

THE EFFECT OF A MINIMUM CREDIT DIPLOMA PATHWAY ON HIGH SCHOOL
GRADUATION RATE

by

Teresa Vassar Strickland

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

There are many paths to high school graduation. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has driven schools to be creative in seeking strategies by which students successfully earn their high school diploma. In this non-experimental, causal-comparative study, a large Western North Carolina school district utilizes a minimum credit diploma to help students who previously experienced repeated academic failure achieve high school graduation by earning 21 course credits. The district requires traditional diploma-seeking students to earn seven additional credits to the 21 required by the State. Participants included high school graduates from the 2013-2014 school year. Both traditional and alternative diploma paths were studied to determine the impact of the alternative diploma on graduation rate of the traditional high school as well as the district. No significant difference was noted in the individual high school's reported graduation rate and graduation rate without the alternative diploma program, suggesting that the alternative diploma pathway may not have an effect on the overall graduation rate at the individual high school level. However, the study indicated a significant difference in End of Course scores for alternative diploma and traditional diploma students, suggesting that End of Course test performance has an effect on diploma pathway. The study also indicated a significant difference in reported graduation rates and graduation rate without the use of the alternative diploma program, suggesting that the alternative diploma program has an effect on the district's overall graduation rate.

Keywords: alternative school, high-stakes testing, cohort graduation rate, dropout

Dedication Page

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Stephen Strickland. Your loving support throughout this process has been my inspiration and salvation. Stephen, your continuous love and encouragement carried me through. You truly took care of me, our children, and our home while I have had my nose in the book and/or computer for the past years.

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In the edited words of Dr. Seuss (1960), “You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. [Let God be the One] who’ll decide where [you] go” (Seuss, 1960, p. 2). I love you, Stephen, Vassar, and Mathis, to the end plus one.

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List of Abbreviations

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

End of Course Test (EOC)

End of Grade Test (EOG)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED)

Local Education Agency (LEA)

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE)

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Reserved Officer's Training Corps (ROTC)

School Performance Grade (SPG)

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely (SMART)

Western County Public Schools (WCPS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of an alternative diploma pathway and its impact on the overall graduation rate in a large Western North Carolina school district. This study further investigated the impact of students' End of Course test results on potential participation in the alternative diploma pathway as opposed to the traditional diploma pathway. Chapter One includes a brief background of the problem, an explanation of how the problem impacts the researcher, the research questions and null hypotheses, and a list of terms used throughout this study along with definitions for each.

Background

With the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, No Child Left Behind, graduation rates were pushed to the forefront of education (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], 2013). Schools' and Local Education Agencies' graduation rates became a matter of public record. According to the No Child Left Behind Act, schools were to meet a 100 percent proficiency rate by 2014 and to determine a goal for graduation rate (NCDPI, 2012a). Under the pressure of living up to this legislation, schools sought alternatives to increase their graduation rate.

In their search for creative and inventive methods to increase graduation rates, schools implemented a variety of initiatives, encouraging students to persist to graduation instead of dropping out prior to completion. One deterrent to student persistence is repeated academic failure. When students become aware that they cannot possibly graduate with their four-year cohort peers, they have the potential to choose instead to drop out (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Graduation cohort refers to those students who entered high school together as ninth grade students and are expected to successfully complete by earning the credits required for

high school diploma with four consecutive years or eight consecutive semesters of high school. (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Academic failure can be influenced by a host of outside factors including lack of motivation, absenteeism, disciplinary infractions, and general lack of academic progress (Benard, 1993; Fan & Wolters, 2014; Geronimo, 2010; Jolivet, Swoszowski, & Ennis, 2013).

High-stakes testing has also played a major role in the challenge schools face regarding dropout and graduation rates (Nichols & Berliner, 2008a; Papay, Murnane, & Willett, 2010; Polesel, Dulfer, & Turnbull, 2012; Reardon, Arshan, Atteberry, & Kurlaender, 2010; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Historically, students who perform poorly in school have a tendency to drop out of school. While this is not new, the profound focus on high-stakes testing has led to a new phenomenon. Students who generally scored in the average grade range and are faced with less than optimal high-stakes testing scores are beginning to choose to drop out (Reardon et al., 2010; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). There is also a trend toward larger ninth grade classes. This is due, in part, to rising eighth graders being joined in number with the ninth grade students who have failed. Students who have been socially promoted throughout grade school are faced for the first time with being retained due to academic failure (Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

In the 1960s and 1970s, alternative schools became popular as schools were seeking other, more impactful, ways to educate and graduate students (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Stanley and Plucker (2008) deemed alternative education a viable option that parents could choose for their students. Raywid (1994) identified three types of alternative schools. Type I schools are those schools which provide a more creative and innovative educational environment. Type II schools are schools of last chance. Type III schools are those schools which offer a heavy

emphasis on academic remediation. Alternative schools range from those intended for students to attend briefly, as in the case of remediation and last chance alternative schools, to magnet schools such as Raywid's (1994) Type I schools, which are intended for students to attend throughout their high school years.

Credit recovery programs became popular in the 1960s and 1970s (Lange & Sletten, 2002) as schools sought ways for students to repeat courses without impacting class sizes (Kennedy, 2010; Kronholz, 2011). As the practice of credit recovery was refined, different companies began to create products for schools to purchase which included accelerated programs. Programs such as OdysseyWare and Compass Learning became valuable resources within schools for students to recover courses. Students who participated in online credit recovery courses through OdysseyWare completed courses quickly by working through the courses one unit at a time. When students earned a proficient score on a unit pre-test, they could skip to the next unit. Progressing through units quickly enabled students to finish courses in record time (Journell, 2010). Often, students were able to complete more than one course within a scheduled semester block (Davis, 2011; Dessoff, 2009; Plummer, 2012).

A large Western North Carolina school district introduced an alternative graduation program as an option in nine traditional high schools in the 2009-2010 academic year, based on the belief that every student can learn and deserves the opportunity to earn their education (Caroleo, 2014; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Alternative education has been available since the onset of Boston English, the first public high school (Birch, 2013). In the case of this school district, the alternative graduation program is defined as an academic program within the traditional school environment for students who have experienced repeated academic failure

(Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010; Jolivette, McDaniel, Sprague, Swain-Bradway & Ennis, 2012; Kraftl, 2014).

Recognizing the stigma associated with failing to graduate with cohort peers (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2013; Nolan, Cole, Wroughton, Claton-Code, & Riffe, 2013; Schargel & Smink, 2013), these students are given the opportunity to participate in the alternative diploma program. This alternative presents students who have fallen significantly behind their cohort peers with the opportunity to graduate within four years of entering high school. The lack of these students' academic success creates a situation in which the students fail to recognize the possibility of graduating with their cohort peers. Many students in this situation consider dropping out of high school (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Since the introduction of the alternative graduation program into the high schools, the school district's graduation rate has continued to climb yearly. In the past two years, this school district has been among the top ten school districts in the state in regard to graduation rate (NCDPI, 2014b). It is time to determine the genuine impact of the alternative graduation program on the graduation rate of the school district.

The Western County Public Schools (WCPS*) alternative graduation program gave students the opportunity to earn their high school diploma by successfully completing the minimum number of credits as required by the State instead of completing the 28 credits as required by the local education agency. "These students must have (unsuccessfully) completed 3 semesters and be 16 years old before admission into the program" (WCPS, 2011). This opportunity was sanctioned by the state in order for schools to give students who were behind academically the opportunity to graduate with their cohort peers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2012b). Included in the minimum number of credits as required by

the State are all of the core academic classes. Students participating in the alternative graduation program, however, are not required to complete the additional elective courses which are required by the local education agency. In order to be eligible to participate in the alternative graduation program, students must have fallen negligible (WCPS*, 2011). For confidentiality reasons, the actual name of the school district is not being used.

Problem Statement

Since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was amended through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (NCDPI, 2012a), there has been a renewed focus on the graduation rates of public high schools. When students enter high school, they are expected to graduate with their four-year cohort group of peers regardless of their academic ability. In an effort to help students in their pursuit of a high school diploma, schools have begun to incorporate various alternative programs as they seek to provide students with their best opportunity to succeed (Miller, 2010). Every student deserves the opportunity to successfully complete their high school education (Caroleo, 2014; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this non-experimental, causal-comparative study was to investigate the effectiveness of an alternative diploma program for students who graduated from high school in a large Western school district in North Carolina. A causal-comparative study was appropriate for this research as it was impossible to manipulate the independent variable, choice of diploma pathway, or assign subjects to groups because the data was collected ex post facto (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). At this stage in the research, the independent variable, diploma pathway, was generally defined as the pathway by which a student chooses to graduate from high school in a large Western North Carolina school district.

There were two graduation pathways in consideration for this research study. The first was the traditional diploma pathway, which required that a student earn a minimum of 28 Carnegie units – 21 of those credits were required by the State, and the others were required by the Local Education Agency (LEA). The credits required of each high school student participating in the traditional diploma pathway also included those credits that were required by the State of every student participating in the minimum credit, alternative diploma pathway. Additionally, it was required that each student participating in the traditional diploma pathway earn a minimum of their maximum potential minus four. For example, a student in this large Western North Carolina school district all four years would have the potential to earn 32 credits. To successfully earn a traditional diploma, they had to complete the courses required by the state (as outlined in the alternative diploma pathway) and other courses to total 28 credits (WCPS, 2011).

The second graduation pathway under consideration was the alternative diploma pathway, which required that students earn 21 Carnegie units – those specifically required by the State. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2012b; WCPS, 2011), students in the 2010-2014 graduation cohorts must earn 21 credits at a minimum which must include:

- 4 English credits: English I, II, III, IV;
- 4 Math credits: Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II and a fourth Math course or Integrated Math I, II, III, and a fourth Math course;
- 3 Science credits: a physical science, Biology, and an earth science;
- 3 Social Studies credits: World History, Civics and Economics, and United States History;

- 1 Health and Physical Education credit;
- 2 elective credits: Career and Technical Education (CTE), Arts Education, or World Language departments;
- 4 additional elective credits: CTE, Reserved Officer's Training Corps (ROTC), Arts Education, or any other academic subject area.

Bandura's social theory along with his theory on efficacy guided this study. The graduation rate of the traditional high schools as well as the overall school district's graduation rate ultimately determined the effectiveness of the alternative program. Through this study, the researcher seeks to provide an important contribution to the school district as well as other school districts seeking methods by which to address their four-year cohort graduation rate.

Significance of the Study

The primary significance of this study is to the large Western North Carolina school district in which it took place. In 2009-2010, the alternative diploma pathway was introduced to individual high schools to help students, who previously experienced repeated academic failure for various reasons, graduate with their four-year cohort. These students would not have been able to graduate within four years and may, instead, have chosen to drop out.

It is important to note that principals cannot arbitrarily move a student to the alternative diploma pathway. There is a process by which a student is identified and subsequently applies to be considered for participation in the alternative diploma pathway (WCPS, 2014). Students who are eligible for the alternative diploma pathway are identified in a variety of ways. When students register for courses for the following year by meeting with their guidance counselors, the counselors have the opportunity to identify students as eligible candidates for the alternative diploma program. First, they must have completed three semesters of high school and must be at

least 16 years old. Throughout the three semesters the student has completed, he must demonstrate a lack of academic success which impacts his ability to graduate with his cohort class. Additionally, students who discuss the possibility of dropping out of high school are considered strongly for the alternative diploma pathway. Also, as guidance counselors audit students' high school transcripts, they can identify students who have demonstrated a significant lack of academic progress and would be a candidate for the alternative diploma pathway. A student's eligibility is based, therefore, on their prior lack of academic performance, excessive absences, consideration of dropping out of high school, or other exceedingly difficult personal circumstances.

Once a student is identified as a candidate for the alternative diploma program, the student is referred to the dropout prevention counselor, so the school can provide assistance to the student and establish interventions to help with student success and academic promotion. The dropout prevention counselor then informs the student in detail about the alternative diploma program and assists in the application process that must be completed (WCPS, 2014). The application itself (Appendix C) requires the student and his parent to sign a statement indicating that they understand that the application does not guarantee admittance into the program and that the student will follow the plan as laid out through the application documentation. The application also requires the student to reflect on his academic experience to indicate what led him to the point of possibly not graduating from high school. The student must also write a statement of his intent to change the negative habits that led to the prior academic failure.

Following the completion of the alternative diploma application, a committee meets to determine the student's eligibility into the alternative diploma program (WCPS, 2014). The committee is comprised of dropout prevention counselors and administrators. Once the decision

is made and the administrator signs the application indicating the student's request is accepted, a meeting is set and executed which includes the student, parents, and school administrator. An individual graduation plan must be developed, and the student and parents must sign the commitment contract. Guidance counselors constantly monitor the student's progress according to the plan to ensure that he is able to graduate. The length of the monitoring is determined by the point at which the student was approved for the alternative diploma pathway. If the student fails to graduate, the failure counts against the home school's cohort graduation rate. If the student successfully graduates through participation in the alternative diploma pathway, the student receives an alternative school diploma, and his data is transferred to the alternative school.

As a principal considers a student for the alternative diploma pathway, they are also conceding to the fact that these students will not count toward the home school's graduation rate. Data pertaining to students who participate in the alternative diploma pathway are transferred immediately upon the student's successful graduation completion to be included in the graduation rate of the alternative school of the school district. While these students do not count against the graduation rates of their home schools, careful consideration must be given before granting students permission to participate in the alternative diploma pathway. Each student who participates in the alternative diploma pathway effectively reduces the numerator and denominator of the total graduation rate of the home high school. Therefore, each student who fails to graduate from the home school has a greater impact on the overall graduation rate. While this is a necessary consideration of the home school principal, the graduation rate at the alternative school is also impacted. The numerator and denominator of the alternative school graduates are both increased, making each student who fails to graduate from the alternative

school affect the graduation rate less. In either case, each graduate positively affects the graduation rate of the school district (WCPS, 2011).

Initiatives are often put into place without considering their overall effectiveness. This study was intended to determine the effectiveness of the alternative diploma program on the overall graduation rate of the school and the school district. Furthermore, since the alternative diploma program was in its sixth year of implementation within the school district, it was important to determine whether it continues to be an effective method to affect students as well as the cohort graduation rate.

Additionally, schools are hesitant to implement diploma options that deviate from the traditional. This study will serve as an impetus for schools to consider other options and, therefore, to help their students achieve high school graduation. Every student deserves the opportunity to earn his high school diploma (Caroleo, 2014; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The purpose of this study was to explore another option by which students could earn their diploma. If the alternative diploma program continues to be effective within this large Western North Carolina school district, other school districts could gain knowledge to more effectively implement an alternative diploma program for their students as well. This study, therefore, could help schools encourage students to graduate instead of dropping out of high school by providing them with additional options by which to graduate with their four-year cohort peers.

Research Questions

The goals of this research were to explore:

Research Question 1: To what extent do End of Course test results impact student participation in the alternative diploma program or the traditional diploma program in a large Western North Carolina school district?

Research Question 2: To what extent does student participation in the alternative diploma program affect the district high school graduation rate?

Research Question 3: To what extent does an alternative diploma program affect the graduation rate in an individual high school in a large Western North Carolina school district?

Null Hypotheses

Therefore, this research study was designed to explore the following null hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference between End of Course test results for students who graduated from the alternative diploma program and students who graduated from the traditional diploma program.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in the high school graduation rates of the school district when the graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in the individual high school graduation rates when the graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

Identification of Variables

The dependent variable in this study was the graduation rates of the individual high school along with the graduation rate of the school district. The independent variable was participation in the alternative diploma program and participation in the traditional diploma program. Another independent variable was student scores on End of Course tests.

Definitions of Terms

Several terms must be defined, so readers will clearly understand the content and intentions of this study. These terms are frequently used in educational environments but could

be misunderstood by those outside of the field of education. Therefore, throughout this research study, the following definitions will be used regarding these terms:

Alternative program – An academic program within the traditional school environment for students who experience repeated academic failure (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010; Jolivette et al., 2012; Kraftl, 2014).

Alternative school – An academic program in a separate facility for students who experience repeated academic failure (Carver et al., 2010).

At-risk – Students who significantly fall behind their peers due to factors such as academic failure, poor attendance, and suspension (Balfanz et al., 2013; Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011).

Credit recovery – Courses students repeat face-to-face or online due to their prior failure in the same course (Davis, 2011; Dessoff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011; Journell, 2010).

Cohort Graduation Rate – The rate at which students graduate from high school with their peers within four years (eight semesters) of beginning high school. This number is attained by dividing the number of students who successfully graduated by the total number of students who entered with those students in the ninth grade four years prior (Stanley & Plucker, 2008).

Differentiated diploma path – A diploma path by which students are permitted to graduate according to state instead of local standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2014a).

Dropout – A student who leaves high school before graduating from high school. The student must have attended school the previous academic year, but failed to attend during the current school year (Balfanz et al., 2013; Schargel & Smink, 2013).

End of Course Exams – Exams administered according to strict state guidelines intended to measure student proficiency at the end of an academic course. In the state of North Carolina, End of Course Exams are administered at the end of Math 1, Biology 1, and English II (NCDPI, 2014b).

End of Grade Exams – Exams administered according to strict state guidelines intended to measure student proficiency at the end of the academic grade year (NCDPI, 2014c).

Graduation cohort group – Students who enter high school as freshman and graduate together within four years (Stanley & Plucker, 2008).

Graduation rate – The percentage of students who graduate within four years of entering high school with their cohort group (Stanley & Plucker, 2008).

High-stakes testing – The practice of attaching significant consequences to students' standardized test scores (Nichols & Berliner, 2008a).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – Legislation containing regulations determined by Congress to require all states to identify standards required for students to advance to the next grade (Gall et al., 2010; Goldstein, 2012).

PowerSchool – A web-based program developed by Pearson School Systems for student demographics and attendance, grades, discipline records, and transcripts (PowerSchool, n.d.).

Retention – Requiring that a student repeat a grade due to failure to meet proficiency associated with promoting to the next academic grade (Warren, Hoffman, & Andrew, 2014).

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

According to the North Carolina Constitution, “The General Assembly shall provide by taxation and otherwise for a general and uniform system of free public schools ... wherein equal opportunities shall be provided for all students” (N.C. Const. art IV, § 2). It is, therefore, the responsibility of the state, as carried out by the local education agency, to make every opportunity available for students to successfully complete their education. Every student deserves the opportunity to earn their education (Caroleo, 2014; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Since 1820 when Boston English, the first public high school, opened, there has been a concerted effort in the United States to give every student the opportunity that only affluent families could provide their students prior (Birch, 2013). In North Carolina, a county in the Western portion of the state boasts a 90 percent graduation rate for the 2012-2013 school year (Bledsoe, 2013; NCDPI, 2013) and 92.6 percent for the 2013-2014 school year (WCPS, 2014).

While this puts this county among the top ten counties in the state as far as graduation rate, it also means that there were over 300 students who failed to successfully earn a high school diploma among the students who began high school in 2010. Educators have a responsibility to students and to society to provide every opportunity for each high school student to finish successfully by reaching their culminating event – their graduation (Caroleo, 2014; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Dessoff, 2009; Holmes, Richards, Jimerson, & Cohen, 2010; Wyant, 2008).

In the state of North Carolina, approximately one third of the students who entered high school in ninth grade failed to earn their high school diploma within four years along with their graduation cohort. For minority students, there are approximately one half of the students who fail to graduate within four years (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011; Lee et al., 2011;

Schargel & Smink, 2013). According to a study conducted by Balfanz and Legters (2004) for Johns Hopkins University, North Carolina is among the 15 states of “high schools that produce the highest number of dropouts” (p. v). Students who cannot find a hope of graduating along with their graduation cohort peers fail to recognize earning a high school diploma as a viable option for them (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). As these students watch their dream of earning high school diplomas dissipate, they choose to drop out. This is not a compulsive decision; it is a process (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) and is a problem that cannot be ignored.

As a response to the drop out epidemic, schools have begun utilizing online credit recovery options to help students catch up with their graduation cohort peers. Participating in online credit recovery offers students the possibility to work at their own pace, in their own time, and in a location of their choice (Dessoiff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011; Plummer, 2012; Wolff, 2014). When schools schedule a class period for students to complete online credit recovery, students often are able to recover more than one course credit in an academic period. When they are able to advance in this way, they are able to make up time lost due to previous academic failure (Ash, 2011; Dessoiff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011; Wolff, 2014). Subsequently, students who previously would have dropped out because they could not graduate with their cohort have chosen to persist to successful high school completion (Dessoiff, 2009; Plummer, 2012). Online credit recovery provides students with the opportunity to progress, matriculate, and graduate successfully from high school.

In 2009-2010, to meet the needs of students in danger of dropout due to academic failure, a large Western county in North Carolina began offering students the opportunity to graduate from high school with a minimum credit diploma. This alternative graduation pathway was an option for students who were behind their graduation cohort due to previous academic failure for

a number of reasons which include lack of motivation, absenteeism, discipline infractions, and lack of academic progress (Benard, 1993). In order to be considered for this alternative diploma pathway, students must have completed a minimum of three semesters of high school and have demonstrated a lack of academic success while doing so (WCPS, 2011). Principals have the discretion to permit students to pursue the alternative diploma pathway when they have demonstrated that, due to their lack of academic success, they will fall behind their graduation cohort and, therefore, are at risk for dropping out of school before earning their high school diploma. Students who earn this alternative graduation diploma are able to graduate by earning the North Carolina state minimum graduation requirements (NCDPI, 2012b) while being able to omit the non-essential electives that are required of students who graduate through participation in the traditional diploma pathway.

In the large Western North Carolina school district in which this study took place, students must earn their maximum credit potential minus four credits to graduate. Students who have been in the school district for their four years have the potential to earn a maximum of 32 high school credits; therefore, each student must earn a minimum of 28 credits to receive their high school diploma. In the previously mentioned Western school district in the state, this is a difference between the 28 credits required by the county and the 21 credits required by the state.

The state of North Carolina requires that students earn four sequential English credits (English I, II, III, IV), four Math credits (Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II, plus one higher level Math course or Integrated Math I, II, III, plus one higher level Math course), three Science credits (a physical science, Biology, and an earth/environmental science course), three Social Studies credits (World History, Civics and Economics, United States History), one Health and Physical Education credit, two elective credits (from Career and Technical Education, Arts

Education, or World Languages), plus four additional elective credits (from Career and Technical Education, Reserved Officer's Training Corps, Art Education or any other academic area). Additional Physical Education courses do not count toward these four additional elective credits. These courses are the minimum requirement for any student to graduate from high school in the state of North Carolina (NCDPI, 2012b). In order to earn a traditional high school diploma, students in the large Western school district in North Carolina in which the study is to be conducted must earn an additional seven high school credits to meet their maximum potential minus four credits (WCPS, 2011).

It is also important to note that principals must determine how each student's diploma pathway will affect the school's graduation rate (Coelli & Green, 2012; Tavakolian & Howell, 2012). Graduation cohort is comprised of a group of students who entered high school together with the goal of graduating within four years of entry (Balfanz et al., 2013; Stanley & Plucker, 2008). In order to determine graduation cohort and graduation rates, schools must keep very detailed records of each student who entered high school within the graduation cohort (Adams, 2014; Klein, 2015). Every student who leaves the school district must be accounted for in the following ways: transfer to another school within the district, transfer to another public school district in North Carolina, transfer to a high school in another state, transfer to a private school, or transfer to a homeschool. Students are expected to graduate within four years of high school entry; therefore, students who entered in 2010 are expected to graduate in 2014. Each student affects the school's graduation rate (Adams, 2014). If the student drops out of high school, the denominator (total number of students in the graduation cohort) remains the same while the numerator decreases resulting in a lower graduation rate. Students who graduate through participation in the traditional diploma pathway positively affect the graduation rate. Students

who graduate through participation in the alternative diploma pathway do not count for the home schools from which they graduated. Upon successful completion of all requirements for the alternative diploma, these students' records are transferred to the alternative school within the school district. Therefore, these students directly affect the graduation rate of the school; however, principals must consider that when their graduation cohort is reduced, each graduate counts more in the percentage of the school's graduation rate.

This consideration does not affect the school district's numbers. The school district continues to be able to count these students toward the overall graduation rate of the Local Education Agency (LEA) as "North Carolina's goal is to provide more and stronger support to enable all students to graduate from high school career and college ready" (ESEA, 2013, para. 4). The purpose of this literature review is to investigate the theoretical framework, various aspects of alternative schools past and present, and credit recovery, which has become a popular venue for schools to enable their students to recover class credit in an accelerated environment to catch up with their graduation cohort peers.

Theoretical Framework

Since the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, "survival of the fittest" has become a commonplace phrase (Darwin, 1859). In the modern education world, however, schools cannot presume to follow this philosophy. Schools have the obligation to provide every student with the opportunity to learn regardless of their ability level, socioeconomic status, race, gender, or any other distinguishing characteristic (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In a society in which schools are expected by law to continually raise their graduation rate, survival of the fittest would be counterintuitive. All students can learn and deserve the opportunity to develop academically (Caroleo, 2014; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Although

the federal constitution does not provide for a free and public education, every state in the union provides for an educational opportunity for all students.

According to Bandura (1990), there are multiple determining factors which influence behavior. These determining factors include “action, inner personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events, and environmental influences” (p. 101). Furthermore, perceived efficacy plays a role in student academic outcomes. Teachers who fully believe in their ability to instruct students follow through with teaching students effectively. In contrast, teachers who have negative beliefs regarding their ability to instruct students rely heavily on nonacademic pursuits in the classroom and communicate with their students that they are incapable of being successful (Bandura, 1990). Applying this theory to students, those who receive the support they need and who believe they are capable of successfully graduating from high school will persist as they matriculate toward earning their diploma. Conversely, students who do not believe in their ability to successfully complete will instead choose to take a different path – one that does not lead to graduation.

Persistence is the key. Students who are resilient possess the means to persevere through their struggles until they reach their goal of graduating successfully from high school. Resilience is a complex characteristic. For students who have experienced life in situations of high risk, through ill treatment and poverty, teen pregnancy and school failure (Sapienza & Masten, 2011), resilience can be derived internally or externally (Reivich, Gillham, Chaplin, & Seligman, 2013). “Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life” (Grotberg, 1995, para. 2). This is critical for students who are considering dropping out. For students who are experiencing repeated academic failure, dropping out is not a compulsive decision. Instead, it is a process that students go

through as they experience continual and repeated academic failure (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Benard (1993) discussed children's ability to "bounce back" (p. 44) even in the face of immense adversity. While she acknowledged the risk factors associated with student failure, she stated adamantly that "we must move beyond a focus on the 'risk factors' to create the conditions that will facilitate children's healthy development" (Benard, 1993, p. 44). She suggests that there are four attributes which contribute to students' resilience. These include "social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future" (Benard, 1993, p. 44).

Social Competence

Students who are resilient demonstrate the ability to develop positive relationships with others. Character traits resilient students exhibit include empathy and a sense of humor along with flexibility and the ability to communicate with others (Benard, 1993). For students to be successful, they must possess social competence, and schools must work with students to help them establish these characteristics. "Resilient youth take the opportunity to fulfill the basic human need for social support, caring, and love" (Benard, 1993, p. 46). Students who find that this opportunity is not available to them from their immediate family find themselves in a situation in which the school must fill the needs that students have for the development of personal and caring relationships. Having a strong relationship with a competent adult who cares deeply for the student is an important resource that these children need. In schools, there are many adults who are willing to invest in the lives of children. Among these caring adults, guidance counselors are accessible to students when they experience personal and academic crises. They are also in a unique position to guide students into areas in which they can be successful academically.

According to Sapienza and Masten (2011), resilience is associated with children's social competence. As children develop relationships with caring adults in schools (Ash, 2011; Raywid, 1994; Wolff, 2014), they develop the ability to cope and therefore have a greater chance of persisting to graduation (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). As children develop social competence, they develop relationships skills such as "responsiveness ... flexibility, empathy, caring, communication skills, and a sense of humor" (Benard, 1993, p. 44).

Problem-Solving Skills

Problem-solving skills include the ability of the student to see himself in control along with the ability to seek help when needed. Students who are at risk of dropping out of high school view their circumstances as beyond their control. When schools communicate openly with students in order to collaborate with them as they develop an educational plan, they are giving students control of their own future and destiny. Students at this age are not interested in simply being given a plan; they want to be integrally involved in its development as they seek to realize their ultimate goals (Reid, 2014).

Students who possess the ability to problem solve must also be able to plan for themselves along with being able and willing to seek others' help (Benard, 1993). Self-advocacy was recognized as an important skill related to success (Cohen, 2014). Students need to learn how to advocate for themselves in order to develop the skills associated with being problem-solvers. In order to help students develop self-advocacy skills, educators can involve students in decisions regarding their education, help them understand the strengths and weaknesses they have related to their learning, model self-advocacy for them, and help them set appropriate and realistic learning goals (Byers, 2013).

Autonomy

Autonomy includes a strong sense of identity along with the ability to separate from dysfunctional relationships. These relationships could include family or friends (Benard, 1993). Students who demonstrate a general sense of independence are able to “exert some control of [their] environment” (Benard, 1993, p. 44). Autonomy also includes establishing an individual sense of identity as well as a sense of independence (Bernard, 1993). Schools that recognize students’ need to be autonomous allow students the freedom to be themselves while encouraging them to make choices that are conducive to matriculating toward graduation. These choices include being able to establish their own learning goals. Students should be taught how to establish specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely (SMART) goals for themselves (Byers, 2013).

Sense of Purpose and Future

Students who are at-risk for dropping out of school have often forgotten their goals and educational aspirations (Benard, 1993). They lack the ability to hope in their capacity to succeed. Schools have the responsibility to help students find hope. “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jeremiah 29:11, New International Version). Dysfunctional families are often an accepted way of life for students. This leaves students in a general state of being lost. “School has become a vital refuge for a growing number of children” (Benard, 1993, p. 45) as they provide a caring environment in which students are able to blossom and be successful. School personnel must be able and willing to communicate with students that they can succeed; that they believe in their students’ ability to finish and earn their high school diploma.

Bandura recognized the need of students to possess a sense of efficacy. He stated that “students’ beliefs in their efficacy to regulate their own learning and to master academic activities determine their aspirations, level of motivation, and academic accomplishments” (Bandura, 1993, p. 117). Students need “loving support and self-confidence, the faith in themselves and their world” (Grotberg, 1995, para. 4). School staff have the unique opportunity to build students through the establishment of respectful relationships (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; McKeown, 2011; Morrissette, 2011) which allows the students to grow in confidence. As school staff communicate with students that they believe that they can be successful, students develop a belief in themselves. This belief develops into a motivation to persist.

Research on Alternative Education

History of Alternative Education

Public education was created to establish a system that would guarantee a universal education for all children (Miller, 2010). Since its inception, determining the best curriculum and educational strategies to give students the best opportunity to be successful has been a challenge (Miller, 2010). Public education was established in order for all students to be able to receive an education, but it was not required for students to participate in public education. Therefore, since the establishment of the public education system, alternatives were made available.

Because of this, school systems sought alternative routes by which they could better educate their students. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a growth trend toward Alternative Education (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Stanley and Plucker (2008) identified alternative education as a viable option for parents to select for their students. They added that alternative schools were beneficial to students who would otherwise drop out of high school before earning their

diploma and they had “been used as a means of addressing the needs of at-risk students for over three decades” (Stanley & Plucker, 2008, p. 4). Although traditional education was recognized as routine in the 1980s, this did not reduce the need for schools to offer alternative choices for students to pursue regarding their education (Stanley & Plucker, 2008).

Raywid (1994) identified three types of alternative schools. These three types center on educational purpose. Lange and Sletten (2002) identified seven types of alternative schools. Their alternative school options relate to the educational experience. Raywid’s (1994) and Lange and Sletten’s (2002) alternative school types overlap some. They can also be combined to form yet another type of alternative school.

According to Raywid (1994), Type I schools are those alternative schools intended to foster creativity and innovation. Students who attend Type I schools continue to matriculate until they graduate from Type I schools. These schools are very popular, and students choose to attend them. Magnet schools would be included in Raywid’s Type I schools. Lange and Sletten (2002) also included magnet schools in their alternative education choices. According to them, magnet schools were developed with the intention to integrate racially. These schools attract diverse student groups ranging from many distinct racial and cultural backgrounds.

Raywid’s (1994) Type II schools are considered schools of last chance. Students are “sentenced” (Raywid, 1994, p. 27) to these schools and are given no choice in making the decision. Students attend Type II schools as their last chance to receive their high school education, the only alternative being expulsion. These schools focus on modifying student behavior (Booker & Mitchell, 2011). While the behavior code is monitored strictly, there is little deviation from the tradition educational approach. Of the seven types of alternative schools

suggested by Lange and Sletten (2002), there are no last chance schools. The focus of their alternatives is on student choice.

Raywid's (1994) Type III schools are suggested to provide weaker students with additional academic remediation. These schools are intended to support students on a temporary basis only. Students are permitted to select to attend Type III schools, but are not permitted to make this a long-term solution to their academic challenges. Once students attending Type III schools have achieved an acceptable level of remediation, they must return to the traditional school environment – the environment in which they were previously unsuccessful.

“Alternative programs have been in place for many years. They have evolved since the 1960s to the present day and currently are a popular educational alternative for many students across the country” (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 1). Raywid (1994) and Lange and Sletten (2002) describe many different types of alternative education. They also allow and recommend flexibility to combine Raywid's (2002) alternative school types. Given flexibility between the types of schools, there would be options for second chance schools which would benefit students prior to their needing to be considered for a last chance.

Purpose of Alternative Schools

There are many reasons that schools would choose to institute, and students would choose to select, alternative schools (Carver et al., 2010; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; De la Ossa, 2005). Schools' primary purpose is to offer students the opportunity to successfully earn their high school diploma (Carver et al., 2010; Kronholz, 2011; Raywid, 1994); however, each school provides their alternatives in their own unique manner. According to Raywid (1994), the purpose of some alternative schools is to provide schools an option to sentence, or require, students to attend due to their poor behavior. These schools serve two purposes. They operate

to be able to keep chronically disruptive students separated from the student population in the traditional school system and provide character reinforcement to transform students' negative behavior into that which is acceptable within the traditional school setting (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; De la Ossa, 2005; Raywid, 1994). These schools do not consider it their purpose to amend the traditional educational environment. Students continue to be educated using the traditional methods. While the location is new, the educational strategies employed continue to be the same. Students would benefit from an environment that provided differentiated instruction to meet the educational needs of the students while they were attempting to modify their negative behavior (Raywid, 1994).

Other alternative schools serve the purpose of providing academic remediation for their student population. In order to address the dropout rate, these schools provide a lower student-teacher ratio along with employing adults who will serve as mentors to students (Schargel & Smink, 2013). Employing nurturing adults could be effective in the effort to reach students at risk for high school dropout. While there are strategies that were successful in the alternative setting, they could also be effective in the traditional school setting with traditional students (Schargel & Smink, 2013).

Another purpose for school systems to provide alternative education opportunities is to offer students additional resources to achieve academic success (Caroleo, 2014; Kronholz, 2011). Since the legislation accompanying No Child Left Behind made schools accountable for increasing their graduation rate and minimizing their dropout rate, the challenge for schools to create programs that engage students in new and creative ways as they seek to raise academic achievement has increased (Gall et al., 2010; Goldstein, 2012; Kronholz, 2011). The U. S. Department of Education (2010) identified raising academic achievement as the primary purpose

of these programs. Along with addressing the graduation rate, schools must identify strategies to engage students in their academic process to such a degree that they develop a sense of ownership of it (Smyth, McInerney, & Fish, 2013).

Perception of Alternative Schools

The perception of alternative schools is varied, particularly depending upon the type of alternative school (Lange & Sletten, 2002; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Raywid, 1994; Whitfield, 2012). Parents and students view alternative schools from a different perspective (De la Ossa, 2005; Journell, 2010; McKeown, 2011; Morrissette, 2011), but educators view alternative schools as a resource to provide students with the differentiated and individualized instruction that each student needs (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Some also view alternative schools as a source of belittling society's value on high school diplomas (Weissberg, 2010). There are also those who view alternative schools for the drain that they place on school funding (Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013).

De la Ossa (2005) stated that "historically, public alternative high schools have addressed disruptive and school-avoidance behaviors with the goal of reducing the dropout rate" (p. 25). Because students do not choose to attend these schools, they view the school from a negative perspective. Students feel that others' perception of them is negative simply because they attend the alternative school and feel that this negative view is directed toward them from students, faculty and staff, and the community (De la Ossa, 2005). Parents also have a negative opinion of participation in alternative schools because they view alternative schools as purely a negative assignment due to poor student behavior (Geronimo, 2011; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012).

There are many types of alternative schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994), but according to Weissberg (2010), the end result is that these programs reduce the value of a high

school diploma. Students who are required to attend school when they have repeatedly expressed a disinterest in it have a tendency to disrupt the educational system and keep students who are interested from earning the excellent education they so desperately desire. In Weissberg's (2010) opinion, if schools allowed students to drop out when they are disinterested, this would liberate valuable resources, including human resources, to be used to combat some of the systemic problems in schools along with eliminating the problem of overcrowding that schools are experiencing.

While adults have varied perceptions of alternative schools, students' perceptions are valuable input as well. Students who attend alternative schools view traditional schools as lacking in staff who truly value students (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; McKeown, 2011; Morrissette; 2011). Students find relief in the lack of pressure they feel in alternative settings along with the variety of programming offered (McKeown, 2011; Morrissette, 2011). They value the emphasis on maturity and responsibility (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011) and the respect that is afforded them by the adults in the schools (Morrissette, 2011). Students appreciate the focus that is placed on life skills development (McKeown, 2011) and the freedom to talk about real-life situations (McKewon, 2011; Morrissette, 2011). They experience a sense of belonging (Morrissette, 2011).

There are risk factors associated with alternative schools (Caroleo, 2014). Alternative schools are often established in an off-site location. This gives the students who attend these schools a feeling of alienation from the general student population (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The quality of the education that students receive in alternative schools is also questionable (Caroleo, 2014). While mainstream schools focus on the academic growth of their students, alternative schools' focus is often on the behavioral remediation of their students

(Caroleo, 2014; Raywid, 1994). In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), it was established that separate but equal was not possible. Separate was inherently unequal. If alternative schools are separate from their traditional counterparts, this inequality is perpetuated (Caroleo, 2014; Ingerham, 2012). Alternative schools are further viewed as places for students who cannot function successfully in the real world (De la Ossa, 2005) because they are perceived as schools strictly for students with discipline problems (Ennis, Harris, Lane, & Mason, 2014; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Alternative schools lack trained and skilled leadership (Hemmer et al., 2013; Morgan, Brown, Heck, Pendergast, & Kanasa, 2013; Price, Martin, Robertson, 2010; Riddle & Cleaver, 2012). School leadership programs offer multiple opportunities for would-be school leaders to study how to lead in the traditional school setting and need to include curriculum to help leaders handle students who are considered at risk because these students have a variety of needs. Because alternative schools are different from traditional schools, they therefore require leaders who are trained, skilled, and supported differently. Alternative school leaders who have the proper training and skill set to understand the unique needs of alternative school students “can help ensure success for staff and students in ... alternative schools” (Price et al., 2010, p. 300).

The perception of many educators is very different (McGregor & Mills, 2012). They view alternative school options as a positive option for schools to present to students as they address students’ need for individualized instruction. Because alternative schools are intended to be smaller, there is also a lower student-teacher ratio (D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; De la Ossa, 2005). In these situations, teachers have the flexibility to provide additional creativity in their lessons. With a lower student-teacher ratio, teachers have more opportunities to provide individualized instruction to students who need additional assistance. As these teachers plan their

instruction, they are more able to be creative and flexible to address individual student needs (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Because teachers are given greater flexibility with the lower class sizes, they can create lessons that are more engaging for students. When students are more engaged in their learning, this could encourage them to persist and matriculate through their courses as they approach and achieve high school graduation.

Alternative School Examples

Maria Montessori (Larson, 2013a; Larson, 2013b) established classrooms in which students were encouraged to learn by exploration and investigation. According to Montessori, this approach enhanced intrinsic motivation for learning. With the vision of creating an environment that combined learning and enjoyment, she discovered that children who actively engaged in their learning were also able to master content that was more advanced (Larson, 2013a). Montessori's vision included students choosing their own lessons (Larson, 2013b). Students, in this manner, were able to enjoy the learning experience in a pleasant environment without the stress associated with the traditional school environment (Larson, 2013b).

Twilight Academy (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009) is another example of an effective alternative school. Twilight Academy operates as a school within a school (Lange & Sletten, 2002), holding classes after the traditional school dismisses in the evenings. Students who attend Twilight Academy are those who have been identified as at-risk for academic failure. They have experienced repeated academic failure in the past. Twilight Academy functions with 60 students and seven employees who include teachers, an administrator, a guidance counselor, and a secretary. While the students do not attend Twilight Academy by choice and this is their last academic option, it would not be considered a purely Type II school (Raywid, 1994). Instead it is a combination of Type II and III schools. Staff is specially selected for their tendency to nurture

students, establish caring relationships with them, and for their creativity and willingness to try new strategies. The nurturing relationships that are established at Twilight Academy are a new experience for its students who previously neglected to form relationships with adults in their schools (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). As children develop relationships with caring adults in schools (Ash, 2011; Raywid, 1994; Wolff, 2014), they learn how to cope and, therefore, have a greater chance of persisting to graduation (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

Twilight Academy provides an online approach to instruction to offer students more individualized instruction. Twilight Academy's individualized approach deviates from the traditional school environment which provides "one size fits all" education (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009, p. 211). Teachers are able to create unique and differentiated lessons for each of their students. Twilight Academy teachers view online instruction as an optimal opportunity to differentiate instruction. Their reservation is that it is difficult to find online programs that adhere to state curriculum standards. During their first year in operation, Twilight Academy graduated every student who entered within reach of their high school diploma. Not one of these students chose to drop out prior to earning their high school diploma.

There are various alternative schools and programs in North Carolina (Wyant, 2008). "Early College High Schools" (p. 12) are five year programs from which students graduate after having simultaneously earned their high school diploma along with their college associates degree. There are also magnet schools, called "Specialized Content Schools" (p. 12). These schools emphasize "themes meant to attract diverse groups of students from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds" (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 5). "Learn and Earn" (Wyant, 2008, p. 12) is another alternative program offered by North Carolina. This program allows students who are attending high school to concurrently earn college credit through online courses.

Credit Recovery

When a student fails a course required for graduation, they must repeat the class to earn credit and matriculate to the next course. There are many reasons for academic failure; these include disabling learning conditions, absenteeism, repeated suspensions due to behavioral misconduct in school (Ash, 2011; Flannery, 2015; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012; Kronholz, 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Plummer, 2012). When a student experiences repeated academic failure, the student and the school are negatively impacted. For the school, there is a burden in the class sizes of the courses that students fail. Class numbers rise as students who naturally matriculate must be joined by students who have previously failed and must repeat the course (Kennedy, 2010; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). As students experience the negative impact of their academic failure, they become disillusioned with the traditional school system. When they begin to recognize that they are unable to graduate with their cohort peers, dropping out becomes a viable option (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Credit recovery provides schools with the ability to offer students an option to repeat a previous course without impacting course sizes (Kronholz, 2011). Credit recovery is not a new strategy. Consider other credit recovery options – summer school, weekend and after-school classes (Plummer, 2012). Online credit recovery allows students to progress through courses at their own pace. Because online credit recovery is taken individually, students are able to spend more time focusing on areas in which they are academically weak without having to draw attention to themselves like they would in a traditional classroom setting. Many schools purchase online credit recovery programs from other agencies. In these cases, the course matter is not individualized; however, students are able to progress at their own pace. In this way, they are able to progress quickly through content with which they are familiar, adept, and comfortable.

When they are in portions of the course that are more difficult, students are able to take more time, seek additional resources online, and seek assistance from educators within the building to provide help.

Each credit recovery course is comprised of a series of academic units. Students are required to take a pre-assessment at the beginning of each unit on which they are given the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the concept. If the student performs poorly on the pre-assessment, he is required to work through each assignment of the unit, including the unit test. If the student performs successfully on the pre-assessment, he earns credit for the unit and is not required to progress through the individual assignments in the unit (Davis, 2011; Dessoff, 2009; Plummer, 2012). This provides students with the opportunity to progress quickly through units in which they demonstrate mastery of content. Students who are able to complete courses before the end of the semester are able to enroll in another course. As students accelerate through their courses, they are able to catch up with the cohort peers (Dessoff, 2009).

Online credit recovery is a viable option for schools for various reasons. Nearly one half of the states provide students with some sort of online credit recovery option (Franco & Patel, 2011). When schools are faced with rescheduling students to repeat courses that they have failed previously, online credit recovery is an option that does not impact traditional class sizes. Online credit recovery recognizes that the Carnegie Unit obligation of 150 academic seat hours is only a minor portion of the requirements to earn credit for courses (Priest, Rudenstine, & Weisstein, 2012). Additionally, when students repeat courses, they often present discipline problems which further impacts the academic success of the students in the class (Stancill, 2014). Students who experience academic failure need other options for repeating courses. Many students demonstrate improved academic performance when they operate in an online setting. Students are also able,

in many cases, to complete more than one course in a scheduled class period during a semester. Many online credit recovery programs are established to parallel the state-approved, rigorous curriculum (Kronholz, 2011; Schachter, 2013). The traditional school setting is often a deterrent to students who have experienced academic failure. Online credit recovery provides schools with a viable, rigorous option for students to successfully matriculate toward earning their high school diploma.

While credit recovery is presented as a viable option for students to pursue in order to recover course credits lost due to academic failure, it is not without its problems or opponents. Motivation is one the problems noted for credit recovery students (Ash, 2011; Dessoff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011; Wolff, 2014). Generally, students who participate in credit recovery due to previous academic failure are not motivated to remain focused and complete the assigned tasks. Credit recovery is a method by which students can complete courses in shorter amounts of time because they have already met the seat-time hour requirement (Schachter, 2013); however, when students lack the motivation to push forward toward completion, credit recovery is not achieving its goal (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Wolff, 2014). When students are not motivated, it does not matter how many strategies are employed; credit recovery is not successful (Ash, 2011; Dessoff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011; Wolff, 2014).

Another roadblock associated with credit recovery is the legacy of failure. Students who have experienced repeated academic failure have a tendency to view themselves as failures. “The legacy of failure must be overcome” (Wolff, 2014, p. 57). Student retention reduces a student’s sense of self-pride. A single retention can increase the likelihood of dropout by ten times (Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Glass & Berliner, 2014). It is important to reach students early. Students who fail in their first year of high school have a lower probability of reaching

graduation (Ingerham, 2012; Wolff, 2014). Credit recovery is no guarantee that students will be successful and matriculate toward graduation (Dessoff, 2009).

Credit recovery is also a significant financial obligation for school systems. One program, K12, “can run \$425 per student per semester” (Plummer, 2012, p. 22). Credit recovery is an expensive strategy. While it does alleviate the greater numbers in the face-to-face classes, it may not be a money-saving strategy (Plummer, 2012). In order to make credit recovery a successful venture, intensive professional support is necessary for students. The staff members who work with credit recovery students also require focused assistance – from principals, teachers, and facilitators. This requires additional resources to make credit recovery a successful strategy (Franco & Patel, 2011).

There is also a question of equity (Ingerham, 2012). The question is not whether students are able to matriculate toward graduation. The question is whether students are obtaining the content knowledge that they need to be successful in life (Molnar et al., 2014). Credit recovery may be helping students matriculate and graduate from high school, but it may do so at the expense of students’ ability to process and digest the content knowledge that they need to be successful (Ingerham, 2012; Molnar et al., 2014). Franco and Patel (2011) listed various problems associated with credit recovery. Assignments are often unclear or confusing. The authenticity of the assignments required of online credit recovery students is often questionable. Students who have limited technology skills have difficulty participating in online activities. Students who are successful in online credit recovery are those who self-regulate and are motivated to finish successfully. However, the students who need credit recovery are often those students who lack the motivation and the personal drive to finish (Ash, 2011; Dessoff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011; Wolff, 2014).

Research on Government Influence on Education

Role of Government Legislation

In 1790, the Pennsylvania state constitution instituted a requirement for poor children to have access to a free public education. At that time, rich families already sent their children to schools. It was the poor families who were unable to educate their children because they were unable to pay for their children to attend school. Boston English, the first public high school, was founded in 1635 (Birch, 2013). It was the first public high school, providing poor families an option for further education. Later, in 1965, The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was put into place to “improve educational opportunities for poor children” (ESEA, 2013, para. 2). It was no longer acceptable for all students to simply have access to education; they were also to be given equal educational opportunities. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) further amended this legislation in 2001 and again in 2013 (NCDPI, 2012a). One of the major pieces of legislation for schools was a requirement for schools to reach 100 proficiency by 2014 and to include a graduation goal (NCDPI, 2012a).

Along with the graduation rate, schools were required to meet yearly benchmarks established by the state in reading and math. These benchmarks were to increase yearly until the year 2014 when, in addition to a raising the graduation rate, schools were required to meet 100 percent proficiency in reading and math. It would no longer be acceptable for schools to neglect students who were considering dropping out or failing to matriculate toward graduation. In keeping with the reform required under No Child Left Behind, revisions were made to the Individuals with Disabilities of Act of 2004. These revisions were made to reflect the legislated requirements of No Child Left Behind.

No Child Left Behind was the most comprehensive piece of federal legislation related to public education to date (Tucker, 2015). According to NCLB, states were accountable for their results (Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013). Up to this point, the states had held the responsibility of legislating education (Tucker, 2015). With NCLB, the federal government took control over public education and demanded accountability measures to ensure the appropriated money was well-spent (Tucker, 2015). Included in the requirements were school accountability, the hiring of highly qualified teachers, and narrowing the achievement gap between educationally disadvantaged, minority, and students with limited English proficiency and their non-disabled peers (Bohrnstedt; 2013; Goldstein, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In the accountability section of NCLB, state and local education agencies were mandated to evaluate their disaggregated data at least every three years. Included in this evaluation was a mandate to determine the program's impact on grade promotion and high school graduation (NCLB, 2001). In the School Dropout Prevention section, schools were required to challenge students to reach their "highest academic potential" (NCLB, Part H, Section 1802).

A Nation at Risk

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), 1983). Their premise for releasing this document was that the education system of the United States had lost its international competitive edge (Olsen, 2010). It was, therefore, written to provide evidence of the problems with the then-current education system in the United States. The United States was no longer at the forefront of education - calling for much-needed reform. The problems addressed were that millions of people were unable to read, average high school achievement had dropped, and college entry exam data was dropping, among others (NCEE, 1983; Olsen, 2010). "The

educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (NCEE, 1983, p. 9). According to *A Nation at Risk* (1983), “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves” (Olsen, 2010, para. 2). This led to the sentiment that the American education system was broken (Olsen, 2010). Several recommendations were made throughout this thesis. The recommendations focused on a new set of basics in which all students should demonstrate proficiency before successfully achieving high school graduation, improving teacher quality, and on student achievement.

Two years before *A Nation at Risk* was released, President Reagan was ready to launch his education platform which consisted of three focus areas: additional support for private schools through a voucher system and tuition tax credits, cutting federal education spending, and eliminating the United States Department of Education (Blumenfeld, 2012). After *A Nation at Risk* was released, President Reagan moved away from discussions on cutting education spending (Blumenfeld, 2012; Graham, 2013).

A Nation at Risk accused the American education system of delivering a diluted product. Students were able to progress through school without exerting much effort. The National Commission of Excellence in Education found that the public education system in the United States was a mix of declining test scores, poor teacher salaries, and poor teacher preparation programs (Graham, 2013). Testing was implemented to measure student achievement. This accountability measure came at the expense of content instruction (Goldstein, 2012; Graham, 2013).

Even though the United States is over thirty years beyond *A Nation at Risk*, the educational gains made in public schools are minimal at best. High school graduation rate hovers around seventy percent. One-third or fewer students have not tested at the proficient level in math, science, or reading. And only approximately 24 percent of students who graduate from high school are sufficiently prepared for their first year of college (Klein, 2011).

Research on High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing is defined by Nichols and Berliner (2008a) as “the practice of attaching important consequences to standardized test scores” (p. 14). It is further suggested that high-stakes testing “is the engine that drives the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act” (p. 41). High-stakes testing was introduced with a simple goal – if teachers and students are held accountable for their efforts in school, they will work even harder to achieve more (Glass & Berliner, 2014; Lobascher, 2011). The results of high-stakes testing have been much different than its original intent. In the state of North Carolina, the new School Performance Grades (SPG), which were established in “the long session of the North Carolina General Assembly,” (NCDPI, 2015a, para. 1) are driven by the data associated with high-stakes testing (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2015; Goldstein, 2012). High-stakes testing is part of every indicator of student achievement as well as part of the student growth indicators. Schools are “subject to accountability measures that begin with public warnings and ultimately can escalate to school restructuring and removal of administrators” (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006, p. 78). While high-stakes testing is viewed as a necessary evil, there are many areas that must be considered.

Role of NCLB in High-Stakes Testing

According to Nichols and Berliner (2008a), high-stakes testing “is the engine that drives the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act” (p. 41). It is also the engine that drives schools’

accountability (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2015). One of the intended purposes of the NCLB legislation is to identify and eliminate lazy teachers (Nichols & Berliner, 2008b). According to the legislation, every student in United States public schools was to achieve 100 percent proficiency in Reading and Math by the year 2014 (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Clearly from the data stated herein, not every student in the country has achieved this level of proficiency by the year 2014. The law requires that schools use annual testing data to demonstrate their accountability as they change the level of student performance (Darling-Hammond & Weingarten, 2015). Another provision of NCLB was that every state was required to set their own achievement levels (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). While this gave states more school control, it also made it difficult to determine how to compare achievement from state to state. What was proficient in one state may not have been proficient in another state (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011; Phillips, 2013).

High-Stakes Testing and the Dropout Rate

Since the introduction of No Child Left Behind, a correlation between high-stakes testing and dropout rates has been suggested (Nichols & Berliner, 2008a; Papay et al., 2010; Polesel et al., 2012; Reardon et al., 2010; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). The number of students with poor grades appears to maintain a similar number of dropouts before and after the introduction of high-stakes testing; however, the dropouts among students in the average grade range who are also doing poorly on high-stakes testing is on the rise (Papay et al., 2010; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). In an era in which schools should be focused on motivating students to persist to graduation, high-stakes testing seems to be a reason that students are choosing to drop out. These drop outs also appear to be occurring earlier in a student's academic career (Balfanz et al., 2013; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2011; Peguero & Bracy, 2015; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006).

There have been many studies conducted which have identified a correlation between high-stakes testing and an increase in the number of students dropping out of high school (Glennie, Bonneau, Vandellen, & Dodge, 2012; Nichols & Berliner, 2008a; Nichols & Berliner, 2008b; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006; Thompson & Allen, 2012). Thompson and Allen (2012) found that high-stakes testing has harmed students in four ways: incorporating strategies that do not lead to academic gains, increasing students' apathy toward school, instituting more punitive disciplinary consequences, and creating a system that looks good instead of including lessons that will change students' lives. For schools with higher numbers of students in the low socio-economic status bracket, when minimum competency tests are required for graduation purposes, students drop out earlier. These early drop out dates have begun in the eighth through the 10th grades (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). As students find the prospect of passing high-stakes tests unattainable, hundreds choose to drop out instead (Nichols & Berliner, 2008a). In Florida, high-stakes testing did not impact dropout rates for students with low grades; however, students with "moderately good grades" who failed to pass high-stakes tests were more likely to drop out before graduating (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006, p. 79). A system which continues to push students to be college ready when the economy does not call for every graduate to be thus prepared contributes to the dropout rate.

This could also be impacted by the greater numbers of ninth grade students who are also required to take high-stakes tests (Willens, 2013). Students who have been promoted from the eighth grade join in number with students who have been retained in the ninth grade, causing a rise in the number of ninth grade students. While the number of students dropping out of high school prior to graduation has been impacted by high-stakes testing, in the state of North Carolina, there is a rising number of students under the age of 20 who are choosing to take their

Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED) as an alternative to graduating with a traditional high school diploma (Nichols & Berliner, 2008a). These students impact the schools because the schools must count these students among their dropouts. Part of the NCLB legislation includes the requirement that schools set goals for graduation rates and make this information available to the public (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006).

There are many reasons for dropping out of high school. Students who experience repeated academic failure in school often find themselves in the position of seeing themselves as failures instead of perceiving themselves as students who are competent in a classroom setting (Leech, 2014). The traditional school system continues to force students into classes they do not appreciate nor excel in (Mora, 2011). Other countries provide educational opportunities in which students' academic focus is on the area in which they choose to build a career. In other countries, "students may choose a specific vocational or technical pathway in which all coursework supports entry into the chosen field and provides prerequisites to higher training and qualifications recognized by the industry that the student would like to enter" (Leech, 2014, p. 70). Instead of dissuading students from achieving the goal of high school graduation, "we could view [those students] as consumers of our services and provide them with more paths toward opportunities they consider worth the cost" (Leech, 2014, p. 70).

Narrowing the Curriculum

Since the introduction of high-stakes testing, school hours have not changed. Students still spend, on average, six hours in school per day (Hull & Newport, 2011; Wrigley, Thomson, & Lingard, 2011). However, the time spent in math and reading has increased while other areas have decreased or been cut, whereas time spent preparing for test-taking has greatly increased (David, 2011; Plank & Condliffe, 2013; Robelen, 2011; Walker, 2014). The time spent preparing

for tests is void of time spent addressing curriculum and focusing on instruction and student learning (David, 2011; Robelen, 2011; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012; Walker, 2014). High-stakes testing is, therefore, narrowing the curriculum as schools are forced to spend more time in tested areas like reading and math while time spent in areas such as science, technology, fine arts, and physical education is reduced or cut (Goldstein, 2012). This is especially the case in urban schools where liberal arts classes are dropped to focus more time on tested areas (David, 2011; Goldstein, 2012). As schools narrow curricular options for students to focus on test preparation, they continue to divide students according to their socio-economic status (Robelen, 2011). As schools narrow the curriculum to focus on tested areas only (David, 2011; Robelen, 2011; Walker, 2014), they take on the characteristics of 19th century instruction instead of the 21st century instruction that is necessary for the United States to be competitive in the international market (Berliner, 2009; Munro, 2008).

This narrowing of the curriculum is rampant across the United States (David, 2011; Robelen, 2011) and is also evident in North Carolina (Ferriter, 2013). In order to maintain its edge, the American public recognizes the need for United States education to include a broader curriculum which will increase productivity while it maintains its economic strength around the world (Amadeo, 2015; Walker, 2014). High-stakes testing is not a practice limited to use in the United States (Lobascher, 2011; Strauss, 2014; William, 2010; Wyn, Turnbull, & Grimshaw, 2014). In Australia, standardized testing was predicted to impact literacy curriculum by focusing primarily in schools on literacy which would detract from other content areas and aligning the literacy content with the testing (William, 2010; Wyn et al., 2014).

This narrowed curriculum is being demonstrated across the country (David, 2011; Walker, 2014). As more time is devoted to reading and mathematics, the time spent in liberal arts

and foreign languages, by default, must decrease (David, 2011; Robelen, 2011). Across the country, there has been a 47 percent increase in time spent in language arts and a 37 percent increase in time spent in math (David, 2011). Sadly, large urban school districts are witnessing these decreases in elective opportunities more than schools with lower percentages of minority students (David, 2011; Plank & Condliffe, 2013; Walker, 2014). While many low-minority schools have seen increases in language arts, math, and science since they have devoted more time to them, eight out of ten high-minority school principals have seen these increases; but more time spent in these areas also denotes reduced time in other areas such as liberal arts. When the stakes are raised for educators, the trend seems to be that teachers are teaching more to the test. This is particularly the case in schools that are low-performing (David, 2011; Robelen, 2011; Walker, 2014). Students need the opportunity to experience a varied curriculum. With more student engagement in their learning, students could be encouraged to persist and matriculate through their courses as they approach and achieve high school graduation (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).

High-Stakes Testing's Effect on Learning

The rationale for high-stakes testing is for teachers to work more effectively, for students to be more motivated to learn, and for schools to run more smoothly (Nichols & Berliner, 2008b). However, there is no compelling evidence to indicate that high-stakes testing has a significant positive effect on student learning (Nichols and Berliner, 2008a). Instead, schools are seeing that preparation for high-stakes testing takes time away from student learning (Nichols & Berliner, 2008a). As teachers devote more time to preparing their students for the tests, not on teaching the necessary content, “high-stakes testing may ultimately weaken our nation, not improve it” (Berliner, 2009, p. 284) as instruction focuses more on test preparation and less on

critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is sacrificed for time spent in test preparation. In this type of environment, schools suppress complex thought. Teachers across the curriculum are spending more time preparing students for their English-Language Arts and math testing (David, 2011; Robelen, 2011; Walker, 2014). Since the introduction of high-stakes testing, time spent in instruction in areas outside of reading and math decreased significantly (Goldstein, 2012).

Researchers also found that some teachers moved from interactive, engaging activities to using worksheets to save instructional time to devote to English-Language Arts and Math (Plank & Condliffe, 2013; Polesel et al., 2012; Tate, 2010). An inordinate amount of time is spent on practicing for end of grade testing (Berliner, 2011; Polesel et al., 2012) while teachers moved away from leading deep, impactful learning experiences in their classrooms to rely more on shallow, superficial learning as they sought to prepare their students for high-stakes testing.

The legislation associated with NCLB makes the assumption that all students are motivated to do well and have the opportunities associated with learning the necessary material (Crotty, 2013; Dee & Jacob, 2010). Instead, there is evidence that suggests that the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing “are damaging to the education of students” (Nichols & Berliner, 2008a, p. 14). According to Berliner (2011), testing decreases student motivation. As schools push students to be college-ready, they neglect to recognize that not every student is college bound. This system contributes to the dropout rate. Nichols and Berliner (2008a; 2008b) further stated that high-stakes testing leads to cheating, curriculum narrowing, teaching to the test, and demoralizing educators, along with creating reluctant learners. The focus has moved to the testing instead of on investing in the students’ academic needs and in the curriculum (Berliner, 2011; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). It is important to recognize that test scores are also affected by the make-up of a class. For example, classes with heavy special education and

limited English proficient numbers create situations in which it is difficult for teachers to recognize and implement strategies to increase test scores (Nichols & Berliner, 2008b). High-stakes testing further perpetuates the separation between poor, diverse populations and the advantage population (Nichols & Berliner, 2008b). High-stakes testing was permitted to become implanted in our educational culture because the students who were already doing well did not have to worry about their level of success on high-stakes tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2008b).

Research on School Accountability

School Performance Grades

In 2013, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation (G.S. § 115C-83.15) during their long session establishing School Performance Grades (SPG). These SPGs were to be determined by adding two scores – 80% was based on achievement and 20% was based on growth (NCDPI, 2015b). School Performance Grades were to be based on test scores and other indicators with the intention of reporting college and career readiness. For high schools, SPG involved five specific indicators:

- End of Course test results in Math 1, English II, and Biology;
- The percentage of graduates who successfully completed Algebra 2, Math 3, or Integrated Math 3;
- The percentage of 11th grade students who scored sufficiently high on their ACT to meet University of North Carolina admissions requirements (minimum composite score of 17);
- The percentage of graduates who earned Silver Certificate or higher on their ACT WorkKeys assessment (a test given upon completion of a prescribed selection of CTE courses);
- The percentage of students who graduated within four years of high school entry.

These five indicators correspond to the columns in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1

WCPS School District School Performance Grade Data by High School

	SPG Score	SPG Grade	Growth Status	EVAAS Growth Score	Overall Achievement Score	Math 1 Score	English II Score	Bio Score	ACT Score	Work Keys Score	Math Course Rigor	Grad Rate
HS – Sp – A	A	93	Exceeded	95.7	93	91	95	89	87	86	>95	>95
HS – A	A	88	Exceeded	89.4	87	83	88	79	88	71	>95	>95
HS – Sp – B	A	89	Exceeded	86.3	90	91	86	83	>95		>95	>95
HS – B	C	64	Exceeded	86.1	59	41	49	45	37	63	>95	87
HS – C	A	91	Exceeded	89.3	91	89	91	77	95	92	>95	>95
HS – D	C	57	Exceeded	85.7	50	42	41	20	28	72	>95	87
HS – E	C	66	Not Met	59.5	68	53	59	49	61	79	>95	90
HS – F	B	83	Exceeded	96.7	80	71	71	83	64	80	>95	92
HS – G	B	77	Met	72.8	78	69	73	63	72	83	>95	95
HS – Alt	N/A											
HS – H	B	75	Met	83.3	73	63	69	63	59	69	>95	89
HS – I	A	91	Exceeded	90.5	91	90	87	87	84	88	>95	>95

Growth scores were determined through EVAAS® by comparing students' current test data with their previous year's test data. For schools that did not have growth data, the achievement data alone determined the SPG. For the 2013-2014 school year, school grades (A-F) were based on a 15 point grading scale. Schools with a grade of A earned a composite score of 85 to 100; schools with a grade of B earned a composite score of 70 to 84; schools with a grade of C earned a composite score of 55 to 69. In this school district, all high schools earned grades of A, B, or C. There were four schools which earned A's, three schools which earned B's, and three schools which earned C's. Two of the schools which earned A's were non-traditional high schools. The alternative school was not included in these results as determined by the State of North Carolina. The SPGs earned by the elementary feeder schools were four A's, 16 B's, six

C's, and four D's. The SPGs earned by the middle feeder schools were three A's, three B's, one C, and two D's.

Accountability

Educational accountability is the means by which schools are held accountable for their students' academic success – linking federal funding to student accountability data (Edwards, 2015). The No Child Left Behind Act called for specific accountability associated with demonstrating students' continued progress toward academic achievement (Goldstein, 2012; Iachini et al., 2013). While the intended premise of No Child Left Behind was to support the view that “every child can learn” (Munro, 2008, p. 315) and deserved the opportunity procured in a free and public education (N.C. Const. art IV, § 2), “public schools in the United States have been operating under what some would say is a test-based accountability system built on politically volatile values” (Munro, 2008, p. 315). What began as an initiative to revolutionize the public education system into one that would benefit every student has proven difficult to implement (Munro, 2008). Any legislation calling for proficiency of each and every student by the year 2014 is unrealistic. Duncan (2012) suggested that NCLB had significant “flaws that need to be fixed” (para. 1).

Accompanying the notion of accountability through testing are the punitive measures that are imposed when schools fail to meet their performance objectives (Taylor, Stecher, O'Day, Naftel, & LeFloch, 2010). According to Munro (2008), once a school has failed to meet these objectives for two consecutive years, technical assistance is required from the school district along with giving students the opportunity to attend another school within the school district. After the school has failed to meet their performance objectives for three consecutive years, the school is required to fund tutoring services, whether this be from within the school or from an

outside source. After the school has failed to meet their performance objectives for four consecutive years, along with the previous sanctions, the school must undergo staffing changes. After the fifth consecutive failing year, the school governance must change.

Schools are required to document their students' accountability data through a report card system (NCDPI, 2014b). The report card is made available to the public and includes a comparison of all schools within the district and within the state. The report card includes test results in Reading and Mathematics. The data is separated into four categories: students identified with disabilities, students receiving Limited English Proficiency services, racial and ethnic breakdown, and socioeconomic status as identified through free and reduced lunch data. While the accountability system is designed to measure student and educator success, the outcome is very important. Schools must focus on academic results which go beyond academic compliance and address areas of student need (Munro, 2008).

Summary

This chapter has provided a theoretical framework for this study along with a review of the literature. The review of the literature relates to alternative education and credit recovery, government influence on education, high-stakes testing, along with school accountability. Every student can learn and deserves the opportunity to successfully complete high school and earn their diploma (Caroleo, 2014; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Munro, 2008).

Since public education began, there have been what are considered traditional as well as alternative schools and programs for students to learn and seek successful completion of high school (Miller, 2010). No Child Left Behind legislation brought with it a new level of accountability for high schools (NCLB, Part H, Section 1802; Tucker, 2013). Included in this accountability was an expectation that by the year 2014 high schools would have achieved a 100

percent graduation rate (ESEA, 2013). While states were given the flexibility to determine how to calculate their graduation rate, schools were responsible for graduating a higher percentage of their students (Dessoiff, 2009).

Another facet of school accountability came in the form of high-stakes testing. With a pronounced focus on students' high-stakes testing results, more school time was devoted to test preparation (Berliner, 2011; Plank & Condliffe, 2013). The expectations handed down through NCLB preempted this change. Because the length of the school day continued to be similar (Hull & Newport, 2011), this reduced the time available to spend in enrichment classes such as liberal arts and foreign language. It was necessary for schools to demonstrate student growth to meet Average Yearly Progress (Dee & Jacob, 2010).

While schools sought creative ways to demonstrate that students were growing academically, students who continued to score poorly on high-stakes tests began to contribute to the drop-out rate (Papay et al., 2010; Polesel et al., 2012; Reardon et al., 2010; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). Students with lower grades continued to drop out at an expected rate, but students with average grades who scored poorly on high-stakes tests began to drop out at a higher rate (Balfanz et al., 2013; Papay et al., 2010; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). The combination of students failing to pass high-stakes tests as they also failed classes contributed significantly to the drop-out rate. Schools sought alternatives by which students could matriculate toward graduation as they caught up with their graduation cohort peers (Davis, 2011; Dessoiff, 2009; Plummer, 2012).

As online opportunities for earning course credit were introduced and improved, schools offered additional options to offer their students; their programs were improved to address their academic needs (Kronholz, 2011; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Technology provides schools and

students the flexibility that comes with being in school in the 21st century. Online opportunities include credit recovery and new credit options (Dessoff, 2009; Franco & Patel, 2011; Plummer, 2012; Wolff, 2014). They allow students to repeat courses without negatively impacting class sizes (Kennedy, 2010). They also provide opportunities for students who are advanced academically to take advanced placement and college courses that they would not previously have been able to complete.

In response to students at-risk for dropping out of high school, school systems are offering alternative schools and programs within schools to address students' individual needs (Bohrnstedt, 2013). The decision to drop out of high school is not made compulsively (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Instead, students who experience repeated failure due to academic difficulties, poor attendance, behavior issues which often include additional attendance issues due to suspension, and personal issues, make this decision across the course of various years (Flannery, 2015; Kronholz, 2011; Lee et al., 2011). Schools have the responsibility to address students' needs in order to encourage students to persist to graduation. With the legislation associated with NCLB, schools can no longer ignore this problem. It must be addressed. Alternative education is a viable solution which helps many students reach the goal of graduating from high school, thus enabling students to pursue their post-secondary goals (Stanley & Plucker, 2008).

With the expectation that schools would continue to raise their graduation rates came the realization that dropout rates were not as low as they should be (Snyder & Dillow, 2011; Stillwell, 2010). As schools addressed this expectation, they also sought new and creative ways to reach students who were considered at risk for high school dropout (Carver et al., 2010).

Alternative education was identified as a viable option for students to complete their education (Stanley & Plucker, 2008; Wyant, 2008).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study was an investigative project on the impact of alternative school programs on high school graduation rate. The trend toward Alternative Education was identified in the 1970s and accepted then as a viable option for students by their parents (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Graduation rates were brought to the forefront of educational reform with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act through No Child Left Behind (Duncan, 2013). As schools have sought answers to students dropping out of high school for various reasons, including academic difficulties, poor attendance, behavior issues, and personal issues (Kronholz, 2011), they have begun to implement alternative diploma programs for students who would not previously have persisted to graduation (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Larson, 2013a; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994; Wyant, 2008). In response to the focus on high school graduation rate and the need to reach students who may have considered dropping out without completing high school, a large Western North Carolina school district modified its graduation pathway to include an alternative diploma pathway. This study provided valuable information to schools and school districts regarding alternative diploma programs such as the alternative diploma program in this large Western North Carolina school district and its impact on the high school graduation rate.

Research Design

The researcher chose a non-experimental, causal-comparative research design for this study. Causal-comparative research is considered non-experimental due to the researcher's inability to assign subjects to groups because the data is collected "operating retroactively" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 306). This research is designed to observe the naturally occurring differences between the group of students who earned a traditional diploma with a minimum of 28 Carnegie

units of credit and the group of students who earned an alternative diploma with a minimum of 21 Carnegie units of high school credit in order to be able to graduate with their four-year cohort group. A causal-comparative research design is most appropriate for this study because it would be impossible or unethical to assign students to the independent variable (Creswell, 2012). The independent variable, participation in the alternative diploma program, is present in one group and absent from the other group, thus forming the comparison group values (Creswell, 2012). Causal-comparative designs are intended to investigate cause and effect by identifying groups in which the independent variable is present or absent. The researcher, upon conducting the research, determines whether the effect of the independent variable varies by group on the dependent variable (Gall et al., 2007).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This research study used the causal comparative research design in order to determine the effects of a large Western North Carolina school district's alternative diploma program on the graduation rates of the individual high schools as well as the school district as a whole. Students in the treatment group successfully graduated from the alternative diploma program. Because the data was retrieved ex post facto, the variables could not be controlled or manipulated.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this research study:

Research Question 1: To what extent do End of Course test results impact student participation in the alternative diploma program or the traditional diploma program in a large Western North Carolina school district?

Research Question 2: To what extent does student participation in the alternative diploma program affect the district high school graduation rate?

Research Question 3: To what extent does an alternative diploma program affect the graduation rate in an individual high school in a large Western North Carolina school district?

Null Hypotheses

Therefore, this research study was designed to explore the following null hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference between End of Course test results for students who graduated from the alternative diploma program and students who graduated from the traditional diploma program.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in the high school graduation rates of the school district when the graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in the individual high school graduation rates when the graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

Identification of Variables

For the purpose of this research study, the independent variables related to Research Question 1 were End of Course test results. The dependent variable was the type of high school graduation diploma earned. For the remaining two research questions, the independent variable was determined to be diploma pathway while the dependent variable was the graduation rates of the individual high schools along with the graduation rate of the school district.

Participants

The group of research participants consisted of students who were enrolled in a large Western North Carolina school district and were part of the 2010-2014 four-year graduation cohort in the district. All participating students were 2014 graduates of the school district,

whether they were enrolled throughout the four continuous high school years or transferred into the school district. All participating students graduated in 2014 under the traditional diploma pathway or the alternative diploma pathway.

Comparison groups could not be determined randomly. They were determined based on the natural occurrence of the independent variable (Gall et al., 2007) or the absence of the independent variable. In this case, the independent variable for RQ 1 was student scores on End of Course tests. For RQ 2 and RQ 3, the independent variable was considered participation in the alternative diploma program. All students who were included were those students in the 2010-2014 four-year graduation cohort. The students who graduated successfully through participation in the alternative diploma program comprised one group while the other group was comprised of students who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program. Students' identities were protected by coding each student with an assigned numeric code.

While students were in school, their demographic and academic data were documented in PowerSchool®, the district's online database. Upon graduation, however, the student information was printed, added to their cumulative files, and purged from the online system. Therefore, data was retrieved by the researcher from the stored cumulative files of the student participants from the alternative school, where all files were held relevant to students who graduated successfully from the alternative diploma program. Student records for students who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma pathway were stored at the student's high school one year beyond the year that student graduated from high school. Therefore, data for these students were retrieved by the researcher from the traditional high school where students graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program.

The researcher employed the comprehensive sampling technique in which all students from the 2010-2014 four-year graduation cohort lists were included in the study. This group included students from the 2010-2014 cohort who graduated through participation in the alternative diploma program, those who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program, and those students who failed to graduate with their four-year cohort peers. This was the target population for this study in order for the researcher to determine whether the alternative diploma program has a statistically significant impact on the school district's graduation rate in various ways.

Setting

The setting for this study was in a large public school district in Western North Carolina. The school district consists of 30 elementary schools, nine middle schools, 11 high schools which include two non-traditional high schools, and three special purpose schools. According to the school's website (WCPS, 2014), the enrollment for the 2013-2014 school year was 42,047 with 11,082 of these students enrolled in high school. The demographic makeup of the school district was 67.17 percent White, 14.98 percent Latino, 13.27 percent Black, and 4.58 percent listed as Other (WCPS, 2014). The school district reported that 28.76 percent of high school students received free or reduced meals in the year 2012-2013 (WCPS, 2014). The demographic make-up varied by school along with the number of students reported as receiving free or reduced lunch. Table 3.1 indicates the enrollment information specified by the ethnic backgrounds along with free and reduced meal information for the students in each high school.

Table 3.1

WCPS School District Enrollment and Ethnic Demographic Data

School	Enrollment	White	Black	Latino	Free/Reduced
HS – Sp – A	823	72.51%	12.51%	11.58%	25.68%
HS – A	1447	80.06%	10.70%	5.93%	13.47%
HS – B	947	45.89%	31.91%	19.10%	59.96%
HS – C	1517	85.09%	5.06%	3.97%	2.49%
HS – D	933	12.31%	41.94%	44.44%	76.94%
HS – E	885	81.22%	10.50%	5.97%	35.52%
HS – F	1161	86.13%	5.62%	6.50%	17.95%
HS – G	1586	76.84%	9.90%	9.55%	26.12%
HS – Alt	119	37.12%	48.48%	10.61%	98.23%
HS – H	1324	62.26%	17.62%	14.58%	35.61%
HS – Sp – B	340	63.42%	8.55%	21.24%	26.88%
HS – I	1452	83.81%	7.37%	4.16%	11.06%
LEA	11082				28.76%

The school district was located in one of the fastest growing counties in North Carolina, with a combination of very rural areas along with metropolitan and suburban areas (Western County Government, 2014). The estimated population of this county is 212,758 (United States Census Bureau, 2014). By comparison with the county’s student population, the county population is made up of 73.8 percent White, 12.1 percent Black, and 10.9 percent Latino, with 9.7 percent below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2014). In 2012, this school district was among ten districts to be honored for its high graduation rate from the 2011-2012 school year. At that time the graduation rate was 89.5 percent, and there were 2715 students in the four-year cohort. Among the ten school districts honored, this school district had the highest number of students in the cohort – more than doubling the number from the county with the next largest four-year cohort number (NCDPI, 2014b).

Instrumentation

To address the first research question, the researcher utilized the End of Course (EOC) test results for the student participants. In the state of North Carolina, students are required to take End of Course tests in Math 1, Biology 1, and English II. Math 1 and English II are required by the end of students' sophomore year of high school; Biology 1 is required by the end of each student's junior year of high school. In order to receive high school credit, students are required to pass the course along with passing the respective EOC test.

There are several layers of reliability considered for End of Course testing. In order for the test to be considered reliable in regard to its alternate forms, there must be a reliability coefficient of at least 0.85 (Sanford, 1996). Equivalent forms are developed to administer various testing forms within a testing site. These equivalent forms are developed by comparing a balance of the sum of p-values (NCDPI, 2003a). Tests are developed over a 44 month period and go through trials, field testing, and pilot testing before they are adopted for use throughout the state (NCDPI, 2003a). This is the process by which all EOCs are developed, including the Biology 1, Math 1, and English II exams. When students were given the tests one week apart, the reliability estimate was found to be 0.86 (Sanford, 1996). There is also a reliability element associated with the plethora of test administrators across the state. In order to address this issue, there are very specific test administrator guidelines that must be followed. All test administrators must strictly adhere to the *Testing Code of Ethics* (NCDPI, 2014b; NCDPI, 2014c) to ensure standardized test administration and, thus, ensure the validity and the reliability of the test results. Each test administrator must be trained every semester they administer the test and must sign a test administrator agreement prior to administering the test (North Carolina Testing Program, 2003).

Test validity refers to the extent to which a test measures what it states it will (Gall et al., 2007). In order to ensure that the tests have content validity, they are written by a team of experts in the curriculum. After the tests are written, they are reviewed by others who are also experts in the field. After a rigorous process of editing and re-writing the test questions and answers, the tests are piloted in select schools and evaluated again (NCDPI, 2003b). Only after the content validity is ascertained are tests administered across the state (Sanford, 1996).

Procedures

In order to conduct this research study, it was necessary to obtain several layers of permission in a variety of areas. First, the researcher sought the approval of the members of the dissertation committee to proceed with the proposed study (see Appendix A). After the dissertation committee granted permission to proceed, the researcher sought approval from the Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Programs in the school district in which the research study took place. This person works with all researchers in the school district and is responsible for approving, amending, or denying requests for research within the school district. After the Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Programs granted permission to conduct the study in the school district, the researcher requested approval from the Institutional Review Board of Liberty University. It was not necessary to obtain parental consent as the data was collected ex post facto and the identities of the students were coded to maintain student confidentiality. To ensure this confidentiality, students were assigned a unique identification number to protect their identities while allowing the researcher to cross-reference data that was ascertained as part of this study. Students' identity will not be able to be ascertained directly or indirectly throughout this study or in its subsequent reports. In order to secure the data, all of the data associated with each

participant was maintained under a password protected spreadsheet only known and accessible to the researcher.

In order to obtain the necessary data, the researcher worked directly in one of the ten traditional high schools within the school district. The specific high school in which the researcher gathered data was based upon the recommendation of the Accountability Officer of the school district. Schools hold their students' cumulative data at the high school one year beyond their expected graduation year. This includes students who continue to progress toward graduation as well as students who drop out prior to graduation. In the case of students who have dropped out, the schools continue to keep these students' files one year beyond the expected year of graduation as determined by their entry date. The exception to high schools holding students' files is in the case of students who graduated under the alternative diploma program (see Appendix C). For these students, their cumulative data is transferred to the alternative school upon their successful graduation from the program. For this reason, the researcher visited both the traditional high school as well as the alternative school. The student data pertinent to this research study was that which was associated with those students who were included in the 2010-2014 four-year cohort lists.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this non-experimental causal-comparative study was to determine the effect of participating in an alternative diploma program on the four-year cohort graduation rate in a large Western North Carolina school district. The independent variable was defined as participation in the alternative diploma program of the school district. The dependent variable was defined as the graduation rate of an individual high school along with the graduation rate of the school district as a whole. A causal comparative design was identified as the most

appropriate means of conducting this study as there was no manipulation nor random assignment of the participants (Gall et al., 2007). In order to identify this effect, the researcher compared students' score results on End of Course tests in the ninth through eleventh grades between students who graduated successfully through the alternative diploma program and students who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program. Because the researcher was utilizing a null hypothesis with groups that may have had different numbers of participants, an independent samples *t*-test was used to analyze the data (Gall et al., 2007; Zaiontz, 2014). A two-tailed *t*-test was most appropriate for this research study because there was no direction hypothesized regarding the research questions (Gall et al., 2007; Zaiontz, 2014). In order to utilize the *t*-test, the dependent variable must meet the assumption that the samples are normally distributed.

The researcher utilized a significance level of $p < .05$ to reject or fail to reject the null hypotheses to avoid Type I errors, rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true, or Type II errors, accepting the null hypothesis when it is false (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher used the largest sample size possible among the students who entered high school in 2010 and were expected to graduate in 2014 with their four-year graduation cohort. To address the first question, the researcher averaged the three individual EOC scores for each student (Math 1, Biology 1, and English II) to determine a student-specific composite EOC score. A *t*-test was performed by combining the scores from the graduates of the alternative diploma program and comparing these scores with those combined scores from students who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program. Once these scores were combined, they were compared using the independent samples *t*-test. To address the second research question, the researcher conducted a *t*-test comparing the number of graduates at the end of their fourth year in high school which

included the participants in the alternative diploma program with the high school graduates who would not have successfully completed high school with their four year graduation cohort had there been no opportunity for achieving graduation through the alternative diploma program. To address the third research question, the researcher compared the graduation rates of one of the high schools as reported, having transferred the graduation data of the alternative diploma pathway students to the alternative school and the graduation rate as it would have been reported had there been no alternative diploma option, in which case those students would have counted as non-graduates for purposes of the four-year cohort graduation rate.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this non-experimental, causal-comparative study was to explore the effect of the alternative diploma pathway on high school graduation rate in a large Western North Carolina school district. Diploma pathway was defined as the pathway by which a student is permitted to graduate (NCDPI, 2014a), whether this is by means of graduation with a traditional high school diploma, earning the State minimum requirements along with the local requirements for a minimum of 28 credits, or with an alternative high school diploma, earning the State minimum requirements of 21 credits. Additionally, this study explored the effect of End of Course test scores on students' diploma pathway – specifically whether students graduated with a traditional diploma or an alternative diploma.

Data was collected through the use of the comprehensive sampling technique in which all students from the 2010-2014 four-year graduation cohort list were included in the study. This included students who entered high school in 2010 and were expected to graduate in 2014 through participation in the alternative diploma program along with those who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program. This was the target population for this study, so the researcher could determine whether the alternative diploma program had a statistically significant impact on the school district's graduation rate in various ways. Participation was limited to those students who were expected to graduate in June 2014 from a high school in the Western North Carolina school district in which this study took place. Students entered high school in this school district in 2010 and were expected to graduate in 2014. All data was collected ex post facto. Student identity was numerically coded upon collection and, therefore, identities of the participants were unknown to the researcher or otherwise. Graduation data from nine traditional high schools were included in the study. Additionally, End of Course data for

students who graduated in 2014 from one of the traditional high schools along with their graduation pathway classification, traditional or alternative, was included in the study. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a clear explanation of the results of the research. The descriptive statistics and demographic information is presented first, followed by an analysis of the hypotheses. Last, a summary of the research is provided to the reader.

Research Questions

The goals of this research were to explore:

Research Question 1: To what extent do End of Course test results impact student participation in the alternative diploma program or the traditional diploma program in a large Western North Carolina school district?

Research Question 2: To what extent does student participation in the alternative diploma program affect the district high school graduation rate?

Research Question 3: To what extent does an alternative diploma program affect the graduation rate in an individual high school in a large Western North Carolina school district?

Null Hypotheses

Therefore, this research study was designed to explore the following null hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant difference between End of Course test results for students who graduated from the alternative diploma program and students who graduated from the traditional diploma program.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant difference in the high school graduation rates of the school district when the graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no statistically significant difference in the individual high school graduation rates when the graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

Descriptive Statistics

Data were collected in two batches. The first group of data was collected from one of the traditional high schools in the Western North Carolina school district and the alternative high school. The data were directly related to the students who were included in the 2010-2014 graduation cohort. Students' data were collected directly related to their End of Course testing results along with their identified graduation pathway, traditional or alternative. This information was identifiable based on the number of credits the graduates earned prior to successful completion of high school. Students who earned a minimum of 28 credits were identified as traditional diploma students while students with less than 28 credits were identified as alternative diploma students. A total of 192 transcripts were included representing the graduates in the class of 2014 from one of the high schools in the large Western North Carolina school district, including the alternative diploma graduates (15%; $n = 29$) and the traditional diploma graduates (85%; $n = 163$). These data included all students who graduated successfully at the end of the 2014 school year – both those who graduated through participation in the alternative diploma pathway and those who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma pathway.

While attrition was not expected as all data was retrieved ex post facto and directly related to graduates of the high school, there were participants whose End of Course data could not be utilized due to incomplete test information. Each of these participants were missing test scores for one or all of the End of Course tests. There are several reasons that this data could have been omitted. While human error is a possibility, it is also possible that these students

transferred to another school for part of their high school career, and the End of Course data was not included on their transcripts upon their return. Additionally, when students are within their first calendar year of entering the United States, they are often exempt from taking End of Course tests which include reading comprehension as they are considered Limited English Proficient.

The school population is reported to be 50% Caucasian, 29% African American, 18% Latino, and 3% Other (NCDPI, 2014a). In the 2010-2014 graduation cohort, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction reported that 2% of the students were Limited English Proficient (NCDPI, 2014a). After consulting with the Accountability Officer, the researcher discovered that these scores were rigorously sought to be able to post complete data for each student. Many of the students transferred into the school with the credit for Math 1, English II, Biology 1. Once a student has received credit for the course, he is not required to take the related exam. Additionally, there were students who transferred these credits from other North Carolina schools, but without the posted test score. Calls were made to the North Carolina school, but these schools did not have record of the students' test scores due to transferring into that school from an out of state school.

Appendix D outlines the End of Course data for the alternative diploma students by each test, Math 1, English II, and Biology, along with the composite score as determined by establishing the mean of the three EOC scores for each student.

Appendix E outlines the End of Course data for the traditional diploma students by each test, Math 1, English II, and Biology, along with the composite score as determined by establishing the mean of the three EOC scores for each student.

Table 4.1 provides a summary of the descriptive statistics related to the End of Course composite data for the students who graduated in 2014 through participation in the alternative diploma program and those students who graduated in 2014 through participation in the traditional diploma program.

Table 4.1

End of Course Descriptive Statistics

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Traditional Diploma	163	1.0	4.0	2.90	0.75
Alternative Diploma	29	1.0	3.67	2.18	0.79

The second group of data was collected from the Accountability Office of the school district in the large Western North Carolina school district. There were two sets of data collected from the Accountability Office. The first set of data was related to the graduation rate of the school district. Graduation data were collected relevant to the five years in which the alternative diploma pathway had been utilized in this large Western North Carolina school district. Additionally, the number of graduates from the traditional high schools and those students who graduated through participation in the alternative diploma program and whose data were transferred to the alternative school were retrieved from the Accountability Office. The number of graduates who graduated through participation in each diploma pathway, traditional and alternative, were relevant in order to determine what the district's graduation rate would have been had the alternative program not been an option for the graduates or the school district.

As can be seen in Table 4.2, the graduation rate of the school district would have been much different had the schools not had the option of graduating students by means of participation in the alternative diploma program. The data is separated into two categories: the

graduation rate as reported by the school district and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the implementation of the alternative diploma program.

Table 4.2

LEA CGR Rates

Academic Year	Reported LEA CGR	Would-be Reported LEA CGR without Alternative Diploma
2009-2010	84.23	82.08
2010-2011	89.10	85.33
2011-2012	88.78	84.64
2012-2013	90.83	84.93
2013-2014	92.65	86.51

The graduate numbers were collected to determine the graduation rates of the school district for the five years since the alternative diploma program had been put into place. This was determined by reducing the numerator of the graduation rate by the number of students who had participated in the alternative diploma program for each of the five years. These students would have been counted as non-graduates without the alternative diploma program. The denominator – the total number of students included in the 2010-2014 graduation cohort – would have remained the same. Table 4.3 indicates the number breakdown of the graduates per year during the life of the alternative diploma program in the school district.

Table 4.3

LEA Graduation Rate Breakdown

Year	Reported Graduates	Alternative Diploma Students	Traditional Graduates
2009-2010	2078	53	2025
2010-2011	2296	97	2199
2011-2012	2421	113	2308
2012-2013	2646	172	2474
2013-2014	2760	183	2577

Graduation data were further gathered relevant to one of the traditional high schools for the five years in which the alternative diploma program had been utilized in the school district.

Alternative diploma and traditional diploma graduate numbers were garnered to determine the difference between the reported graduation rates and what the graduation rates would have been had the schools had to count the alternative diploma students as non-graduates. Table 4.4 indicates the number breakdown of the graduates per year during the five years in which the alternative program has been utilized in the school district. Therefore reported graduation rates ($n = 5$) and what would have been the graduation rate without the alternative diploma pathway ($n = 5$) were included.

Table 4.4

High School Graduation Rate Breakdown

Year	Reported Graduates	Alternative Diploma Students	Total Graduates
2009-2010	138	20	158
2010-2011	161	31	192
2011-2012	148	27	175
2012-2013	173	32	205
2013-2014	186	30	216

As can be seen in Table 4.5, the graduation rate of the high school would have been much different without the alternative diploma option. The data is separated into two categories: the graduation rate as reported by the school and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the implementation of the alternative diploma program.

Table 4.5

High School CGR Rates

Academic Year	Reported High School CGR	Reported High School CGR without Alternative Diploma
2009-2010	80.23	71.88
2010-2011	81.73	70.61
2011-2012	80.43	70.14
2012-2013	81.99	71.12
2013-2014	89.07	76.17

Assumptions Testing

Null Hypothesis One

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether any of the t -test assumptions were violated. A visual inspection of the Q-Q Plots indicates the normality of both the alternative and the traditional diploma data (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

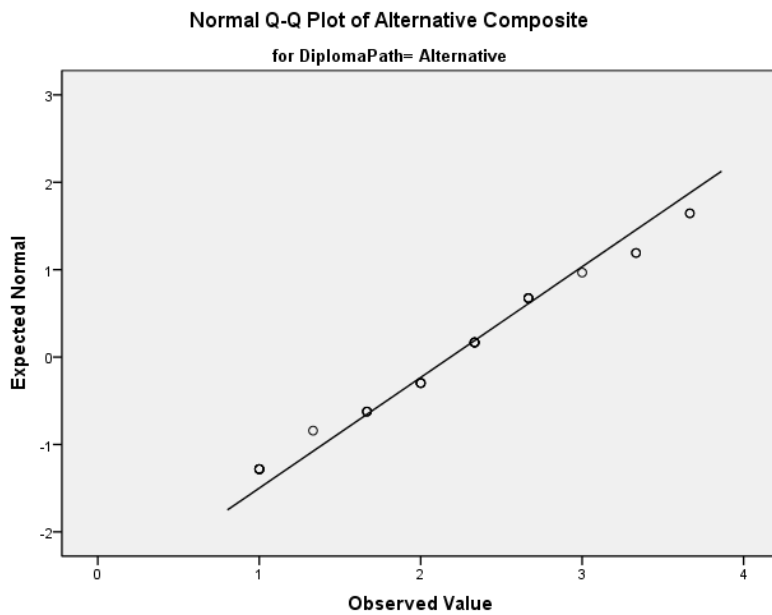


Figure 4.1

Normal Q-Q Plot of EOC Composite for Alternative Diploma Pathway Students

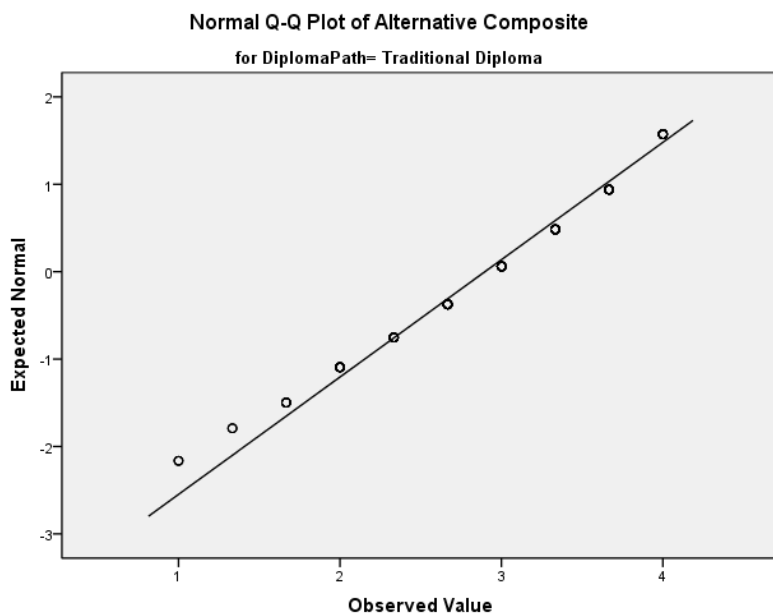


Figure 4.2

Normal Q-Q Plots of EOC Composite for Traditional Diploma Students

The Shapiro-Wilks data indicated that the alternative diploma data followed a normal distribution while the traditional diploma data did not meet the assumption of normality.

However, “according to the central limit theorem ... in large samples (>30 or 40), the sampling distribution tends to be normal, regardless of the shape of the data” (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012, para. 3).

Levene’s (Green & Salkind, 2011; Howell, 2011) test was performed to determine homogeneity of variance. For the diploma pathway, $F = .050$, $p = .824$, which is greater than $\alpha = .05$. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was found to be tenable.

Null Hypothesis Two

Preliminary assumptions were also performed to determine whether any of the t -test assumptions were violated for null hypothesis two. Null hypothesis two stated that there was no statistically significant difference between the graduation rate of the school district as reported

and the graduation rate of the school district as it would have been reported without the alternative diploma program option.

A visual inspection of the Q-Q plots indicate the normality of both the graduation rate as reported and the graduation rate without the alternative diploma option (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4).

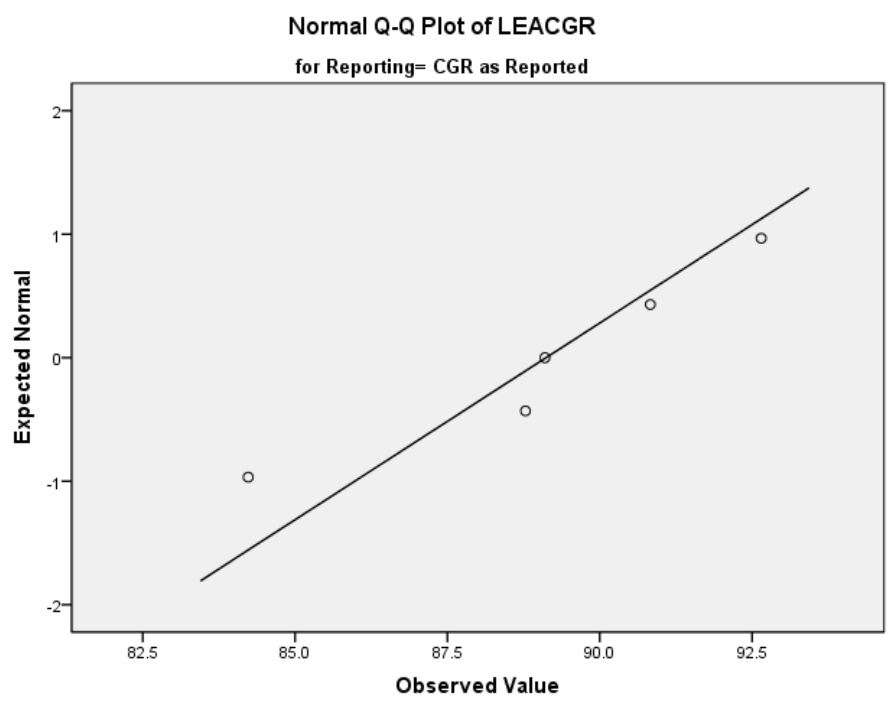


Figure 4.3

Normal Q-Q Plot of LEA Cohort Graduation Rate As Reported

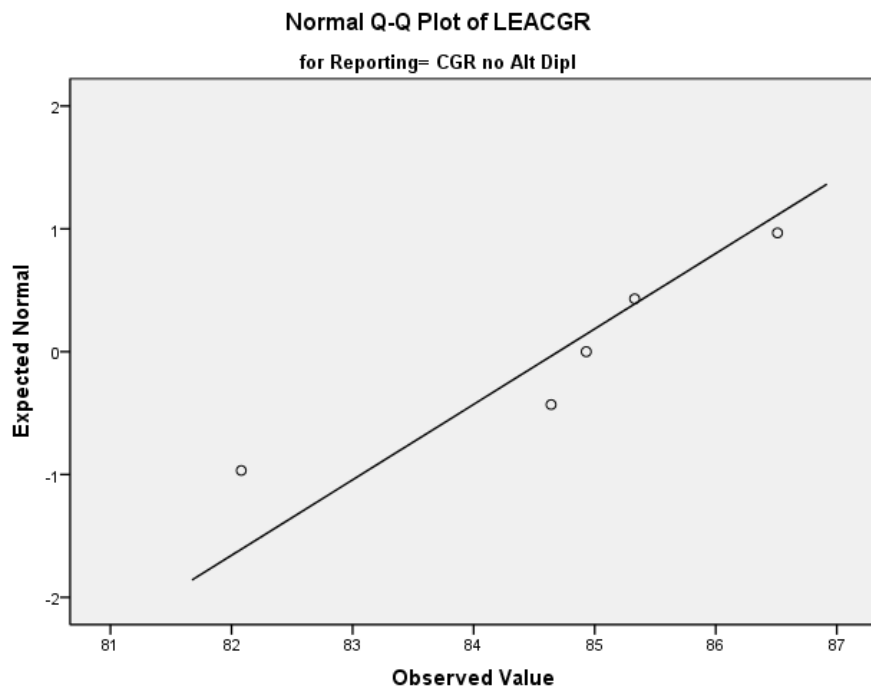


Figure 4.4

Normal Q-Q Plot of LEA Cohort Graduation Rate if No Alternative Diploma

The Shapiro-Wilk test for the graduation rate as reported ($S-W = .941$, $df = 5$, $p = .675$) and the graduation rate without the alternative diploma option ($S-W = .914$, $df = 5$, $p = .489$) indicate that normality can reasonably be assumed.

In order to determine homogeneity of variance, Levene's (Green & Salkind, 2011; Howell, 2011) test was utilized. For graduation rate, $F = .947$, $p = .359$, which is greater than $\alpha = .05$. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was reasonably found to be tenable.

Null Hypothesis Three

Preliminary analyses were finally conducted to determine whether any of the t -test assumptions were violated. Null hypothesis three stated that there would be no statistically significant difference in the individual high school graduation rates when the graduation class included the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class did not include the

alternative diploma students. In the case of not including the alternative diploma students, these would have counted as non-graduates for the purposes of the four-year cohort graduation rate. Upon initial inspection and analysis, the data violated the assumption of normality. Therefore, the researcher transformed the graduation data in an attempt to render “a more powerful test” (Northwestern University, 1997). The data was transformed by computing the absolute value of the graduation rate less the mean graduation rate split by diploma pathway.

A visual inspection of the Q-Q plots indicate the normality of both the high school’s graduation rate as reported and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the alternative diploma option (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6).

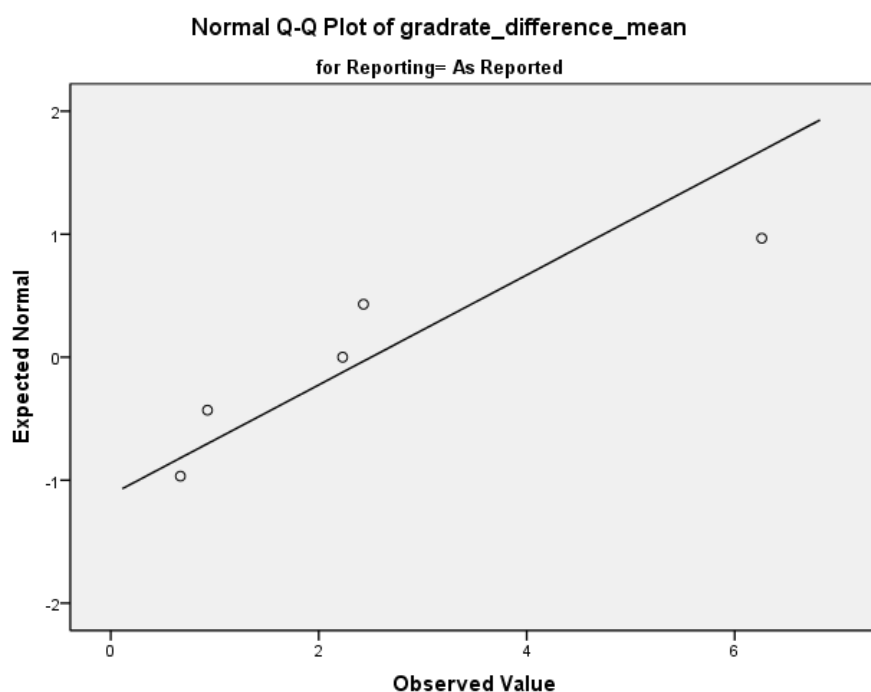


Figure 4.5

Normal Q-Q Plot of High School Graduation Rate as Reported

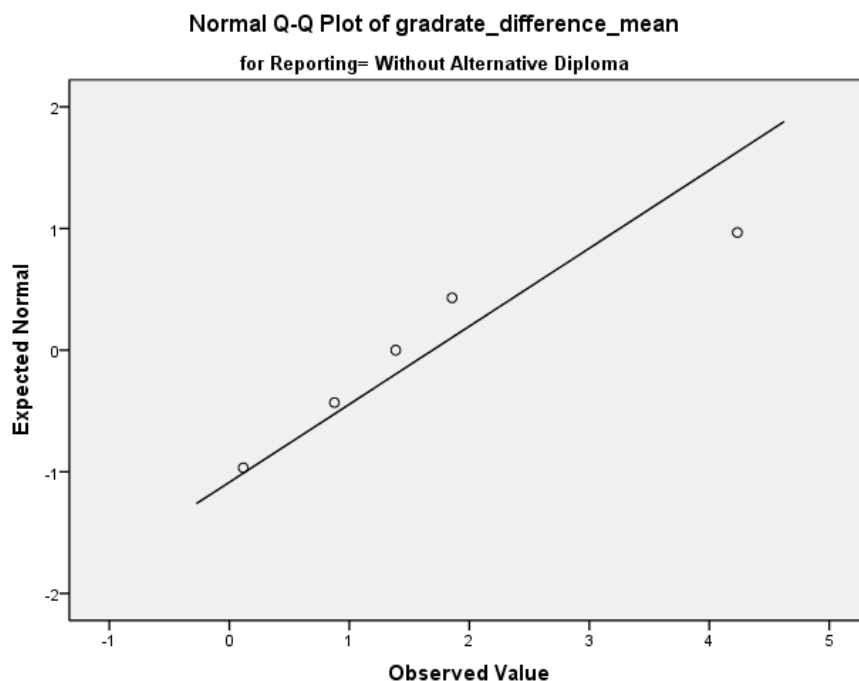


Figure 4.6

Normal Q-Q Plot of High School Graduation Rate if No Alternative Diploma

The Shapiro-Wilk test for the graduation rate as reported ($S-W = .830$, $df = 5$, $p = .139$) and the graduation rate without the alternative diploma option ($S-W = .909$, $df = 5$, $p = .459$) indicated that normality can reasonably be assumed.

In order to determine homogeneity of variance, Levene's (Green & Salkind, 2011; Howell, 2011) test was utilized. For graduation rate, $F = .281$, $p = .610$, which is greater than $\alpha = .05$. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was found to be tenable.

Results

Separate t -tests were performed to analyze each null hypothesis. The first t -test compared the Composite End of Course test scores for students who graduated in 2014 through participation in the traditional diploma pathway with Composite End of Course test scores for students who had graduated in 2014 through participation in the alternative diploma pathway.

The dependent variable was participation in the alternative diploma program and participation in the traditional diploma program. The independent variable was the End of Course test scores, which were averaged together to determine a Composite End of Course test score.

The second *t*-test compared the graduation rates of the school district to determine if there was a significant difference between the rates as reported and the graduation rate as it would have been reported if the alternative diploma program had not been an option. Without the alternative diploma program, these graduates would have counted as non-graduates for purposes of the four-year high school graduation cohort.

The third *t*-test compared the graduation rates of one of the high schools in the school district to determine if there were a significant difference between the graduation rates of the high school as reported and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the option of the alternative diploma program. In this case, alternative diploma graduates would have counted against the high school's four-year cohort graduation rate.

Null Hypothesis One

Null hypothesis one stated that there would be no statistically significant difference between End of Course test results for students who graduated from the alternative diploma program ($n = 29$) and students who graduated from the traditional diploma program ($n = 163$). A Composite End of Course score was determined by taking the mean of each student's Math, English, and Biology End of Course test scores. Levene's (Green & Salkind, 2011; Howell, 2011) test was used to establish that the results were used from the *t*-test assuming equal variances. The independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare students' Composite End of Course test score for students who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program and students who graduated through participation in the alternative diploma program.

There was a significant difference in the scores for alternative diploma students ($M = 2.18$, $SD = .79$) and traditional diploma students ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .75$); $t(190) = -4.71$, $p = .00$ (see Table 4.6). These results suggest that End of Course test performance does have an effect on graduation diploma pathway.

Table 4.6

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-tests (Composite End of Course Scores)

Group	n	M	SD	t	p=
Graduates of traditional diploma pathway	163	2.90	.75		
Graduates of alternative diploma pathway	29	2.18	.79	-4.71	.00

Null Hypothesis Two

Null hypothesis two stated that there would be no statistically significant difference between the graduation rate of the large Western North Carolina school district as reported, in which the graduates of the alternative diploma program counted toward the graduation rate, and the graduation rate as it would have been reported had the school district not had the option of the alternative diploma program, in which case the alternative diploma graduates would have counted as non-graduates for the four-year graduation cohort. Levene's (Green & Salkind, 2011; Howell, 2011) test was used to establish that the results were used from the t -test assuming equal variances. The independent samples t -test was conducted to compare the graduation rates for the school district as reported and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the alternative diploma program option. There was a significant difference in the graduation rates as reported ($M = 89.12$, $SD = 3.14$) and the graduation rate without the alternative diploma program ($M = 84.70$, $SD = 1.63$); $t(8) = 2.80$, $p = .023$ (see Table 4.7). These results suggest that the

incorporation of the alternative diploma program does have an effect on the overall graduation rate of the school district.

Table 4.7

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-tests (School District's Graduation Rate)

Group	n	M	SD	t	p=
Graduation rate as reported	5	89.12	3.14		
Graduation rate without alternative diploma program	5	84.70	1.63	2.80	.023

Null Hypothesis Three

According to the null hypothesis three, there would be no statistically significant difference between an individual high school's graduation rate as reported and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the alternative diploma option. Levene's (Green & Salkind, 2011; Howell, 2011) test was used to establish that the *t*-test assuming equal variances results were used. Therefore, the individual samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the graduation rates for the individual high school as reported and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the option of the alternative diploma. No significant difference was noted in the graduation rate as reported ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 2.24$) and the graduation rate without the alternative diploma ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.56$); $t(8) = .664$, $p = .525$ (see Table 4.8). These results suggest that at the individual high school level, the alternative diploma pathway has no effect on the overall graduation rate. The researcher, therefore, failed to reject null hypothesis three.

Table 4.8

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-tests (Individual High School's Graduation Rate)

Group	n	M	SD	t	p=
Graduation rate as reported	5	2.50	2.24		
Graduation rate without alternative diploma program	5	1.69	1.56	.664	.525

Summary

This study used a non-experimental, causal-comparative research design comparing traditional diploma pathway to alternative diploma. Specific comparisons included students' End of Course test data by diploma pathway as well as high school and school district graduation rates comparing the reported data with the data as it would have been reported without the option of the alternative diploma pathway. All data was collected ex post facto. After conducting the necessary assumption tests, three research questions were analyzed by utilizing *t*-tests.

The first research question compared the Composite End of Course test data between students who graduated with a traditional diploma and those students who graduated with an alternative diploma. The results of the *t*-test indicated that there was a significant difference between groups. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between End of Course test data of students who graduate through the traditional diploma pathway and those who graduate through the alternative diploma pathway.

The second research question compared the graduation rate of the Western North Carolina school district as reported to the graduation rate had there been no alternative diploma program. In the case of no alternative diploma option, the school district would have had to

report all students who had not graduated through the traditional diploma pathway as non-graduates because they would not have been able to graduate within four years of entry into high school. The results of a *t*-test indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups. Therefore the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the graduation rates when the school district is able to count the alternative diploma graduates as graduates as opposed to not being able to count them as graduates because they were unable to graduate within four years of entry into high school.

The third research question compared the graduation rate data of one of the high schools in the Western North Carolina school district as they were reported to the graduation rate data that would have been reported had there been no alternative diploma program. In the case of no alternative diploma, the school would have had to report all students who had not graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program as non-graduates because they would not have been able to graduate within four years of entry into high school. In this school district, once a student successfully completes the requirements for the alternative diploma pathway, their data is transferred to the school district's alternative high school. The results of a *t*-test indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups, the reported graduation rate and the graduation rate as it would have been reported without the alternative diploma pathway in place. Therefore the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis, indicating that there is no statistically significant difference between the graduation rates when the alternative diploma students' data is transferred to the alternative school as opposed to having to count these students as non-graduates because they were unable to graduate within four years of entry into high school.

The following chapter discusses the implications of the findings of this study and provides a final analysis of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Every student can learn and deserves the opportunity to earn their education (Caroleo, 2014; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Munro, 2008). The first public high school, Boston English, was founded in 1635 (Birch, 2013). Before Boston English, only wealthy students were afforded the privilege of an education. Free appropriate public education made it possible for students of any financial status to seek their education. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the most comprehensive federal legislation associated with education to date (Tucker, 2015), added accountability related to schools' education results (Iachini et al., 2013). Until NCLB, education was strictly a state responsibility. After NCLB, educational control became a federal responsibility and with it brought accountability measures ensuring that money appropriated to education was well-spent (Tucker, 2015). This accountability included such initiatives as hiring highly qualified teachers, narrowing the achievement gap (Bohrnstedt, 2013; Lee & Reeves, 2012), and evaluation of the impact the school program on graduation (NCLB, 2001) as they challenge students to reach their "highest academic potential" (NCLB, Part H, Section 1802).

With the requirement of schools' accountability for graduation rate came the need for schools to develop alternative options to raise their graduation rate (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Larson, 2013a; Raywid, 1994; Wyant, 2008). Various types of alternative schools emerged – alternative schools that were totally separate from the traditional high school, alternative schools that operated in the traditional school outside of the traditional school day, and alternative schools that operated along with the traditional school program (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994; Wrigley et al., 2011). Raywid (1994) and Lange and Sletten (2002) introduced various types of alternative schools which included advanced programs, remediation programs, and disciplinary programs.

The purpose of this non-experimental, causal-comparative study was to examine the effectiveness of one school district's high school alternative diploma program. This research study took place in a large Western North Carolina school district using a comprehensive sampling method in which all of the graduates from one of the district's high schools were included along with the graduation rate data of the nine traditional schools and the alternative school in the school district. The alternative diploma program in WCPS graduated more than 700 students between the years of 2010 and 2014. Without the alternative diploma program, these students would not have graduated within four years of entry into high school along with their graduation cohort. It is possible that many of those students would have chosen to drop out instead of remain in high school beyond their cohort peers (Chapman et al., 2011). The dependent variable in this study was the graduation rates of one of the high schools in the district along with the district's graduation rate data. The independent variables were participation in the alternative diploma program and End of Course test scores.

This chapter is intended to provide a summary of the findings along with a discussion associated with its implications. Included in this chapter are consideration of the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and a final conclusion.

Discussion

Graduation rate and End of Course data were collected directly from one of the high schools in the district, the district's alternative high school, and from the Accountability Office of the school district. The data collected from the traditional high school and the alternative high school were from graduates' high school transcripts. The data was directly related to their End of Course test scores and their diploma pathway. Student identity was numerically coded upon collection and, therefore, unknown to the researcher or otherwise identifiable. The data collected

from the Accountability Office was that which pertained to the graduation rate of one of the high schools in the district along with the school district's graduation rate and graduates' diploma pathway, whether the students graduated through participation in the traditional diploma pathway or the alternative diploma pathway.

Three research questions were used to guide this study:

Research Question 1: To what extent do End of Course test results impact student participation in the alternative diploma program or the traditional diploma program in a large Western North Carolina school district?

The purpose of the first research question was to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean scores of students' End of Course test scores who graduated through participation in the alternative diploma program and students' End of Course test scores who graduated through participation in the traditional diploma program. The researcher used a *t*-test to compare the mean scores between the two groups. Among the Composite End of Course testing scores of the 2014 graduation cohort students ($N = 192$), there was a statistically significant difference between the two diploma pathways, the traditional diploma pathway ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.75$) and the alternative diploma pathway ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 0.79$). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference between End of Course test results for students who graduated from the alternative diploma program and students who graduated from the traditional diploma program.

While the intended purpose of this study was not to determine if End of Course testing had a correlation on high school dropouts, the results indicate that End of Course testing does have an impact on students' need of the alternative diploma pathway. Prior studies have identified a correlation between high-stakes testing and high school student dropout (Glennie et

al., 2012; Nichols & Berliner, 2008a; Nichols & Berliner, 2008b; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006; Thompson & Allen, 2012). The results of this study indicate that there could be a difference between the End of Course test scores of students who graduated by means of participation in the traditional diploma as compared to test scores of students who graduated by means of participation in the alternative diploma program. Comparably to Nichols and Berliner's (2008a) findings that students choose to drop out instead of facing the prospect of taking and passing high-stakes tests, this study indicates that there may be a possibility that students who do not score as well on End of Course tests are more likely to be unsuccessful in school and, therefore, require the alternative diploma pathway to graduate with their four-year cohort peers.

Research Question 2: To what extent does student participation in the alternative diploma program affect the district high school graduation rate?

The purpose of the second research question was to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean graduation rates of the school district as compared to the mean graduation rate of the school district had there been no alternative school opportunity. In the event of removing the alternative school opportunity, those students who participated in this diploma pathway would have counted as non-graduates because they would have been unable to graduate successfully with their cohort peers within four years of entry into high school. The researcher used a *t*-test to compare the mean scores between the two groups. Among the school district 2014 graduation rates ($N = 5$), there was a statistically significant difference between the two sets of graduation rates, the graduation rate which did not include the alternative diploma students ($M = 84.70$, $SD = 1.63$) and for graduation rates which included the alternative diploma students ($M = 89.12$, $SD = 3.14$). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference in the high school graduation rates of the school district when the

graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

Research Question 3: To what extent does an alternative diploma program affect the graduation rate in an individual high school in a large Western North Carolina school district?

The purpose of the third research question was to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean graduation rates of one of the high schools in the district as compared to the mean graduation rate of the high school had there been no alternative diploma pathway opportunity. Once again, if there were no alternative school option, the students who graduated through participation in the alternative diploma would have counted as non-graduates because they would not have been able to successfully complete all graduation requirements within four years of high school entry. The researcher utilized a *t*-test to compare the mean scores between the two groups. Among the high school's 2014 graduation rates ($N = 5$), there was no statistically significant difference between the two sets of graduation rates, the graduation rate as reported, which did not include the alternative diploma students, ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 2.24$) because their data had been transferred to the alternative high school and the graduation rates which included the alternative diploma students as graduates and they, therefore, counted as non-graduates of the four-year cohort ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 2.24$). Therefore, the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference in the individual high school graduation rates when the graduation class includes the alternative diploma students and when the graduation class does not include the alternative diploma students.

The movement of this school district to incorporate an alternative diploma pathway within the individual high schools has produced an increase in the graduation rate of the county over the previous five years. This could be, in part, a reflection of the saved perception of the

necessity to physically attend the alternative school. According to De la Ossa (2005), the perception of alternative school attendance has been that students attending these schools are those who are disruptive and avoid school for various negative reasons. Maintaining student attendance in the home schools allows student the possibility to graduate successfully while not adding the stigma of alternative school attendance (De la Ossa, 2005; Geronimo, 2010; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012) nor the feeling of alienation associated with attending school in an off-site location (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). As in the case of Twilight Academy (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009), students who participated in the alternative diploma pathway had the opportunity to utilize online instruction programs to progress and often accelerate their pursuit for successful completion of high school (Dessoff, 2009; Schachter, 2013).

WCPS has not yet achieved a 100% graduation rate. Students are not officially designated as alternative graduates until they successfully earn their diploma. There are various students who pursue alternative diploma pathway who are not able to graduate within four years of their high school entry. Many of these students persevere through earning their diploma, but cannot be counted toward the four-year cohort graduation rate. The process is private, including the graduation itself. All students participate in the graduate ceremony without indication of the chosen diploma pathway. The school assignment has not changed and, therefore, the negative perception associated with alternative school attendance is avoided (Geronimo, 2010; Gut & McLaughlin, 2012).

Implications

The nature of the research in this study is significant to the large Western North Carolina school district in which it took place. As students, parents, and educators continue to consider the alternative diploma pathway for students who have experienced a lack of academic success and

could be considering the possibility of dropping out of high school (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), the data to support the alternative diploma pathway is vital and relevant to their decision-making. Students who are at risk for not graduating with their cohort peers, have been able to take advantage of the alternative diploma pathway to graduate within four years of high school entry. While it cannot be said that these students would not have graduated from high school, there is a disillusionment that accompanies students' not being able to graduate with their cohort peers (Nolan et al., 2013; Schargel & Smink, 2013). The alternative diploma program gives these students the opportunity to experience the success associated with graduating within four years of high school entry. Therefore, the alternative diploma pathway provides an option for students to graduate with their graduation cohort as well as for schools to continue to address the accountability issue associated with graduation rate as presented in NCLB (Edwards, 2015; ESEA, 2013; NCDPI, 2014b).

Additionally, this research is valuable to schools as they seek new and creative strategies by which to assist students to matriculate toward graduation. Schools can identify students who might be at risk for dropout through their End of Course test scores and the need to repeat courses due to academic failure. As schools work with these students to steer them toward success as they progress toward earning their high school diploma, this research provides schools with the data tools to make informed recommendations to students and their families. These recommendations include courses that would be beneficial for students to more readily matriculate toward graduation as well as identifying the best diploma pathway for the individual student. Schools have an obligation to help students on their quest to earn their high school diploma. This research provides valuable information to help schools seeking to offer students creative strategies to achieve successful high school graduation.

In order to continue to strengthen the case for the alternative diploma pathway, it is recommended that this school district continue this research as graduation results are recorded and communicated annually.

Limitations

Several limitations can be identified within this study. These threats include internal and external validity. Controlling for threats to internal validity includes controlling for the possibility of having confounding variables (Gall et al., 2007) – variables that could offer an alternative explanation for the treatment effects of the study. Threats to external validity create a situation in which the results of the study are compromised related to whether the results are also generalizable to other groups (Gall et al., 2007).

One threat to internal validity is participant attrition. While the researcher did not identify this as a potential threat to internal validity, participant mortality was evidenced in this study. In this case, there were ten participants whose data could not be utilized based on the lack of End of Course testing data. There are various reasons that these students may not have had complete End of Course data recorded on their transcripts. The data could be missing due to entry error, meaning the person responsible for entering this data on the students' transcripts failed to do so. It could also be missing due to transience. Students in this geographic area sometimes transfer to other schools and then return to their original school. The testing data could also be missing due to the fact that students took the courses within one calendar year of entering the United States. In these cases Limited English Proficient students are not required to take End of Course tests in which they would be required to demonstrate reading proficiency in the target language. This would primarily affect English End of Course tests. Another potential threat to validity is the participant characteristics. Due to the manner in which data was collected, it was not possible to

collect demographic information. Therefore, demographic characteristics were not controlled for the purposes of this study.

Because this study took place in one large Western North Carolina School district, it is possible that the results are limited to this school district. Further research would be necessary to determine whether the alternative diploma program might have an effect in other school districts across the state of North Carolina. The results of this study are limited to the large Western North Carolina school district in which the study took place.

Another threat to external validity is the limited sample size. The alternative program is a relatively new diploma option for the students and schools within this school district. As such, data are limited to five years. In order to increase the confidence level that the results can be generalized beyond the school district, the sample size needs to be larger. This can only be accomplished after years of continuous data are collected. This also contributed to a potential threat due to insufficient number of treatment replications.

The nature of this study was non-experimental. The data utilized for this study was collected ex post facto. Because the data was retrieved ex post facto, the variables could not be controlled or manipulated. Participants were not assigned to groups based on the ex post facto collection of data. It would not be possible or ethical to assign participants to the research groups for this type of study. Participants followed the alternative or the traditional diploma pathway based on their ability to graduate on time with their four-year graduation cohort. Due to the lack of random assignment, the results of the study may not be generalizable.

Due to the non-experimental nature of this research, interpretations about cause are tentative. In order to establish cause, an experiment would be required. This action would be unethical due to the requirement of assignment to traditional or alternative diploma pathways.

Additionally, this type of research design does not indicate the extent of the relationships between the independent and the dependent variables (Gall et al., 2007).

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the alternative diploma program on graduation rate. The school district in which the study took place was a large Western North Carolina school district with nine traditional high schools and an alternative high school. This research supports the efforts of the school district to continue to provide this alternative diploma pathway as a viable option for students to graduate from high school on time with their four year cohort peers. Following are a number of recommendations that could improve future related research.

Continued Research

This type of study should continue within the school district as the accountability office continues to seek to determine whether the alternative diploma pathway offers a significant opportunity for students to graduate on time with their four year cohort peers. As the program continues, from year to year, additional data is gathered to provide important data to ascertain the effectiveness of the alternative diploma program. This would serve to address the validity issue of treatment replication by adding years of data to the research.

Include Neighboring Districts

Additionally, as school districts consider the alternative diploma pathway as an option to graduate students and to increase their graduation rate to address this accountability measure imposed through No Child Left Behind (ESEA, 2013), this research could expand to incorporate data from various school districts. This would increase the generalizability of this study and future studies like it.

Careful Principal Consideration

High school principals in this school district are cautioned to be careful as they consider the alternative diploma program for their students. Principals are responsible for their graduation rate. The alternative diploma program allows principals to work with students to afford them the possibility of graduating with their four-year cohort. This is an advantage when considering that the students would otherwise count as non-graduates. However, principals must also remember that students' data which corresponds to those who graduate with an alternative diploma are transferred to the alternative high school. This means that the principals of the traditional school are no longer able to count these students in their four-year cohort graduation rate. Every student who is permitted to earn an alternative diploma reduces the numerator and denominator of the graduates; therefore, each student who graduates with an alternative diploma changes the proportion of each student graduating with a traditional diploma and every non-graduate counts more against the school's graduation rate.

Consideration of Students' Post-Secondary Options

As high school principals consider the alternative diploma for students, they must be mindful of the fact that these students earn fewer credits than those who graduate with a traditional diploma. This could limit students' post-secondary options. With the course requirement at 21 Carnegie units, this also limits the instructional exposure that these students receive at the high school level. Students who graduate through participation in the alternative diploma essentially do not count for or against the high school's graduation rate. Because they successfully graduate, they are not counted as non-graduates. However, the school district's program includes transferring the alternative diploma graduates' data to the alternative school. Therefore, they do not count toward the graduation rate of the traditional high schools. When

schools transfer this data to the alternative school, they are reducing the cohort number and, therefore, each student counts more for or against the graduation rate. The alternative diploma program is helpful to some students who may not have graduated otherwise; however, principals are recommended to be judicious as they consider permitting students to participate in the alternative diploma pathway.

Continued Search for Graduation Options

Finally, it is recommended that schools continue to seek opportunities to help students graduate successfully from high school. When a student experiences repeated academic failure, and finds himself so far behind his cohort peers that he cannot possibly graduate from high school with them, he becomes disillusioned with the education system (Nolan et al., 2013; Schargel & Smink, 2013). This creates a matter of public concern as they present a greater likelihood of unemployment, receiving poor pay, and eventually depending upon public assistance (Nolan et al., 2013). High school graduation is of vital importance (Caroleo, 2014; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009) because students who fail to graduate from high school are more likely to be unemployed, receive poor wages, and be recipients of public assistance (Ahn, Wyant, Bonneau, Rosch, & Owen, 2008).

Conclusions

The purpose of this non-experimental, causal-comparative study was to investigate the effectiveness of an alternative diploma pathway and its impact on the overall graduation rate in a large Western North Carolina school district. No Child Left Behind legislation included accountability measures to ensure that money appropriated to education was well-spent which included schools' accountability in regard to their annual graduation rate (Globally Competitive Students, 2013; NCDPI, 2012a; Tucker, 2015). Data were collected to analyze the effectiveness

of the alternative diploma pathway by considering the graduation rate as it was reported as compared to the graduation rate as it would have been reported without students' option of graduation by means of the alternative diploma pathway.

The first analysis was conducted to determine whether students' composite End of Course test scores in the traditional diploma program were significantly different from the EOC test scores of the students in the alternative diploma program. The data revealed a significant difference between the two groups. A second analysis was conducted to determine whether the graduation rates as reported were significantly different from the graduation rates as they would have been reported without the alternative diploma pathway option. The results indicated a significant difference between the diploma paths. The final analysis was conducted to determine whether the graduation rates of one of the school district's high schools as reported were significantly different from the high school's graduation rates as they would have been reported without an alternative diploma pathway option. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the graduation rates, the graduation rate as reported and the graduation rate as would be reported if the alternative diploma graduates counted as non-graduates in the four year cohort graduation rate.

The legislation that accompanied NCLB required that schools pay particularly close attention to their graduation rate as part of the accountability model (NCLB, 2001; NCLB, Part H, Section 1802; Tucker, 2015). As a result, school districts have begun to incorporate various alternative programs as they seek to provide students the best opportunity to succeed (Miller, 2010). In 2010 the first alternative diploma pathway graduates successfully completed high school in their home schools, while the data related to these alternative graduates was transferred to the alternative high school. The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a

significant difference in the high school graduation rates and if this might be as a result of the alternative diploma pathway option provided to high school students.

High school graduation is an important milestone for students (Atugonza, 2010; Fabiano, 2012). As students matriculate toward graduation, they must encounter and succeed in the area of high-stakes tests. They must refute the urge to drop out (Bowers et al., 2011) and persevere to the success associated with successfully completing high school. The alternative diploma pathway in this large Western North Carolina school district has provided an avenue for students who may previously have chosen to drop out, due to their inability to graduate with their four-year cohort peers, to choose to remain in school and complete high school by earning their diploma.

As noted by Munro (2008), “every child can learn” (p. 315). Students deserve the opportunity to learn and to graduate from high school (Caroleo, 2014; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). This school district’s alternative diploma pathway initiative provides the opportunity for students to graduate who may not have persevered to graduation due to their experience of repeated academic failure (Kronholz, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). While the increase in graduation rate communicated through NCLB (ESEA, 2013) is lofty, it continues to be the responsibility of high schools to seek avenues by which students can experience the success associated with graduation. It has become a rite of passage – one stressed more than college graduations (Atugonza, 2010; Fabiano, 2012). While the impact to the school district’s graduation rate can be analyzed quantitatively, the impact to the individual student is something that is immeasurable. It is the priceless sense of accomplishment that every student deserves to obtain (Caroleo, 2014; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 22, 2015

IRB Exemption [REDACTED] The Effectiveness of a Minimum Credit Diploma Pathway on High School Graduation Rate

Dear [REDACTED]

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(4), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

[REDACTED]

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

APPENDIX B**Western County Public School's Approval Letter**

Friday, March 20, 2015

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter serves as permission for Ms. [REDACTED] to collect research for her study in association with the College of Education at Liberty University.

The approved basis for this research is the form of gathering archival data related to student achievement and performance on NC End of Course assessments. No action research involving students, teachers, or administrators will be conducted during the study. All names associated with the school system, individual schools, faculty, staff, and students will remain confidential and not be identified during the research project. All data accessed will be securely stored and discarded at the conclusion of the research project. At the conclusion of the study, we request that the candidate share the findings of her research with the instructional division leadership.

Our system looks forward to supporting [REDACTED] in this project. Please do not hesitate to contact my office if we can provide further assistance.

Regards,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED], Ed.D.

Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Programs

APPENDIX C

Western County Public School's Alternative Diploma Program Application

The [REDACTED] will provide flexibility for academic instruction, credit completion and repeat coursework. It utilizes community resources for job skills and job placement. In keeping with the [REDACTED] motto [REDACTED], this program offers students at-risk for dropping out of school an opportunity to complete the requirements for high school graduation in a nontraditional setting.

[REDACTED] Diploma Program Description

1. The [REDACTED] Diploma is based on the Future Ready Common Core / Essential Standards Course of Study. All NCDPI exit standards must be met.
 - 4 English credits (English I, II, III, IV)
 - 4 Math credits (Algebra 1, Geometry and two other math courses aligned with the student's post high school plans.)
 - 3 Science credits (Earth/Environmental Science, Biology, Physical Science)
 - 3 Social Studies credits (World History, Civics and Economics, US History)
 - 1 Health/PE credit
 - 6 Elective Credits:
 - 2 elective credits of any combination from either
 - Career and Technical Education (CTE)
 - Arts Education
 - World Languages
 - 4 elective credits (four course strongly recommended concentration) from one of the following:
 - Career and Technical Education (CTE)
 - JROTC
 - Arts Education (e.g. dance, music, theater arts, visual arts)
 - Any other subject area (e.g. social studies, science, mathematics, or English)
2. Students must have completed 3 semesters and be 16 years old before admission to the program.
3. Priority in admissions will be given to students who meet the following criteria: students considering dropping out or previous dropouts, older students, students with a history of chronic absences, students with a significant social, emotional, or physical barriers preventing success in a conventional school environment, students experiencing extremely difficult life circumstances, and students needing fewer credits to graduate.
4. The program curriculum will focus heavily on graduation requirements and career oriented courses.
5. Students will be allowed to attend classes on a flexible schedule (at least 2 blocks/day) to allow for internships, necessary employment, and childcare issues.
6. Students with significant discipline issues, criminal charges or adjudicated charges, will generally not be accepted to this program but will be considered on an individual basis.

Process

1. Identification of students who display at-risk tendencies for dropping out of school.
2. Student either informs school staff that they are contemplating dropping out; student is exhibiting at-risk behaviors (increase in absences, failing classes at an increased rate, experiencing traumatic life situations), and/or has formally asked to withdraw from school.
3. Referral to dropout prevention coordinator/core team/guidance department of high school for student assistance.
4. In-house interventions to assist with student success and retention are implemented.
5. Student is informed about the Alternative [REDACTED] Diploma Program.
6. If interested, student completes the application with the assistance of a Dropout Prevention Counselor or Administrator (it is required that a student's transcript be examined and a course checklist completed to include with the student application).
7. The application is submitted to the Dropout Prevention Counselor to be reviewed by the Dropout Prevention Committee at their monthly meetings/as need arises.
8. Committee meets to determine if the student is accepted or denied entrance into the program.
9. Upon acceptance into the [REDACTED], a meeting will be held with the student, parent(s)/guardian(s) and administration at the traditional high school. At this time, the Dropout Prevention Committee develops a Personalized Education Plan to ensure that the processes for completion of the [REDACTED] Diploma graduation requirements are met.
10. The program requirements are discussed and the student and parents are required to sign a Contract of Commitment to the [REDACTED] program.
11. Prior to the last semester of a student's senior year, the Dropout Prevention Counselor will present each student portfolio to the Central Screening Committee. Once reviewed the student will be cross-enrolled with [REDACTED].
12. Upon completion of the [REDACTED] Diploma graduation requirements, the student will receive a [REDACTED] Diploma during a graduation ceremony. The student may participate in a graduation ceremony at his/her home school or at [REDACTED].

Instruction

1. Students may use OdysseyWare, NCVPS, [REDACTED] Virtual and/or High School courses developed by Jefferson County High School in Louisville, Kentucky.
2. Students will be mainstreamed into CTE courses. The first time a student is enrolled in an EOC course it should be taken face-to-face in a traditional classroom setting as best practice. Students that are taking an EOC course as credit recovery can be placed in any of the available programs. All students are eligible for face-to-face instruction as appropriate.

Complete the following information:

Student name: _____ Last school attended: _____

Age: _____ Date of birth: _____ Number of high school credits: _____

Number of semesters in high school: _____

The _____ Diploma program is a highly structured and limited opportunity for a select number of students whose circumstances prevent graduation from high school. Students must complete 21 required and elective credits in order to receive a North Carolina high school diploma. The program is coordinated through the home school in conjunction with _____

The student application must be completed by the student and submitted to the dropout prevention counselor and reviewed by the Dropout Prevention Committee.

Referrals are submitted by the principal or dropout prevention counselor and reviewed by a committee of school system staff. Only students who demonstrate a high degree of motivation and cooperation will be accepted into the program.

The student application packet must be completed in order for the referral to be considered. The review committee will give strong consideration to each student's application and responses in determining which students will be accepted. All applications must be signed by a parent/guardian.

Guidelines:

1. Students must have 3 semesters and be 16 years old before admission to the program.
2. A plan for graduation will be developed for every student admitted to the program.
3. The school principal will have the authority to dismiss any student from the diploma program who is disruptive, uncooperative, or not making progress toward graduation.
4. Only students displaying a significant hardship that will impede their ability to graduate from high school in the traditional fashion or who are strongly considering dropping out of school will be admitted.
5. The principal and the Dropout Prevention Committee reserve the right to deny admission to any student who does not meet the set criteria.

**I understand that submitting this application does not guarantee that I will be accepted to the program. I agree that, if accepted, I will comply with the guidelines outlined in this application as well as any and all expectations established at _____

Student Signature Date Parent Signature Date

Please answer the following questions as completely as possible. Feel free to use the back side of this paper if additional space is needed.

1. Explain how you got to the point where you may not graduate from high school.

2. What are you going to change, either in your life or school habits, which will cause you to be successful? *Remember that only students who demonstrate a strong willingness to succeed will be accepted.*

This area is for school use.
Date application received: _____ Committee review date: _____
Received by: _____ Accepted: _____ Denied: _____

Student Name _____

*Attach a recent copy of the student's transcript to this form.

Course	Completed (passing grade and year)
4 English	
• English I	
• English II	
• English III	
• English IV	
4 Math	
• Algebra I	
• Geometry	
• Sequence I (Algebra II or 3 rd Math Course):	
• Sequence II (4 th Math Course):	
3 Science	
• Earth/Environmental Science	
• Biology	
• Physical Science	
3 Social Studies	
• World History	
• Civics and Economics	
• US History	
6 Elective Credits –	
2 from CTE, Art or World Language	
• Course 1:	
• Course 2:	
4 from CTE, JROTC, Arts Education or Any other subject area	
• Course 1:	
• Course 2:	
• Course 3:	
• Course 4:	
1 Health/PE	
Exit Standards:	
English II	
Algebra I	
Biology I	

Courses remaining for graduation:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Referral Form

To be completed by Dropout Prevention Counselor.

Student Name: Gender: <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	Age: Date of Birth:
Current Grade:	Home School:
Student Address:	Student PowerSchool Number:
Parent/Guardian Name:	Relationship: <input type="checkbox"/> Mother <input type="checkbox"/> Father <input type="checkbox"/> Grandparent <input type="checkbox"/> Aunt/Uncle <input type="checkbox"/> Case Worker <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify)
Parent/Guardian address: (if different from student)	Home Phone: Work Phone: Cell Phone:
EC Classification: <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> LD <input type="checkbox"/> OHI <input type="checkbox"/> BED <input type="checkbox"/> Occupational Curriculum <input type="checkbox"/> Resource Services	Date of Referral:
Documents Required for Completion of Referral Process: <input type="checkbox"/> Written documentation of a conference or phone contact with the parent/guardian notifying them of the intention to refer to alternative education services. <input type="checkbox"/> School records (Test scores, Attendance, Transcripts, EC Status, include a copy of the IEP, Behavior Intervention Plan, health concerns, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> IEP or 504 Plan <input type="checkbox"/> Current academic schedule and grades <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline profile	Rationale for Requesting Services: (check all that apply): <input type="checkbox"/> Poor academic performance <input type="checkbox"/> Frequent absences (specify frequency) <input type="checkbox"/> Considering dropping out <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely difficult life circumstances

<p>Intervention Strategies Attempted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Parent Contact/Conference <input type="checkbox"/> Behavior Plan <input type="checkbox"/> Behavior Intervention Plan <input type="checkbox"/> Detention <input type="checkbox"/> Peer Tutor <input type="checkbox"/> Modified Instruction <input type="checkbox"/> Change in Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Change in Teacher <input type="checkbox"/> Specialized Instructional Equipment <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to Student Assistance Program <input type="checkbox"/> SSMT <input type="checkbox"/> Other Methods/Personnel Used (specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Referral to Other Agency for Assistance (specify) <input type="checkbox"/> Adult Mentor <input type="checkbox"/> Other: Please Specify: 	<p>Results:</p>
<p>Other Agencies Involved w/Student & Family:</p> <p>Agency: Contact Person/Phone #:</p> <p>Agency: Contact Person/Phone #:</p>	<p>Goals to Achieve in Alternative Education Services:</p> <p>Increase attendance Increase academic performance Increase respect towards authority figures Graduation from high school Other:</p>

Additional Comments:

Signature

Title of Staff Completing Referral Information

Principal's Signature

The information in this referral form is accurate. The student's parent/guardian was contacted on _____ (date) by _____ (name) and informed of the intention to refer the student for alternative education services.

Date of Presentation to Referral Committee:**Disposition:**

- Accepted**
- Not Accepted**

Contract of Commitment

Students enrolling in _____ are expected to maintain a high quality of social, emotional and academic performance. The purpose for enrollment is to successfully complete high school by earning a _____ Diploma within two years of entry. The _____ Diploma program is a highly structured program and a limited opportunity offered to a select number of students who are willing to demonstrate a commitment to their education, future and community.

In order to successfully complete the _____ Diploma program, students will abide by the _____ Student Code of Conduct and the rules and procedures specific to the school campus on which they attend.

As a student, I agree to:

- Abide by all rules, regulations and procedures assigned by the _____ and _____.
- Adhere to school bus safety and behavioral expectations.
- Honor the privilege of this opportunity by making a personal commitment to become invested in my education as evidenced by my regular attendance, work ethic, respect for others and pride in myself.
- Understand that failure to abide by the policies above will result in a recommendation for long-term suspension and/or removal from the program.
- It is the expectation that all students will abide by the _____ Public Schools Student Code of Conduct. Disciplinary infractions will be the exception and may cause a student to be removed from the program. The 1st disciplinary offense that warrants an out-of-school suspension will result in a minimum two-day of out-of-school suspension or more based on _____ Student Code of Conduct, the 2nd offense will result in a minimum three-day of out-of-school suspension or more based on _____ Student Code of Conduct and the 3rd offense will result in a recommendation for long-term suspension and/or removal from the program.

I understand the following applies to disciplinary infractions while enrolled in _____

I, _____, understand my responsibilities as a student of the _____ (print name) _____ and I commit to fulfill them. I further understand that once I enter this program I may not return to the College Tech Prep or College/ University Prep programs.

I, _____, have had the opportunity for an explanation of and enrollment in _____ and I am declining at this time.

Student signature/date

Parent signature/date

APPENDIX D

Alternative Diploma Students EOC Results

Student	Algebra 1	English II	Biology	EOC Composite
916001	1	1	1	1
916002	3	3	3	3
916003	2	2	3	2.333333333
916004	3	3	2	2.666666667
916005	3	4	3	3.333333333
916006	2	1	3	2
916007	3	3	2	2.666666667
916008	2	3	2	2.333333333
916009	4	4	3	3.666666667
916010	1	2	2	1.666666667
916011	3	3	1	2.333333333
916012	2	3	3	2.666666667
916013	2	2	2	2
916014	1	3	2	2
916015	1	1	1	1
916016	1	1	1	1
916017	2	2	3	2.333333333
916018	2	2	3	2.333333333
916019	3	3	4	3.333333333
916020	1	3	3	2.333333333
916021	4	4	3	3.666666667
916022	1	1	1	1
916023	1	3	2	2
916024	1	2	1	1.333333333
916025	1	2	2	1.666666667
916026	1	2	2	1.666666667
916027	3	2	3	2.666666667
916028	1	1	1	1
916029	2	2	3	2.333333333

APPENDIX E

Traditional Diploma Students EOC Results

Student	Algebra 1	English II	Biology	EOC Composite
916030	2	2	2	2
916031	3	4	4	3.666666667
916032	4	4	4	4
916033	2	1	1	1.333333333
916034	2	2	3	2.333333333
916035	3	3	3	3
916036	1	1	2	1.333333333
916037	2	2	2	2
916038	4	4	4	4
916039	3	2	3	2.666666667
916040	3	3	4	3.333333333
916041	4	3	3	3.333333333
916042	3	3	2	2.666666667
916043	2	2	2	2
916044	3	3	3	3
916045	4	3	3	3.333333333
916046	2	3	3	2.666666667
916047	4	3	4	3.666666667
916048	3	3	3	3
916049	3	3	3	3
916050	4	3	3	3.333333333
916051	3	2	3	2.666666667
916052	4	4	3	3.666666667
916053	1	1	1	1
916054	4	4	4	4
916055	4	4	4	4
916056	4	3	2	3
916057	1	2	3	2
916058	4	4	4	4
916059	3	3	3	3
916060	2	1	1	1.333333333
916061	4	3	4	3.666666667
916062	3	2	3	2.666666667
916063	2	2	2	2
916064	2	2	2	2
916065	3	3	3	3
916066	3	3	3	3
916067	3	3	2	2.666666667
916068	2	3	3	2.666666667
916069	2	3	2	2.333333333

916070	3	1	2	2
916071	3	1	1	1.666666667
916072	4	3	3	3.333333333
916073	4	4	4	4
916074	2	3	3	2.666666667
916075	4	3	3	3.333333333
916076	4	4	3	3.666666667
916077	3	2	2	2.333333333
916078	4	3	3	3.333333333
916079	4	3	2	3
916080	3	3	4	3.333333333
916081	3	4	3	3.333333333
916082	2	2	1	1.666666667
916083	3	3	2	2.666666667
916084	4	3	3	3.333333333
916085	4	4	4	4
916086	3	3	1	2.333333333
916087	3	3	3	3
916088	2	3	3	2.666666667
916089	3	2	3	2.666666667
916090	3	3	3	3
916091	3	3	3	3
916092	3	4	3	3.333333333
916093	3	3	2	2.666666667
916094	2	3	3	2.666666667
916095	4	3	3	3.333333333
916096	3	3	3	3
916097	4	3	3	3.333333333
916098	4	3	3	3.333333333
916099	3	3	3	3
916100	3	4	4	3.666666667
916101	4	4	4	4
916102	4	3	4	3.666666667
916103	4	4	3	3.666666667
916104	4	4	4	4
916105	4	4	3	3.666666667
916106	2	3	4	3
916107	3	3	3	3
916108	1	1	1	1
916109	4	2	3	3
916110	2	3	4	3
916111	4	3	3	3.333333333
916112	4	3	4	3.666666667
916113	2	1	2	1.666666667
916114	3	2	2	2.333333333
916115	2	2	2	2

916116	2	2	2	2
916117	3	1	1	1.666666667
916118	3	3	3	3
916119	3	3	3	3
916120	4	3	4	3.666666667
916121	2	2	3	2.333333333
916122	4	4	4	4
916123	3	4	3	3.333333333
916124	2	3	3	2.666666667
916125	4	3	4	3.666666667
916126	3	3	3	3
916127	3	2	2	2.333333333
916128	3	3	3	3
916129	3	3	1	2.333333333
916130	4	4	4	4
916131	2	2	2	2
916132	2	2	2	2
916133	3	4	3	3.333333333
916134	4	4	4	4
916135	2	2	3	2.333333333
916136	2	2	1	1.666666667
916137	3	3	3	3
916138	2	3	3	2.666666667
916139	3	2	3	2.666666667
916140	4	3	4	3.666666667
916141	4	2	3	3
916142	4	3	3	3.333333333
916143	3	2	3	2.666666667
916144	3	3	3	3
916145	2	1	3	2
916146	1	3	2	2
916147	4	3	4	3.666666667
916148	4	4	4	4
916149	2	3	3	2.666666667
916150	4	3	4	3.666666667
916151	1	1	1	1
916152	4	4	4	4
916153	4	3	3	3.333333333
916154	4	4	4	4
916155	3	2	3	2.666666667
916156	4	3	3	3.333333333
916157	2	3	2	2.333333333
916158	4	3	3	3.333333333
916159	3	3	4	3.333333333
916160	3	3	4	3.333333333
916161	3	2	3	2.666666667

916162	2	3	3	2.666666667
916163	4	4	3	3.666666667
916164	1	1	1	1
916165	3	3	4	3.333333333
916166	3	3	2	2.666666667
916167	4	3	4	3.666666667
916168	4	3	4	3.666666667
916169	4	3	3	3.333333333
916170	4	4	4	4
916171	4	4	4	4
916172	3	3	2	2.666666667
916173	3	3	2	2.666666667
916174	2	2	1	1.666666667
916175	3	3	3	3
916176	3	2	2	2.333333333
916177	4	4	3	3.666666667
916178	3	3	2	2.666666667
916179	3	3	3	3
916180	2	2	2	2
916181	3	3	2	2.666666667
916182	2	2	2	2
916183	4	4	3	3.666666667
916184	3	2	3	2.666666667
916185	3	2	1	2
916186	3	3	2	2.666666667
916187	3	3	2	2.666666667
916188	3	3	4	3.333333333
916189	4	4	4	4
916190	2	2	1	1.666666667
916191	2	3	2	2.333333333
916192	2	2	3	2.333333333
