewed the experience as a waste of their time. Overall, students spoke highly of the AIP, and believed that participating in the program contributed positively to their success.

## Research Questions

There were four research questions associated with this study. The answers to these questions are intertwined throughout the chapter, but are more specifically addressed in the discussions that follow.

Research Question One

*In what ways, if any, do students perceive that their participation in the AIP has influenced them in the comprehensive setting in the areas of academics, attendance, and discipline?*

**Academics.** During their time of participation in the AIP, data show that the majority of students performed well with regard to academics, attendance, and discipline. Although not comprehensive, research suggests that students in alternative education programs do indeed perform well academically (Aronson, 1995). Over 11.0 percent of participants in the program from 2005 to 2007 graduated from high school, while more than 3.0 percent received a GED.

Prior to attending the AIP, data show that 45.0 (55.0%) of 81.0 middle school students and 57.0 (70.0%) of 81.0 high school enrollees passed mathematics, while 47.0 (58.0%) of middle school students and 52.0 (64.0%) of high school students passed English. Consequently, there was room to improve during their AIP participation. During a nine-week period, students dramatically increased their pass rates to an average of 93.9% in both English and mathematics. Although most students indicated that they performed

well academically upon return to the regular setting, data show 50.0% of students passed mathematics, while 46.9% passed English. These percentages are lower than those achieved prior to attending the AIP. These findings were consistent with a study performed by Wolfe (2008), indicating that discrepancies existed between students' perceptions of their academic performance and statistical data results.

Student responses indicate that a curriculum with flexible scheduling allowed them to work at their pace without the need for a school bell. Students dictated the time schedule for each class. Some students also spoke of boredom, a watered-down curriculum, and the challenges of sitting in one classroom for five hours each day.

**Attendance.** With regard to attendance, detailed information on some students was limited because they had not been enrolled in school anywhere for at least a year or more. Some students were so transient that their records were inaccurate or misplaced. Others came to the AIP with sketchy school records from previous alternative settings or juvenile justice facilities.

Approximately 49.0% of program participants were enrolled in school after completing the AIP. The Champions provided the most feedback regarding their attendance issues in the comprehensive setting. All five of the students were still enrolled in school with no discipline incidences, and were proud of their good grades and attendance. Three of the five students had perfect attendance. One student admitted to having attendance issues related to her home environment.

**Discipline.** A Virginia study of alternative education options was reported in November 2006. The data show a lack of school-based programs that address anger

management, conflict resolution, and other behavioral issues. The study indicates that such programs reduce suspensions and expulsions (Virginia Commission on Youth, 2006).

Prior to AIP attendance, students accumulated nearly 500 discipline infractions. The largest number of incidences occurred with disruptive behavior. Of the total discipline infractions, 65.4 percent related to disruptive behavior. Other notable areas were attendance, including truancy, skipping class, leaving school without permission, and excessive tardies. There were 72.0 prior incidences of attendance, but this number was reduced to only 3.0 in the alternative setting. The number of fights also decreased from 25.0 to 16.0 during the AIP.

Data show significant decreases in discipline infractions during AIP participation. Incidences of disruptive behavior, fighting, assault and battery, sexual offenses, and threats toward students and staff decreased considerably during AIP enrollments. Prior to attending the AIP, students accumulated over three-hundred infractions relating to disruptive behavior. However, this number was reduced to 116.0 during the AIP. After returning to comprehensive setting, serious infractions remained minimal, but the largest number of offenses involved disruptive behavior. However, more serious, expellable offenses such as drugs, sexual offenses, weapons, and assault and battery showed no increase. Overall, students showed a 35.7 percent decrease in their discipline incidences from their prior school enrollments to the time spent in the AIP.

Student responses indicate that fewer discipline incidences in the AIP were the result of small class sizes, a smaller school setting, and a caring staff. Students said that they had no reason to become involved in discipline issues. They also stated that the

school setting made it more difficult to act inappropriately because staff members were always close by to intervene. Students also commented that not every discipline offense committed was used as an opportunity to suspend or expel them. Staff members took the time to talk through discipline incidents and give students options to impulsive negative behavior.

Students talked about giving and receiving respect. This is a major concern for students, whether in school or in the community. They are told during orientation that during their time in the program, they will always be treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve, regardless of their previous issues. Students learned that respect works in two ways – they must give respect to receive respect.

After transitioning from the AIP, several areas of discipline reverted back to more numerous. Issues within the category of disruptive behavior increased from 116.0 during AIP enrollment to 156.0 after transitioning. Other violations including arson, property theft, trespassing, or other code violations not otherwise included showed a slight decrease, from 19.0 incidences in the AIP to 14.0 upon transitioning.

Research also reveals that effective programs offer long-term follow-up with students for six months to possibly several years after returning to the comprehensive setting (James & Jurich, 1999). Research on reintegrating students to their home schools indicates that a student should return when the transition team determines the time. Factors considered are whether the student is ready to reintegrate, how the family feels about the transitions, if the teachers and principal are resistant or open to the student's return, and whether environmental factors in the student's life may impact the reintegration

process (Valore et al., 2006). Transition time is a risky time, as it is not uncommon for a student nearing transition to revert back to negative behaviors. Since the alternative program offered a safe, caring, and predictable setting, students want to remain in such an environment, rather than face the uncertainty of a new setting.

Gregory (2001) indicates that successful alternative programs engage and nurture students to the point that they do not want to return to the comprehensive setting. Students in the AIP have voiced their concern regarding the transition to a comprehensive setting. Some students have even protested by chanting, "Heck no, we won't go!" The transition process is indeed challenging for some students who have found a sense of security and normalcy in the alternative program. Parents have also expressed anxiety when informed of student placements in a comprehensive setting. For some parents, they too are experiencing their first successes with school.

## Research Question Two

*What are student perceptions of the differences and/or similarities between the AIP and other educational settings?*

Student perceptions of the differences and/or similarities between the AIP and other educational settings are extensive and aligned with the alternative education research presented in chapter two. Student responses indicated that the two major differences between the settings are support and environment. All study participants overwhelmingly indicated that a caring staff was paramount in their success. The AIP staff was readily

accessible and always willing to help. Students spoke of the bond established with staff, and considered them to be trustworthy confidants. Students said that there were a few teachers in the comprehensive setting who supported them, but not consistently. Alternative education students tend to thrive in a smaller, family-like environment. Most students have felt overwhelmed in the larger traditional setting (Mottaz, 2002).

The students realized that as they progressed through their academic years, the work became more challenging and the support was less frequently available. They admitted that they could have done a better job of asking for help, but felt they could manage by themselves. In hindsight, most students believed they would have achieved more success by asking for help.

A nurturing environment gave students the chance to be self-expressive. They believe that the family oriented setting allowed them to make mistakes and learn from them. Although academics are a critical part of the program, self-actualization is equally as vital.

The Pros indicated that the comprehensive setting was a place where they could easily get lost. All students enjoyed the small environment and the closeness with staff and others. Students believed that not only could they learn academically, but also learned life lessons. They considered teachers to be “real” and had no problems telling them exactly what they needed to know. The Pros and Champions stated that teachers in the AIP understood their past and could relate to what they had endured in the regular setting. Students said that they could not establish a trusting relationship with teachers in the comprehensive setting because there were just too many students. One respondent chose

to attend a community college after attending the AIP because he liked the bond established with staff. He wanted those similar types of relationships in the college setting with faculty members who were readily accessible. The Pros and Champions believe that teachers who cared about them, and still do care, made a difference in their lives. While a few students indicated that they had nurturing relationships with a couple of teachers, they believed that most teachers were more interested in teaching. McCall (2003) indicates that alternative school educators are often able to engage many students who had significant problems in comprehensive school settings.

Students also indicated that a major difference between the regular setting and the AIP is that they were given a chance to make and correct mistakes. Teachers who work in alternative settings can assist students by helping them focus on the consequences of specific actions and by exploring new options of responding (Miller et. al., 2003). The Pros believed that teachers in the AIP would take the time to talk to students about their behavior instead of writing a disciplinary referral. One of the Pros said, "The first time it's a mistake. The second time it's done on purpose." Students worked hard to ensure there was no second time.

## Research Question Three

*How successful have students been before, during, and after their placement in the AIP, as defined in the areas of academics, attendance, and discipline?*

Analysis of student data revealed the alternative intervention program may have contributed to the positive change in students' academics, attendance, and discipline. Prior to attending the AIP, the data show that a little over half of middle and high school students passed English and mathematics. Consequently, there was room to improve during the AIP enrollment. Students dramatically increased their pass rates during the AIP. Middle school students increased from the mid-fifties percent to over 92.0% passing in English and Mathematics. After transitioning to the comprehensive setting, approximately 45.0% of students passed English, while close to 50.0% passed Mathematics. A concern is the number of students who were not enrolled in school after completing the AIP. These students moved out of the area, were incarcerated, or are no longer enrolled in school. Approximately 35.0% of the 162 students in the AIP fell into this category. However, 49.3% of students were still enrolled in school during a nine-week period after completing the AIP. Nineteen students have received a high school diploma upon their return to the regular school setting, while six received a GED during enrollment in an evening program or adult education program.

With regard to attendance, detailed information on student attendance prior to the AIP is limited because some students had not been enrolled in school for several years. Some students were so transient that their records were not accurate or could not be located. Other students came to the AIP with imprecise school records from previous alternative settings. Student records do not always follow them from one location to another. This also holds true for discipline data, which would be included in the school record. Although it is known that students attend the AIP mainly due to disciplinary

reasons, the total number and types of infractions are not always available. For purposes of this study, attendance and discipline rates are reported only for those students who are transitioning to and from the AIP from within the division. Program participants missed a total of 790 days during the 2005-2006 school year, and 281 days.

## Research Question Four

*What are the resilience factors resulting from the student experience of the AIP?*

Doll, Zucker, and Brehm (2004) indicate six characteristics necessary for creating resilient classrooms. A detailed explanation of each characteristic is given in chapter two. Student responses reveal a connection between their success and the resilience factors listed below.

*Academic Efficacy* is an indication that students believed in their ability to learn and to be successful in the classroom. Students expecting success will take steps in that direction to ensure success. Students who expect to fail act in ways that almost ensure failure. Students with high academic efficacy make better grades, complete assignments, score higher on tests, and have a plan to ensure learning. Initially, students in the AIP not only expected to fail, but also believed that others shared that expectation. The majority of students displayed a history of failure not only in school, but also at home and in the community. Students received habitual offender status for their numerous discipline issues. Academic efficacy increased during students' enrollment in the AIP, as indicated

by improved grades, and the high percentages of pass rates achieved during the AIP enrollment.

*Behavioral Self-Control* is the display of the classroom behaviors essential for learning, including active engagement in academic work, positive peer interaction, and successfully transitioning from one learning activity to the next. Negative behaviors include constant disruption toward peers and teachers, inability to sit still, and being inattentive to the teacher or the lesson. The majority of students displayed positive behavior in the AIP, based on the number of discipline incidences during their enrollment.

A research study conducted by Miller, Fitch, and Marshall (2003) measured the degree to which students believe that reinforcement is a result of their own actions or a result of fate or chance. The study revealed that educators and counselors can help students make connections between their thoughts and actions, and academic and social consequences. They can also assist students in determining the segments of their lives that they can or cannot control.

*Academic Self-Determination* shows that students are self-determined when they have established their own personal goals for success. They take responsibility for their own learning and credit for their success. Resilient classrooms foster academic self-determination by teaching students to set goals, make decisions, solve problems, and receive feedback. Students indicated that prior to the AIP, they believed no one cared about their success. A few students believed that they were usually blamed for disruptions, whether they created them or not. However, some students said that participating in the

AIP gave them a sense of purpose and hope for a future. Prior to attending the AIP, most students indicated that they gave little thought to future goals.

*Effective Teacher-Student Relationships* – The most effective teacher-student relationships are warm, engaged, responsive, and characterized by high demands and expectations. Teacher-student relationships contribute to learning by reassuring students in the face of failure, and engaging them in active learning with new knowledge. Students overwhelmingly stated that the relationships established with AIP faculty and staff was paramount in their success. They indicated that the ability to bond with staff was one of the most appealing aspects of the program. They believed the comprehensive setting did not lend itself to such relationships, mainly due to crowded classrooms. All students admitted to feeling cared for and nurtured in the program. One student used the word "spoiled" to describe her relationships with staff. Strong stipulations were set for and communicated to students. They indicated that there was no doubt about what they were expected to do, and how they were supposed to act. Most students did not want to leave the program, and said that they would return if given the opportunity.

*Effective peer relationships* – Students have supportive peer friendships when classmates realize how to resolve conflicts quickly and without disruption. Peer relationships are important in the development of social competence. In the AIP, students were taught to develop peer relationships. Participants had become accustomed to managing for themselves and lacked the ability to establish meaningful relationships with others. Some students had a difficult time learning to trust or accept the help of others.

Students were given opportunities for group interaction through projects, debates, activities, and field trips.

*Effective Home-School Relationships* – Teachers define parent involvement as family attendance at conferences, school assemblies, or classroom events. At home, parents monitor television viewing, provide appropriate study areas, check homework, and reinforce classroom rules. When parents are involved in school, students' grades and test scores improve, students stay in school longer, have higher attendance, and lower suspensions. Interestingly, most parents were not involved in the AIP. Some parents indicated that their limits were tested with teacher phone calls and out-of-school suspensions. The AIP offered several opportunities for parents and guardians to visit the program. However, most parents held full time jobs, attended school themselves, or lacked transportation. AIP staff made a point of contacting parents on a weekly basis.

In addition to the aforementioned resilience factors, Henderson and Milstein (2002) established "The Resiliency Wheel" to display those resilience factors critical to student success. These factors emulate Doll, Zucker, and Brehm's (2004) characteristics.

It is important to mention that students spoke highly of the life skills offered in the AIP, and indicated that the program could have expanded on this component. Students benefited from the school counseling sessions on careers, and presentations from outside educational organizations. Staff members taught male students to tie neckties, and the females learned to quilt and sew. These activities provided opportunities for students to establish healthy relationships with each other, and to help students feel a sense of accomplishment.

## Conclusions

This study provided numerous revelations for this researcher. Analysis of student data revealed the AIP may have contributed to a positive change in students' academics, attendance, and discipline. Data show strong pass rates, minimal attendance problems, and few discipline infractions during students' AIP placement.

Interestingly, students who the researcher thought would be eager participants chose not to participate in the study. A couple of these students initially agreed to participate but did not show up for the interviews.

Students provided good feedback for program improvements and revisions, particularly with uniforms, daily schedules, and student ability levels. The program needs to do a better job of tracking students once they transition from the program from a statistical standpoint. Although students receive visits from the AIP staff once they have transitioned, additional data are needed to recover dropouts.

An issue that needs to be addressed to ensure a smooth transition for students is stronger collaboration between the alternative program and the comprehensive setting. Although a transition team, along with the hearing officer, determines the student's next educational placement, a transition team in the receiving school would be beneficial to acclimate students to a new environment. As one student indicated, it is "easy to get lost" in a larger school setting. Several students commented on the difficulties in navigating through schools with many doors, hallways, elevators, and stairwells. Safeguards should be implemented to ensure student success. It has been customary for students to meet with

their new administrator and counselor before making the transition to the receiving school. However, that is not always the case.

Although several students indicated that the AIP had no bearing on their success and saw no purpose in attending, the majority of students agreed that the program was beneficial due to school staff, program structure, and a nurturing environment. Most students viewed the AIP as a safe place to learn, grow, and achieve success. Students concluded that the skills learned in the AIP would benefit them in becoming productive citizens and contributing adults.

# CHAPTER 5

## Introduction

There are many concerned voices and opinions with regard to appropriate educational opportunities for students in alternative programs. According to Darling and Price (2004) many research studies support using students' opinions to improve schools.

The overall purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions of their experiences in an alternative program, how the experiences impacted them, and ultimately to include their voices in the body of knowledge on alternative programs. This study examined challenges and successes that students faced during their AIP placement, communicated their experiences in returning to the comprehensive setting, and identified support factors that fostered resiliency. This study revealed students' perceptions of their participation in the alternative intervention program and provided a much-needed student view of an alternative intervention. A total of 162 students, eighty-one middle school and eighty-one high school students, received educational services in the AIP during the 2005 through 2007 school years. The 162 students consisted of 120 males, 42 females, 135 African-American, and 27 Caucasian students. Fifty-three students received exceptional education services.

Attendance, discipline, and academic achievement data were analyzed to provide an overall scope of the program and the total participants served. Five themes emerged from an analysis of eleven codes. The themes, *Challenges to Success*, *Experiences*, *The*

*Alternative School Environment*, *Support*, and *Outlook on Life*, were collapsed from a series of eleven codes that had been developed from student responses. These responses can be grouped into two prominent student perspectives. Students overwhelmingly indicated that these two perspectives are a caring staff, and a nurturing environment (including school climate and physical structure).

Student responses from three focus groups and six in-depth interviews revealed a timeline continuum where student responses slowly progressed from Newbies to Champions and then to young adults who were no longer in school. Although different students were interviewed for each group, the responses show growth pattern representing "birth" to "adulthood" in the AIP, similar to a progression in maturation. The five students in the Newbies focus group said they had not ever been exposed to a nurturing environment with caring adults, and were bitter and in denial regarding their mistakes. They exhibited no indications of any future endeavors and took great pride in negative experiences. The Pros, having completed at least a nine-week period in the AIP, were calm and could easily identify their areas of growth. Prior to attending the program, they admitted to numerous bouts of disruptive behavior and unexplained anger. Although they were nervous about their success, they left the program with specific goals and a plan to accomplish them. The Champions, longest removed from the alternative setting, showed the greatest amount of growth. These students planned to graduate from high school and were looking forward to college. While the in-depth interviewees battled their share of demons throughout their high school and young adult years, most were employed or attending college. They were able to realize and overcome their challenges.

When the Champions and Pros initially entered the AIP, they carried as much negative baggage as the Newbies. Yet, as time progressed, students seemed to have different perspectives after completing the AIP. Interestingly, the longer they remained in the program, the more positive, and realistic their perspectives were. This is revealed through their interview responses. Initially, the Newbies would not admit mistakes or wrongdoing. They were quick to blame others and accepted no responsibility. After spending nine weeks in the program, the Newbies' responses to similar questions showed more maturity. This information is aligned with research on the amount of time students spend in alternative intervention programs, and the appropriateness of the transition process. This issue is addressed later in this chapter.

Students believed that the AIP offered a caring, nurturing environment where they were treated with dignity and respect. Since all students were sent to the program for disciplinary reasons, behavior was a major obstacle to success. Students considered school the safe haven from family and community issues, and even self-inflicted obstacles. Noddings (2003) makes the connection between care and responsiveness and identifies the hallmarks of caring as the ability to listen attentively and respond as positively as possible. Students believed this was a major difference between the alternative and comprehensive settings. Students felt a connectedness with AIP staff that they had not experienced in any other school.

Throughout their schooling, students indicated periods of disengagement for various reasons, including challenging teachers, boring classes, and negative relationships with others. Family challenges at home played a role in school disengagement because

students believed that similar to the comprehensive school, there were adults at home who failed to care about them or their challenges.

According to Blum and Libbey (2004), school connectedness is the belief held by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals. According to the authors, two ways to influence connectedness is through individuals (students and school staff) and environment (school climate and school bonding). The author's findings are aligned with the two major components of the AIP (caring staff and a nurturing environment) that students believed significantly contributed to their success. Libbey's (2004) literature review on caring and connectedness showed that teacher support was the most common emerging theme, including student perceptions of their closeness to teachers and school staff.

AIP students revealed that caring relationships that included trust and honesty were critical in their success. Students believed that staff members were trustworthy adults in their lives who told them want they needed to hear, whether they wanted to hear it or not. One student said that "Although I knew he was right," her teacher was "so real that I couldn't listen to him." Results from a Girl Scouts of America (1989) survey on the beliefs and moral values of America's children, which according to the study is among the largest and most comprehensive of its kind ever conducted, indicate that although one-third of the more than 5,000 students surveyed say that teachers really do care for them, only 7.0% said they would turn to them for advice. Forty-three percent of students, particularly high school students, report that friends are their first preference for advice. More recently, Darling and Price (2004) completed a mixed methods study using students'

feedback to improve an alternative school. Focus groups revealed that students felt cared for and described their school environment as “healthy.”

Students responded favorably in regard to the AIP staff as being readily accessible and always willing to help. They spoke of the bonds established with staff members, and considered them to be trustworthy confidants. Students said that there were a few teachers in the comprehensive setting who supported them but not consistently. Care must be regular and consistent in order to be beneficial (Noddings, 2005).

Just as positive connections benefit students, lack of connections can lead to damage to student success. Researchers have examined the link between supportive schools and academic success. Schaps (2004) found that although building community in schools does not appear to directly affect achievement in terms of grades or test scores, it might directly affect students’ decisions not to drop out of school, increase the enjoyment of school, and promote educational aspirations, motivation, and engagement. Students who perceive schools to be uncaring places had no sense of belonging, felt less engaged, and spent more time in negative situations (Osterman, 2000).

For most students, the AIP proved to be the catalyst for positive experiences. Fewer incidences of suspensions, fighting, and disruptiveness were reported during enrollments, as well as lower absences and higher pass rates.

In addition to the caring staff, the AIP proved to be a source of positive academic support for students. Study participants benefited from individualized, one-on-one instruction. Students also revealed that individualized instruction might not have always been academic in nature, but rather instruction with aspects of the student’s life that

prompted concern. For example, students discussed home or community concerns, issues with friends or siblings, or resolving conflicts with others. For most students, until they were allowed to bring some type of closure to their outside issues, academic learning was void. Closure came in many different forms such as tears, arguing, swearing, fighting, or a temporary time out. Good schools have staff members who work cohesively not only to provide meaningful, high quality instruction, but also to offer supports necessary to foster student learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). Student responses indicate that the comprehensive setting did not provide outlets for closure, and students were not empowered to handle situations in ways best for them. The comprehensive setting did not understand them, and according to students, an out-of-school suspension was usually the final answer. An out-of-school suspension could have been the final answer in the AIP when students could not maintain appropriate behavior. When a suspension was eminent, students were given the respect of a student-teacher-administrator conference. Maintaining dignity was vital, even when students lost control and were suspended from school. Students may display oppositional and defiant behavior and show resistance to school rules and policies; however, students should never be devalued or labeled (Goodman, 1999).

The word "respect" emerged as a major topic of conversation during focus group interviews, particularly with the Newbies. Students demanded to be treated with dignity and respect, especially in the community. Yet, disrespect toward others was the main reason for student placement in the AIP. The moral philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785) made the connection between respect, dignity, and value. Kant purposed that humans have a distinctive worth called "dignity," and the moral response to dignity is respect. Kant

described dignity as being the supreme value, and that all persons have dignity and are owed respect. Kant further states that respect is not something that individuals must earn or fail to earn, but something they are owed. While the price of misbehavior may be punishment, misbehavior is never a reason to lose dignity. Individuals cannot sacrifice dignity or the right to respect, in spite of what they do.

Student responses regarding respect are quite different from Kant's perspective. Conversations with AIP interviewees clearly indicate their belief that respect is earned and not owed, and respect can be lost as quickly as one can lose dignity or value. Interestingly, when the Newbies talk about respect, they do not mention the need for them to show respect toward others, but believe that it is something that should be shown to them. Burbules (1993) attributes this to students wanting to be treated as though they are uniquely special. Their situations are special, about them and no one else. Every student in the AIP formed a bond with a staff member that was unique for both individuals. Students believed that they were not disrespected or ridiculed during interactions with staff, or with other AIP peers. Burbules also suggests that respect is give and take, and not a one-way hierarchy where, according to Freire (2001) adults talk 'at' or 'to' students instead of 'with' them. Teachers talk 'at' students because they do not know how to talk 'with' them. Some teachers may feel a loss of dignity if they are able to talk 'with' a student who is a troublemaker, but as Goodman (1999) indicates, it is from a close and personal relationship with a teacher that alternative education students then develop a personal reason to learn. Some students commented that they only give respect if they are given respect. The other person has to go first. At that point, the relationship escalates to

friend or foe, or as one student said, “However they want it to go down.” According to student responses, this usually means some type of physical altercation.

At-risk youth residing in a community-based facility with their parents were asked to participate in a research study on respect (Jones, 2002). Students made several observations about their experiences. They indicated respect meant that others felt that not only were they important, but their ideas, experiences, and participation were equally valued. Students made the connection between respect and value, indicating that respect is shown by listening to each other and showing that opinions and experiences are valuable and interesting. When asked about differences in educational settings with regard to respect, students spoke of the differences between the regular school and the project where they resided. They indicated that they felt labeled in the regular setting if they had discipline problems. However, the alternative setting treated students as young adults. Students felt disrespected in the regular school because they were ridiculed or treated like kids. This type of treatment usually led to discipline incidences. It is important to note that the AIP interviewees yielded similar responses. AIP participants spoke of teachers labeling them as troublemakers. Students believed that they were usually the ones to receive blame in negative situations, regardless of their involvement.

During their time of participation in the AIP, data show the majority of students typically performed well with regard to academics, attendance, and discipline. Although not comprehensive, research suggests that students in alternative education programs do indeed perform well academically (Aronson, 1995). Over 11.0 percent of AIP participants graduated from high school, while more than 3.0 percent received a GED. Although the

percentages are not amazingly large, they represent a population of students who are behaviorally challenged, have been incarcerated, experienced homelessness and abandonment, and have been disconnected from school.

With regard to academics, most students (55.0% to 70.0%) passed English and mathematics prior to attending the AIP. Yet there was room to improve during their AIP participation. During their nine-week enrollment period, enrollees dramatically increased their pass rates to a group average of 93.9% in both English and mathematics. Available data on the total AIP population show 50.0% of the group passed mathematics, while 46.9% passed English after attending the AIP. Surprisingly, these percentages are lower than those achieved prior to attending the AIP. In other words, students scored lower in English and mathematics after leaving the AIP than they did prior to attending the AIP. Despite the AIP placement, student scores were not sustainable after the placement. This could be attributed to a large number of students who left school without continuing to receive academic instruction. Students left school for various reasons, such as relocation, dropping out, or incarceration. These same students could re-appear in school after missing several weeks of instruction. The lack of instruction could have a major impact on grades and test scores. Data for this study consisted only of students who were enrolled in school for a nine-week period after completing the AIP. Scores could have possibly been higher if students remained in school to benefit from academic teaching.

Discrepancies existed between students' perceptions of their academic performance and actual statistical data results. It is possible that a relationship exists between the lackluster curriculum students spoke of regarding the AIP, and the low pass rates upon

return to the comprehensive setting. While a watered-down curriculum provided the opportunity for students to improve their grades, it could have provided a false sense of academic achievement that students could not maintain in the regular setting. The fast pace and rigor of a standards-based curriculum proved challenging for students in need of a caring, nurturing environment that offered individualized instruction.

Despite concerns with the AIP curriculum, students' responses in focus groups indicate that flexible scheduling allowed them to work at their pace without the need for a school bell. Student academic needs also dictated the time schedule for each class. This was helpful if students needed more time in a particular subject area. There were no clocks on the classroom walls, and in one classroom, the teacher covered the clock with a smiley face made from yellow construction paper. The word "FOCUS" was written across the paper. Students commented that the smiley face helped them to focus on class work and not the clock. Some students were pleasantly surprised to realize that they had worked without interruption from morning until afternoon. Some students spoke of boredom and the challenges of sitting in one classroom for five hours each day, including daydreaming, irritability, and problems with sleeping in class. These are similar challenges faced in the comprehensive setting. Schools must pay attention to students who are not benefiting from instructional reform efforts, particularly students who have become disengaged from learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). These are the students who possibly fall through the cracks, lose years of learning while moving closer to adulthood, and lack the academic, social, and emotional skills to become viable members in society.

Attendance proved to be a challenge for both the AIP participants, and for AIP staff attempting to collect attendance data. Before the AIP enrollment, detailed information was limited for some students because they had not been enrolled in school for months, while some students missed at least a year or more of schooling. Some students lived in neighboring towns or suburbs with family members, and were not enrolled in the correct school zone. Once school officials were informed, families would relocate for fear of being caught. Some students were so transient that their records were inaccurate or misplaced. Others came to the AIP with sketchy school records from previous alternative settings or juvenile justice facilities, while some students just chose not to attend school. Truancy has been labeled one of the top ten major problems in schools, negatively affecting the future of our youth (DeKalb, 1999). Truancy is an early warning sign that extends much further than the school. It affects the student, the family, and the community. Absenteeism could lead to potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or lack of school success (Huizinga et. al., 2000). Robins and Ratcliff (1980) conducted a longitudinal study of African-American males. They found that of those students who were often truant in elementary school and in high school, 75.0 percent failed to graduate. Failure to achieve a high school diploma, in turn, is linked with diminished earning potential in adulthood and other poor outcomes (Mottaz, 2002).

Students showed their highest percentages of consistent school attendance during their time in the AIP. This could be attributed to some students facing court-ordered attendance with the possibility of incarceration, or the realization that the attendance secretary would notify a parent or probation officer of an unexcused absence, or that

students actually enjoyed attending school. However, less than half (49.0%) of program participants were enrolled in school after completing the AIP. Students indicated that in a larger setting, it was easier to leave school or not attend. Particularly in an open, campus style setting, students could leave and not be missed or noticed. A student said that in the smaller setting, "There was no where to go but to class."

Moreley (1991) reveals that alternative education comes in many types of environments and structures. The ultimate goal is to create a variety of alternative environments to ensure that each student can find one that helps "facilitate progress" (p. 8). Raywid (1990) identified three distinctive types of alternative programs, based on their goals and objectives. As discussed in chapter two, the three approaches are educational, disciplinary, and therapeutic in nature. The literature suggests that most alternative programs include components from all three approaches (Sagor, 1999). Research also indicates the design and success of a program is affected by the type of program implemented (Mottaz, 2002). It is crucial for policymakers and school districts to understand the implications of each program type, and outcomes for students. The decision to invest in alternative education and the types of programs to implement should be carefully planned and considered.

Raywid (1990) suggests that alternative discipline programs rarely lead to significant gains for students. Students often make progress while enrolled in the program, but tend to regress upon return to the traditional setting. This holds true for AIP enrollees, who dramatically improved their attendance, grades, and discipline during their program placement. However, some students regressed upon return to their traditional setting. The

length of time spent in the AIP was a major topic of conversation for AIP enrollees. Once students adjusted to the smaller environment and nurturing staff, they were transitioned to the comprehensive setting. Students overwhelmingly confessed that they did not want to leave the program, while some admitted that they were not ready to go. Several parents indicated that this was their child's first successful educational placement. Results from a study by the Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center (1995) show that students in long-term alternative programs showed more improvement and performance than students in short-term environments. Greater effectiveness is achieved in programs of longer duration. The research also showed that most descriptions of successful alternative programs fail to include length of time in the program as a strong structural feature. There is a connection between the program duration and the program goals. Some students may be expected to meet the goals of a program based on a period of time, and not whether a transition is warranted. Consequently, students are transitioned who have demonstrated their ability to be successful over a short period of time, but exhibit negative behaviors in the comprehensive setting due to a loss of support, labeling, and stigmatization by both peers and teachers. Strong consideration must be given to a "revolving door" concept in designing short-term alternative programs. Transition decisions should be based on student readiness to transition, and not the number of days spent in the program. Students in the AIP are reviewed for transition purposes at the end of each quarter. Students who have exhibited growth in the areas of academics, attendance, and discipline are eligible to transition. Due to the large numbers of students needing an alternative intervention, and the lack of programs for these students, quite often the AIP is the only option for

placement. Consequently, students are transitioned who may not be ready to leave the program. A “catch-22” situation exists with the dilemma of keeping students in the program because they may benefit from the additional time, or risk transitioning them to accommodate additional students who need the program.

Owens and Konkol (2004) conducted a research study to gain student perspectives on the differences between the alternative and comprehensive school settings. Students reported feeling the most comfortable in the alternative setting for reasons aligned with alternative education research. Students liked having smaller class sizes, having personal connections with teachers, staying in one classroom, having a self-paced curriculum, and feeling included. When students in the Owens and Konkol (2004) study were asked why their transition to a comprehensive setting was unsuccessful, student responses included an inability to manage anger issues, a lack of positive relationships with school staff, too many students in one classroom, and the lack of a mentor or person to talk to when situations occurred.

When AIP students were asked about their perspectives on the differences between the alternative and regular school settings, their responses were similar to the Owens and Konkol (2004) participants. AIP students spoke of the nurturing staff in the alternative setting and their ability to bond with staff members. There were mixed responses to the curriculum. Students expressed bouts of boredom in both the AIP and the comprehensive setting. However, some students enjoyed a more structured learning environment.

Research indicates a growing population of students who may be better served in an alternative setting (Aron, 2003). There are many students at-risk of failure, and school

districts must determine how to meet their educational needs. AIP placements were based on the severity of prior discipline infractions and habitual offender status. However, some students would have been better served in an alternative environment long before enrolling in the AIP. It may have benefited some students to enroll in the AIP at the first sign of difficulties in school, and not after the comprehensive setting exhausted its options to improve student behavior.

In-depth interviewees and members of the Champions focus group discussed their transition to the comprehensive setting. Student responses showed that they did not find many AIP attributes in the regular school setting. A student said that an administrator welcomed her from the AIP to her new sophomore year by telling her that there were three-hundred eighty-six students in the sophomore class – she was number three-hundred eighty-seven. The student translated that statement to mean there was very little time left for her.

The process of transition should begin at the point of student entry into the alternative program. There must be specific guidelines that structure this process. All stakeholders, including parents, both the sending and receiving schools, and students should play a role in the student transitions. Follow up with students is critical to their reintegration process. Transition time could be tumultuous and overwhelming for students. A team effort is required so that students know that they are always cared for and supported, regardless of their difficulties.

## Frameworks

The two frameworks used for this study are Anne Wheelock's *The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round*, and Nan Henderson's *Resiliency Wheel*. The Merry-Go-Round is the framework that was used to develop questions designed to capture student perceptions of their educational experiences prior to attending the AIP, and show "Pre-AIP" student dispositions. Anne Wheelock designed the figure during the mid 1980's, to show how students travel through a cyclic motion of alienation and disengagement. For at-risk students, one negative school experience leads to another. As these experiences accumulate, they begin to overshadow students' positive experiences. Consequently, student self-perceptions and their role in their schools lead them to doubt that they belong in school at all (Wheelock, 1986). The figure provides an accurate description of student focus group responses. Some students revealed that they had no positive school experiences until the AIP. The second Merry-go-Round figure reveals comments of many new AIP enrollees, disengaged from school over issues concerning teachers, schools, and low expectations. Alienation and disengagement usually led to thoughts of dropping out. The role of the AIP was to help students make the transition from the At-Risk Merry-go-Round to the point of resiliency by giving students hope and optimism about their future.

## Resiliency

According to resiliency researcher Nan Henderson (2008), resiliency is the ability to spring back from and successfully adapt to adversity. All AIP participants experienced some type of adversity related to schooling, thus the AIP placement. The AIP was the

springboard for most students to bounce back to success. The majority of participants indicated that family, friends, and the AIP staff were instrumental in their ability to be resilient. They further indicated that these were the same groups who supported and encouraged them. Henderson interviewed several young people who bounced back from devastating life experiences. They were asked open-ended questions about their lives and their ability to overcome adversity. Henderson found that the emerging themes from the interviews were aligned with resiliency research; as well as literature on dropout and gang prevention. Students in the Henderson study mentioned caring adults outside the family as the major factor in their success, and the absence of caring as a main reason that led to their disengagement from the comprehensive setting. Some students in the study were labeled in school as being "at-risk," which made them feel different from other students. Expectations were different for at-risk students. For example, the Henderson study students felt that it was expected of them to perform poorly academically and behaviorally. Similar dispositions held true for AIP participants, who stated that they were blamed for wrongdoing, whether they were guilty or not.

AIP participants showed resiliency traits in numerous ways, by transitioning from Newbies to Champions, completing high school or receiving a GED, attending college, full-time employment, or entering military service. Students indicate bumps along the way, but were still able to overcome adversities with the help of caring adults.

The AIP program is structurally aligned with the six components of the Resiliency Wheel. What follows are the components of the wheel, along with supportive student statements that led to their success. Additionally, research by Doll, Zucker, and Brehm

(2004) supports the wheel in establishing characteristics necessary for creating resilient classrooms. The authors contend that classrooms in which students can become more successful both academically and interpersonally contain components of the six Resiliency Wheel characteristics.

**Opportunities for participation.** Students have supportive peer friendships when classmates realize how to resolve conflicts quickly and without disruption. Peer relationships are important in the development of social competence. In the AIP, students were taught to develop peer relationships. Participants had become accustomed to managing for themselves and lacked the ability to establish meaningful relationships with others. Some students had a difficult time learning to trust or accept the help of others. Students were given opportunities for group interaction through projects, debates, activities, and field trips.

**Set clear, consistent boundaries.** Clear, consistent boundaries are essential for learning, including active engagement in academic work, positive peer interaction, and successfully transitioning from one learning activity to the next. The majority of students displayed positive behavior during their placement in the AIP, based on the number of discipline incidences during their enrollment. All students in the AIP entered the program with prior discipline incidences. Some of these behaviors were so severe that expulsion was the end result. Students indicated that AIP interventions, such as group and individual counseling, one on one attention from staff, cooling-off periods when agitated, and the ability to talk through difficult situations were paramount in helping them establish self-control.

**Teach life-skills.** Resilience researcher Nan Henderson (1998) describes the components of life-skills teaching as cooperation, conflict resolution, communication skills, problem solving, decision-making, and healthy stress management. She further indicates that when these skills are adequately taught and reinforced, students can successfully navigate the perils of adolescence. One of the best ways to teach life skills is through cooperative learning, which incorporates skills for getting along.

A sampling of statistics from The Children's Defense Fund's (1990) publication entitled The State of America's Children, indicate that on any given day in America, six teens commit suicide; 135,000 children bring a gun to school; 1,629 children are in adult jails, and 1,512 high school students drop out of school. A similar report printed in 2005 revealed that on any given day in America, five children or teens commit suicide; 177 children are arrested for violent crimes; 4,262 children are arrested; 2,756 children drop out of school, and 16,964 public school students are suspended.

Students in the AIP have contributed to these numbers by experiencing similar outcomes. Student responses reveal a history of drugs, guns, abuse and neglect, and incarceration. While many efforts have been made to address such grim statistics, these problems continue to exist with youth. It is possible that students, armed with the skills to successfully manage life situations, can position themselves to make better decisions for a positive, meaningful future. Overwhelmingly, students suggest that establishing meaningful relationships with caring, nurturing adults, was the reason for their triumphs.

**Provide caring and support.** The most caring, supportive relationships are warm, engaged, responsive, and characterized by high demands and expectations. Teacher-

student relationships contribute to learning by reassuring students in the face of failure, and engaging them in active learning with new knowledge. Students in this study overwhelming stated that the relationships established with AIP faculty and staff was vital to their success. They indicated that the ability to bond with staff was one of the most appealing aspects of the program. They believed the comprehensive setting did not lend itself to such relationships, mainly due to crowded classrooms and insensitive teachers. All students admitted to feeling cared for and nurtured in the program. One student used the word "spoiled" to describe her relationships with staff. Strong stipulations were set for and communicated to students. They indicated that there was no doubt about what they were expected to do, and how they were supposed to act. Most students did not want to leave the program, and said that they would return if given the opportunity.

Caring and support extends to family and parents also. The relationship between the parent, school, and the alternative school is important. Kellmayer (1995) suggested schools should offer academic credit, attendance policies that are flexible to meet student needs, such as working or having family responsibilities, and students should be offered participation in extracurricular activities.

**Set and communicate high expectations.** High expectations require that students are self-determined when they have established their own personal goals for success. They take responsibility for their own learning and credit for their success. Resilient classrooms foster academic self-determination by teaching students to set goals, make decisions, solve problems, and receive feedback (Doll et. al., 2004). Students indicated that prior to the AIP, they believed no one cared about their success. A few students believed that they

were usually blamed for disruptions, whether they created them or not. However, some students said that participating in the AIP gave them a sense of purpose and hope for a future. Prior to attending the AIP, most students indicated that they gave little thought to future goals. The majority of students were looking forward to graduation, preparing for college, or employed either part-time or full-time.

**Conclusions**

This study provided numerous revelations for this researcher. Analysis of student data revealed the AIP might have contributed to the positive change in students' academics, attendance, and discipline. While data show that students progressed in all three areas during their AIP enrollment, students' responses indicate greater progress than the quantitative data reveal. Upon return to the regular setting, most students indicated that they performed well academically. After transitioning to the comprehensive setting, data from the full AIP enrollment show 50.0% of students passed mathematics, while 46.9% passed English. Surprisingly, these percentages are lower than those achieved prior to AIP attendance. Student scores were lower in English and mathematics after returning to the regular setting than they were prior to attending the AIP. A total of 38.0% of students passed English after the AIP enrollment, compared to 50.5% who passed before the placement. Comparatively, 40.5% of students passed mathematics after the AIP placement, compared to 51.0% who passed prior to attending the AIP. Despite the AIP placement, student scores did not continue to improve after the placement. This could be attributed to a large number of students whose whereabouts were unknown after attending

the AIP. It is important to reiterate that the data set for this study incorporates the entire AIP enrollment from the 2005 through 2007 school years. Test scores, attendance, and discipline data are reported as averages and not individual, student-by-student data. Averages provide consistency before, during, and after the AIP placement. Individual students may have lacked data during a particular time continuum, such as students who entered the program with no prior data, or students who left the program and cannot be located.

Students who the researcher thought would be eager participants in this study chose not to participate. A couple of these students initially agreed to participate but did not show up for the scheduled interviews. These were students who completed the program and received a high school diploma.

Students gave strong recommendations for developing strong, robust programs. These recommendations can be used to strengthen alternative programs nationwide. Students provided good feedback for program improvements and revisions, particularly regarding uniforms, daily schedules, and student ability levels. Students revealed concerns with boredom, irritability, sleeping in class, and the ability to remain focused. The AIP may consider different instructional strategies to actively engage students. While students are placed in the program for behavioral concerns, alternative education research addresses the need for a flexible, varied curriculum designed to meet the needs of all students. The goal of the program is to better prepare students to return to the comprehensive setting, both academically and behaviorally. The program needs to offer the means to challenge students academically, regardless of behavior. This may prove challenging for the AIP,

with a mixture of grade and ability levels in one classroom. Students note a watered down curriculum, one that is quite different from the comprehensive setting. While the curriculum offers most students the opportunity to improve their grades, students usually find themselves in trouble with grades in the comprehensive setting because they cannot keep the rigorous pace. Data from this study support the need for a program expansion to include additional classrooms and staff. Students would greatly benefit from elective class offerings, along with the four core academic classes they receive daily. However, core classes should reflect the student's grade level. In other words, all 9th grade high school students should not take 9th grade English just because they are in 9th grade.

More students are entering the AIP who are enrolled in honors and advanced classes. There are two rules of thought regarding these students. Some feel that the outcome for suspended students could have been an expulsion, meaning that the student would remain out of school and uneducated for 365 days. The AIP gives them the opportunity to continue their education, despite the discipline infraction. Others believe that students are being short changed with easier classes, and will face unfair challenges upon return to the comprehensive setting. Students in the AIP have the chance to learn at their own pace, as teachers are not confined to a specific schedule or timetable. Once students have mastered the material, they are able to move forward. This is very different from the comprehensive setting, where pacing guides are used to steer teachers through the curriculum.

The program needs to do a better job of tracking students once they transition from the program. Good communication between the alternative and regular schools is critical

for student success. It is important to provide a transitioning bridge for personnel in the receiving schools so that the progress of the students can be tracked (Remier and Cash, 2003). Although students receive visits from the AIP staff once they have transitioned, additional data are needed to recover dropouts and to help ensure that students remain in school. The transition process is an issue that needs to be addressed to ensure a smooth changeover for students. Strong collaboration between the alternative program and the receiving school is critical to keep students in school. Although an AIP transition team determines the student's next educational placement, it is beneficial for the student if the receiving school established a team to acclimate students to a new environment. As one student indicated, it is "easy to get lost" in a larger school setting. Several students commented on the difficulties in navigating through schools with many doors, hallways, elevators, and stairwells. Safeguards should be implemented to ensure that students are not lost. AIP participants told several stories about the pitfalls of transitioning to a different setting. It has been customary for students to meet with their new administrators and counselors before making the transition to the receiving school. However, that is not always the case. Sometimes students are left to fend for themselves in a large building with several hundred students.

Although the AIP program is a protective factor aiding resiliency, once students return to the comprehensive setting, some are not strong enough to survive the challenges offered by the larger setting. Students perceive the AIP to be a safe, nurturing environment where their emotional, social, and academic needs are addressed. The students drive the pace of the curriculum, as well as the daily schedule. However, the comprehensive setting

does not lend itself to these freedoms. The curriculum is data driven and the daily schedule is set according to state mandates. Emotional and social needs are usually handled with a school counselor on a case-by-case basis. The comprehensive setting is all about business, understandably so, with the large numbers of enrollees and achievement goals to accomplish. However, for AIP students who are transitioning, it is a "sink or swim" mentality. Prior to enrolling in the AIP, students have participated in a comprehensive setting, whether in a public school division or juvenile justice facility. The determination was made that student needs could best be served in a smaller environment. Students are placed in the AIP, where they usually meet with success. However, they are returned back to the setting that initially landed them in the AIP. This appears to be a type of cyclical setup where the AIP is viewed as an "out of sight, out of mind" student placement. Once students are ready to make their appearance in the comprehensive setting, they are forced to function in an environment that at least for nine weeks or more, has been foreign to them. The need for attention appears to drive them to revert back to negative behaviors.

**Future Study**

The number of at-risk students in the nation is growing daily. Students at risk of school failure are attending alternative programs in large numbers nationwide (Hughes & Adera, 2006). As alternative education continues to evolve and play a more prominent role in public education there is a need for current information about alternative settings and the students served (Lehr et. al, 2004). There are numerous challenges posed to educate at-risk

youth and provide the tools for them to be viable members of society. More longitudinal studies are needed to track students who display behavior concerns at a young age. With the appropriate interventions in place, student needs could be discovered before they are overwhelmed with challenging behaviors. Since one size does not fit all, there should be a variety of alternatives available. Some students need academic assistance, others may have behavioral concerns, and some are not English Language proficient (Reimer and Cash, 2003). A variety of programs within the same building might be the key to meeting individual needs.

Based on the variety of student responses on receiving adequate, challenging instruction, further study is required to reveal the type of instruction delivered in alternative settings, and which type proves to be the most effective. Academically proficient students with disciplinary offenses could find themselves in alternative intervention placements. Instruction provided to meet the needs of the individual student is critical to student success. Most students indicated that the AIP curriculum lacked rigor and a moderate pace. Students found it difficult to manage a curriculum that was lackluster for some, but challenging for others. Equally critical to a meaningful curriculum is placing students in the appropriate level of classes, based on their ability level. This proves to be a daunting task when students function on a variety of academic levels, yet share the same classroom.

Student responses addressed numerous issues that are critical in developing and evaluating alternative programs. These issues are aligned with research on effective alternative education programs. A review of legislation on alternative schools suggests

they offer educational programs that usually include strong emphasis on individualized instruction, a focus on basic academic skills, and counseling (Lehr et. al., 2003). Strong teachers with the ability to nurture and support students are critical to their success. Solid instruction based on curriculum and content, yet flexible enough to meet the needs of individual learners, will arm students with academic prowess.

Students mentioned the need for a counseling program that focused on life skills and career aspirations, coupled with counselors who are good listeners and can provide sound advice. Risk researchers often look at the family for potential sources of stress to youths' development (Gerard and Buehler, 1999). The authors further contend that high levels of stress may pose a unique challenge to youth because they are less skilled than adults in handling the day-to-day struggles of life**.** Students may cope by showing aggression toward others, or causing harm to themselves. Adults who can help students bridge home connections using behavioral interventions

This study helped fill the gap of research on specific alternative programs, particularly from the student perspectives. While numerous studies focus on state and federally funded programs, there are few that are conducted solely on stand-alone, on-site alternative programs. It is important that in establishing alternative programs, student voices must be heard and their suggestions implemented. The sense of empowerment for students only serves to elevate their self-esteem and the realization that they can make viable contributions to their own educational success.

Alternative programs and schools must be a critical component of conversations regarding inclusive schools. If schools are to provide every child the opportunity to learn

and grow, this should include educating the at-risk, alternative education student. On one hand, it may appear easier to isolate these students in a structured environment, free from distractions and communication with other educational settings. However, inclusion is about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child, regardless of background. The goal of transition is to prepare the student for inclusion in the regular setting, and to realize that along with transition must come support and nurturing.

Preparing students to transition to the comprehensive setting should start the first day that students enter the alternative program. This would encompass interaction with the receiving school's counselor throughout the span of the alternative placement, planned visits from the receiving school's administration, assigning mentors for transitioning students to give them a tour of the school facility, and assist students with finding and changing classes. It may also be helpful for students to attend a half-day or full day orientation at the receiving school prior to regular attendance. This would be an opportune time to review school rules and regulations, expectations, and available extracurricular activities.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. Focus group participants were limited to high school students and in-depth interviewees were restricted to young adult students. High school students represented the largest group of program attendees, consequently providing a larger pool of participants. Quantitative data were analyzed based on middle and high school enrollments for the full 2005-2007 school years. Although middle school

data were included in the quantitative data, no middle school students participated in focus groups or in-depth interviews.

Only one alternative intervention program was included in this study. One hundred sixty-two students were enrolled in the program over a two-year period, from 2005 – 2007. A total of eighteen participants were interviewed for this study, twelve in focus groups, and six in individual interviews. The alternative program studied is limited to the characteristics, guidelines, and policies established specifically for the AIP only. Although there are many different types and varieties of alternative programs, the purpose of this study was to focus on one specific, on-site program.

The AIP has done an admirable job of meeting student needs, as indicated by student responses to this study. It is clear that nurturing, caring relationships in a safe environment are critical to student success. It is this researcher's hope that educators come to the realization that all students can learn, in the right environment with the right teachers and staff. It has been personally fulfilling to watch students learn and grow to become remarkable young adults. For some, the road has been a difficult one. Even so, most students have managed to find their way through the ever twisting and turning paths of their lives.

A limitation for this researcher is the dual role played in this study process. The Purpose of this study was to learn student perceptions of the AIP on improving student achievement, attendance, and discipline. As the AIP administrator, the ability to be totally unbiased has been a challenge. The AIP is a program with students that this researcher nurtured and supported on a daily basis. This study may reveal flaws associated with the

program, which the researcher cannot take personally or professionally. However, this researcher believes that identifying flaws enables growth and excellence, both of which the AIP so richly deserves. Hopefully stakeholders will share the same sentiment.

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Appendices

Appendix A

The alternative education program (AIP) guidelines.

Program basics

Program requirements

What works – serve the needs of children

*AIP Guidelines*

The AIP program provides an alternative intervention for middle and high school students who have been long-term suspended or expelled from the school division. "The AIP high school" refers to high school students, while "Fresh Start" comprises the middle school component of the program. The program serves the educational needs of both regular and special education students. The goal is to successfully transition students to the comprehensive setting while arming them with the necessary skills needed for their success. Students are referred to the program only for disciplinary reasons. The program consists of four classrooms:

Fresh Start – Regular education, middle school students

The AIP – Regular education, high school students

The Fresh Start SPED MS – Special Education, middle school students

The AIP SPED HS – Special Education, high school students

*Program Basics*

◆ A disciplinary hearing officer can place a student in the AIP for a period of nine to thirty-six weeks. Students are reviewed quarterly to determine their return to the comprehensive setting. Expelled students will remain in the AIP for thirty-six weeks. If

students do not meet with success during the thirty-six week period, they are usually given an alternate placement, such as a private alternative setting.

- Class sizes are relatively small, with no more than 10 – 12 students per class. The program consists of four academic teachers and four instructional assistants. Class sizes may vary because students enter the program on a rotating basis.
- Only the four core subject areas are taught in the student's grade level. The four core subjects are English, Mathematics, social studies, and science. No elective classes are provided in the program.
- The school system provides transportation for the AIP students. Monday through Thursday, the student day begins at 9:00 a.m. and ends at 2 p.m. Students are dismissed at 12 noon on Fridays. Parents must complete a bus form that is sent to the school's transportation bus office. The school division Code of Student Conduct rules and regulations for student transportation apply to the AIP students.
- Both breakfast and lunch are provided on a daily basis. Students having to pay for meals will be charged the customary rates, similar to rates paid in the comprehensive setting.
- Students use division issued iBook computers for instructional purposes only. The computers remain at school and cannot be taken home. Parents must sign a student usage form. There is no charge for iBook use.
- There are no specific school supplies required for the program. Students should come prepared with paper, pens, and pencils on a daily basis.
- Students are administered the appropriate standardized tests, including the state Standards of Learning Test and a division designed assessment test. A thematic approach

to learning is implemented with hands-on activities and use of technology. Students are able to participate in independent study options through the Center for Diversified Studies. The center provides independent study opportunities for students with special circumstances, such as being out of school due to illness or pregnancy, missing credits due to transient behavior.

- Students receive grades, interims, and report cards just as any comprehensive school. Grades achieved in the AIP are transitioned with the student upon leaving the program. Students should take advantage of smaller class sizes and additional instructional staff in an effort to improve grades.

*Program Requirements*

- Each student and parent must participate in an orientation session. During that time, paperwork is completed and a program overview is provided.
- Each student must wear the school uniform every day with no exceptions. The uniform consists of navy blue khaki pants and a solid white collared shirt or blouse for middle school students, and tan khaki pants and a solid white collared shirt or blouse for high school students. All students must wear a belt, shirts must be tucked in, and pants worn at the waist. No bracelets, necklaces, anklets, earrings, sunglasses, do-rags (type of head scarf), or hats are allowed in the building. Students are allowed to wear a watch. Shoes must be appropriate for outdoor activities. No flip-flops or shoes that do not cover the entire foot. Students are not allowed to wear shorts or skorts.

◆ Each student must participate in school counseling activities. A male counselor facilitates a male student group. Students are allowed to discuss any concerns during their weekly meeting. A similar group is formed for females, led by a female counselor.

◆ Each student must abide by the school division's Code of Student Conduct. Extensive class activities and lessons are taught to ensure understanding of the Code. Students who violate the Code are subject to the customary discipline procedures outlined in the Code.

*What Works – serve the needs of children*

Treat students with dignity and respect every day!

Provide a nurturing environment with lots of love and individualized attention.

Give students the opportunity for self-expression.

Provide structure and discipline each day.

Ensure that the AIP needs are met – no one goes hungry in the program!

Constant praise and motivation for academic success.

Weekly teacher contact with parents.

Creative ways of addressing student behavior as teachable moments.

Adults model the way for students (AIP Rules and Regulations, 2005).

Appendix B

Focus group interview questions

Newbies

Pros

Champions

Focus group interview questions.

*Newbies*

1. Tell me about your first nine weeks in your last educational setting, especially in academics, attendance, and discipline.
2. What did you like and dislike about your last school?
3. What do you think are your biggest successes?
4. What have been your biggest challenges, at home and at school?
5. How have you managed your challenges?
6. What do you expect from the AIP? How can the program help you improve?
7. What skills and knowledge do you hope to learn in the AIP that will help you to be successful once you transition?

*Pros*

1. Tell me about your nine weeks in the alternative program, especially in academics, attendance, and discipline. How do you feel now that you are done?
2. What did you like and dislike about the program?
3. What do you think were your biggest successes in the alternative program?
4. What were your biggest challenges at home and in the community, during your time in the program?
5. How have you managed your challenges? Has the AIP helped?

6. Did the program help you improve? If so, how? If not, what could have been done?
7. What skills and knowledge did you learn in the AIP that will help you to be successful in your transition?

*Champions*

1. Tell me about your first nine weeks in your comprehensive setting, especially in academics, attendance, and discipline.
2. What declined, improved, or remained the same?
3. What do you like and dislike about your last school?
4. What do you think have been your biggest successes in the new setting?
5. What have been your biggest challenges, at home and at school during the past nine weeks?
6. How have you managed your challenges?
7. Do you believe that the alternative program helped you improve?
8. What skills and knowledge did you learn in the AIP that have helped you to be successful in your new setting?

# Appendix C

In-depth interview questions

In-depth interview questions.

1. How would you describe your high school experience?
    a. What was it like for you?
    b. What successes to you remember?
    c. What problems did you face?
    d. Were there discipline issues?  Probe: Can you talk about them?
    e. Were there attendance issues? Probe: What happened?
2. Did you get any educational support during your high school years?
    a. Tell me about that
    b. When were your best times in high school?  What happened?
    c. What were the worst?
    d. Did you ask for help?
    e. Did you receive it?
    f. From where did you receive your educational support – who or what kept you motivated?
    g. From where did you receive emotional support – who or what supported you?

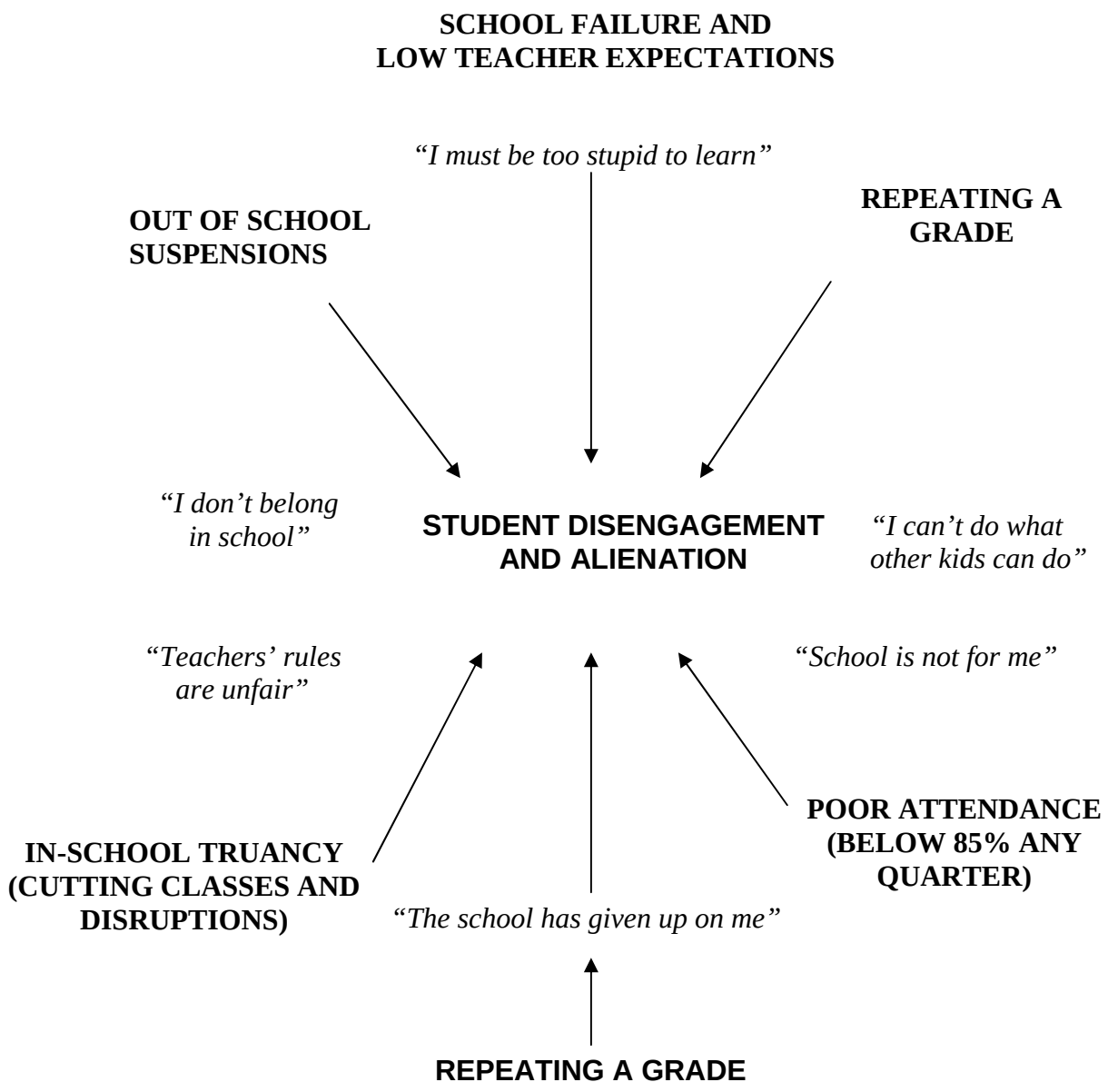
3. What was it like to leave a large educational setting to come to the alternative program? Probes: What were your feelings having to attend the alternative setting? How did you adjust?
4. What is your perception of the alternative program? Probes: What did you like and/or dislike about the program?
5. What would you change?
6. Describe your return to the comprehensive setting. What was it like?
7. How did you respond to questions about your whereabouts during the time you were in the alternative program?
8. How did others feel about or respond to your return?
9. When did you decide that you wanted to graduate from high school, or receive your GED?
10. What made you finish school? What made you leave school?
11. What are you doing now? Probes: What are your successes in terms of employment, education, etc. How do you feel about what you are doing now?
12. Now that you are an adult and no longer in high school, have your supporters changed? Probe: Who motivates you now?
13. When you reflect on your past, what impact did the alternative program have on your life?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to share about the program?

Figures

Figure 1

The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round

**The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round**



- Anne Wheelock, 1986 Permission to Reprint

Figure 2

The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round with AIP Student Responses

The At-Risk Merry-Go-Round with AIP Student Responses

**SCHOOL FAILURE AND LOW TEACHER EXPECTATIONS**

*"I just didn't want to do nothing because of the way I was treated."*
*"I hate when teachers show favoritism to certain students."*

**OUT OF SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS**

*"I was suspended from school a lot."*
*"I was suspended most of the time."*
*"I would fight to get kicked out."*
*"I missed classes that I needed due to suspensions."*

**REPEATING A GRADE**

*"I get distracted easily."*
*"I just shut down."*
*"I slept in class."*

**STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT AND ALIENATION**

*"My school experience sucked."*
*"My last school experience was terrible."*
*"I hated my last school."*

*"I don't need anybody's help."*
*"Teachers stayed on me for stupid stuff."*
*"My biggest challenge was teachers."*

**IN-SCHOOL TRUANCY (CUTTING CLASSES AND DISRUPTIONS)**

*"I skipped class a lot."*
*"I got in trouble for fighting."*

**POOR ATTENDANCE (BELOW 85% ANY QUARTER)**

*"Sometimes I just didn't want to go to school."*
*"I went to school but I didn't ever go to class."*
*"I went to school because I had to go."*

*"I don't have any successes."*

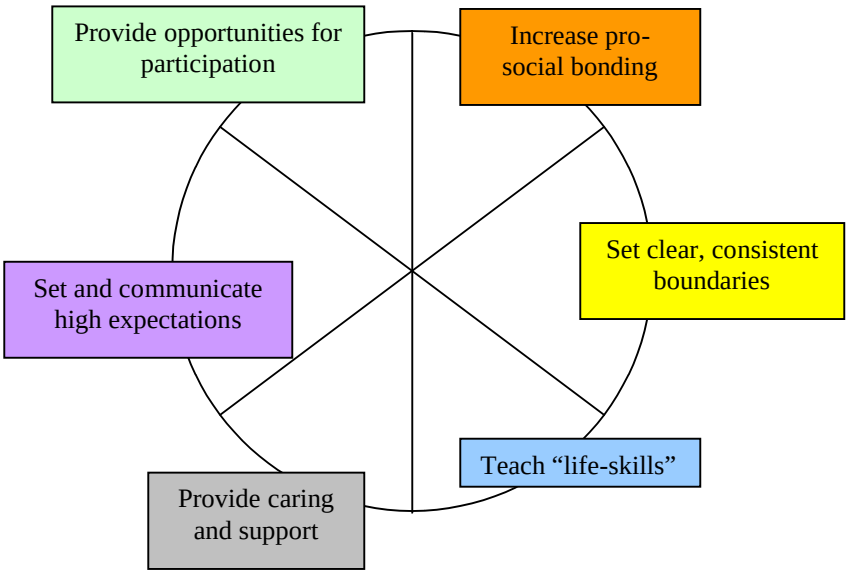
**REPEATING A GRADE**

*"I failed a few classes."*
*"I didn't know how to study."*
*"I was tired of school."*

Figure 3

The Resiliency Wheel

Figure 3. The Resiliency Wheel




*(Henderson & Milstein, 2002)* *Permission to reprint*

Figure 4

Resiliency wheel components with AIP participant responses

Figure 4. Resiliency wheel components with AIP participant responses

**Provide opportunities for participation**

"When I returned to high school, I missed the small setting."

"I liked volunteering at the food bank."

"Listening to guest speakers helped me realize that I had a future."

**Increase pro-social bonding**

"Lots of activities and group projects."

"Everyone was nice and helpful."

"I liked when the counselor brought in guest speakers."

"I didn't have to fit in to be cool."

"I learned to control myself and ignore what others say."

"I want to make contact with my family."

**Set clear, consistent boundaries**

"People wouldn't let me slack."

"There were few disruptions."

"It wasn't real strict because we already knew why we were there."

"I needed the discipline."

"The students weren't rowdy and there was no yelling."

"Things were real peaceful."

"You had to keep your shirt tucked in and your pants up."

**Teach "life-skills"**

The teachers talk about "real stuff."

"The program taught me to think before acting."

"I learned to be responsible for my actions."

"The program taught me that it's OK to be me."

"If you think you're going to fail, then you will."

"Being incarcerated made me decide to graduate."

**Provide caring and support**

"People hugged me!"

"Great people who wanted me to be successful."

"My counselor always seemed to know the right thing to say."

"Teachers supported me."

"The teachers help you out and encourage you."

"Teachers give more advice than a regular school could give you."

"If you raised your hand, a teacher was right there to help."

**Set and communicate high expectations**

"The program helped me get back on track."

"The program showed me character."

"I'm glad I got a second chance to prove myself."

"I had to step up my game and pull through."

"Quitting was not an option."

"It's hard to get into trouble wearing a uniform – it's bad for your image to look good

*Pro-social bonding/O*

Tables

Table 1. Program and Student Incidence in Alternative Education Programs (AEPs)

| Year | Number of schools | Total number of students | Total AEPs | Number of students, AEPs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1993-1994 | 83,621 | 43,476,268 | 2,271 | 347,810 |
| 1994-1995 | 84,705 | 44,108,775 | 2,604 | 441,000 |
| 1995-1996 | 85,102 | 44,840,481 | 2,782 | 403,564 |
| 1996-1997 | 86,058 | 45,592,213 | 2,874 | 410,330 |
| 1997-1998 | 87,631 | 46,127,194 | 3,380 | 461,292 |
| 1998-1999 | 88,548 | 46,534,687 | 3,605 | 511,882 |
| 1999-2000 | 89,599 | 46,857,321 | 3,588 | 468,573 |
| 2000-2001 | 90,640 | 47,222,778 | 4,045 | 472,228 |
| 2001-2002 | 91,380 | 46,687,871 | 4,492 | 513,567 |

SOURCE: NCES Report year 1993 – 2002.

Table 2: Trends in Regional Alternative Education Programs in Virginia

| School Year | Number of Programs and/or sites | Number of Students Served |
|---|---|---|
| 1993-1994 | 4 | 217 |
| 1994-1995 | 13 | 849 |
| 1995-1996 | 19 | 1,550 |
| 1996-1997 | 29 | 2,297 |
| 1997-1998 | 29 | 2,350 |
| 1998-1999 | 29 | 3,255 |
| 1999-2000 | 29 | 3,494 |
| 2000-2001 | 30 | 3,347 |
| 2001-2002 | 30 | 3,895 |
| 2002-2003 | 30 | 3,509 |
| 2003-2004 | 29 | 3,534 |
| 2004-2005 | 29 | 3,903 |
| 2005-2006 | 29 | 4,155 |

SOURCE: 2006 Annual Report on Regional Alternative Educational Programs in Virginia

Table 3: Rough Estimates of the Number of Vulnerable Youth in Alternative Education

| | 16 – 19 year olds at-risk | 20 – 24 year olds at risk |
|---|---|---|
| Total estimated number of at-risk youth | 2 to 5 million (100%) | 2 to 5 million (100%) |
| • Estimated number of at-risk youth in alternative programs through public, private, Catholic regular schools | 280,000 (6 – 14% of all at-risk youth) | 0 (0% of all at-risk youth) |
| • Estimated number of at-risk youth in education at Job Corps centers | 51,000 (3 – 9% of all at-risk youth) | 45,000 (2 – 9% of all at-risk youth |
| • Estimated number of at-risk youth in education at Juvenile Justice residential facilities | 80,000 (2 – 4% of all at-risk youth) | 0 (0% of all at-risk youth) |
| • Estimated number of at-risk youth in other alternative education (e.g., CBOs, treatment facilities, etc. | 50,000 (approx.) (1 – 3% of all at-risk youth) | 50,000 (approx.) (1 - 3% of all at-risk youth) |
| Total approx. number of at-risk youth in alternative education (% of all at-risk) | ~500,000 (10 – 25% of all at-risk youth) | ~ 1000,000 (2 – 5% of all at-risk youth) |

SOURCE: Aron and Zwieg, 2003

Table 4: Reasons for Referrals to Alternative Education Programs (McCall, 2003)

| Reason Referred | Description of Student |
|---|---|
| Dysfunctional school behavior | Students referred to the principal or disciplinary board for chronic or serious problems that have led to discipline actions |
| Need for academic remediation | Students whose test scores show a significant degree of academic deficiency that requires a more individualized educational program |
| Social skill dysfunction | Students experiencing difficulties in the community requiring court or social service involvement |
| Family disruption or conflict | Students who have experienced destabilization or traumatic family events, including stresses relating to single parenting, family substance abuse, incarceration, and child abuse or neglect |
| Truancy | Students who attend school 50% of the time or less. |

Table 5: Reasons for Enrollment in Regional Alternative Education Programs 2005-2006

| Reasons for Enrollment | Total | Percent [1] |
|---|---|---|
| Suspensions for violation of School Board Policy [2] | 4,062 | 97.8 |
| • Chronic Disruptive Behavior | 1,049 | 25.2 |
| • Drugs or Alcohol | 554 | 13.2 |
| • Intentional Injury | 409 | 9.8 |
| • Weapons | 242 | 5.8 |
| • Theft | 49 | 1.2 |
| • Combination of Above | 350 | 8.4 |
| • Other [3] | 1,490 | 33.9 |
| Released from youth correctional centers | 93 | 2.2 |
| Total Suspensions and Released from Youth Correctional Centers | 4,155 | 100 |

Note [1]: Percentage of 4,155 or the total students reported in response to these questions.

Note [2]: Included pending violations

Note [3]: Verbal threats, malicious mischief, bomb threats, destruction of property, chronic truancy, vandalism, and other serious offenses

SOURCE: 2006 Virginia Annual Report on Regional Alternative Educational Programs

Table 6. AIP Enrollment by Gender for the School Years 2005 - 2006 and 2006 - 2007

| Gender | 2005-2006 | 2006-2007 | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|
| Males | 65 | 56 | 121 |
| Females | 21 | 21 | 42 |
| Totals | 86 | 77 | 163 |

Table 7. AIP Enrollment By Ethnicity for the Years 2005 - 2006 and 2006 - 2007

| Ethnicity | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|
| Black | 72 | 63 | 135 |
| White | 12 | 14 | 26 |
| Other | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Totals | 86 | 77 | 163 |

Table 8. AIP Enrollment by Educational Status for the Years 2005-2006 and 2006-2007

| | Regular Education | | Special Education | | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grade Level | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2005 - 06 | 2006-07 | Totals |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 30 | 19 | 13 | 19 | 81 |
| Middle School | 27 | 27 | 16 | 12 | 82 |
| Totals | 57 | 46 | 29 | 31 | 163 |

Table 9. Breakdown of AIP students by grade level, gender, ethnicity, and disability category.

| | Exceptional Education | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | None | ED[a] | LD/SLD[b] | Other[c] | TOTAL |
| | (n=109) | (n=21) | (n=18) | (n=14) | (N=162) |
| Grade Level | | | | | |
| Middle (n=81) | 55.0 (67.9) | 10.0 (12.4) | 8.0 (9.8) | 8.0 (9.8) | 81.0 (100.0) |
| High (n=81) | 54.0 (66.6) | 11.0 (13.5) | 10.0 (12.3) | 5.0 (6.1) | 81.0 |
| Gender | | | | | |
| Male (n=120) | 77.0 (64.3) | 16.0 (13.3) | 14.0 (11.6) | 13.0 (10.8) | 120.0 (100.0) |
| Female (n=42) | 32.0 (76.2) | 5.0 (11.9) | 5.0 (11.9) | 0.0 (0.0) | 42.0 (100.0) |
| Race | | | | | |
| Caucasian (n=27) | 9.0 (33.4) | 7.0 (25.9) | 5.0 (18.5) | 6.0 (22.2) | 27.0 (100.0) |
| African-American (n=135) | 100.4 (74.0) | 14.4 (10.7) | 13.0 (9.8) | 6.0 (4.7) | 135.0 |

[a] ED = emotional disturbance

[b] LD/SLD = learning disability / specific learning disability

[c] Other = other health impaired, mental retardation, or undefined

Table 10. School Enrollment Status for AIP Participants During the 2005-2007 School Years

| Enrollment Status | N | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Still enrolled in school after completing the AIP | 106.0 | 65.4 |
| Middle School (n=52) | | 64.1 |
| High School (n=54) | | 66.6 |
| No longer enrolled[d] | 56.0 | 34.5 |
| Middle School (n=29) | | 35.8 |
| High School (n=27) | | 33.3 |
| Graduated from high school | 19.0 | 11.7 |
| Middle School N/A | N/A | N/A |
| High School (n=19) | | |
| Received a GED[e] | 6.0 | 3.8 |
| Middle School N/A | N/A | N/A |
| High School (n=6) | | |
| TOTAL | 162.0 | |

[d]Not enrolled = Moved, incarcerated, or no longer in school

[e]GED = General Educational Development certificate

Table 11. N's and Percentages of AIP participants who passed or Failed English Before, During and After Placement by Grade Level, Gender, Ethnicity, and Exceptional Education Status.

| | English | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Before AIP | | During AIP | | After AIP | | |
| Grade Level | Pass | Fail | Pass | Fail | Pass[a] | Fail | Not Enrolled[b] |
| Middle (n=81) | 47.0 (58.0) | 34.0 (42.0) | 75.0 (92.6) | 6.0 (7.4) | 36.0 (44.4) | 21.0 (25.9) | 24.0 (29.6) |
| High (n=81) | 52.0 (64.2) | 29.0 (35.8) | 77.0 (95.1) | __ | 40.0 (49.3) | 8.0 (9.9) | 33.0 (40.7) |
| Gender | | | | | | | |
| Male (n=120) | 74.0 (61.6) | 46.0 (38.3) | 112.0 (93.3) | 8.0 (6.0) | 58.0 (48.3) | 19.0 (15.8) | 43.0 (35.8) |
| Female (n=42) | 25.0 (59.5) | 17.0 (40.5) | 40.0 (95.2) | __ | 18.0 (43.0) | 10.0 (23.8) | 14.0 (33.3) |
| Race | | | | | | | |
| Caucasian (n=27) | 24.0 (88.9) | 3.0 (11.1) | 26.0 (96.3) | __ | 22.0 (81.0) | 2.0 (7.4) | 3.0 (11.1) |
| African-American (n=135) | 75.0 (55.6) | 60.0 (44.4) | 126.0 (93.3) | 9.0 (6.7) | 54.0 (40.0) | 27.0 (20.0) | 54.0 (40.0) |

Table 11. N's and Percentages of AIP participants who passed or Failed English Before, During and After Placement by Grade Level, Gender, Ethnicity, and Exceptional Education Status (*Continued*).

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sped | | | | | | | |
| ED[c] (n=21) | 9.0 (42.9) | 12.0 (57.1) | 20.0 (95.2) | __ | 7.0 (33.3) | __ | 12.0 (57.1) |
| LD/SLD[d] (n=18) | 14.0 (77.8) | 4.0 (22.2) | 18.0 (100.0) | __ | 9.0 (50.0) | __ | 8.0 (44.4) |
| Other[e] (n=14) | 9.0 (50.0) | 4.0 (50.0) | 14.0 (100.0) | __ | 9.0 (50.0) | 2.0 (12.5) | 3.0 (37.5) |
| None (n=109) | 67 (61.5) | 42 (38.5) | 100 (91.7) | 9 (8.3) | 51 (46.7) | 24 (22.0) | 34 (31.1) |
| TOTAL | | | | | | | |
| N=162 | 99.0 (61.2) | 63.0 (38.8) | 152.0 (93.8) | 10.0 (6.2) | 76.0 (46.9) | 29.0 (17.9) | 57.0 (35.2) |

Note: Dashes indicate the cell size was less than 5.0% of the total group for each exceptionality

[a] Pass rates include graduates and GED recipients

[b] Not enrolled = Moved, incarcerated, or no longer in school

[c] ED = emotional disturbance

[d] LD/SLD = learning disability / specific learning disability

[e] Other = other health impaired, mental retardation, or undefined

Table 12. N's and Percentages of AIP participants who passed or Failed Mathematics Before, During and After Placement by Grade Level, Gender, Ethnicity, and Exceptional Education Status.

| | Mathematics | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Before AIP | | During AIP | | After AIP | | |
| Grade Level | Pass | Fail | Pass | Fail | Pass[a] | Fail | Not enrolled[b] |
| Middle (n=81) | 45.0 (55.5) | 36.0 (44.5) | 75.0 (92.6) | 6.0 (7.4) | 38.0 (46.9) | 20.0 (24.7) | 23.0 (28.4) |
| High (n=81) | 57.0 (70.4) | 24.0 (29.6) | 78.0 (96.3) | 3.0 (3.7) | 43.0 (53.1) | 6.0 (7.4) | 32.0 (39.5) |
| Gender | | | | | | | |
| Male (n=120) | 76.0 (63.4) | 44.0 (36.6) | 113.0 (94.2) | 7.0 (5.8) | 61.0 (50.8) | 18.0 (15.1) | 41.0 (34.1) |
| Female (=42) | 26.0 (61.9) | 16.0 (38.0) | 40.0 (95.2) | 2.0 (4.7) | 20.0 (47.6) | 8.0 (19.1) | 14.0 (33.3) |
| Race | | | | | | | |
| White (n=27) | 21.0 (77.7) | 6.0 (22.3) | 26.0 (96.3) | 1.0 (3.7) | 21.0 (77.8) | 3.0 (11.1) | 3.0 (11.1) |
| Black (n=135) | 81.0 (60.0) | 54.0 (40.0) | 127.0 (94.1) | 8.0 (5.9) | 60.0 (44.4) | 23.0 (17.1) | 52.0 (38.5) |

Table 12. N's and Percentages of AIP participants who passed or Failed Mathematics Before, During and After Placement by Grade Level, Gender, Ethnicity, and Exceptional Education Status (*Continued*).

| Sped | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ED[c] (n=21) | 7.0 (33.3) | 14.0 (66.6) | 20.0 (95.2) | 1.0 (4.7) | 5.0 (23.8) | 4.0 (19.1) | 12.0 (57.1) |
| LD/SLD[d] (n=18) | 11.0 (61.1) | 7.0 (38.8) | 18.0 (100.0) | __ | 10.0 (55.6) | 1.0 (5.6) | 7.0 (38.8) |
| Other[e] (n=14) | 6.0 (42.8) | 8.0 (57.2) | 14.0 (100.0) | __ | 10.0 (71.6) | 2.0 (14.2) | 2.0 (14.2) |
| None (n=109) | 75.0 (68.8) | 34.0 (31.2) | 101.0 (92.6) | 8.0 (7.4) | 57.0 (52.3) | 18.0 (16.5) | 34.0 (31.2) |
| TOTAL N=162 | 102.0 (62.9) | 60.0 (37.1) | 153.0 (94.4) | 9.0 (5.6) | 81.0 (50.0) | 26.0 (16.1) | 55.0 (33.9) |

[a] Pass rates include graduates and GED recipients

[b] Not enrolled = moved, incarcerated, or no longer enrolled in school

[c] ED = emotional disturbance

[d] LD/SLD = learning disability / specific learning disability

[e] Other = other health impaired, mental retardation, or undefined

Table 13. Types and totals of discipline infractions before, during, and after AIP Enrollment

| Discipline Infraction | Total number of infractions | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Before AIP[a] | During AIP[b] | After AIP[c] |
| Assault and Battery | 10 | 1 | 0 |
| | (2.0) | (.56) | (0.0) |
| Attendance | 72 | 3 | 65 |
| | (14.4) | (1.7) | (25.4) |
| Disruptive Behavior | 326 | 116 | 156 |
| | (65.4) | (65.2) | (61.0) |
| Drugs | 6 | 4 | 2 |
| | (1.2) | (2.3) | (.80) |
| Fighting | 25 | 16 | 6 |
| | (5.0) | (8.9) | (2.3) |
| Gang Activity | 2 | 6 | 0 |
| | (.42) | (3.4) | (0.0) |
| Sexual Offenses | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| | (1.2) | (0.0) | (0.0) |
| Technology Violations | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| | (.90) | (1.1) | (.80) |
| Threats | 15 | 2 | 3 |
| | (3.0) | (1.1) | (1.2) |
| Tobacco | 1 | 6 | 8 |
| | (.21) | (3.4) | (3.1) |

Table 13. Types and totals of discipline infractions before, during, and after AIP Enrollment (*Continued*).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vandalism | 6 | 3 | 0 |
| | (1.2) | (1.6) | (0.0) |
| Weapons | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| | (.63) | (0.0) | (0.0) |
| Other | 22 | 19 | 14 |
| | (4.4) | (10.7) | (5.4) |
| Totals | 498 | 178 | 256 |

[a.] Before AIP means academic school year prior to AIP attendance.

[b.] During AIP means the AIP enrollment period based on student placement.

[c.] After AIP means academic school year following the AIP enrollment period.

[d.] Other violations include arson, property theft, trespassing, or other code violations not otherwise included.

Table 14. McNemar Test Comparing the Consistency of Classification for Students Who Passed or Failed English before Placement in AIP to During Placement in AIP

| | English During | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| English Before | Fail | Pass | Total | McNemar's $\chi^2$ |
| Fail | 8 | 55 | 63 | 47.439 |
| | (5.0%) | (33.9%) | (38.9%) | |
| Pass | 2 | 97 | 99 | |
| | (1.2%) | (59.9%) | (61.1%) | |
| Total | 10 | 152 | 162 | |
| | (6.2%) | (93.8%) | (100.0%) | |

$p < .001$

Table 15. McNemar Test Comparing the Consistency of Classification for Students Who Passed or Failed Mathematics Before Placement in AIP to During Placement in AIP

| | Mathematics During | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mathematics Before | Fail | Pass | Total | McNemar's $\chi^2$ |
| Fail | 6 | 54 | 60 | 43.860 |
| | (3.7%) | (33.3%) | (37.0%) | |
| Pass | 3 | 99 | 102 | |
| | (1.8%) | (61.2%) | (63.0%) | |
| Total | 9 | 153 | 162 | |
| | (5.5%) | (94.5%) | (100.0%) | |

$p < .001$

Table 16. Breakdown of AIP absentee rates by grade level, gender, ethnicity, and disability category during 2005-2007 school years.

| | Days Absent Before | Days Absent During | Days Absent After |
|---|---|---|---|
| Grade Level | | | |
| Middle (n=81) | 23.40 | 2.61 | 30.42 |
| High (n=81) | 21.78 | 2.57 | 32.40 |
| Gender | | | |
| Male (n=120) | 23.76 | 2.34 | 30.24 |
| Female (n=42) | 19.26 | 3.29 | 34.56 |
| Ethnicity | | | |
| Caucasian (n=27) | 17.28 | 2.79 | 25.56 |
| African-American (n=135) | 23.76 | 2.56 | 32.76 |

Table 16. Breakdown of AIP absentee rates by grade level, gender, ethnicity, and disability category during 2005-2007 school years (*Continued*).

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Exceptional Education | | | |
| ED[a] (n= 21) | 20.16 | 3.96 | 34.02 |
| LD/SLD[b] (n= 18) | 27.36 | 1.90 | 15.84 |
| MR (n= 8) | 23.58 | 2.84 | 19.08 |
| OHI[c] (n= 6) | 25.02 | 1.00 | 32.04 |
| None (n= 109) | 22.32 | 2.48 | 33.48 |

[a] ED = emotional disturbance

[b] LD/SLD = learning disability / specific learning disability

[c] OHI = other health impaired, mental retardation, or undefined

Beverly Betts Allen-Hardy was born in South Boston, Virginia. She received her Bachelor of Music Education degree from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, and her Master of Arts degree in Human Resources from Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. In addition to working in the private sector as a Human Resource Director, Beverly has worked for Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, and also in the Virginia public school divisions of Franklin County, Halifax County, and Henrico County, where she has worked for more than twenty years with at-risk students, serving as a music teacher, vocational counselor, and school administrator. She has also served as an adjunct faculty member at Southside Virginia Community College in Keysville, Virginia. In addition to being an educator, Beverly is a professional musician and performs for many corporate, non-profit, and private events. She currently serves as the principal of Mount Vernon Middle School in Richmond, Virginia.