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# Leaders Reflect on Alternative Learning Environments: Resources Needed to Ensure Student Success

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LEADERS REFLECT ON ALTERNATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS:
RESOURCES NEEDED TO ENSURE STUDENT SUCCESS

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Dedication

**(Optional)**

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the decision-making process of school leaders in ALE settings when determining the resources they provide and whether the resources provided ensure that these students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma. In the study, there were 10 participants who represented a variety of schools in Southwest Arkansas. Seven of the schools operate their alternative learning environment classes on-site. Three of the schools partnered with an educational cooperative to operate their ALE programs. The data were collected by conducting interviews which allowed the researcher to identify common themes.

The major findings identified from the study were that all ALE programs have a referral process and a goal of transitioning ALE students back to their home campus. The findings also indicated that ALE staff spend time with students preparing student action plans that set short-term and long-term goals for the students to work towards as they prepare to transition back to their home campus and work towards graduating on time.

The strength of alternative education is an environment that is student-centered, safe, and accepting of everyone, a place where students feel that they belong, and can graduate high school or earn a GED. Alternative programs present alternative pathways in which to achieve educational success in the classroom and earn a high school diploma. Alternative education programs provide multiple academic and mental health resources that the traditional campus may not be able to offer.

Keyword: Alternative Learning Environment (ALE)

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**Chapter I: Introduction**

The ultimate goal of public education is to provide all students with the academic skills, soft skills, behavioral skills, and knowledge to be successful in the classroom and to achieve their professional or career goals in an ever-changing world (Zinser, 2003). This goal is realistic and attainable. One word that dominates educational conversations is the single word ALL. When addressing ALL students, that includes the at-risk youth population as well. But, school administrators and teachers have become stymied in their efforts to adequately adjust and react to the increasing number of students that fail to graduate from high school.

In an effort to address the needs of at-risk students, alternative learning environments (ALE) may afford these students a setting that eliminates some of the barriers to learning for students whose academic and social progress are negatively affected by their personal characteristics or situation (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). This study sought to identify ideas, strategies, and interventions that engage students in learning and working towards earning their high school diploma or a high school equivalency diploma, through school leaders' experiences and practical knowledge in these alternative environments.

In Arkansas public schools, students referred to an ALE setting must meet at least two criteria on the referral form before a placement meeting is scheduled. Once the placement meeting is scheduled and the committee decides that the student meets the criteria, then the student is placed in an ALE setting. School leaders in ALE settings were interviewed to determine which curricula and interventions (academic, behavioral, social, and emotional) they utilize once a student is placed with them. These educators also

discussed the characteristics and certifications they look for when employing a teacher to work with at-risk students.

**Background of the Problem**

The question of how to provide the best education for all students has compelled educators to look at various options and venues to ensure they are getting the best education possible (Gable et al., 2006). Whether termed a "problem," a "crisis," or an "epidemic," the large number of students who do not graduate from high school generates clear and widespread concern (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The traditional classroom may not meet all students' academic and emotional needs (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Over the last two decades, educational environments have evolved in how classrooms are organized and how instruction is delivered for those students identified as at-risk. Generally, at-risk students are defined as students who are likely to fail to complete their high school education (Kaufman et al., 1992).

Alternative education is defined as schools or programs that are set up by states, schools, districts, or other entities to serve young people who, for a variety of reasons are not succeeding in a traditional public school environment (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Alternative education for at-risk youth has expanded to include alternative public schools, charter schools for at-risk youth, programs within juvenile detention centers, community-based schools, and alternative schools with evening and weekend classes (Foley & Pang, 2006). Therefore, when examining how ALEs operate, it should be understood that one size does not fit all situations. But, while there are many different kinds of alternative education programs, most are characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller student-teacher ratios, career-oriented themes, and modified curricula (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006).

The creative and individualized environments of these educational programs serve to reengage out-of-school youth providing them with an opportunity to achieve in an alternative setting using innovative learning methods (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006).

Alternative education in the state of Arkansas ensures that students who require a non-traditional educational environment have opportunities to learn at high levels (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.-b). It is the mission of the Arkansas Department of Education Alternative Education team to provide leadership, support, and service to schools, districts, and communities so that every student who graduates is prepared for college, career, and community engagement (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.-b).

**Problem Statement**

Leaders of schools with an at-risk student population require specific preparation with appropriate training and support, so they can lead staff toward teaching effectively and for at-risk students to learn successfully. Because at-risk students are likely to drop out of high school, more research is needed to determine the resources, provided by school leaders, that will ensure ALE students are successful in the classroom and graduate high school. Research has identified gaps in identifying the characteristics of effective ALEs partly because the measurement of success in these programs is often inconsistent (Curley, 2016).

The ALE student's ability to achieve academically in the classroom, earn credits needed to graduate, transition to post-secondary education, or find employment is evidence that alternative education programs are a vital part of the overall education

program needed to provide an opportunity for success of ALL students (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006).

However, they can be effective or ineffective in their mission, depending on how the ALE is designed and operated. A program that does not adequately assess, address, and support the needs of students has the potential to cause negative academic and behavioral consequences (Curley, 2016). Given the number of students who are dropping out of school or being expelled from traditional school settings, the need for ALEs is clear (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). They provide a viable educational option for at-risk students when the programs are linked to educational standards, implement research-based best practices, and assess the students' social, emotional, academic, and behavioral needs (Powell, 2003).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the decision-making process of school leaders in ALE settings when determining the resources they provide and whether they ensure that these students succeed in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma.

This study explored and identified the components of effective alternative education programs that assist at-risk students in and out of school. Flower et al. (2011) defined effective alternative schools as those that implement best practices that are appropriate for meeting the individual needs of students, feasible for use in a school setting, and proficiently able to produce positive student results. ALEs are recognized as a tier 3 intervention, and as such, will increase the chances of graduating high school for

these at-risk students. Once a student earns his/her high school diploma, other doors of opportunity open, such as attending post-high school classes or joining the workforce.

The study also investigated what other options a school district provides to students who cannot always attend school in a traditional classroom setting. Non-traditional settings may include weekend classes, evening classes, and GED preparatory classes due to students' need to work to help support their family, or parenting responsibilities.

**Research Question**

This study attempted to address the following question. How do school leaders make decisions about the resources provided to an ALE to ensure those students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma?

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is that it will provide data from various schools that operate or outsource their ALE programs and contribute to the understanding of all ALE administrators as to how they can best lead these schools, such as student referrals and the resources provided (staff, social-emotional learning (SEL) support, Response to Intervention (RTI), general education development (GED) prep classes) that will ensure students in an alternative learning program are successful.

The findings from this study may also provide educators with academic, behavioral, and social skill interventions that positively impact an at-risk student's future. ALE is considered a tier 3 support, because of the small class sizes, the additional mental health support, emotional support, and the flexibility in developing a student's schedule.

The data collected in this study may provide school leaders in a traditional school and an alternative school setting with ideas, strategies, interventions, and wrap-around services to reach at-risk students. The utilization of the information provided in this study will aid in student success (academically, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally) in an alternative learning setting, traditional school setting, and the student's life outside of school. Evaluating and reporting the identified components of ALE programs through this study will be valuable to superintendents, principals, alternative education directors, and teachers of alternative learning programs in determining what resources are effective and have the greatest possibility to reduce the likelihood that students will become disengaged and fail to finish their high school education.

**Theoretical Framework**

Before a student's cognitive needs are met, they must first fulfill their basic physiological needs (McLeod, 2018). Educators cannot satisfy every physiological need of every student. It would be impossible for a principal, teacher, or staff member to equip every student with sufficient sleep, shelter, clothing, and nourishment. Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model, if these basic needs fail to be provided, students will be unable to prioritize education (Kurt, 2020). School leaders can strive to offer students resources and referrals to school programs to satisfy as many needs as possible (Kurt, 2020). For example, there are free and reduced lunch programs provided by school districts that are a great way to solve some of the student hunger issues in schools.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) served as the theoretical framework for this study. Every step an educator makes toward contributing to those fundamental needs will enhance their students' capacity for learning and achievement in

the classroom. When school leaders make a true effort to know each student and comprehend the student's level on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, they can best help students progress upwards through the hierarchy (Kurt, 2020). School leaders need to explore what the school can offer and build partnerships with community outreach programs to provide resources for students with lower-level needs to help the students thrive in their learning environment. A greater comprehension of each student's basic needs is likely to lead to the teacher's ability to help the student overcome their educational obstacles, allowing each student to reach their educational potential (Kurt, 2020).

**Research Design**

The design for this study was qualitative using a phenomenological method to answer the research question. Phenomenological research is a qualitative method in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 249). The data collection process in a phenomenological study includes interviews, observations, and artifact collection. Due to changing Covid 19 parameters, observations, and face-to-face interviews were not always possible. If the participants preferred, the interviews were scheduled and conducted via Google Meets, Webex, or Zoom. The researcher asked open-ended questions with the intent that participants would provide details on how school leaders make decisions about the resources provided to an ALE that ensures an alternative education student is successful in class, graduates high school, or earns a high school equivalency diploma.

The researcher requested that school leaders provide a copy of the school district's referral packet, which includes a checklist of documentation that provides insight into the student's academic, behavioral, and mental health needs that paints a picture of the student's strengths and areas of growth. Also requested was a copy of the school district's yearly cycle 7 report submitted to the Arkansas Department of Education. The cycle 7 report lists the total number of students in a school district's alternative learning environment program, the number of students by grade level (K-12), the number of students that graduated, and the number of students that earned a high school equivalency diploma.

**Definition of Terms**

- **Academic intervention** is the opportunity for students who do not have a basic understanding of skills and/or learning targets during regular classroom time to receive additional help outside of their regular classroom (Arif & Miraz, 2017).

- **Alternative education** is defined as schools or programs that are set up by states, schools, districts, or other entities to serve young people who, for a variety of reasons are not succeeding in a traditional school environment (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006).

- **Alternative Learning Environment (ALE)** means an alternative class or school environment that seeks to eliminate learning barriers for students whose academic and social progress are negatively impacted by their personal characteristics or situations (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016).

- **At-risk** is a term used to reflect on students' educational experiences, drawing on disciplinary suspensions or expulsion, truancy/dropout rates, and time spent in the juvenile justice system (Sperling, 2019).

- **General Education Development (GED)** is a series of four subject tests a person can take to demonstrate their high school academic knowledge. Earning a GED diploma from your state is the equivalent of a U.S. high school diploma, so some students choose to take this certification exam if they were not able to complete a traditional high school program (Tobin & Sprague, 1999).

- **Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)** ensures that students with exceptional needs are provided special education services to maximize their opportunity for success in school (Hoge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014).

- **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)** serves to meet the specific needs of the student as it relates to their disability (Hoge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014).

- **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)** To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removals of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEAS], 2019).

- **Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)** is a data-driven framework for organizing (a) positive, preventive, and evidence-based practices

that result in desired youth outcomes and (b) systems features (e.g., teaming

structures, professional development supports, staff recognition) that promote

sustained implementation with fidelity (Simonsen & Sugai, 2003).

- **Resilience** is defined as bouncing back from difficult situations and adapting well

  to adversity, trauma, tragedy and threats, stressors, and health problems. (Arif &

  Miraz, 2017).

- **Response to Intervention (RTI)** is a multi-tier approach to the early

  identification and support of students with learning and behavioral needs (Ervin,

  (n.d.).

- **School-Wide Positive Behavioral Support (SWPBS)** is a multi-tiered

  framework to make schools more effective places. SWPBS employs a continuum

  of support with three tiers of prevention, universal interventions, targeted-group

  interventions, and individualized interventions (Simonsen, Britton, & Young,

  2010).

## Assumptions

The overriding assumption for this study was that all participants answered the

interview questions truthfully. A secondary assumption of the truthfulness of participants

was that the research participants understood the questions. Finally, it was assumed that

misinterpretations of questions and/or pre-knowledge bias by the research participants

cannot be controlled.

## Limitations

As with any study, there were limitations in this study. Limitations of a study are

potential weaknesses within the study that would affect the reliability or validity of the

research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sample consisted of 10 school leaders, in a district of 1,000 students or more, who are responsible for making decisions about the resources a school district provides to their individual alternative learning programs to ensure alternative education students are successful. This is a limitation due to the small sample size of school leaders who participated in the study and that schools with less than 1,000 students were excluded from the study.

Although ALEs have been present in American education since the 1950s, their impact and function have changed significantly in recent years to address student success and student dropout (Gable et al., 2006; Raywid, 1994). The lack of empirical data on alternative learning programs as recently as 10 years old can be considered a limitation of the study.

Data collected from this study came from 10 schools within the Dawson Educational Cooperative and the Southwest Educational Cooperative in the state of Arkansas. Because the study only included 10 schools in a specific geographical region of Arkansas, the generalizability of the findings from this study were limited.

**Delimitations**

The sample for this study consists of 10 school leaders who make decisions on the resources provided to an alternative learning environment that ensures that alternative education students are successful. The small sample size is a delimiting factor. The availability of a larger sample size in the context of alternative education is not possible. A broader population of participants with experience in making decisions about the resources provided to an alternative learning environment would allow for a more

purposeful sampling. Given the limited sample size, the results in this study may not exactly conform to other districts or state alternative learning programs.

The study will involve 10 school districts in Southwest Arkansas. Each district has an alternative education program or participates in a cohort that has access to an alternative education program. A wide margin of discrepancies exists within Southwest Arkansas in demographic makeup. Given the large differences in demographics, the variance in student social, emotional, behavioral, and academic attainment varies across the district and the state will generalize results as a delimiting factor.

The study faces delimitations due to the geographic location of the participating districts. The study was confined to Southwest Arkansas. Given the geographical isolation of the sampling population, the results in this study may not exactly conform to generalizations about other districts' alternative learning programs.

**Organization of the Study**

The chapter first addressed the theoretical framework and how it relates to the study. The chapter presented the history of ALE programs, the process for placing a student in an ALE and transitioning ALE students back to the student's home campus. The final items addressed in the chapter are the types of curriculum and interventions utilized in an alternative setting, staffing needs, and social and emotional learning that helps the student attain academic and behavioral success.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the decision-making process of school leaders in ALE settings when determining the resources they provide and whether they ensure that these students succeed in the classroom, graduate on time,

or earn a high school equivalency diploma. One word that dominates educational conversations is the single word ALL. When addressing ALL students, that includes the at-risk youth population as well. Educators must ensure that at-risk students in an ALE setting are afforded the same educational rights as those in the traditional classroom setting. When examining how ALEs operate, it should be understood that one size does not fit all situations. There are many different ALE models. Most are characterized by their flexible schedules, smaller student-teacher ratios, career-oriented themes, and modified curricula (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). The findings from this study will provide educators with academic, behavioral, and social skill interventions that positively impact an at-risk student's future. ALE is a tier 3 support, because of the small class sizes, the additional mental health support, emotional support, and the flexibility in developing a student's schedule.

**Chapter II: Literature Review**

The literature review begins with an overview of the theoretical framework that provides the foundation for this study. Next, the literature review presents the history of ALE programs, placement in ALE, curriculum and interventions implemented in an ALE, credit recovery, staffing, social and emotional learning, and positive behavior supports. Since this study will focus on alternative education programs in Arkansas, research will be included to frame the current programming rules and regulations. To fully understand how alternative education may help some students, it will be necessary to research the different types of alternative education schools, referral processes, the goal of an ALE program, staff, curriculum, and student social and emotional learning needs.

For this literature review, the researcher utilized ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar to access peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, statistical reports, and national reports for this study. The Arkansas Department of Education Division of Elementary and Secondary Education website was accessed to review the state definition of ALE, ALE referral document, and placement criteria.

Keywords used in the literature search included: Alternative Education Programs, Alternative Learning Environments, Alternative Learning Programs, At-Risk Students, Effective Alternative Learning Programs, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports, Social and Emotional Learning, School-Wide Positive Supports,

**Theoretical Framework**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as a hierarchical level within a pyramid (McLeod, 2018). From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are: physiological

(food and clothing), safety (job security), love and belonging needs (friendship), esteem, and self-actualization (McLeod, 2018). A person's actions focus on satisfying the lower-priority needs so they can move on to reach higher-priority needs (Kurt, 2020).

This five-stage model is divided into deficiency needs and growth needs. The first four levels are often referred to as deficiency needs and the top level is known as growth or being needs (Kurt, 2020). Deficiency needs arise due to deprivation and motivate people to focus on meeting their highest-priority needs when they are unmet (Kurt, 2020). The motivation to fulfill such needs will become stronger the longer the duration they are denied (McLeod, 2018). For example, the longer a person goes without food, the hungrier they will become. When a deficit need has been satisfied it will go away. Then a person's activities become directed toward meeting the next set of needs that have yet to be satisfied (McLeod, 2018). However, growth needs continue to be felt and may even become stronger once they have been engaged (McLeod, 2018).

Growth needs do not stem from a lack of something, but rather from a desire to grow as a person (McLeod, 2018). Once these growth needs have been reasonably satisfied, one may be able to reach the highest level called self-actualization (Kurt, 2020). Every person has the ability and desires to move up the hierarchy toward a level of self-actualization (McLeod, 2018). Progress is often disrupted by a failure to meet lower-level needs (McLeod, 2018). Life experiences, including divorce and the loss of a job, may cause an individual to fluctuate between levels of the hierarchy (McLeod, 2018).

Before a student's cognitive needs can be met, they must first fulfill their basic physiological needs (McLeod, 2018). Educators cannot satisfy every physiological need of every student. It would be impossible for a principal, teacher, or staff member to equip

every student with sufficient sleep, shelter, clothing, and nourishment. Based on Maslow's model, if these basic needs are not met, students will be unable to prioritize education (Kurt, 2020). School leaders can strive to offer students resources and referrals to school, state, and federal programs to satisfy as many needs as possible (Kurt, 2020).

For example, fortunately, there are free and reduced lunch programs provided by school districts that are a great way to solve some of the student hunger issues in schools. Some schools offer weekend backpack programs that students with food, so students have enough to eat at home until they return to school on the following Monday.

Educators should consider many aspects to help students feel a sense of safety. A sense of safety can come from routines that are established in class and predictability (McLeod, 2018). Educators should establish routines and procedures in their classrooms and set clear rules for students; teachers should maintain a daily schedule, allowing students to anticipate and expect order in the classroom (Kurt, 2020). Students will feel a sense of control in their classroom because they can anticipate what will happen each period of the school day. Additionally, students must have a sense of psychological and emotional safety in their school environment (Kurt, 2020). Teachers should foster an environment that allows students to share their thoughts, ask and answer questions, and have healthy discussions (Kurt, 2020). They should not feel fearful of judgment from other students. Students crave a positive and trust-based relationship with their teachers (Kurt, 2020). Students may seek gratification from teachers or school staff. Educators need to try to show students that their hard work and dedication are genuinely appreciated. This prioritization will support the development of each student's self-esteem and self-worth (Kurt, 2020).

It has been almost 80 years since Maslow proposed his hierarchical approach to human motivation. Maslow's pyramid has influenced psychology and it continues to be cited in research (Kenrick et al., 2010). However, Maslow's theory has recently been criticized for its lack of empirical support and for implying lower needs must be met before self-actualization is possible. Kenrick et al. (2010) took another look at the idea of motivational hierarchy through theoretical developments in evolutionary biology, anthropology, and psychology. Their renovated version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs was published in an issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Sciences*. They argue that the basic design of Maslow's model should be reinforced. Maslow's original pyramid contains five levels, the revised model includes seven levels. After self-esteem, the next three levels are mate acquisition, mate retention, and parenting. Self-actualization has been deleted from the revised pyramid. It has been suggested that an individual will shift throughout the pyramid based on cognitive and developmental priority, not necessarily just meeting their basic needs.

Despite this recent criticism, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is still considered theoretically valid and is a good framework for this study because school leaders are making decisions on the resources needed to ensure students are successful in the classroom. Maslow suggests that every step an educator makes toward contributing to those fundamental needs will enhance their students' capacity for learning and achievement in the classroom. When school leaders make a genuine effort to know each student and comprehend the student's level of needs, they can best help students progress through the hierarchy (Kurt, 2020). When educators have an understanding of each student's basic needs, it is likely to help each student reach their educational potential

(Kurt, 2020). School leaders need to explore outside of what the school can offer and build partnerships with community outreach programs to provide resources for students with lower-level needs to help the students thrive in their learning environment.

**History of Alternative Education**

The concern for equity in education can be traced back to the civil rights movement, which received national attention in the 1950s. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs Board of Education* recognized the importance of equitable education for all students (Young, 1990). The court decision broke down the existing structure of public education. The mainstream public education system of the late 1950s and 1960s was criticized for being racist and exclusively designed for the success of the few (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Raywid (1981) supported these ideas stating, "schools were cold, dehumanizing, irrelevant institutions, largely indifferent to the humanity and the 'personhood' of those within them" (p. 551).

The number of alternative schools grew in the late 1960s and early 1970s, largely influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. During this era, educational practices and priorities made a shift to a more progressive approach (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The number of alternative schools grew from approximately 460 in 1973 to over 5,000 in 1975. The 1972 President's Commission on School Finance requested more alternative educational avenues for at-risk students. The 1970s witnessed the development of a variety of alternative education settings. Working from the individualized concept of the 1960s, schools worked to develop an alternative education model that could be implemented in a public school setting (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

President Reagan's report entitled *A Nation at Risk* shook the nation and challenged America's educational systems by asserting that public schools were failing (Park, 2004). The nation began to focus on more rigorous and measurable educational standards that would prepare students to become productive and competitive citizens in a global economy (Park, 2004). The study outlined the fear that the educational system was on a downward trajectory but failed to specify when this decline began. Alternative learning environments of the 1980s and early 1990s circled back to the concern over students who were unengaged in the learning process and dropping out of school. Alternative programs focused primarily on the core curriculum (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies) as well as vocational education.

Alternative learning environments offer students who are failing academically, may have a learning disability, need social learning support, or have behavioral problems an opportunity to achieve in a different setting. Alternative schools generally maintain small class sizes, a low student-teacher ratio of 15:1, maintain a safe and supportive environment, while allowing for modified scheduling, and emphasize student decision-making (Lange & Sletten, 2002). There are 43 states with a formal definition for alternative education, plus the District of Columbia (Porowski et al., 2014).

At the federal level, "the definition of alternative education is a public elementary/secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school; provides nontraditional education; serves as an adjunct to a regular school; or falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education" (Porowski et al., 2014, p. 1).

The argument over the need for alternative education programs dates back to the 1960s (Raywid, 1994). Today, alternative education occupies a position of increased acceptability and respectability. There is recognition of the legitimate role of alternative schools that is attributable to federal and state legislation (Gable et al., 2006). The No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act call into question the longstanding practice of suspension and expulsion of students who engage in disruptive classroom behavior. Interventions, if implemented with fidelity will help staff and students understand how to work through behavioral issues without the first discipline step being suspension to correct the behavior. At a state level, alternative education programs are no longer dumping grounds for students who exhibit habitual misbehavior that prohibits students from reaching academic and social success (Gable et al., 2006).

Alternative education programs are designed to address the individual needs of the student enrolled in the program. A program that does not adequately address the needs of all alternative students has the potential to cause more academic and behavioral consequences (Curley, 2016). Instead of out-of-school suspension or expulsion, students are referred and placed in an alternative learning environment to provide students with a second chance to earn a diploma (Kamrath, 2019). The hope is that students placed in an alternative learning environment will succeed in a smaller setting without facing many of the challenges they experienced in the traditional school setting. Placing a student in an alternative program is the last attempt at providing a successful educational experience to a student who is not engaging in the regular classroom setting (Kamrath, 2019).

School districts intervene and advocate for at-risk students at all levels of academic and behavioral concerns; however, ALEs can prioritize the individual needs of a student because of smaller class sizes and staff specifically trained to deal with at-risk students. Szlyk (2018) suggested that to appropriately engage at-risk students with behaviors, the classroom must foster student independence through an academic culture of social responsibility to meet their emotional needs. The goal of a school district is to help students reach their highest potential whether it is in a traditional setting or an ALE. setting.

**Placement in an Alternative Learning Environment**

An alternative learning environment means an alternative class or school environment that seeks to eliminate learning barriers for students whose academic and social progress is negatively affected by their personal characteristics or situations (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016)**.** The traditional education model has been productive in educating most students in the United States. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) opined that traditional education is designed for volume. Education is not a one-size fits all approach to educating all students. In contrast, alternative learning environments are designed to operate outside the traditional school environment and provide various avenues to academic success. Alternative learning environments were meant to provide students with a smaller community of belonging, focusing on the educational needs and interests of the students. (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Over time, there has been a significant increase in the number of alternative schools provided for students (Gable et al., 2006). "This increase includes charter schools, court schools, detention schools, magnet schools, day treatment, educational

centers, school-without-walls, and second chance schools" (Gable et al., 2006, p. 7) At-risk students need another opportunity to be successful.

An alternative education setting is a tier 3 intervention that is in place to provide students with intensive support and guidance to improve academically, both socially and emotionally, and to graduate on time. Tier 3 (tertiary prevention) is an additional layer of intensive support available to address the needs of a smaller percentage of the student population. Students who are experiencing academic, behavioral, or mental health problems are at risk of developing more severe problems if tier 3 supports are not implemented with fidelity (RTI Network, n.d.).

In Tier 3, the goal is the remediation of existing problems and the prevention of more severe problems developing (Weber, 2018). A school district should only have one to three percent of students identified at a tier 3 level. At this level, students receive individualized intensive interventions that target the student's academic and behavioral skill deficits (Hawken et al., 2008).

At a legislative level, alternative schools are no longer dumping grounds for those students who exhibit norm-violating behavior that prohibits them (or others) from reaching academic and social success (Gable et al., 2006). Many students who, for one reason or another, are not successful in regular public schools are being referred and sent to alternative placements (Powell, 2003). In general, students are referred to alternative schools and programs if they are at risk of education failure. Educational failure is described as a student with poor grades, truancy issues, disruptive school behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with students dropping out of school (Foley & Pang, 2006).

In the referral process district administrators, building administrators, or school counselors can complete and submit a referral form to the director of alternative learning programs. Students who are referred to an ALE program would likely be referred for specific academic and or behavioral problems (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Once the referral is accepted the director will contact the referring administrator, school counselor, classroom teacher, parent, student, and other support staff that is deemed appropriate for an ALE committee placement meeting. During the placement meeting, the committee will discuss the following reasons for placement consideration: family problems, recurring absenteeism, mental health problems, frequent relocation of residency, abuse (physical, mental, or sexual), inadequate emotional support, disruptive behavior, the student is a signal parent, student pregnancy, ongoing persistent lack of attaining proficiency levels in literacy and math, homelessness, and risk of dropping out of school.

Student referral, enrollment, and transition in the nation's public alternative schools and programs are highly fluid (Kleiner et al., 2002). Students are removed from and returned to regular schools on an individual basis, for a variety of reasons. Alternative schools and programs aim to transition at-risk students to regular schools as soon as students meet their academic and behavioral transition goals (Kleiner et al., 2002). Some students do return to regular schools less "at risk," but many are sent back to or simply remain in (by choice or decree) an alternative school or program for the duration of their education (Kleiner et al., 2002). Alternative placement will vary from a short period or longer with a goal to transition the student back to their home campus to graduate with the student's senior cohort (Tobin & Sprague, 1999).

When students return to their home campus a transition plan is a key instrument in obtaining successful outcomes. Daws (2018) noted in her work that all participants in her qualitative study described a need for a transition process to support at-risk students when returning to the traditional classroom from the alternative learning environment. Several factors must be addressed in the development of a transition plan. All stakeholders need to be involved in this process (students, parents, teachers, staff, and administration) when developing short and long-term goals for the student and making sure there is a student support team in place in case the student starts to feel overwhelmed during the transition.

**Curriculum and Interventions**

It is the responsibility of the school district to ensure that students who require a non-traditional educational environment implement interventions to ensure ALE students have the same opportunities to learn at high levels (Powell, 2003). Alternative education students have a diverse set of academic, behavior, and social-emotional needs which require highly qualified and effective educators (Foley & Pang, 2006). General education and special education teachers need to develop knowledge of the general education curriculum and the general education development (GED) curriculum when teaching alternative education students (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

Educators need professional development in behavior management strategies such as positive behavior support and social-emotional learning. In addition, educators will need an awareness of the school and community resources available to support the diverse needs of youth such as health care services, substance abuse treatment programs, service-learning opportunities, and social service agencies (Foley & Pang, 2006). Whether students at risk of education failure can transfer back to regular schools or

successfully graduate from alternative schools and programs may depend in part on the quality of the education and services they receive (Foley & Fang, 2006). Various factors have been identified as beneficial to at-risk students in alternative education environments. Two important factors include an effective curriculum and a variety of support services provided in collaboration with an array of agencies to meet the personal needs of the student (Kleiner et al., 2002). Teachers in an alternative learning environment setting need professional development in special education strategies, reading strategies, and behavior management strategies to better meet the needs of the students (Guerin & Denti, 1999). According to Postiglione (2012), instructional strategies should implement change in all aspects of education. These instructional strategies can benefit students in traditional and alternative education settings. The benefits of alternative education strategies will also be effective in the traditional classroom setting, as long as they are student-centered approaches.

**Similarities among ALE Programs**

Alternative education program success is evidenced by students' ability to academically achieve or to get on a pathway to achieve the academic credentials they need to graduate, earn a high school equivalency diploma, and transition to post-secondary education or employment (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). School districts with alternative schools and programs for at-risk students are required to have policies requiring a wide variety of services, best practices, and instructional strategies to be in place to ensure alternative education students' success (Kleiner et al., 2002).

The policies that govern ALE regulations are defined and approved by state and local education boards. Alternative education programs must have a curriculum and

response to intervention programs guiding remedial instruction, behavioral interventions, and graduating on time (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). Teachers in an alternative education classroom utilize and implement researched best practices that are useful and effective with low-achieving students. Alternative education teachers have several tools in their toolbox to engage students in classroom instruction. Educators have the flexibility to use alternative assessments, thematic units, portfolios, high-interest topics, and other hands-on activities for students to demonstrate mastery of learning standards (Guerin & Denti, 1999).

Every student does not learn the same way. Alternative learning focuses on providing students with opportunities for success. Family outreach programs, tutoring programs, career, and technical classes, and providing opportunities for mental health services are examples of what alternative education programs offer at-risk students (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). To provide additional support alternative programs partner with outside agencies that can consist of; juvenile court, and social workers, to provide supplemental services after school hours for at-risk students (Foley & Pang, 2006). Alternative schools address the issues specific to at-risk students, such as truancy, poor grades, and emotional health issues, and school programs can range from being more disciplinary to having a specific academic focus.

**Differences among ALE Programs**

Alternative education provides a viable educational option for at-risk students when the program is linked to state standards, is developmentally appropriate, and adheres to best practices in the field (Powell, 2003). Despite the similarities among alternative programs, curricula in an alternative learning environment will vary.

Depending on the need of the ALE student an emphasis will be placed on personal development and behavior, some on basic skills, and some on core academic content. There are ALE programs designed to focus on developing vocational skills and preparing students for the workforce (Murray & Holt, 2014). Alternative schools have the flexibility to structure coursework and class time to better accommodate the work schedules and parenting responsibilities of students who have left or contemplating leaving school (Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009).

Depending on the program and the number of staff, an ALE could offer evening classes and weekend classes to accommodate the individual need of the student. Alternative schools and programs for students at risk of education failure often collaborate with agencies, centers, or departments outside of the public school system. The individual needs of the students dictate the curriculum and interventions put in place to engage the student and guide the student toward behavioral and academic success.

**Credit Recovery**

Credit recovery is an opportunity for students to redo the coursework for a class they failed, therefore, earning back their credits to graduate. For example, if a student failed physical science, the credit recovery program would reteach the standards, allow the student to make up assignments, and reassess the student based on the student's knowledge of the content and standards. Earning credits on time is a significant problem for many high school students (Gurung & Rutledge, 2014). This is especially true of at-risk students. At-risk students are often referred to an alternative placement for a short or long time to take credit recovery classes. Depending on the number of credits the student is behind on, there may be an option where the student could attend their home campus

for a half day to take core classes and attend an ALE setting for a half day to take credit recovery classes. For students who are struggling academically, the difference between dropping out and finishing school may end up being a question of how an ALE provides academic opportunities for students to obtain the needed credits (Gurung & Rutledge, 2014).

Many at-risk students require a blended approach of both face-to-face instruction and online remediation. This healthy blend may positively influence them to be independent learners as well as learn to better respond in a traditional or alternative education setting. Online education programs assist students in obtaining credits needing to be recovered to meet graduation requirements. At times a blended approach of online programs plus face-to-face time with a teacher will help at-risk students perform better academically than they did in the traditional setting (Gurung & Rutledge, 2014). Students who have not succeeded in the traditional settings, in most instances, have already satisfied the requirement of seat time. Credit recovery is a self-paced program that is supplemented by teacher assistance and guidance as the student progresses through the online curriculum. Students enrolled in a credit recovery program, have to focus on completing the course and demonstrate mastery of the essential learning standard course (Cardak & Vecci, 2015).

In a recent quantitative study, Cunningham (2018) concluded that a blended learning structure would facilitate learning for academically deficient students. Teachers and support staff would combine both direct instruction and assistance with the online portion of the class. This approach would help provide students with one-on-one time

with the teacher and help the student build confidence to be successful in the credit recovery program.

**Staff**

In an alternative education setting recruiting, hiring, and retaining highly qualified staff cannot be emphasized enough. Staff with certification in multiple content areas, relevant experience, and competencies, as well as a deep commitment to working with students at risk, is vital to the success of the program. Staff members that are certified in multiple grade levels and academic areas are game-changers. They can teach across multiple grade bands and connect with various grade-level students in an alternative education program. Ongoing professional development is crucial in the evolving continuum of education. Each teacher should have an individualized professional development plan. Teachers need professional development not only in academia but also in social-emotional learning, special services, and mental health awareness.

"The heart of alternative education is the teacher" (Morley, 1991, p. 16). For students to be successful in alternative learning environments, committed faculty is a necessity. The staff must care deeply for their students, set high expectations for them, and believe unwaveringly that all students can learn. Barr and Parrett (1995) stated that without these elements, the effectiveness of alternative programs can be negatively impacted; furthermore, the researchers claimed that teacher attitude and behavior impact not only program effectiveness but also student learning. If teacher attitude can impact student learning and program effectiveness, the question of what traits are desirable in an alternative setting must be addressed.

A study conducted by Quinn and Poirier (2007) focused on three different alternative programs revealing that effective teachers in an alternative setting were characterized as being respectful, caring, honest, genuine, and trusting when compared to teachers in more traditional settings. These characteristics help foster positive relationships between teachers, students, and parents. These relationships are vitally important in aiding student success. Positive relationships not only help students to learn but also help them to make better choices overall. "Building relationships with students implies efficacy, respect from the teacher and what the child brings to the class, and allowing the experiences of the child to be recognized in the classroom" (Hattie 2009, p. 118).

**Social and Emotional Learning**

For many students, school is a place to build the social and relational skills necessary to interact with peers and adults. Students' being accepted by their peers is as important as their academic performance in the classroom (Erickson, 1989). In a study by Kumari and Yadav (2017), they established that the development of relationship skills such as communication, patience, and friendships were important components of a safe and supportive learning environment. The absence of that sense of belonging may be a cause of why students do not feel they can be successful in the traditional school setting.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) website states that there are four types of social skills: survival skills, interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills, and conflict resolution skills (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002). These four skill sets can be placed in two categories, relational skills, and character development. At-risk students who struggle with social skills may have a difficult time

succeeding in a traditional school setting. At-risk students may have difficulty carrying out a social skill, for example shaking hands with a peer or an adult, based on a social skill deficit (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002). There are four types of deficits; acquisition deficits, performance deficits, fluency deficits, and skill deficits At-risk students need assistance learning the appropriate social skills so they can interact with others. This assistance can come through mentoring, SEL classes, and mental health counseling. In a study on behavior-focused alternative schools, Wilkerson et al. (2016) concluded that alternative schools are designed to meet the needs of students who are not on track to complete secondary school successfully. Alternative education programs must make every effort to increase the odds that at-risk students can master the necessary social skills required to complete high school and succeed in their adult lives (Wilkerson et al., 2016).

Schools play an important role in educating children. Schools not only focus on the student's cognitive ability but also on social and emotional learning. Developmental research indicates that mastering social and emotional competencies is associated with better well-being and academic growth (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). Social skills are very critical in the alternative education setting especially in dealing with students who have a long history of behavioral problems with little to no support. Walker (2009) found that alternative school counseling "acts as an extension of social skills programming by helping the students work on troubles, they have in their lives that contribute to the need for social skills instruction" (p. 149-150). Developing behavioral and academic skills will be in vain if the student does not develop the foundational social skills needed to function in the classroom.

Alternative education students need a social and emotional learning class to learn appropriate coping strategies and how to apply those strategies appropriately in a stressful situation. Teaching social skills to students in the alternative education setting will decrease the likelihood of the student displaying negative behaviors and increase the likelihood that their relationships with adults and peers will improve. Social skills instruction aims to remediate performance deficits for students with behavioral issues (Gresham et al., 2004). As with any other intervention, SEL needs to be individualized for each student.

**Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports**

Helping at-risk students manage their behavior and remediate them using restorative practices is an important element of the success of an ALE program. It is the goal of an ALE program to successfully prepare at-risk students to return to the traditional classroom so they can thrive in the traditional school environment. Often, student misbehavior may be a symptom rather than a cause (Koslofsky, 1991). Students may be misbehaving because of a lack of motivation or understanding. For instance, a student who does not understand the math concepts presented in class by the teacher may choose to misbehave hoping to be removed from class. In this scenario, the teacher may believe the student is having a behavior problem but, the student does not understand the concepts presented and is avoiding embarrassment. Alternative programs must offer services to coach students on how to maintain more self-control. This will allow the student to not go down the same path when he/she returns to the traditional classroom setting.

There are many youths educated in some form of an alternative education setting. Carver et al. (2010) conducted a national study and found that approximately 645,500 youth were educated in an alternative education setting, including juvenile detention centers. The students enrolled in an alternative learning environment require academic and behavioral instruction and support to improve their life circumstances. (Flower et al., 2011). Without those interventions, students are more prone to further school and life failures. Alternative education students who do not receive tier 1, 2, and 3 behavior interventions will eventually become a burden to society by way of incarceration and other financial constraints during their lifetime (Flower et al., 2011).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a program, which was initially implemented in regular schools, which can be very beneficial to those students enrolled in alternative education schools. The PBIS framework provides a system model, and resources for establishing a continuum of evidence-based practices with behavior support needs (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). There are three levels of interventions and practices designed, in the PBIS Framework, to provide behavior reinforcement and facilitate positive behaviors in all students (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

The first tier, also known as the universal tier, is available to all students where school-wide expectations are positively stated for all students to follow (Jolivette et al., 2012). In this tier, the students are exposed to prosocial behaviors with reinforcements such as token systems of recognition of positive behaviors (Jolivette et al., 2012). Even though the students who attend an alternative learning environment sometimes display aggressive behaviors, it is important to still have the universal tier as a foundation to resort back to in the case of redirection and a point of reference in correcting

inappropriate behaviors. Tier 1 is very important to have in place because it is the

foundation upon which tier 2 and tier 3 interventions build.

When a student is having difficulty and is nonresponsive to the intervention and

practices in tier one, the student will receive additional interventions and supports for

their display of more intensive behaviors. The interventions and supports that are offered

in tier 2 are designed for the individual student or possibly a small group of students who

will receive various intervention strategies (Ervin, n.d.). The second tier includes all the

interventions that are included in the first tier plus additional supports that are offered in

the second tier (Ervin, n.d.). Students may transition to the second tier of support and

interventions based on data that have been collected on that particular student over some

time.

The final tier, tier 3, is designed for students with the most intensive behaviors

and who need the most intensive interventions and support. Students at this level should

be no more than 3% of the student body (Ervin, n.d.). The ultimate goal of PBIS is to

eradicate inappropriate behavior(s) by providing students with support that is designed

specifically for them (Simonsen et al., 2010).

Once a student has been placed in tier 3, they will still receive interventions and

supports that were offered in tier 1 and tier 2, but in the third tier, they will receive a

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). Functional behavioral assessment refers to

identifying antecedents and consequences for challenging and appropriate behavior such

that individualized interventions can be developed, implemented, and monitored (Flower

et al., 2011). The FBA is a plan which entails the use of various interventions that can be

measured through assessments to maximize the success rate of the student. The student at

this level may have emergency plans that are associated with a safety concern for himself/herself or others. If the student does not respond well to the emergency plan, there is a potential that the student will be removed from the school setting and placed in another alternative setting for more intensified interventions and support.

The information collected in these tiers is valuable data because it helps the teachers and administrators track the various displays of behaviors and to modify their current behavioral system. Students who are enrolled in an alternative learning environment should be allowed to be as successful as possible regardless of their placement (Flower et al., 2011). If PBIS cannot be implemented in an ALE setting, the student must have access to a behavior specialist. This provides an opportunity to make positive changes that will impact the student's life It is important to have a comprehensive approach when working with students that focus on not just academics, but also on behavioral, social, and emotional instruction

**Summary**

The barriers and obstacles that at-risk youth face can lead them to drop out of school if an intervention such as alternative education placement is not introduced. The literature review revealed that alternative learning environments are effective in addressing at-risk students in jeopardy of failing school. Upon review of the literature, educators must examine the needs of at-risk youth and decide what academic, behavioral, and social and emotional learning (SEL) goals are attainable for that student. To ensure success for at-risk youth, today's school leaders must be proactive. School leaders must provide the appropriate curriculum, evidence-based best practices, and interventions that

best fit the individual student. State and national guidelines continue to stress the importance of the attainment of a high school diploma.

School leaders should also look to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as guidance towards helping students meet their fundamental needs, allowing students to focus on school work and achievement in the classroom. Alternative learning environments have evolved to keep students engaged in the educational process when mainstream educational avenues have been unsuccessful for this population of students.

## Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter presents the research question and outlines the methodology that was used in this study. This chapter also presents the research design, population sample, sources of data, data collection, and data analysis. The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the decision-making process of school leaders when determining the resources they provide to an alternative learning environment and whether the resources provided ensure these students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma. The study followed all rules and regulations regarding research ethics.

**Research Question**

This study shall attempt to address the following question. How do school leaders make decisions about the resources provided to an ALE to ensure those students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma?

A qualitative design was selected because the researcher has access to various data collection options that allow the researcher to interact with the participants. The researcher will interview school leaders, transcribe the interviews, collect school district artifacts, and organize all data by theme.

**Research Methodology**

The researcher conducted a qualitative study. Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The process of qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participant's setting;

analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative study was selected over a quantitative study and mixed methods study because the researcher has access to various data collection options that allow the researcher to interact with the participants. The researcher conducted interviews and collected artifacts from the participants in the study. The researcher has advantages such as firsthand experience with the participants, the researcher can record information as it occurs, participants can provide historical information, and allows the researcher control over the line of questioning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An application to the Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was submitted for approval before beginning the study. All ethical policies and procedures concerning human research were followed.

**Research Design**

Phenomenological research is a qualitative method in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 249). The data collection process in a phenomenological study includes interviews, observations, and artifact collection. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, observations and face-to-face interviews may not be allowed. Interviews will be scheduled and conducted via Google Meets, Webex, or Zoom.

For this study, interviews were conducted with 10 school leaders in Southwest Arkansas. The researcher asked open-ended questions with the intent that participants will provide details on how district and building level leaders make decisions about the

resources provided to an alternative learning environment that ensures an alternative education student is successful in class, graduates high school, or earns a high school equivalency diploma.

The researcher requested that school leaders provide a copy of the school district's referral packet and a copy of the school district's state cycle 7 report. The referral document provides insight into the student's academic, behavioral, and mental health needs that paints a picture of the student's strengths and areas of growth. At the end of the school year, each school district must complete a cycle 7 report for the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. The cycle 7 report lists the total number of students enrolled in a school district's alternative learning environment program, the number of students enrolled by grade level (K-12), the number of students that graduated, and the number of students that earned a high school equivalency diploma.

**Setting of the Study**

Given the Arkansas-related parameters of this study and the varied similarities and differences when defining alternative learning environments, it is important for the validity of the methodology to state the working definition of an alternative learning environment as defined by the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. An alternative learning environment is an educational setting that offers nontraditional or flexible instructional methods that enable all students to participate in the educational process (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). The population being studied are school leaders involved with making the decisions on the resources provided to an alternative learning environment that ensures students are

successful. School leaders must make decisions overseeing academic resources, RTI, staffing, behavioral resources, and SEL resources provided to students who are attending an alternative learning environment setting.

**Sampling**

The participants in this study were 10 school district leaders from Southwest Arkansas. To be included in this study, school leaders need to know the curriculum, personnel, response to intervention, social and emotional learning, and alternative learning environment regulations. A request for an interview, a description of the study, and an informed consent form was emailed to the participants after the study was approved. Included in the email was a request for the district's ALE referral packet and the district's cycle 7 report.

The researcher used a random sampling approach when selecting participants for the study. Random sampling is a procedure in research for selecting participants. Random sampling means that each individual has an equal probability of being selected from the population, ensuring that the sample will be representative of the population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher assigned a number to each school district in the Dawson Educational Cooperative and the Southwest Educational Cooperative in Southwest Arkansas. The researcher used a random number generator to randomly pick a set of numbers. A set of numbers were generated that represented all 27 school districts in the Dawson Educational Cooperative and the Southwest Educational Cooperative. The first 10 numbers listed were the participants chosen for the study.

**Sources of Data**

The researcher utilized an interview protocol to elicit responses from the participants that will answer the research question for this study. The interview questions were developed after reviewing sample qualitative questions from journals, articles, assigned readings, and peer discussions. The interview questions are listed below:

1. Does your district have a process or procedure for referring a student to an alternative learning environment? If so, what is the referral process?

2. What is the primary goal of your district's alternative learning environment?

3. What systems are in place to ensure that goal is met?

4. What credentials and qualities do you look for when hiring staff for your ALE program?

5 What academic resources does the district provide the alternative learning environment to support student academic success that is different from the traditional classroom setting? How do you determine those resources?

6. What behavior support resources does the district provide the alternative learning environment to support student success that is different from the traditional classroom setting? How do you determine the behavior support each student needs?

7. What social and emotional learning resources does the district provide the alternative learning environment to support student success that is different from the traditional classroom setting? How do you choose the appropriate social and emotional learning resources?

8. What mental health resources does the district provide the alternative learning environment to support student success that is different from the traditional classroom setting? Do you utilize school-based mental health services or do students have to utilize clinic-based services?

9. How do school leaders ensure a student continues to be successful when a student transitions back to their home campus?

10. What is the process for providing students with Response to Intervention, RTI, as compared to those students in a traditional classroom setting?

11. How will the alternative learning environment prepare students for college or a career after high school?

12. Based on your experience, what are the strengths of an alternative education program?

13. Based on your experience, what areas of an alternative education program need to improve?

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

Patton (2015) described systematic analysis strategies to enhance credibility in qualitative research. He indicated that integrating and triangulating diverse sources of data such as interviews, observations, and survey questions are important. Patton (2015, p. 660) stated, "consistency of findings across types of data increases confidence in the confirmed patterns and themes."

Triangulation of different data sources involves using multiple methods to collect data on the same topic to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) If themes are established based on converging several data sources from

participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the trustworthiness of the study. In this study, the researcher collected data in more than one way. The researcher conducted interviews and collected artifacts. The researcher established validity through the triangulation of data sources.

The researcher also used the technique known as member checking to increase the trustworthiness of the data. Once the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the researcher sent each participant's individual transcript to them for review. The researcher asked the participants to read the transcripts. This allowed the participants to critically analyze the transcripts and comment on them by affirming that the transcripts reflect their views, feelings, and experiences, or they do not. The researcher will make any requested edits to the transcripts. This process increases the credibility or trustworthiness of the data (Birt et al., 2016).

**Reliability**

Qualitative researchers must check to make sure their approaches are reliable. Qualitative researchers need to document as many steps of their procedures used in the data collection of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher emailed 10 participants a request for an interview, a description of the study, and an informed consent form. Participants were asked open-ended questions about the resources provided to ensure ALE students graduate or earn a high school equivalency diploma. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Included in the email was a request for two artifacts, the district's ALE referral form, and the cycle 7 report.

The researcher checked transcripts to make sure there are no mistakes made during transcription. The researcher also checked to make sure themes and codes are

entered correctly on the data analysis table. The researcher made sure there is no drift in the definition of the code by continually comparing data.

**Data Collection**

The data collection for this study came from two sources. The first source of data will be gathered from 10 interviews with district and building-level leaders. The second source of data consisted of artifacts from each school district. The artifacts for this study are the school district's alternative learning environment referral packet and the school district's cycle 7 report.

**Data Analysis**

The narrative data from the study will be analyzed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1984). Interviews were conducted, recorded, and notes taken. Interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. Artifacts were requested from the participant's school district. The artifacts consist of the district's alternative learning environment referral packet and the school district's cycle 7 report. The interview transcription and the artifacts were coded based on themes (referral process, goal of an ALE program, staff, curriculum, behavioral support, and social and emotional learning). Once the data are coded they will be organized and loaded into a data analysis table.

**Researcher Positionality**

There are certain biases in any research conducted but having an understanding of reflexivity enables the researcher to put the study in the appropriate context. Berger (2015) noted the importance of reflexivity in research and how the position may affect the outcome of the research. The researcher is the instrument in a qualitative study and

must recognize and set aside any preconceptions during the study. Reflexivity helps to maintain the ethics of the relationship between the researcher and the research (Berger, 2015). "Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be conscious of the cultural, political, social, and economic origins of one's own perspective and voice" (Patton, 2015, p. 70).

As the researcher, I do have biases, assumptions, and experiences that give me a unique perspective. For example, my job title is Director of Alternative Programs and I currently serve as a board member for the Arkansas Association of Alternative Educators. Based on my experience in this role, I understand that alternative education programs are crucial in helping at-risk students be successful. As I have collaborated with other alternative educators around the state, I have noticed that some ALE educators have multiple titles. Some are considered the lead teacher but also have the administrative responsibility of scheduling referral meetings, leading the placement conference, and completing the student intake folder. There are larger districts that operate their own ALE and have an ALE director. Then there are smaller districts, working in cohorts, that outsource their ALE classes to an educational cooperative. An assumption I have is that every school district provides academic, behavior interventions, mental health, and SEL resources to students in an alternative education program. Another assumption I have is that every ALE program utilizes the resources provided to ensure that seniors graduate with a high school diploma or a high school equivalence diploma.

I have a personal interest in alternative education which has led to my interest in this research. I had a family member that was referred and placed in an ALE program. The academic, emotional support, and mental health services that were provided helped

him to transition back to his home campus and continue his education in the traditional classroom setting. I have worked as an assistant principal, principal, and now director of alternative education programs. My professional experience as an educational leader has helped guide me to understand the referral process, support services, and wrap-around services an ALE can provide to students. I will work to eliminate both personal and professional bias by collecting, analyzing, and triangulating the data. This process increases the trustworthiness of the data (Birt et al., 2016).

**Ethical Considerations**

No interviews were scheduled or conducted, or artifacts requested from participants until IRB approval and participant consent forms were received. After the study was approved, participants were interviewed and asked open-ended questions about the resources provided to ensure ALE students graduate or earn a high school equivalency diploma. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, then kept on the researcher's flash drive. The flash drive is kept in a secure location by the researcher. The names of the participants are kept confidential by using pseudonyms during the reporting phase of the study.

**Summary**

This qualitative study utilized interviews to gather information from district and building-level leaders in Southwest Arkansas on the resources they provide to alternative education students to ensure they graduate high school or earn a high school equivalency diploma. The interviews allowed educators to discuss the academic, behavioral, and support services provided to alternative education students. The researcher requested the participants provide a copy of the district's ALE referral document and the district's

cycle 7 report. The referral document provided insight into the services offered to students to meet their academic, behavioral, and mental health needs. The cycle 7 report provided data on the number of students who graduated high school and the number of students who earned their high school equivalency diploma.

**Chapter IV: Findings**

The purpose of the qualitative study was to investigate the decision-making process of school leaders when determining the resources they provided to an alternative learning environment (ALE) and whether the resources provided ensure that these students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma. By doing this, it will answer the research question of this study, How do school leaders make decisions about the resources provided to an alternative learning environment to ensure alternative education students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma? The data gathered from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the constant-comparative method. Part of this method allows for a coding process that compares trends and patterns found to accurately report findings in the study. In the following sections, a description of the sample population will be discussed; in addition, the findings of the interview questions will be presented.

The first chapter of this study outlined and included the purpose of the study, with the terms and definitions necessary to understand the information with clarity. The second chapter included the literature review and the theoretical framework that guided the study. The third chapter defined the methodology of the study, research design, population and sampling, and the data collection process. This chapter will outline the findings of the study concerning how school leaders make decisions about the resources provided to an alternative learning environment to ensure alternative education students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma.

**Setting of the Study**

Given the Arkansas-related parameters of this study and the varied similarities and differences when defining alternative learning environments, it is important for the validity of the methodology to state the working definition of an alternative learning environment as defined by the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. An alternative learning environment is an educational setting that offers nontraditional or flexible instructional methods that enable all students to participate in the educational process (Division of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). The population being studied are school leaders involved with making the decisions on the resources provided to an alternative learning environment that ensures students are successful. School leaders must make decisions overseeing academic resources, RTI, staffing, behavioral resources, and SEL resources provided to students who are attending an alternative learning environment setting.

**Sampling**

The participants in this study included 10 school district leaders from Southwest Arkansas. To be included in this study, school leaders need to know the curriculum, personnel, response to intervention, social and emotional learning, and alternative learning environment regulations. A request for an interview, a description of the study, and an informed consent form was emailed to the participants after the study had been approved. Included in the email was a request for the district's ALE referral packet and the district's cycle 7 report.

The researcher used a random sampling approach when selecting participants for the study. Random sampling is a procedure in research for selecting participants. Random

sampling means that each individual has an equal probability of being selected from the population, ensuring that the sample will be representative of the population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher assigned a number to each school district in the Dawson Educational Cooperative and the Southwest Educational Cooperative. The researcher used a random number generator to randomly pick a set of numbers. A set of numbers were generated that represents all 27 school districts in the Dawson Educational Cooperative and the Southwest Educational Cooperative. The first 10 numbers listed were chosen to participate in the study.

Table 1

*Participants, Demographics, and Years of Experience*

| Participant | Ethnicity | Gender | Total Years Experience | ALE Years of Experience |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 1 | Caucasian | Female | 16 | 3 |
| 2 | Caucasian | Male | 6 | 6 |
| 3 | African American | Male | 22 | 18 |
| 4 | Caucasian | Female | 8 | 13 |
| 5 | African American | Male | 33 | 10 |
| 6 | Caucasian | Male | 17 | 3 |
| 7 | Caucasian | Male | 12 | 6 |
| 8 | Caucasian | Female | 21 | 21 |
| 9 | Caucasian | Male | 28 | 3 |
| 10 | Caucasian | Female | 33 | 12 |

Table 2

*Participant School District Classification and Student Population 2021-2022*

| Participant | School District Classification | Student Population |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 1 | 3A | <750 |
| 2 | 4A | >2,000 |
| 3 | 5A | >4,000 |
| 4 | 2A | >650 |
| 5 | 4A | >2,000 |
| 6 | 5A | >2,500 |
| 7 | 5A | >3,500 |
| 8 | 3A | >750 |
| 9 | 3A | <750 |
| 10 | 7A | >9,500 |

**Participants**

Participant 1 is a Caucasian female who has been in education for more than 10 years. She has been the lead teacher in the district's ALE program for the last three years. The school district is classified as a 3A school with a student population greater than 750. Participant 1 sat for an interview at her school on October 27, 2022, for 49 minutes. Participate 1 and I met via Google Meet. Participant 1 arrived on time and proved to be knowledgeable of the district's ALE program. The interview was very comfortable with the participant providing in-depth answers to the interview questions. Participant 1 referred to providing students with the resources and opportunities to be successful

several times during the interview. She came across as a person that cares deeply for her students' futures.

Participant 2 is a Caucasian male who has been in education for less than 10 years. He has spent the last six years working in an ALE program. Participant 2 serves as the administrator of the ALE program. The school district is classified as a 4A school with a total population greater than 1,000 students. His ALE program is a K-12 program. Participant 2 sat for an interview on October 6, 2022, for 29 minutes. We had a follow-up phone call on October 27 for 20 minutes.

Participant 2 and I met via Google Meets. He joined from his office on campus and I joined the meeting from my home office. Participant 2 was positive and upbeat about his program and how much his staff cares for the students. During the interview participant 2 and I began to share strategies we each use in our programs to further student success. Participant 2 began to take notes on strategies he would like to implement in his program.

Participant 3 is African American male who has been in education for over 20 years and has worked in an ALE setting for over 15 years. He serves as principal and has served in this role for the last three years. The district he serves is classified as a 5A school with a student population of over 3,000. At the time of the interview, there were 80 students enrolled in Participant 3's ALE programs. Participant 3 sat for an interview on November 3, 2022, for 57 minutes.

During Participant 3's tenure in education, he has served as a teacher, coach, dean of students, and principal. Participant 3 discussed the importance of getting to know the students and thinking outside the box to provide opportunities for students to be

successful in and outside the classroom. Participant 3 was well-versed in the different aspects and supports that ALE can provide to at-risk students.

Participant 4 is a Caucasian female who has been an educator for less than 10 years. She has worked in an ALE setting for over 10 years. Participant 4 currently serves as the lead teacher in the district's ALE program. She previously worked as a paraprofessional in a different ALE setting. The district she serves is classified as a 2A school with a student population of less than 750. At the time of the interview, there were six students enrolled in the district's ALE program.

Participant 4 sat for an interview on October 26, 2022, for 42 minutes. The participant and I met via Google Meet. Participant 4 joined Google Meet from her classroom and I joined Google Meet from my home office. Once during the interview, we had to rejoin Google Meet due to losing the internet connection. Participant 4 stepped into another room on campus, where the internet signal was stronger, and we resumed the interview. Participant 4 mentioned that she has worked hard to change the mindset of the staff and community about what an ALE program can do for students. Participant 4 is resilient when it comes to working with the community to help students find employment using the Jobs for Arkansas Graduate (JAG) program.

Participant 5 is an African American male who has worked in education for over 30 years. He has worked in an ALE setting for over 10 years. Participant 5 serves as an assistant superintendent as well as the administrator, who oversees the ALE program. He previously served other districts as a teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent. The district he serves is classified as a 4A school with a student

population under 2,000. At the time of the interview, there were 10 students enrolled in the ALE program.

Participant 5 sat for an interview on the evening of October 26, 2022, for 58 minutes. Participant 5 and I meet via Google Meet. Participant 5 had just finished driving a bus route when we met that evening at 6:00 pm. He joined Google Meet from his office and I joined from the office at the church I attend. The meeting time was adjusted for the convenience of the participant. The interview with participant 5 was similar to a conversation you would have with a friend. After I would ask a question, Participant 5 would answer the question and then ask me the same thing. He wanted to know how my district's ALE was operated and what we did differently to help students. Participant 5 stressed the importance of providing opportunities for students to receive mental health services. Visiting Participant 5, he seemed very sincere about helping all students be successful in life.

Participate 6 is a Caucasian male that has worked in education for over 15 years. He has worked in an ALE setting for less than five years. Participant 6 serves as the campus administrator for the district's ALE program. He previously served as a teacher and administrator in another school district. The district he serves is classified as a 5A school district with more than 3,000 students. At the time of the interview, there were 22 students enrolled in the program.

Participant 6 sat for an interview on October 31, 2022, for 60 minutes. Participant 6 joined Google Meet from his campus office and I joined Google Meet from my home office. Participant 6 was laid back and easy to interview. Participant 6 had worked in another district as an administrator over an ALE program. He was able to provide insight

on the resources that are helping his students succeed but also using his experience from working in another district to grow his ALE program.

Participant 7 is a Caucasian male that has more than 10 years of experience in education. Participant 7 serves a dual role in his district, he is the secondary principal and ALE principal. He has more than five years of experience working with students enrolled in an ALE program. The district is classified as a 5A school with more than 3,000 students. Participate 7 sat for an interview on November 2, 2022. Participant 7 joined Google Meet from his office and I joined Google Meet from my campus office. Participant 7 was confident and thorough in his answers to the interview questions. Participant 7 had previously served the district as a teacher and an assistant principal.

Participant 7 explained that the ALE program is operated on the secondary campus. Participant 7 talked about the importance of making the ALE students feel like they are part of the main campus. He provides ALE students with the opportunities to attend literacy intervention on the student's home campus. Participant 7 will stay in communication with teachers and students to ensure that they are meeting their goals, so they can transition back to their home campus. Participate 7 wants all his ALE students to return to the home campus to complete their education.

Participate 8 is a Caucasian female with more than 20 years as an educator. She has worked in an ALE setting for more than 20 years. The district is classified as a 3A school with less than 750 students. Participate 8 sat for an interview on November 2, 2022, for 29 minutes. Participant 8 joined Google Meet from her office and I joined Google Meet from my office.

Participate 8 was very straightforward when answering the interview questions. She stated that an outside agency runs the day-to-day operation of the program and the district provides additional academic and SEL resources. Participate 8 addressed that the students placed in ALE utilize a work-based program approach to work towards graduation and employability. She spoke highly of the program and has seen students succeed in class and the workplace.

Participant 9 is a Caucasian male with more than 35 years of experience as an educator. He has worked with at-risk students for over 10 years. The district is classified as a 3A school with more than 750 students. At the time of this interview, four students were enrolled in the ALE program.

Participate 9 sat for an interview on the evening of November 7, 2022, for 39 minutes. Participant 9 joined Google Meet from his office and I joined Google Meet from my home office. We met that evening at 5:30. Participate 9 serves many roles in his school district. He serves as secondary principal, bowling coach, and bus driver. He is also the administrative liaison between the school district and the outside agency that operates the ALE program.

Participant 9 is a very busy administrator. With Participant 9's experience in education, he was able to describe how students' needs have changed over time from just academic support to mental health and behavioral support. He also expressed that it may be time for him to retire and turn the reigns over to someone younger.

Participant 10 is a Caucasian female who has worked in education for over 20 years. She has worked in an ALE setting for over 10 years. Participant 10 has her Educational Specialist degree and serves in a district administrative role that includes

overseeing the district's ALE program. The district she serves is classified as a 7A school with a student population of over 9,000. At the time of the interview, there were 30 students enrolled in the ALE program.

Participant 10 sat for an interview on November 9, 2022, for 57 minutes. Participant 10 and I met via Google Meet. She joined Google Meet from her district office and I joined from my campus office. The interview with participant 10 was very friendly and informative. Participant 10 asked one of her staff to sit in during the interview in case there was a question she may not know the answer to. Participant 10 made me feel like I was part of her staff. Participate 10 asked me to share resources we use in my district's ALE program. Participant 10 wants to continuously improve the district's program so the district can help as many students as possible. Participant 10 stated, "we are trying to provide an environment for a kid that is struggling for whatever reason and just gives them an overall better experience with their education." Participant 10 wants to create opportunities for success for all students. As she talked about student success stories, she smiled ear to ear and was proud of what the students had accomplished.

**Emergent Themes**

There were many common themes that emerged from the data analysis. Although most responses generated a consistent pattern, there were some questions in which some responses were not the same. It is important to remember that the interview questions asked addressed 12 areas that support at-risk students enrolled in an alternative learning environment: referral process, program goals, systems in place to meet goals, staffing, academic resources, behavioral resources, social and emotional resources, mental health

resources, transition back to home campus, response to intervention, college and career preparedness, and the strengths of the program. The findings are presented with themes for each area of the interview questions.

### *Referral Process*

The first interview question addressed the process for referring a student to an alternative learning environment. All ten participants acknowledged there is a referral process for referring and placing a student in an alternative education setting. Each participant stated that academic, behavioral, social, and emotional intervention data must be collected from the staff member referring a student for alternative education services. The listed interventions must provide data on the interventions that were successful and unsuccessful. All participants also request information from parents about the student's demeanor at home, possible traumatic events, and any emotional or mental health needs. All participants stated that once all data is collected there is a referral meeting scheduled. The referral committee consists of the student, parent, ALE director, referring administrator, teacher, guidance counselor, and any other special services teacher the student may see during the day. The committee will review the referral packet and decide if the student meets the criteria to be placed in an ALE program.

Participant 1 stated, "referral to our ALE program is not punitive, we are here to meet the need of the student." During the referral meeting, the committee looks at the root of the problem and discusses what is needed to transition the student back to their home campus.

Participant 2 stated, "there is a referral packet that has to be completed containing student grades, behavior reports, and any necessary support documentation." Once the

referral is reviewed, a meeting is set up to discuss placement. The committee consists of

an administrator, school officials, teacher, a parent, sometimes the student (depending on

age), and any other support staff that the student interacts with daily.

Participant 4 stated, "a referral is completed when prior interventions used in the

classroom have not worked."

Participant 9 stated, "we look at several factors that are reviewed by our assistant

principal." The assistant principal will call and schedule a meeting after the referral

packet has been reviewed. Participant 9 stated, "we look at behavioral referrals and

academics to see if there is a need for flexible scheduling."

Table 3

*Emergent Topics related to Referral Process Theme*

| Theme | Topics |
|-------|--------|
| Referral Process | • All participants have a referral process |
| | • Have to hold a referral meeting |
| | • Committee reviews academic, behavior, social and emotional intervention data |
| | • Committee determines if student meets criteria for placement |
| | • Placement is not punitive |

***Program Goals***

The second interview question addressed the goals of an ALE program. Each

participant in the interview had multiple goals. The two main themes identified were the

successful transition of students back to the traditional educational setting and helping the student regain credits and graduate high school on time.

Participant 1 stated, "their main program goal is to transition students back to the traditional campus."

Participant 2 stated, "the primary goal is to remove the barriers for students to be successful in class and for the ALE students transition back to their home campus." The second goal for the program is to help the seniors in the program graduate on time.

Participant 3 stated, "the primary goal of his program is to equip students with the needed tools to get them back into the regular setting." A secondary goal is for juniors and seniors that enter the program late to focus on regaining credits towards graduation or work towards a GED.

Participant 6 stated, "the main goal, is to try to facilitate the student has a successful transition back to the traditional setting." The program also focuses on students working towards graduating high school on time.

Participant 8 stated, "the main goal of their program is to help students regain credits and graduate on time."

Participant 5 stated, "their primary goal for the program is to have students regain credits and graduate with a diploma."

Participant 7 stated, "our primary goal for the ALE program is to give students every opportunity they need to be successful in class and walk across the stage with a high school diploma." The program offers students an opportunity to work towards their GED if that is best for the student.

Table 4

*Emergent Topics related to Program Goals Theme*

| Theme | Topics |
|---|---|
| Program Goals | • Equip students with the tools to return to the traditional setting |
| | • Remove barriers for students to be successful in class |
| | • Work on regaining credits to graduate on time |
| | • GED preparation coursework |

**Systems**

The third interview question addressed the systems in place to ensure the goals of an ALE program. The most common theme that came from this interview question was following the student action plan (SAP). The student action plan is developed during the student placement meeting. The committee reviews and discusses the academic, behavioral, mental health, social, and emotional data. The data is used to develop a short-term goal, long-term goal, and at least two interventions to help the student reach his/her goals. The goals are reviewed every quarter with the student and staff to see if the student is on track to meet his/her goals.

Participant 1 stated, "that during the placement meeting academic and behavioral goals are developed and written into the student action plan."
Participant 2 stated, "we use the student action plan to develop academic and behavioral goals for each student." The program has a grading system in place to monitor student grades daily, and a point system to monitor student behavior on a weekly basis. The goals

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listed in the SAP are reviewed with the student at the end of each nine-week grading period.

Participant 3 echoed each student has a student action plan that has all their goals (academic, behavior) listed.

Participant 4 stated, "we review student goals quarterly." The staff will look at the goals the students have met and look at the goals that were not met and discuss ways the student can reach their goals. Participant 4 stated, "if we need to add to the goals we will, if we need to modify goals we will."

Participant 6 stated, "when a student comes into our program, during the placement meeting, there is usually at least two initial goals set that are placed in the student's action plan." Academic, behavior, and social assessments are administered the first five days a student is placed with us. The data will show the areas of behavior or academic need. Participant 6 stated, "we monitor those goals daily, weekly, and all the way up to the 45-day review." If the student has met their goals, the administrator will communicate with the student's home campus administrator about implementing a partial transition back to the student's home campus. If a student is not meeting their goal, the student will remain on the ALE campus until the goal is reached.

In this study, a second theme that developed from the interview question was providing follow-up checks by teachers, administrators, and support staff with students. Participant 1 stated, "we use mentors, career counselors, and mental health counselors to check on students daily to address their academic and behavioral needs and develop appropriate staff and student relationships."

Participant 7 stated, "in terms of additional supports, we have our school counselors who meet with each student and talk about their goals and their progress". Participant 7 also stated, "the administration team will work with those students as well to make sure that if students are here because of behavioral reasons, that we are helping to correcting those mistakes and those behaviors."

Participant 9 stated, "we are doing better with follow-up checks on students in the ALE program and on the home campus." There are five administrators in the district. Each administrator takes a day to visit with the alternative education kids. The administrators visit with the kids one on one and get to know them a little better. The district sends a career coach down to visit with the students to discuss plans after high school.

Table 5

| Theme | Topics |
| --- | --- |
| Systems | • Student Action Plan (SAP) |
| | Developed during the referral meeting |
| | Develop two short-term and long-term goals |
| | Develop interventions to reach goals |
| | Grading system in place to monitor grades weekly |
| | Point system in place to monitor behavior weekly |
| | 45-day review of goals |
| | If goals are met, new goals are set |
| | If goals are not met, goals are modified |
| | • Check In |

| | Daily check-in with students |
| | Mentors and Career Counselors check on student's academic grades |
| | Mental Health Counselor checks on students and their behavioral needs |
| | Career Coach checks in with students and discusses grades |
| | Administrators visit with students daily to get to know them better |

*Staffing*

The fourth interview question addressed what credentials and qualities administrators look for when hiring staff for their ALE program? There were two themes identified from the interview question. The most common theme was employing a teacher or paraprofessional that can build rapport with students. All 10 participants stated that hiring a person that has patience, loves working with at-risk students, and can build rapport with students is the most important quality they look for when hiring staff for an ALE program.

Participant 1 stated, "sometimes students get upset, they lash out, but are really upset about something not related to school or the teacher." Building good rapport with students and not taking anything personally are qualities she looks for when hiring staff.

Participant 2 stated, "the qualities he looks for is someone with patience, empathy, and being proactive." When asked about looking for someone proactive, participant 2 expanded that he wants someone that is on top of behaviors and is aware of things that hinder the student's success in the classroom. An example, Participant 2

shared, if a student is wandering around the room the teacher could respond, "hey I would love it if you come sit in your seat." This is better than pointing out, in front of the class, what the student is doing wrong.

Participant 6 stated, "we are looking for people that have a big heart and they can relate to kids that are at risk." Participant 6 opinion is that it takes a special type of educator to work with alternative education kids.

Participant 7 stated, "we added a teacher to our ALE program and above everything else, we are looking for that cheerleader, that champion that has a heart for student success." We are looking for someone who is not afraid to work with challenging students.

Participant 10 echoed similar concerns about hiring the right person for educating at-risk students. Participant 10 looks for someone that has the right personality. He looks for someone that has the right demeanor; if that person has a negative demeanor, it is not going to work. That is really the biggest thing that drives participant 10 when he hires a teacher. Participant 10 stated, "once you come onboard, within two weeks, when I talk to a teacher and ask about a kid, do not say, well, let me go check." You better be able to tell participant 10 right then what is going on with that kid.

Table 6

*Emergent Topics related to Teacher Qualities Theme*

| Theme | Topics |
| --- | --- |
| Teacher Qualities | • Good rapport with students |
| | • Does not take anything personal |
| | • Patient with students |

- Empathetic

- Big Heart for students

- Champion for students

- Certified in multiple content areas

- Multiple teaching experiences

- Meet Arkansas Highly Qualified Teacher

- Pass the Praxis 5511 assessment to teach in an ALE setting

The second theme identified from the interview question was hiring teachers that are certified in one or more content areas. Staff members certified in multiple grade levels and academic areas are game-changers. They can teach across multiple grade bands and connect with various grade-level students in an alternative education program. This also allows for alternative learning programs to offer more content area classes during the school day.

Participant 1 stated, "she looks for teachers that are certified or qualify under the Arkansas Qualified Teacher requirements." To meet Arkansas Qualified Teacher requirements, the educator must have either: met highly qualified teacher status under the Arkansas Department of Education rules governing highly qualified teachers or have obtained a bachelor's degree or an advanced degree and meets one of the following requirements: the bachelor's degree or advanced degree is in the content area in which the educator will teach; the bachelor's degree or advanced degree contains a minimum of 18 college credit hours in the content area in which the educator will teach; the educator has successfully completed a content area assessment approved by the State Board of

Education for the content area in which the educator will teach; the educator is a National

Board Certified Teacher for the content area in which the educator will teach; or the

bachelor's degree or advanced degree is in any major and the educator has documented

successful, relevant work experience in the teaching area (citation)

Participant 4 looks for a person with multiple certification areas and multiple

work experiences. Participant 4 stated, "in our program we have a certified

paraprofessional that is also certified as a nurse and has a provisional teaching license."

Participant 6 stated, "of course we always want to try and find licensed staff,

which also includes looking at alternative certification routes, such as; taking and

successfully passing the Praxis 5511." The praxis 5511 is a general content area

assessment approved by the State Board of Education that allows a person to teach in an

ALE setting.

Participant 10 echoed I want someone certified that is a good teacher.

### *Academic Resources*

The fifth interview question addressed what academic interventions are in place to

ensure the student's academic success. There were several interventions that the

participants mentioned to help students succeed in the classroom. The main theme of the

interview question was credit recovery. Nine out of 10 participants mentioned credit

recovery as an intervention used in their alternative education program. Credit recovery is

an opportunity for students to redo the coursework for a class they failed, therefore,

earning back their credits to graduate. Earning credits on time is a significant problem for

many high school students (Gurung & Rutledge, 2014).

Participant 1's ALE program utilizes APEX, an online software program, for students to retake classes they have failed earlier in their high school career.

Participant 2 stated, "we use face-to-face instruction 51% of the time, and 49% of the time we use online resources." Students enrolled in Participant 2's alternative education program use APEX to work on credit recovery classes.

Participants 3, 4, 6, and 9 echoed that their programs also use APEX for students to work on credit recovery classes.

Participants 7 and 10 enrolled students in Edgenuity classes to work on regaining credits towards graduation. Edgenuity is another online software program dedicated to offering credit recovery classes.

Table 7

*Emergent Topics related to Academic Resources Theme*

| Theme | Topics |
|---|---|
| Academic Resources | • Credit Recovery: |
| | 49% of the time online resources can be used |
| | APEX is an online software program utilized for students to retake classes online to regain credits needed for graduation |
| | Edgenuity is an online software program utilized for students to retake classes online to regain credits needed for graduation |
| | • Project-Based Learning (PBL): Integrate multiple subject areas in projects |

Incorporate academic, soft skills, and work skills
into projects

Implement real-world scenarios

A second theme that developed during the interviews was the use of project-based learning. Project-based learning is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects.

Participate 1 uses project-based learning to incorporate academics, soft skills, and work skills into his lesson. One project her class has completed is building flower beds for the district campuses and the local Mexican restaurant.

Participant 4 stated, "that her program uses project-based learning projects to integrate multiple subject areas." By incorporating the multiple subject areas in the project, it mirrors real-life scenarios students will encounter when entering the workforce.

Participant 10 mentioned that her science teacher implements a lot of hands-on activities in class. Participant 10 stated, "that rather than just sitting in a science class, the students actually go outside and work in the garden." The science class has built a greenhouse, that provides the students with the opportunity to grow plants year-round.

### Behavioral Resources

Interview question six asked the participants what behavior resources are provided to support student success. Behavior resources can help students improve the specific behavior goals listed in their student action plan and help them transition back to their home campus. The major theme identified from the interviews was the use of a behavioral specialist to work with students.

Participant 2 stated, "Arch Ford Cooperative provides a lead behavior interventionist for his ALE program." The behavior interventionist is a former probation officer and youth probation officer. The behavior specialist is on campus daily during school hours. His job is to monitor extreme behaviors, conference with students, and help them deescalate situations that would hinder student success

Participant 3 stated, "behavior specialists and counselors come over from the student's home campus and read to students, check on them, and visit with the students." Participant 5 stated, "we spend time counseling students about making good choices." Every student in the ALE program sees a school-based mental health therapist. The therapist works with students on building strategies that they can use when they feel frustrated, upset, or angry. We have a partnership with the county juvenile officers, who will come and talk to our students about the consequences of their actions if they choose to break the law.

Participant 6's ALE program uses several behavior support services. He shared that they have a behavior specialist on campus that works with all students. The behavior specialist will first start working with students that have a behavior plan in place. The behavior specialist will review the student's SAP and build in supports for students who are working on a behavioral goal.

The interview question also identified a second theme. There are a few schools that do not have a behavioral specialist so their programs use several interventions throughout the day to meet the student's individual needs.

Participant 1 stated, "students can be pulled out of class to meet with their counselor, case worker, therapist at anytime." We try not to pull out of core classes if it

can be helped. We give students the opportunity to talk things out but at the same time if a consequence is necessary it is assigned.

Participant 4 stated, "we do not have a behavioral specialist in the district." The students are allowed to use manipulatives and fidget toys to help them calm down. The calm down corner allows students a space away from others, so they can step away before they become upset. The students can also use the calm down corner to regain their composure after a behavior incident. At the end of the day, Participant 6 and the students come together and talk about the positive things that happened during the day.

### *Social and Emotional Learning Resources*

The seventh interview question addressed the social and emotional learning resources provided to support student success. Teaching social skills to students in the alternative education setting will decrease the likelihood of the student displaying negative behaviors and increase the likelihood that their relationships with adults and peers will improve. Social skills instruction aims to remediate performance deficits for students with behavioral issues (Gresham et al., 2004). The number one theme was the use of a social and emotional curriculum. All of the 10 participants use a social and emotional curriculum. Six of the participants use the Guide for Life curriculum that the Arkansas Department of Education provides to schools as a free resource. The other four participants use a different social and emotional curriculum to work with students.

Participant 2 stated, "we utilize the Guide for Life curriculum provided by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, (DESE)". The staff will use the lessons weekly to address social skills.

Participant 3 stated, "the district sends a specialist over two to three times a week." The specialist will come in and teach a class and model the behaviors that are appropriate and respectful. She will use the curriculum and lessons from Guide for Life.

Participant 6 stated, "we have used Guide for Life for the last two years." He also commented that there is a bundle of resources available on the DESE website that supports mental health. Teachers and counselors use the lesson and activities weekly in class.

Participant 8 stated, "that their program uses the Guide for Life curriculum weekly." The teacher presents the lesson and interacts with students during the activities embedded in the lesson.

Participant 9 ALE program also uses the Guide for Life curriculum.

Participant 10 stated, "his alternative education program uses Capturing Kids Heart to address social skills." Capturing Kids' Hearts is a relationship-building approach to discipline that creates self-managing groups. Capturing Kids Heart is used weekly in all classes.

Participant 4 told me that they use the Responsibility Centered discipline and the Give Me Five approach to work on SEL skills. The objective is to teach students to recognize when they are too emotionally charged to make the best decisions and to get them to a point where they can handle situations in a positive manner. The goal of "Give 'em Five" is to help educators feel comfortable and natural while delivering a message of responsibility. The teacher says, "Give Me Five," and the students go through five steps: Eyes are watching, Ears are listening, Lips are zipped, Hands are still and Feet are quiet.

*Mental Health Resources*

The eighth interview question addressed the mental health resources provided to students in an alternative setting. All the participants in the study provide students with an opportunity to see a mental health counselor. The participants provide time for 1 on 1 with school counselors, school-based mental health services, and partner with outside agencies to provide services for students.

Participant 1 stated, "their school district partners with Therapeutic Family Services." All but one student in the program sees a therapist. Participant 1 explained that she can provide families with mental health referrals but parents can refuse the referral. School personnel cannot mandate a student see a therapist.

The district where Participant 3 works hired a mental health therapist last year. Participant 3 stated, "we have staff that transports students to their home campus to see the therapist." If one of the staff members is unable to transport to campus, the school resource officer will help with transportation. He also serves as a mentor to the students in the program. The program also partners with Family Services for mental health services. Family Services sends a therapist to our campus for school-based mental health. Participant 4 stated, "we have an onsite therapist and case managers that work with our students." The program has been using The Pointe counseling agency, but we are switching to Phoenix counseling agency. The outside agency will intervene as needed and work with any kid on campus even if that student is not a client.

Participant 6 stated, "pre-pandemic we had clinic-based mental health agencies onsite." He also stated, "now, after the pandemic, the mental health industry's just like us in education, they are having a hard time finding therapists and case managers." The

program does partner with an outside agency to provide mental health services for ALE students. Participant 6 made the comment, "it is tough to have a therapist on campus every day, sometimes we have to utilize Telehealth visits."

Participant 8 stated, "we have outside partnerships with counseling agencies." The therapist is allowed to come on campus multiple times a week to see students. Most of the therapists already have a schedule set up to see kids on campus once a week. Students are pulled from their elective classes so they do not miss core instruction. If the students are on a more intensive therapy plan, they will be seen two or three times a week.

Participant 9 stated, "students benefit from on-the-spot counseling while enrolled in ALE. Life Strategies is the program partner agency that is on campus daily. Participant 9 stated, "Life Strategies will see kids even if they are not their clients if there is an emergency." Each student in the program has an opportunity to see a counselor.

### *Transition to Home Campus*

The ninth interview question addressed how school leaders ensure a student continues to be successful when a student transitions back to their home campus. Each program develops a student transition plan when a student has met the goals listed in the student action plan. Each program has the flexibility to transition students back to their home campus by period, half day, or a full day. When a student transitions back to their home campus there must be supports available for the student if he or she is having trouble adapting to the traditional setting.

Participant 1 stated, "we transition kids for a couple of periods at a time." The ALE teacher provides the traditional classroom teacher with strategies that have been

successful in the ALE classroom. The ALE lead teacher will communicate with the home campus teacher daily to see how the student is doing.

Participant 3 stated, "I vet them real tough before I send them back." There is a behavioral plan developed for the student, which is shared with the parent, student, ALE teacher, and traditional teachers. The behavior plan provides the home campus teacher with interventions that will help the student transition back to the regular campus. Another support that is put in place when students transition, is Participant 3 goes over at least once a week to check on students. The home campus administrators will let students call participant 3 if the students are having a difficult time and need to talk.

Participant 4 stated, "a key to a successful transition is continuous communication with staff in the traditional building." The ALE staff communicates with the traditional building staff via email and phone. The staff will also make visits to the traditional building classrooms to check on students and meet with the teacher. The program is set up for student transitions either half days or full days depending on if their goals have been met.

Participant 8 mentioned that when students return to campus the guidance counselor or the mental health counselor they are seeing will check in on the student during the week. The student's grades will be checked weekly along with attendance and behavior. If the teachers start to notice something going on with the student, the teacher will notify the administrator and counselors so the issue can be addressed. The home school administrator does not want the student to get into the same situation that got them referred to ALE.

Participant 10 stated, "I want to make sure we have a plan in place and an open line of communication with the home campus." Participant 10 tried to keep the principals engaged with the students when they come to ALE. He does not want the students to get out of sight and out of mind. One of the ways he does that is to invite the principals over weekly to visit the students. Participant 10 also stated, "the other part of transitioning we do a good job at is being able to transition grade bands into partial days." Participant 10 likes to slowly transition the students back to their home campus. This gives students a chance to readjust to the traditional school setting.

### *Response to Intervention*

The tenth interview question addressed the process for providing students with Response to Intervention (RTI), as compared to those students in a traditional classroom setting. The theme identified from this interview question was each program uses RTI in the classroom daily. There are various methods and strategies implemented in the way RTI is provided to address academic and behavioral deficiencies. Alternative education staff work with students 1 on 1 and in small peer groups to address academic and behavioral deficiencies. Some programs use academic software programs, such as; MobyMax so students have another tool to develop academic skills.

Participant 2 stated, "we use MobyMax to target math and literacy deficiencies based on the student needs." Staff will also pull small groups, by grade bands, to work on math, science, and reading skills.

Participant 3 stated, "the facilitator pulls kids out of class to work on academic skills." There are several outside staff, therapists, counselors, and mentors, who come

into the building to provide students with SEL interventions. They will work with students 1 on 1 or in groups of two to three.

Participant 7 stated, "that students get additional RTI academic support within the ALE classroom." If we are looking to transition a student, that student may start going to a small group literacy or math intervention class at the student's home campus. This allows for the student to receive academic intervention and work on transitioning at the same time.

Students in Participant 8's program take the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress, NWEA Map test. Participant 8 stated, "we look at the testing data so we can identify their areas of weakness, present the data to the staff, and develop an RTI plan for each student." A specialist from the Dawson Education Cooperative has trained the staff on different teaching strategies they can use in class to meet the student's learning styles.

Participant 9 stated, "students get pulled one on one based on their academic SAP goals." Students are also pulled for small group work based on their SAP goals.

Table 8

*Emergent Topics related to Behavioral Resources Theme*

| Theme | Topics |
|---|---|
| Behavioral Resources | • Social and Emotional Learning Resources |
| | • Mental Health Resources |
| | • Transition to Home Campus |
| | • Response to Intervention (RTI) |

*College and Career Preparedness*

The eleventh interview question addressed how alternative learning environments prepare students for college or a career after high school. The main theme identified from the interview question was that eight of the participants utilize a work-based program. The work-based program offers students a flexible schedule to attend classes, gain real-life work experience, and earn an income. Students enrolled in a work-based program can earn a half credit each semester towards graduation if they are employed during the semester.

Participant 2 implements the Jobs for Arkansas Graduate (JAG) program into their alternative education class schedule. Participant 2 stated, "the JAG program allows his students to gain valuable work experience and develop soft skills that the students will need when they graduate high school."

Participant 6 stated, "we use the JAG program for the juniors and seniors that have jobs." The program can offer a flexible schedule that allows students to attend classes only for part of the day and then go to work. Participant 6 gave an example, one of the young ladies in the program, is the primary breadwinner of her family. Last year, as a junior, she worked at the chicken plant. She worked the graveyard shift and did not attend the first and second periods. She came to school for periods third thru seventh.

Participant 8 echoed that their program also implements the JAG program. The teacher that facilitates the JAG program goes out into the community two days a week and checks in on the students at their jobs. The teacher also communicates with the employer via phone and email during the week.

Participant 10 stated, "we have an internship program for our juniors and seniors."

They can attend school for half a day and then leave to work in the internship program.

The internship can be paid or non-paid, it depends on which program the students enroll

in. Another thing the ALE program offers is a welding class during the instructional day.

This provides students with the opportunity to graduate high school with some

prerequisites needed to enroll in a welding school or apply for an apprenticeship.

Table 9

*Emergent Topics related to College and Career Preparation Theme*

| Theme | Topics |
|-------|--------|
| College and Career Preparation | • Work-Based Programs<br>Flexible schedule to attend class and work<br>Gain work experience<br>Develop soft skills<br>Earn credits toward graduation<br>Internship Opportunities<br>• College and Career Classes<br>Teacher/Guidance Counselor<br>Help students apply for financial aid/scholarships<br>Help students apply for college<br>Inform students of application deadlines<br>Teach students how to build resumes and complete job applications<br>Talk with students about appropriate dress for interviews<br>Talk with students about the soft skills employers look for when hiring |

Another theme identified from the interview questions was the use of College and Career Readiness classes. Three of the participants' programs offer a College and Career Readiness class led by either a career coach or a career orientation teacher. The classes discuss topics such as; applying for college, applying for financial aid, building a resume, filling out a job application, and building a monthly budget.

Participant 2 stated, "that the teacher conducts mock interviews, teaches students how to build resumes, and talks about professional dress when going to an interview." The teacher works with students on how to apply for college and the school counselor works with students on applying for financial aid and scholarships and also discusses deadlines for application.

Participant 4 teaches students basic life skills, such as; how to complete a job application, how to balance a checking account, and how to build a budget for living expenses based on a monthly check (groceries, bills, rent, etc.). Participant 4 also has the students write every day because it is a skill they need for work and life.

Participant 7 added a teacher to his program this year who is certified to teach College and Career Readiness and Leadership and Service Learning. The gentleman that teaches both of those courses spends two periods a day with the ALE students and the remainder of the day on the high school campus. The non-traditional students and the traditional students receive the same college and career resources and leadership education. The juniors and seniors are enrolled in the College and Career Readiness class and the freshman and sophomores are enrolled in the Leadership and Service Learning class. Participant 7 stated, "we are trying to educate the students on soft skills and lessons on empathy and selflessness."

*Strengths of an Alternative Education Program*

The next question asked to all participants was, based on your experience, what are the strengths of an alternative education program? Participants see the strengths of alternative education as a place that is student-centered, safe, and accepting of everyone. A place where students feel that they belong and can graduate high school or earn a GED. It is never less than education, but rather an approach that is different.

Participant 1 stated, "that small class size, flexible scheduling, and the hybrid program as major strengths of her program." Participant 1 mentioned that her program will work with students on obtaining a GED if that is best for the student.

Participant 2 stated, "flexibility is the biggest strength of their program." There is the flexibility to meet kids where they are and set them up for their best success. Another strength of the program discussed was the rapport the staff built with the kids.

Participant 3 stated, "the smaller class setting and being able to spend more time with students helps staff tailor more to the student's academic, behavioral, and emotional needs as our strength."

Participant 5 talked about the strength of his program is that he has a staff that really cares for all students. He stated, "we take it personal, we get into these kids' lives, and want to see them succeed."

Participant 6 echoed what participant 2 mentioned, I think just doing things kind of outside the box, with a little more flexibility to meet the students where they are academically and behaviorally.

Participant 10 stated, "I think our program is unique." The program is not just computer-based, there are teachers teaching the class." Participant 10 said, "I think the

biggest advantage we have is our fantastic staff and flexibility." Another strength

participant talked about was, the staff builds such a good rapport with the students, they

do not want to leave the program. The flexibility with the schedule allows Participant 10

to enroll students in a traditional class, credit recovery classes, internships, and half days

to meet the student's individual needs.

Table 10

*Emergent Topics related to Strengths of an Alternative Education Program*

| Theme | Topics |
|---|---|
| Strengths of AEP | • Flexible Scheduling<br><br>• Flexible to tailor to the student's academic, behavioral, and emotional needs<br><br>• Flexibility with traditional programs, workforce programs, internships, and hybrid programs<br>• Flexibility with Face to Face instruction and Online instruction |

Table 11

*Alternative Education Students Graduating or Earning GED; 2021-22*

| Participant | Number of Students in ALE | Number of Students Graduated | Number of Students Earned a GED |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 22 | 4 | 0 |
| 2 | 81 | 19 | 0 |
| 3 | 211 | 27 | 0 |
| 4 | 31 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 68 | 3 | 0 |
| 6 | 86 | 1 | 23 |
| 7 | 85 | 4 | 0 |
| 8 | 48 | 6 | 0 |
| 9 | 44 | 2 | 0 |
| 10 | 155 | 22 | 12 |

**Summary**

The study explored the components of alternative education programs that assist at-risk students in and outside of school. Alternative Education provides at-risk students with a smaller and more personalized environment in which to learn and form strong connections with school staff and peers. Alternative education programs are designed to address the individual academic, behavioral, and emotional needs of the students enrolled in the program. Alternative programs present alternative pathways in which to achieve educational success in the classroom and earn a high school diploma. Alternative education programs provide multiple resources that the traditional campus may not be able to offer.

One key finding in this study is the strength of alternative education as a place that is student-centered, safe, and accepting of everyone, a place where students feel that they belong, and can graduate high school or earn a GED. The 10 participants operate an alternative education program that is tailored to the needs of the student. There is not one component of an ALE that is best for every student. Alternative education meets the student and addresses the area of deficiency whether it is academic, behavioral, or emotional.

There are several components that make alternative education a good pathway for student success. Other key findings, such as; a staff that has a heart for students, building rapport with students, providing access to academic, behavioral, and emotional interventions, onsite mental health counseling, and flexible scheduling provide students with what they need to be successful. It is important to remember that education is not a one size fits all model.

**Chapter V: Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how school leaders make decisions about the resources a school district provides to an alternative learning environment to ensure alternative education students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma. This chapter will discuss the summary of findings for the 10 participants and the resources a school district provides to an alternative learning environment to ensure students are successful. The first section will provide a summary of the findings. This chapter will also present a recommendation for practice and recommendations for future research. The guiding research question for this study was: How do school leaders make decisions about the resources provided to an ALE to ensure those students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma?

**Summary of Findings**

The study investigated the overarching question of how school leaders make decisions about the resources a school district provides to an alternative learning environment to ensure alternative education students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma. The essential topics studied include the following components:

- Referral to an ALE program
- Goals of an ALE program,
- Systems to ensure goals are met
- Staff credentials and qualities
- Academic Support

- Behavior support

- Social and emotional learning support

- Mental health support

- Student transitions

- Response to Intervention

In this study, the findings indicated that there are several interventions and supports in place to help students be successful in class, earn a GED, or graduate high school. The interviews allowed district administrators, building administrators, and ALE educators to discuss the academic, behavioral, and support services provided to alternative education students. These components are important in helping students become successful in and outside the classroom.

Once a student is enrolled in an ALE program the referral committee and student will develop a student action plan (SAP). The SAP list the goals that the student must accomplish to return to the traditional campus. The goals are individualized for each student. Along with the goals, the committee identifies the appropriate interventions that will help the student meet their goals.

Transitioning a student back to his or her home campus is the focus of all ALE programs in this study. When transitioning a student, the ALE staff and traditional campus must develop a plan that provides supports as the student adjusts to the transition. In most programs, students can transition per school period, half day, or full day. The flexibility of an ALE program allows students to have a tailored schedule for traditional classes, credit recovery classes, and participation in work-based programs. This

flexibility in scheduling allows students to transition to the schedule that meets the needs of the student best.

Another component of ALE that provides support for at-risk students is the staff. Administrators not only look for certified staff but the staff that has the heart for working with at-risk students. Several participants look for the following characteristics when hiring staff: good demeanor, empathy, patience, understanding, and someone that will be a champion for the students.

The participants in this study range from a large school of over 9,500 students to a small school of fewer than 650 students. No matter the size of the school the findings indicated that there are several interventions and supports put in place to help students be successful in class, earn a GED, or graduate high school. The difference in the participants' program is how they implement the supports and wrap-around services.

**Research Question**

How do school leaders make decisions about the resources provided to an ALE to ensure those students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma?

**Conclusions**

The findings showed that ALE is like an onion. There are several layers put in place to help students succeed. There is no one size fits all approach to educating at-risk students. Some students will need more supports and interventions than others. The study explored the resources needed to ensure alternative education students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma. The data

from this study helped provide insight into how an ALE setting can support at-risk students.

Every participant acknowledged there is a referral process for referring and placing a student in an alternative education setting. This is the first of many steps in providing a successful educational experience for at-risk students. The student's academic, behavioral, and mental health assessment data is reviewed to ensure that the proper supports are out in place to help the student reach his or her goals.

The participants in this study provided insight into how their programs provide students with academic, behavioral, and social interventions. The programs have distinctive characteristics that meet students where they are educationally. In this study, participants had two main goals for their programs. The first goal was to have their students transition back to the traditional campus and the second goal was for students to graduate on time or earn a high school equivalency diploma. For this to happen ALE programs must utilize several resources.

When hiring staff for an ALE program, administrators always want to hire a certified teacher but it is just as important to hire a person that has patience, loves working with at-risk students, and can build rapport. For students to be successful in alternative learning environments, committed faculty is a necessity. The staff must care deeply for their students, set high expectations for them, and believe unwaveringly that all students can learn.

ALE programs use a variety of resources to help students reach the goals listed in the student's student action plan. ALE programs use academic interventions, such as credit recovery for students to regain credits toward graduation. Behavior specialists

work with students on developing coping skills that can be utilized when a student becomes frustrated in class or interacting with an adult or peer. The social and emotional learning curriculum is used to prepare lessons that can help students learn how to develop relationships and interact with adults and peers. The hope is that the negative behaviors will decrease and that building positive relationships with others will improve.

ALE programs serve at-risk students through flexibility, providing specific interventions to meet the student's needs, and innovative programming. Flexible scheduling allows ALE programs to develop a schedule that best fits the students. Intervention time is implemented into the student's schedule to address the student's academic, behavioral, and mental health needs. ALE programs also use flexible scheduling to help students transition back to the traditional campus. Students can transition per period, half day, or a full day. Flexible scheduling also provides students the option to attend class half days so they can participate in work-based programs or go to work to help provide for family needs.

**Findings Related to the Literature**

Alternative education programs are designed to address the individual needs of the students enrolled in the program. The hope is that students placed in an ALE program will succeed in a smaller setting without facing many of the challenges they experienced on the traditional campus. The findings indicated that all 10 participants in the study consider small class sizes as a strength of an ALE program. Classes are no larger than 15 students per class period. This allows staff to provide one on one and small-group instruction and intervention for students.

An ALE setting is a tier 3 intervention that is in place to provide intensive supports for students. Each participant in the study provides specific resources (academic, behavioral, mental health, and SEL classes) that meet the individual need of the students. This corroborates with what the literature presents about tier 3 intervention. At this level, students receive individualized intensive interventions that target the student's academic and behavioral skill deficits (Hawkins et al., 2008).

Many students who, for one reason or another, are not successful in regular public schools are being referred and sent to alternative placements (Powell, 2003). This also corroborates the findings in the study. Participants in this study listed multiple reasons students are referred to an ALE. Some of the reasons are lack of proficiency in English Language Arts and math, transitioning from a long-term mental health facility, dropout risk, disruptive behavior, abuse, inadequate emotional support, recurring absenteeism, or being a single parent.

Student enrollment and transition in the nation's public alternative schools are highly fluid (Kleiner et al., 2002). Alternative placement will vary from a short period or longer with a goal to transition the student back to their home campus (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). The literature and the findings in this study support each other. The participants in this interview all agree that transitioning a student back to campus is a goal of the program. All the participants explained how fluid transitioning students back to their home campus can be. As soon as the students have met their academic and behavioral goals listed in the student action plan, they can begin the process of transitioning back to their home campus. Before students transition back to their home campus, there is a transition meeting to determine if the student's goals have been met and determine if it is

best for the student to transition for a class period, half day, or full day. During the meeting, the committee develops supports for the student as he or she makes the adjustment of returning to their home campus.

Whether students at-risk of educational failure transfer back to the regular school or successfully graduate from an alternative setting may depend in part on the quality of the education and services they receive (Foley & Pang, 2006). Two important factors include curriculum and a variety of support services provided to meet the needs of the student (Kleiner et al., 2002). It is the responsibility of the school district to ensure that an alternative learning environment provides a viable curriculum and implements interventions to ensure students have an opportunity to learn at high levels. The findings from the study support the literature.

All participants in the study follow the curriculum approved by the department of education. Students in an ALE program have face-to-face instruction and an opportunity to work on web-based learning programs. Administrators and counselors develop schedules for students which include the required courses to graduate high school. For those students needing to recover credits, an ALE program has the flexibility to schedule credit recovery classes so students can retake classes to regain credits to graduate on time.

ALE programs are not tied to a rigid schedule. Flexibility in developing a student schedule gives an ALE program the ability to provide students with academic, behavioral, and mental health interventions anytime throughout the day. The findings indicated that all participants in the study provide students with RTI. The participants provided interventions for all students but implemented RTI in different ways. All of the

participants provide RTI using one on one and small-group interventions with paraprofessionals and certified teachers. Three of the ALE programs use the same instructional strategies for RTI but also incorporate software, such as; MobyMax, as a tool to help students overcome their academic deficiencies.

The findings also support the literature when it comes to the importance of behavioral support, social and emotional learning, and mental health services. Students enrolled in an alternative environment require behavioral support to improve their life circumstances (Flower et al., 2011). All participants in the student provide behavioral, social and emotional learning and mental health support for their students. Three of the larger ALE programs have access to a full-time behavioral specialist while the remaining participants rely on school counselors and mental health therapists to provide behavioral interventions. Participant 4 also relies on the school counselor to provide behavior interventions but also indicated that her program uses manipulatives and provides a calm-down corner for students who become overstimulated and need a place to de-escalate.

Seven of the participants in the study indicated that they use the Guide for Life curriculum provided by the department of education to provide social and emotional lessons for students enrolled in the ALE program. The remaining three participants use different social and emotional curriculums to address student needs. Lessons are taught weekly by the therapist, behavioral specialist, and staff. Along with group lessons, mental health therapists and staff pull students individually to work with students.

All participants in the study acknowledged that their programs partner with outside agencies to provide mental health services. The findings indicated that four of the programs provide onsite school-based mental health counselors while the others have a

scheduled time that outside agencies send a therapist to the ALE campus. If there is an emergency, those programs that do not have an onsite mental health counselor can call the agencies and ask for a therapist to be sent to the ALE campus.

Teachers and staff are an important component of an ALE program. The findings support the literature. Teachers certified in multiple content areas and grade levels are game changers. "Building relationships with students implies efficacy, respect from the teacher and what the child brings to the class, and allowing the experiences of the child to be recognized in the classroom" (Hattie 2009, p. 118). The first thing participants specified they look for when hiring teachers and staff are the following qualities: building rapport with students, empathy, and heart for working with at-risk students. The second thing that all participants look for when hiring staff is certification. Participants look for someone with multiple certifications and multiple experiences. Participant 4 hired a person that is a certified paraprofessional, and certified nurse, and holds a provisional teaching license.

**Limitations**

The Covid-19 pandemic changed how part of the research was conducted and investigated. The interviews were conducted via Google Meet instead of face-to-face. While Google Meet allowed the researcher and participants to interact, it was different from a face-to-face interview. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the amount of time people spend in front of a computer and less time interacting with each other in person. I feel that if the interview were face-to-face, the researcher and participant would have had longer interviews. This would have led to a more personable interaction and provided more data for the study.

**Recommendations for Practice**

       The data collected in this study will provide school leaders in a traditional school and an alternative school setting with strategies, interventions, and wrap-around services to reach at-risk students. Reporting the resources and components of ALE programs through this study will be valuable to superintendents, principals, alternative education directors, and teachers of alternative learning programs in determining what resources are effective and have the greatest possibility to reduce the likelihood that students will become disengaged and fail to finish their high school education.

       Alternative learning programs can change the lives of at-risk students when the traditional forms of education do not provide the student with the wrap-around services needed to be successful. Recommendations for practice stemming from this study revolve around the student action plan, curriculum and instruction, staffing, transitioning back to the home campus, and mental health.

*Student Action Plan*

       It is the recommendation of the researcher that individualized curriculum and instruction be implemented with fidelity using individualized learning plans. The individual SAP targets academic growth, behavioral growth, and social skill development. A student support plan should be established and involved in the monitoring of the student's progress. The data from the referral and student action plan will guide the student support team as they put interventions in place to reinforce and support the student in the class. The following points of emphasis should be in place to ensure student success:

- Parents/guardians are on the student support team and are involved in developing and implementing the student's plan.

- Plans are developed and based on the student's differentiated (accelerated or remedial) needs.

- The SAP includes reviewing current credit attainment and ensuring the student is making adequate progress toward graduation. If there is a lack of credits, the student is to be enrolled in credit recovery classes.

- Administrators, teachers, and school counselors utilize individual student data in making instructional decisions and developing the education plan.

- The SAP must incorporate short-term and long-term goals for the student to work towards. Student goals are developed for academic and behavioral growth depending on the individual need of the student.

- The SAP addresses wrap-around services (IEP, 504 plan, mental health, social and emotional learning, RTI) to meet the student's educational needs.

- Student plans need to be reviewed each quarter and updated twice a year based on informal and formal assessment data, teacher feedback, and student feedback.

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

It is the recommendation of the researcher that instructional practices and curricula are rigorous and inclusive for all students. Classes reflect but are not limited to, those offered in the traditional educational setting. Students also have the opportunity to learn in non-core content areas such as fine arts, health, physical education, music,

service learning, and career and technical courses. The following points of emphasis should be in place to ensure student success:

- Administrators must ensure students have access to the guaranteed and viable academic core curriculum. The curriculum is supported by access to an up-to-date and well-maintained collection of textbooks, library media, technology, software, and other instructional materials that are age and grade-appropriate for all learners.

- The ALE program offers a credit recovery program for students to redo the coursework for a class they failed, therefore, earning back their credits to graduate.

- Teachers have been trained in research-based teaching strategies and behavior management strategies that are age and grade-appropriate for the student population.

- Teachers identify and provide appropriate instruction designed to close gaps in student learning.

- Response to Intervention is built into the student's schedule and implemented with fidelity.

- Differentiated instructional strategies are implemented to meet the individual learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners).

- Community involvement using service learning as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction.

- Instruction integrates life skills into the curricula and affords the student with opportunities to put the acquired skills into action.

- There are opportunities for students to explore career options through career fairs, job shadowing, internships, mentorships, and work-based learning.

*Staffing*

It is the recommendation of the researcher that alternative education programs are staffed with certified, effective, innovative, and qualified individuals. A study conducted by Quinn and Poirier (2007) focused on three different alternative programs revealing that effective teachers in an alternative setting were characterized as being respectful, caring, honest, genuine, and trusting when compared to teachers in more traditional settings. "The heart of alternative education is the teacher" (Morley, 1991, p. 16).

Ongoing professional development is crucial to ensure staff stays current on best practices, is trained in current research-based teaching methods that facilitate active learning, and promotes creativity. Each teacher should have an individualized professional development plan. Teachers need professional development not only in academia but also in social-emotional learning, special services, and mental health awareness. The following points of emphasis should be in place to ensure student success:

- Enthusiastic, energetic, and innovative teachers who demonstrate multiple teaching styles are employed in the ALE program.
- Administration ensures ongoing professional development is geared towards the specific needs of teachers and support personnel as it relates to their role in the ALE program.
- Staff members create written professional development plans that facilitate personal and professional growth, identify the professional development needs

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of the individual, and establish short- and long-term SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-Focused, Time-Bound) goals.

- The focus of professional development is on student achievement, effective RTI development, social skills, and college and career readiness.

- Professional development opportunities include information related to effective collaboration with community agencies and services to support the student in the home and workplace.

- Increasing staff capacity through training to ensure the use of research-based strategies that align with the needs of the program population is used.

*Transitioning back to the Home Campus*

It is the recommendation of the researcher that when a student is transitioning back to their home campus that supports are in place to help the student adjust to a new educational setting. An ALE student should not transition back to their home campus until the goals listed in the student's SAP are meet. When those goals have been met the student support team will meet and develop a transition plan for the student. This is like the referral meeting, a committee will meet and discuss if the student should return to the home campus for certain class periods, a half day, or a full day. The committee will then decide upon the interventions to implement so the student has a successful transition phase. The following points of emphasis should be in place to ensure student success:

- Clear transition criteria and procedures are in place to address student reintegration back into a traditional setting.

- Transition plans include that a counselor will check in on the student weekly to address any concerns the student has based on academic needs.

- Transition plan includes that a mental health counselor will check on the student weekly to address any social, emotional, or mental health concerns the student has.

- Transition plans include a mentor assigned to the student. The mentor will be a staff member on the traditional campus that can provide guidance, advice, and feedback to support the students as he or she adjusts to the new educational environment.

- Transition plans include continued wrap-around services provided by both the ALE program and the traditional campus.

*Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning*

It is the recommendation of the researcher that alternative education programs implement school-based mental health and social and emotional learning. School-based mental health is a vital part of a student support system. Providing school-based mental health can be accomplished in various ways. The district can hire on-site school-based therapists or social workers. Therapists and social workers can provide access to prevention programming, early identification of mental health challenges, and treatment options. They can also work with students on how to develop social skills and interact appropriately with adults and peers. The district can also partner with outside mental health agencies to develop a comprehensive program of support and services. Mentally healthy students are more likely to go to school ready to learn, actively engage in school activities, have supportive and caring connections with adults and peers, and have nonaggressive behaviors. ALE programs need to implement school-based mental health services. The following points of emphasis should be in place to ensure student success:

- Educate staff, parents, and students on symptoms of and help for mental health problems.

- Teach and reinforce positive behaviors and decision-making.

- Develop a referral process to ensure that all students have equal access to mental health services and supports.

- Develop evidence-based SEL programs to promote student skills in dealing with bullying and conflicts, solving problems, developing healthy peer relationships, engaging in activities to prevent suicide and substance abuse.

- Develop interventions for students in need of additional support services such as peer groups to deal with grief, anger, anxiety, and sadness.

- Develop student and family supports and resources.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

More research on this topic is needed to further understand how school leaders make decisions about the resources a school district provides to an alternative learning environment to ensure alternative education students are successful in the classroom, graduate on time, or earn a high school equivalency diploma. Specifically, expanding this study to include more district administrators, building-level administrators, and ALE staff would help build a profile of the type of resources needed to help at-risk students succeed. Also, expanding the study to include more ALE administrators from neighboring states would allow for a comparison of the state of Arkansas with other states that have similar ALE programs.

This would help determine best practices for providing ALE students with the most effective educational setting as possible. Future studies could also explore the

differences in staff, student action plans, flexible scheduling, credit recovery classes, and GED preparatory classes to determine the best interventions and instructional practices to implement. It would be worthwhile to look at the number of students that graduate high school or earn a high school equivalency diploma to determine the effectiveness of the resources used in an ALE program.

More research on program effectiveness of an ALE program would provide data on the percentage of students transitioning back to their home campus and the graduation rate. The percentage of students returning to their home campus is one measure of the effectiveness of an ALE program. An expanded look at the graduation rate statewide would provide another measure of the effectiveness of an ALE program.

Research could be expanded to neighboring states that have ALE programs. The researcher could then build a comparison table of the percentage of students transitioning back to their home campus and graduation rate. By comparing the data between states, the researcher can look at the different interventions in place that are helping students return to their home campus and graduate on time.

More research on the funding provided to an ALE program would help administrators understand the calculation formula for funding. Arkansas school districts receive $7,349 per student. When a student is enrolled in an ALE program the state provides approximately $4,700 in additional funding. Since students transition in and out of an ALE setting there is a funding formula that calculates the appropriate amount of funds awarded due to the number of days a student is enrolled in the program. Further research into ALE funding could provide the amount of funding other states provide for

their ALE programs, a calculation formula, and a comparison of what percent is budgeted for salaries, materials, supplies, interventions, and wraparound services.

**Project Summary**

The study provided insight into how different ALE programs provide supports for their students. There were similarities in the ALE programs and there were differences in the ALE programs. Each program is tailored to their student's needs. Every participant in the study has a referral process for deciding if students meet the criteria for placement in the ALE program. During this process, each of the participants has committees that sit down with the student and parent to develop academic and behavioral goals for the student to work towards. If these goals are met the student can transition back to the traditional campus. The process is the same for all those that participated in the study. The difference is how they help the student succeed.

For instance, the larger programs had an onsite behavioral specialist that worked with students during intervention time to address behavior issues that happened in the classroom. A few of the smaller programs did not have that luxury, so the administrator, counselor, and teachers provided students with behavioral supports. Another interesting piece was that mental health was regarded as an important piece for helping students but only three of the ALE programs had onsite access to therapists while other programs had a partnership with outside agency that only came two to three times a week to see students. There needs to be a priority in getting school-based mental health personnel on site every day.

There was consistency in that everyone mentioned having the flexibility to tailor schedules, RTI, and work-based programs for students. The flexibility in the program

allows staff to meet the students where they are academically, behaviorally, and meet the student's personal needs. Administrators can provide students with individualized interventions, provide credit recovery, and develop an academic schedule so students can attend class and go to work. Some of the students must work to help provide for their families.

Alternative education provides students with different avenues to be successful. This study will mean more to me than most of the people that read it. I have seen the positive impact an ALE program can have on students. I have seen students enter an ALE program devasted by trauma, lack of credits towards graduation, in need of a therapist, and no support from family to do better in school or life. I am part of an ALE program that I am very proud of. I see what a caring staff, mental health services, a credit recovery program, and a career and technical program can do for students. Staff and students build a positive rapport with each other that provides students with a cheerleader to keep them motivated and push students not to give up. There are wrap-around services available for students and families in need.

From this study, I have learned that all participants care for the whole child and want to see the child succeed in life. The study has demonstrated to me the importance of research and presenting the findings for others to learn. This study has taught me that digging deeper can provide information on how to better a person, an idea, or a program. This is what I want educators to realize when they read this study. Everything listed, presented, and explained in this study will help school districts improve their ALE programs so at-risk students have an opportunity for a better life.

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Appendix

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

**ATU** ARKANSAS TECH
UNIVERSITY

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND
SPONSORED PROGRAMS**

1509 North Boulder Avenue
Administration, Room 207
Russellville, AR 72801

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October 13, 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

The Arkansas Tech University Institutional Review Board has approved the IRB
application for Heath Miller's proposed research, entitled "Alternative Learning
Environment: Resources Needed to Ensure Student Success." The Institutional Review
Board used an expedited review procedure under 45 CFR 46.110 (7). Please use number
I-2022-09 when referencing this study.

Please note that in the event that any of the parameters of the study change, the
researcher may be required to submit an amended application.

Please proceed with your research. We wish you success with this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Tennille Lasker-Scott, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
Arkansas Tech University