

Students' Perceptions of the Preparatory Academy,  
A Dropout Prevention Program

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

in

Education Leadership and Policy Studies

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September 11, 2006  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Achievement, Attendance, Dropout Prevention, Parental Involvement,

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Abstract

The Preparatory Academy was established in September, 1999 to improve academic achievement and reduce the dropout rate of at-risk high school students in a mid-Atlantic state. The study looks at the Preparatory Academy as a dropout prevention program for high school students. Students attending the Preparatory Academy are one or more years behind grade level and have not been successful in a general education setting. In addition, the students are identified by the school division as being at-risk of not graduating from high school. The Preparatory Academy was designed to address the increasing drop out rate and to advance students one or two grade levels in one school year, whereby giving them an opportunity to reach their age appropriate grade.

A qualitative design methodology was chosen to evaluate the Preparatory Academy effectiveness from the eyes of the students who were successful in the program. Eight participants who successfully completed the Academy during the 2004-2005 academic year were selected from each participating high school. Students participated in focus groups and answered questions about their experiences, their beliefs, and their perceptions while in the Preparatory Academy. Seven staff members, three administrators, two teachers, and two guidance counselors, were interviewed to clarify Academy procedures and policies.

The results of this study show that the Preparatory Academy is perceived by students to be an effective dropout prevention program. Students reported an increased

commitment to graduation from high school and reported an increase in grade point average. In addition, data revealed students having a positive change in their attitude toward themselves and their education. When asked about the reason, the students gave credit to the Preparatory Academy.

## DEDICATION

“TO GOD BE THE GLORY”

I dedicate this study to my wife Mary and my daughter Camille. I appreciate your support and prayers. You were there when I needed a supporting word or a spiritual uplift. Your encouragement and sacrifice will never be forgotten. I love you with all of my heart. Thank you and may God bless your daily activities.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to my committee chairman Dr. Travis W. Twiford for his patience, support, and assistance in preparing this study. His belief in me and continuous encouragement kept my hopes alive. Dr. Twiford's guidance and professional mannerism motivated me to persevere when my health became a serious concern. It is because of him that I am at this point in my quest to complete this dissertation.

My thanks also extend to the other members of my committee, Dr. Stephen Parson, Dr. Randolph Sykes, and Dr. Rosalie Martin. Your support and assistance in finishing this study is eternally appreciated.

I wish to offer my sincere thanks and gratitude to my wife Mary and daughter Camille for their unselfish support during the times I could not care for myself. They encouraged me to continue through the pain and illness. I could not have completed this study without their spiritual support and when needed their physical assistance. Through the years my family has gone the extra mile to provide an atmosphere conducive to studying.

I would also like to acknowledge the support I received from my pastor and church members who continuously prayed and encouraged me to complete this journey. There were many friends and family members who assisted me on this educational venture. My sisters, Vera and Shelia were instrumental in proof reading my transcription of the focus group meetings and my friend Dr. Ernestine Duncan who reviewed my final draft. And a special thanks to my doctors who worked hard to diagnose and successfully treat my cancer.

My acknowledgements will never be complete without recognizing the source of my strength and the power of His grace. God has made this opportunity for me to show the world that through perseverance and trusting in Him all things are possible. My favorite Bible verse is, “And now we know, all things work together for good to them who love God, and to them who are the called according to His purpose,” Roman 8:28.

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## CHAPTER I

### CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Public school educators are mandated to educate all students with a curriculum that complies with state and federal requirements. Localities are faced with an abundance of students with poor academic achievement. Schools must educate students who lag behind their peers in academic achievement and who are at-risk of dropping out of school.

Data shows that every year there are students who fail to meet promotion standards. These students are either socially promoted, retained in their present grade, or drop out of school. Educators have debated social promotion verses student retention for years (Di Maria, 1999). Smink (2001) argued against retention in the same grade; he stated, “This issue has been studied extensively for decades, and the research has been rather consistent in showing that retention of a student has definite negative effects on the student and clearly has added economic costs associated with additional years of schooling” (p. 3). The report of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) 2000, study group on retention and social promotion agrees with Smink by stating, “Social promotion sends all students a message that little is expected of them, and students learn they can get by without working hard” (p. 8). In regards to either instance, these students continue to get further and further behind academically each year and some eventually drop out of school (Di Maria, 1999).

As these students enter middle school, peer pressure emerges (Bartini, Brooks, & Pellegrini, 1999). This heightened peer pressure has distracted some youth, because rather than focusing on education, they are focusing on other non-academic activities.

When this behavior becomes negative, it affects student achievement in the elementary school and as a result, students are not obtaining basic academic skills. Bonds and Stoker (2000) stated, “In an environment where bullying has created a climate of fear and anxiety, students pay a terrible price physically, emotionally, and academically” (p. 1). Consequently, they fall behind in school (Di Maria, 1999). Many of these students are promoted until they enter the middle school. Once they reach middle school their status and age maturity become a major problem (Di Maria).

School divisions across the nation have implemented programs to address academic and disciplinary problems of students who were socially promoted. Bridging the gap between students who have experienced difficulty in passing to the next grade and students in their age-appropriate grade has been difficult for administrators. Social promotion and or retention of students are controversial issues. It leaves some teachers believing that if a student is retained, it will cause student withdrawal, low self-esteem, and the potential for dropping out (Di Maria, 1999). Others argued that students who do not meet the promotion standards are not prepared for the advanced curriculum in the next level of study. Although many educators are divided on this topic, most will agree that either socially promoting or retaining a student will not necessarily meet the academic needs of the student (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, and Legters (2002) identified at-risk students with weak performing schools that consistently score below average on standardized tests. Schools with a high percentage of minority populations are often schools with high poverty levels (McPartland et al). These schools reflect a high rate of student retention and poor academic performance. In school districts with weak performing schools the

students do not receive the basic skills and knowledge to be promoted to the next grade. McPartland et al. stated, “These factors are directly related to low student achievement, grade retentions, and other antecedents of dropping out” (p. 151). Special dropout prevention programs have assisted in providing the essential academic resources to students who were potential dropouts.

A continuing problem in education is how to meet the unique needs of students who have fallen behind in school. Dropout prevention programs across the country are providing extraordinary educational opportunities for students who have not previously met the requirements to be promoted (Huang, 2001). Because of their advanced age as compared to class peers and their lack of self-esteem, many of these students are potential dropouts. Some of these students will not be able to compete in a highly technical society and their resultant fate is likely to be restricted. In extreme instances, students may end up in correctional institutions, court systems, and low paying jobs. One solution utilized by school divisions is to establish programs to bridge the gap between over-aged students and their appropriate grade level, while motivating young people to continue to make progress (Huang).

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of the students who participated in a dropout prevention program named the Preparatory Academy. This program is located in an urban school division on the east coast of Virginia where a significant number of students are at-risk of not graduating from high school. These at-risk students may enroll in the Preparatory Academy program through their guidance counselor. The Academy encourages academic achievement and

behavior modification through accelerated learning. The Preparatory Academy was established to reduce the student dropout rate and move students closer to their age appropriate grade level.

### Significance of the Study

The results of this study provided information for other school systems that are seeking ways to prevent students from dropping out of school. This qualitative design study reports in detail the deep rich perceptions of students who participated in the Preparatory Academy. Through focus groups, staff interviews, document review, and a student questionnaire, the data collected gives other school systems a student's view of this dropout prevention program. The data collection process is intended to provide pros and cons of the program from a student's perspective. The review of literature was used to document the concept that dropping out of school before graduation is a national crisis.

### Statement of the Problem

This study will provide information regarding at-risk students in an accelerated program. Data were analyzed to determine the motivating factors that influenced success and failure of the participants. Students are sometimes viewed as the silent sufferers of today's schools; however, this study reveals information about their experiences and beliefs. The student participants were one or more years behind in school and were identified as potential dropouts. The Preparatory Academy is designed to bridge the gap for students who are at-risk and give them an opportunity to move one or two grade levels in one year.

For school districts that are seeking programs to reduce the number of dropouts and advance students one or two grade levels at an accelerated rate, this study provides

data concerning student perceptions. This study will have an effect on future endeavors to bridge the gap for students who are two or more years behind in grade level and at-risk of dropping out of school by providing student perceptions of the program and data on their achievement.

### Research Questions

The following question was used to frame the direction of this qualitative study: How do students perceive the Preparatory Academy as a dropout prevention program? Merriam (1998) described qualitative research questions by stating, “They guide the inquiry, and they determine how data are to be collected. In qualitative research they often identify areas of inquiry for what to observe in a field observation, or what questions to ask in an interview” (p. 60). Applying Creswell’s (2003) suggestions on formulating qualitative research questions, the following sub-questions were used to frame the direction of this study: (a) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy account for their increased academic success or their lack of academic success while enrolled in the program? (b) In what way did the Preparatory Academy influence student attendance for those enrolled in the program? (c) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy describe their parents’ involvement while enrolled in the program? (d) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy perceive their likelihood of dropping out of school? (e) What other factors do students describe as important about their experiences in the Preparatory Academy?

### Limitations of the Study

There are two limitations that impact this study. They are; the use of student perceptions and the bias of the researcher. A secondary limitation may include the

answers of the students. Data collection was based on students' perceptions in a focus group format. Students were encouraged to give honest and genuine answers. However, some students may be influenced by what they hear from another student. In addition, students may want to please the facilitator. Students may feel that they should describe the Preparatory Academy positively. A further limitation is the researcher's strong belief that some students need a program like the Preparatory Academy to assist them in completing their high school degree.

### Definition of Terms

The following definitions and terms were used to add clarity and understanding for the reader.

At-risk	Students who display behaviors that negatively impact school success and show characteristics of low self-esteem, poor peer relations, high absenteeism, and low academic achievement are considered at-risk (Brush, 2000).
Dropouts	Students who are absent from school for four or more consecutive weeks in an academic year without being sick or due to an accident (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).
Parental Involvement	The degree to which parents are involved in their child's education by participating in school related activities and assisting with homework (Coulombe, 1995).

Peer Pressure	Factors presented by peers that influence a person's attire, behavior, or speech (Manning & Baruth, 1994).
Student Achievement	As a result of experiences in academic courses, students are expected to master specified content as evidenced by their performance on in-class examinations (Hancock, 2001).
Student Perceptions	The way students view the world around them (Tan, 2000).

### Design of the Preparatory Academy

In September of 1999, a school division on the east coast of Virginia implemented a non-traditional program of accelerated study designed to bridge the gap for students who were more than one year behind their chronological grade placements, 6th through the 8th-grade, in the four middle schools. The school division was experiencing a high rate of student dropouts. Most of these students were experiencing behavioral problems and because of frequent suspensions and being over-aged decided to quit school. This program was started as a means of drop out prevention. The goals of this program were: (a) to provide each student the opportunity to achieve academic success in the four core subject areas, mathematics, social studies, science, and English, and (b) to reduce the number of potential dropouts in grades six through nine. Known as the Preparatory Academy, this program was designed to use a flexible schedule of core courses, computer-assisted instruction, with an accelerated academic focus. The Academy also caters to small clusters of students. It has a parental involvement component where each parent or guardian is required to sign a contract. Their signature denotes their agreement

to be an integral part of the accelerated program by assisting their child with homework, serving as a volunteer at their child's school, and attending each monthly school-based parent workshop (A Parental Guide to the Preparatory Academy, 2001).

The Preparatory Academy utilizes small class sizes to accommodate the fast learning pace. Students may work in small cooperative learning groups in which peers assist each other in successfully completing assignments. Many of these students have never experienced success in an academic environment in which students have to work together.

Students participating in the Preparatory Academy are selected from students who failed two or more core subjects, students who were not successful on both the English and mathematics Virginia Standards of Learning tests in previous years, and also from those who are one or more years behind in academic performance based on age. After selection, these students are placed in small groups where, with hard work, they have an opportunity to move one or two grade placements in one school year. Students not meeting the prerequisites, passing all four-core subjects, for promotion may remain in their present Preparatory Academy.

The Preparatory Academy students were placed in special classrooms separating them from the regular population of the school. The teachers and students in the Preparatory Academy all participated voluntarily. The participating teachers were required to attend several workshops and in-service training activities in order for them to make the transition to an accelerated model of study. The teachers who were selected for this program were interviewed by the selection committee and recommended to the building principal. The principal chose teachers based on their interview and

qualifications. One of the main components of this program was a computer-based software program that assisted students in the areas of mathematics and English. The students who participated in the Preparatory Academy were given a strict curriculum that featured the four core subjects, an enrichment class, and one elective.

Transportation for Preparatory Academy students is provided via the school division's regular transportation department. These students report to their zone school along with other students; however, these students are housed in a special location, isolated from the regular student population if possible. Many of the schools of the division that house an Academy program try to place the program at the end of a wing of the school or on a floor with only the Academy students. Students enrolled in this program need the isolation from the regular population to devote their efforts to their studies. Because of the emphasis placed on this program, these students do not leave the wing or floor with the exception of lunch and their elective class. During lunch these students are permitted to socialize with the regular school population. Students in the Academy are not expected to have disciplinary problems; as a result, these problems could impact their ability to complete class work whereby creating the potential for failure.

The Preparatory Academy was designed to focus on the academic needs of the students by offering only the four-core subjects: English, mathematics, science, and social studies. In this design, students in the middle schools are taught 7th-grade course work for 90 days and assessed. If at this time they pass all four-core subjects, they continue in the Preparatory Academy by taking all 8th-grade core subjects for the next 90 days. If the students then pass these classes, they are promoted to the 9th-grade or placed

in an 8th/9th-grade transition class; thereby, moving two grade placements in one academic year.

In the high school Preparatory Academy program the students entered the Academy in an 8th/9th-grade transition class. These students were over-aged or experiencing academic problems with the traditional classroom setting. This transition class offered these students an opportunity to receive individualized instruction, computer-based instruction, and a small class environment. These students took all core subjects for a semester and upon completion of the program they were placed in the 9th-grade.

Table 1 compares the process in which students in the traditional program move from the 7th-grade to the 9th-grade with those in the Preparatory Academy as they move from the 8th-grade to the 9th-grade. This advancement is based on one school year provided they meet the promotion requirements. It is possible for a student in this program to enter school in September as a 7th-grader and be promoted to the 9th-grade by the next September. The Preparatory Academy's 7th-grade students have the opportunity to be promoted twice in a school year while the traditional 7th-grade students are promoted only once. Academy students utilize an accelerated learning program and longer class sessions to meet the promotion requirements for the 7th and 8th-grades. This accelerated learning model was also designed to reduce the number of students dropping out of school before graduation.

These students also receive computer-based instruction as a resource daily. Consistent with this trend, most students in the Preparatory Academy have exhibited short attention spans, and consequently, classes are designed to transition the students

Table 1

Traditional and Preparatory Academy Programs' Promotion Comparisons

<u>First Semester (90 days)</u>	<u>Second Semester (90 days)</u>	<u>Promoted</u>
<u>Traditional Program</u>		
7th-Grade Students (Traditional)	7th-Grade Students (Traditional)	8th-Grade Students (Traditional)
8th-Grade Students (Traditional)	8th-Grade Students (Traditional)	9th-Grade Students (Traditional)
<u>Preparatory Academy Program</u>		
7th-Grade Students (Academy)	7th-8th Grade Students (Academy)	8th-Ninth Grade Students (Academy)

from one activity to another based on a flexible schedule. Therefore, the teachers of the Preparatory Academy are trained in the characteristics of the middle school students and are given staff development on writing effective lesson plans to address the needs of these at-risk students, particularly because class sessions are longer in duration.

The students in this study entered the program as 7th-graders in the middle school and 8th-graders in the high school. They are promoted one grade level if they successfully pass all core subjects at the end of the first semester. Subsequently, they are re-classified and given the appropriate grade level schedule. At the end of the second

semester, after passing all of the grade level promotion requirements, they may pass to the 9th-grade.

The 8th-graders not enrolled in the Preparatory Academy attend their classes in the traditional program classrooms. These students are in each class for 55 minutes and class size includes up to 30 students. Their schedules include the four core subjects, English, mathematics, science, and social studies, plus one elective of their choice. A computer-based software program is available to the students enrolled in the traditional academic program as a limited resource. This technology was available to the traditional program students as a means of remediation and reinforcement.

#### Conceptual Model for the Preparatory Academy

The researcher developed Figure 1 and Figure 2 to show the components of the Preparatory Academy program and how the domains of the study affect the Academy. The Preparatory Academy is designed to maximize learning and meet the needs of students. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model for the Preparatory Academy. This figure shows the relationship each domain has with the operation of the Academy. For example: (a) attendance and parental involvement have contractual agreements; (b) student achievement has an accelerated learning model; (c) computer-based instruction is a skills building resource; and (d) small class size limits the classes to 15 students.

Figure 2 show the relationship between and among the different domains. Each domain in this model has a direct affect on the operation of the Preparatory Academy;

Conceptual Model for the Preparatory Academy



Figure 1 The Conceptual Model for the Preparatory Academy Developed by the Researcher

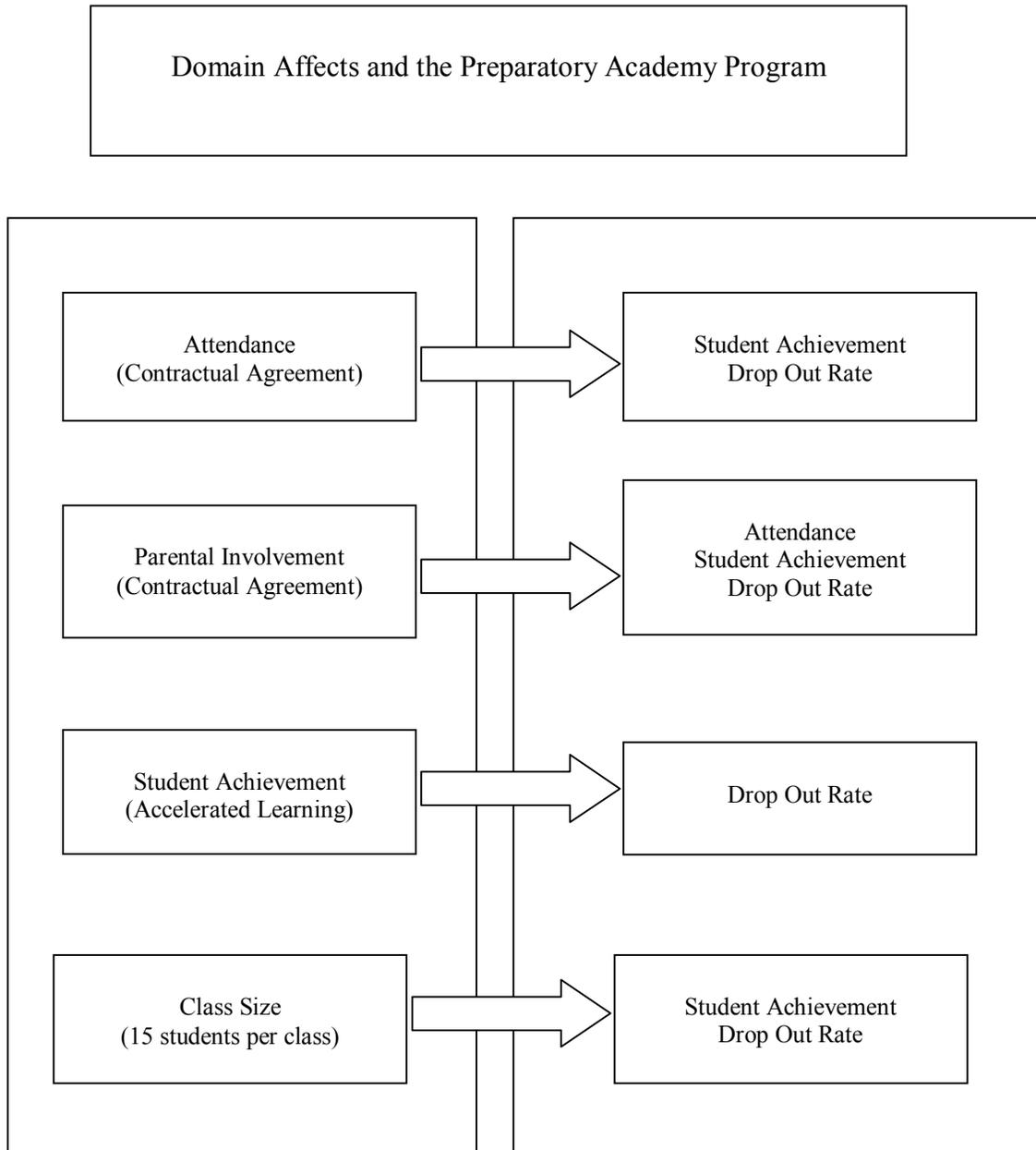


Figure 2 Domain Affects and the Preparatory Academy Program, Developed by the Researcher

however, the domains do not necessarily have a relationship to each other. For example:

(a) attendance directly affects student achievement and the student dropout rate; (b)

parental involvement directly affects attendance, student achievement, and the student

dropout rate; (c) student achievement only affects the student dropout rate; and (d) class size directly affects student achievement and the student dropout rate.

### Conceptual Model for the Traditional Program

The traditional 8th-grade students attend six or more classes daily, which include physical education and an elective. These students also are in classes that may or may not receive computer-based instruction on a regular basis. Since the parents are not required to come to school, students in the traditional program seldom invite their parents to participate in classroom or school activities.

### Theoretical Model

Learning theories are important to educators in identifying how people learn. These theories also imply that how people perceive and process information will determine their learning patterns. For example, mathematics is a course that covers many different areas of academia, such as reading, critical thinking, analysis, writing, comprehension, problem solving, and theorizing. The theoretical model for this study is based on the Behavior Learning Theory where emphasis is placed on repetitive learning, continuous reinforcement, and observations of behavior. Many of the students who are at-risk have problems understanding mathematics' components (Senecal, Koestner, & Villerand, 1995). According to this theory, they best benefit from a teaching modality that consistently reiterates the main ideas of the lesson with interaction and reassurance. Although students who have had problems achieving passing grades are not always unskilled in terms of the three "Rs," reading, writing, and arithmetic, their flaw may be in comprehending the information (Senecal, et al.). Some students are experiencing other variables that interfere with their ability to focus on schoolwork. The Behavior Learning

Theory focuses on changing negative learning behaviors in small stages by reinforcing learned concepts and understanding (Senecal et al.). There are students, who, for their own reasons, will not attempt to meet classroom demands. These students may look for peer acceptance and behavior strategies to avoid participating in class discussions or activities and therefore become more vulnerable to failure (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Magnuson, 1995).

### Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I includes the statement of context, the purpose of the study, the statement of the problem, the research questions, the limitations of the study, the definition of terms, the design of the Preparatory Academy, and the theoretical model. Chapter II presents a review of the literature that comprises research studies on dropout prevention programs. The scope of this review of literature is from 1992 through 2005. Chapter III presents the methodology of the focus groups, telephone interviews, setting, population, sampling, and the demographics of the school division. Also included in Chapter III is the research design, the procedures and data analysis, triangulation, saturation of data, and the trustworthiness and credibility of the focus group questions. Chapter IV presents the findings of the study and the findings of the research domains, while Chapter V presents the conclusions, the recommendations, and the implications for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this review of literature section, research is presented to show evidence of the effects dropout prevention programs, student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement have on the education of at-risk students. These studies are aligned with the research questions and the domains of this study. Each of these research studies has several indicators and strategies that produce significant information relevant to this study.

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, the National Center for Education Statistics (1995) reported several risk factors that identify potential dropouts. The data identifies family and household situations, lack of parental involvement, poor academic performance, behavior problems, and low expectations as some indicators that lead to dropping out of school. Students who experience two or more risk factors are more likely to fall behind in school and drop out (NCES).

Currently, emphasis is placed on dropout prevention resources that provide students who are at-risk of not finishing school with needed assistance. Efforts have been made to identify these students by tendency and trends that lead to failure (NCES, 1995). This chapter presents research literature that describes (a) evidence of an extensive national dropout problem, (b) national longitudinal studies about drop outs, (c) research that addresses indicators of dropping out of school, (d) strategy programs and projects for dropout prevention, and (e) the summary of Chapter II.

A review of literature relevant to this study reveals a lengthy effort by educators and public officials to keep students from leaving school before graduation. In reviewing

the research on dropout prevention, the literature can be placed into two categories, indicators and strategies. Indicators, which include, student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement describe why students become potential dropouts. Strategies are the programs that are implemented to prevent students from dropping out of school. This chapter is organized to reflect the research findings on dropout prevention from a review of the literature. Indicators of dropping out of school and strategy programs to prevent students from dropping out are discussed in detail.

The three indicators for the purpose of this study; student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement emerged from the review of the literature. Keywords and phrases, such as, dropouts, dropout prevention, and graduation rates were used to secure research studies on dropout prevention. Roderick (1995) identified poor student achievement as a major indicator of students who are potential dropouts. Smith (1998) found in his research that poor attendance was a key indicator of students leaving school before graduation. Data from the National Household Education Survey of 1996 revealed students whose parents are not involved in their education are likely to drop out of school before graduation.

Students who fail to meet the minimum requirements for promotion more than once are met with negative pressures that will eventually lead to dropping out of school (Smink, 2001; Huang, 2001; & Di Maria, 1999). Researchers are not sure whether poor student achievement affects attendance or poor attendance affects student achievement; however, they do agree that students with more than one indicator are potential dropouts.

This chapter will first discuss research studies on dropout prevention as a problem for society and educators. The National Center for Education Statistics (1992) presented

data on eighth-grade dropouts on a national scale followed by Tanner, Krahn, and Hartnagal (1995) who viewed this problem as an economic crisis for society.

Second, this chapter presents evidence of indicators; student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement, that lead to students dropping out of school. According to studies conducted by Baditoi (2005), Roderick (1993), Lanham (1999), Farmer and Payne (1992), and Dharmadasa (1995) many students are discouraged by their poor academic performance and eventually drop out of school. Other researchers such as Fisher (1994) and Smith (1998) present studies on student attendance and how it impacts the student dropout rate. The National Center for Education Statistics (2001) using data from the National Household Education Survey of 1996, de Carvalho (2001), and the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) discussed the importance of parental involvement in a student's education.

Third, this chapter presents strategic dropout prevention programs. According to Ruppert and Smith (1996) and Groth (1998) there are several academic programs established by school systems to assist students to move closer to their appropriate grade level. Consequently, these students remain in school and graduate.

#### Dropout Prevention Research

For years, public school systems across the country have wrestled with the dilemma of students leaving school prior to graduation. During the 1950s, the high school diploma was an asset for many job seekers in the labor market, in the current labor force a high school education is the minimum requirement for employment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). It is clear to public school educators that students who leave school early are not prepared for the challenges presented to them by societal

demands; therefore, dropout prevention efforts have received much attention (Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995).

The NELS:88 was the first study to compile data on 8th-grade dropouts on a national level (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). In the spring of 1988, a survey was administered to 24,599 8th-grade students from 1,052 schools across the nation. A follow-up survey was conducted every two years until the students dropped out of school or graduated. NELS:88 defined a dropout as any student who was absent from school for four or more consecutive weeks in an academic year without being sick or due to an accident. The data for this study were obtained from the school with confirmation from the household (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992).

The findings of this study revealed that public schools had an overall national dropout rate of 7.6 % compared with private religious schools with a dropout rate of 0.4 %. It also revealed that 8th-graders in the South, with a dropout rate of 8.9 %, were more likely to drop out of school than a student in the Northeast with a dropout rate of 5.5 % or Midwest with a dropout rate of 5.9 %. Students living in urban cities with a dropout rate of 8.9 % have a higher dropout rate than students living in the suburbs with a dropout rate of 5.4 %. According to this study, students who attend an urban school in the South are highly at-risk of not graduating from high school, while students attending private schools across America are more likely to graduate from school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992). National comparisons of public versus private school attrition rates are important indicators of where one may choose to live. There is evidence that Canada is also experiencing a significant number of students leaving school without graduating (Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995).

According to Tanner, Krahn, and Hartnagel (1995), the increasing problem of students leaving school before graduating from high school is a crisis. One reason for this is that they attribute student dropout to a direct negative impact on lost economic output (Tanner et al.). In 1989, 137,000 students left school early. It was estimated that these students would lose collectively in excess of four billion dollars in earnings during their life-working span (Tanner et al.). Consequently, those students who dropped out of school earned less money, had fewer opportunities to secure a good job, and earned from 12 to 18 % less than high school graduates (Tanner et al.).

Data were obtained from Edmonton, Alberta, with a population of 600,000, on high school dropout and its impact on the economy. A non-random quota sampling totaling 168 students who had dropped out of school was used. The primary method for collecting the data was a semi-structured interview that enabled the researchers to ask exploratory questions, introduce new themes, add questions, rephrase questions, and use follow-up questions (Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995).

The findings of this study revealed that low student academic performance was a major factor for students leaving school early. Other factors leading to dropping out of school were problems in family life, poor attendance, and having a full-time job (Tanner, Krahn, & Hatnagel, 1995). Many of the participants who were surveyed admitted that their decision to quit school without a diploma was not in their best interest. Other participants interviewed were still seeking employment and expressed their lack of work experience and ability to secure a job was directly related to the absence of a high school diploma (Tanner et al.).

Baditoi (2005) conducted a research study on students at-risk of failure. This study investigated how school districts across the country provided staff development for teachers who instructed this diverse population of students. Socio-economic background, the societal needs, and the educational demands placed on these students were evidence of special training needs for a vast amount of today's students, (Baditoi). Many students, as a result of these factors, fail to complete their education and enter the unfortunate statistics of high school drop outs.

The purpose of this study was to assess the amount of staff development districts nationwide provided for K-12 educators who taught students at-risk of school failure. The rationale for this study was to address the academic requirements of students at-risk of school failure in an education environment where teachers have limited experience to meet these needs. The educational demands such as increased testing and accountability have placed a hardship on students who are not academically skilled and have teachers who lack the instructional training to successfully educate these students (Baditoi, 2005).

Baditoi (2005) used a quantitative design to compile data from documents provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002). Data were collected based on the amount of staff development training held by the 100 largest school districts nationwide. The findings of this study revealed that school districts with a higher rate of staff development were better prepared in assessing courses with students who were at-risk of school failure.

#### Indicators of the Student Dropouts Problem

Hancock (2001) stated, "Student achievement is an important learning outcome. As a result of their experiences in an academic course, students are expected to master

specified content as evidenced by their performance on in-class examinations” (p. 284). The National Center of Education Statistics (2003) stated, “As students proceed through school, it is essential to measure their progress to ensure they are acquiring the necessary skills and understanding challenging subject matter” (p. 29). If students do not acquire these skills at an early age they fall behind and many eventually drop out of school (NCES).

### *Student Achievement*

According to Roderick (1993), poor student achievement and poor attendance were indicators of students not completing their high school education. Roderick conducted a research study on the Fall River Public School System. The purpose of this study was to address trends that lead to early and late-grade dropouts. Early-grade dropouts are students who leave school before 9th-grade and late-grade dropouts are those students who leave school after the 9th-grade (Roderick). Fall River is a city with approximately 90,000 citizens. The students were from poor working-class families. The school system was experiencing a high level of students not completing their high school requirements to receive a diploma.

Roderick’s study focused on the 1980-1981 7th-grade class of Fall River Public Schools. In order to get accurate information, data were obtained from students’ academic and attendance transcripts. A multivariate analysis was used to analyze the data. Roderick followed the students from the 4th-grade until they dropped out of school or graduated. Out of 1000 students who were enrolled in the 7th-grade, 35 % dropped out of school, 38 % graduated, and 22 % transferred to another school system.

The findings of this study revealed that students who dropped out of school the first year of high school had severe academic problems that lead to below average performance and one or more grade level retention. It also revealed that late-grade dropouts had average grades; however, demonstrated tendencies of high absenteeism. Roderick (1993) stated, "From the sixth to the 8th-grade, the average attendance of late grade dropouts declined by thirteen days on average, compared to an average decline of 5.26 % for students who later graduated in the bottom third of the graduating class" (p. xix).

In conclusion, Roderick (1993) determined that the two major factors for students dropping out of school were poor student achievement and poor attendance. These indicators were traced back to the 4th-grade of early-grade dropouts. These students had overall percentile ranks that made them at-risk of completing high school and put them at the bottom of the 4th-grade class. On the other hand, late-grade dropouts' percentile ranks were as good as the bottom third of the graduating class (Roderick).

In another study, Farmer and Payne (1992) maintain that all schools must address poor academic achievement and the increasing trend of students dropping out of school. Most researchers agree that low student achievement is the number one reason why students leave school early. As students fail and fall behind in grade level, other factors such as attendance, behavioral disorder, lack of parental support, and an increasing dislike for school enters into the picture (Farmer & Payne). Because of these unacceptable trends, society must make steps to educate the students at an early age. Farmer and Payne investigated dropout prevention as it relates to student achievement and determined that although students begin school eager to learn, at the ages of 11, 12,

and 13 their focus begins to change. Many of these students at this age are aware of their poor academic performance and tend to develop strong opinions on whether they should continue to go to school (Farmer & Payne).

According to Farmer and Payne (1992), one way to improve student achievement and keep children in school is to tell them early in life the importance of a good education. The parent must instill in their child the purpose of going to school along with the long range benefits and innumerable dangers of failing. Academic achievement is only one means of obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary to become a contributing member of society (Farmer & Payne). It is the norm that sets the values and standards for society, unfortunately, that standard in this country is a high school diploma or its equivalent. Farmer and Payne sum it up by stating, “The essence of the matter is that we must abide by the norms of our society if we expect to be functioning members of society” (p. 32).

Dharmadasa (1995) conducted research on class size and student achievement in a school district in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The research focused on the effects of class size on academic achievement in the subject’s mother tongue and mathematics. The objectives of the study were to investigate: (a) the nature of the effects of small classes on students’ academic achievement, (b) the nature of the effects of larger class sizes on students’ academic achievement, and (c) the nature of the effects of class size on students’ academic achievement in different subject areas.

The subjects of Dharmadasa’s (1995) study were 4th-grade students ( $N=610$ ) selected from 18 different classrooms and from three different schools. The setting of this study was a school district in Kandy, Sri Lanka. These schools included students in

grades 1-5, 1-10, and 1-13. The class sizes addressed in this study were 20-30, 31-40, and 41-50 students to one teacher. The smallest student-teacher ratio was 20:1 and the largest was 50:1.

The intervention took 12 weeks with each certified teacher instructed to teach the subjects in the mother tongue (Native Language) and mathematics. These teachers were provided with intensive training in lesson plan preparation, teaching strategies, and time management. During the intervention, teachers were interviewed individually to assure consistency in their teaching approaches. The lessons were designed so that each class, regardless of size, would receive the same information using the same number of materials and resources. The methods used to analyze the data were descriptive statistics and t-test statistics on student achievement scores in the subject's mother tongue and mathematics. Pre and posttests were given to the students and principals and teachers were interviewed.

The findings revealed that in the subject mother tongue, there was a statistically significant difference in achievement favoring the smaller classes of 20-30 students to classes of 31-40 with a  $t(30) = 5.26$  using a predetermined alpha level of  $p < .01$ . There was no statistically significant difference in achievement between class sizes of 20-30 students and 41-50 students. The findings in mathematics revealed there was a statistically significant difference in achievement for class sizes of 31-40 and 41-50 students. This comparison favored the larger class of 41-50 students yielding a statistical significance of  $t(40) = -3.47$  with a predetermined alpha level of  $p < .01$ . Other class sizes did not show a statistically significant difference with respect to student achievement (Dharmadasa, 1995).

This study concluded that class size did not show evidence that the smaller the class size the more students learn. It did show however that teacher planning, attitude, and instructional techniques contributed to student achievement (Dharmadasa, 1995).

### *Attendance*

Hite (2001) focused his study on the extended school year and its impact on student achievement and attendance. Using one middle school, participants included students, parents, and teachers. The purpose of this study was to determine if extending the school year would increase student achievement and attendance. Data were collected through pretest and posttest, taking daily attendance, parent and teacher surveys, and focus groups.

The findings of this study disclosed gains in student achievement and lower absentees for an increase in the daily attendance. Parent and teacher survey data revealed both had positive outlooks towards the extended school year program.

Another indicator in dropout prevention research literature is attendance. Research show that school attendance has a significant impact on students graduating from high school. Fisher (1994) conducted a study on middle school students at-risk of dropping out of school. The purpose of this study was to investigate the Cradock At-risk Prevention Program (CAPP) as it related to attendance, student achievement, and attitude towards school. Although Fisher's research focused on several variables, this researcher only included the research data on attendance as it applied to dropout prevention. Fisher addressed attendance as a major factor in students leaving school early; however, educators must supply the necessary resources to accommodate students' needs.

The subjects of Fisher's (1994) study were selected from three middle schools in an urban school division. All groups had similar demographic characteristics based on where they lived, the number of students who qualified for free and reduced breakfast and lunch, and students whose parents received social service benefits (Fisher).

The CAPP group was comprised of teachers who had good rapport with students, high expectation for students, innovative ideas, enthusiasm, and contributed to the overall school program. These teachers were given a one week in-service on the characteristics of at-risk students. The student participants met after school from 2:45 p.m. to 4:50 p.m. on every Wednesday and Thursday. Some incentive activities included field trips to local universities where they heard motivational speakers, trips to the movie, and trips to local skating centers (Fisher, 1994).

The Split-grade level English class was composed of 7th and 8th-grade students. These students were placed in the class because they had failed one or more core subjects. This group was considered the control group (Fisher, 1994).

The Bridge class was composed of students who had failed to be promoted, had poor school attendance, and had frequent disciplinary referrals. These students were assigned to a self-contained classroom where they were taught the four core subjects, English, mathematics, history, and science (Fisher, 1994).

To insure accuracy of information, Fisher (1994) directed the three middle schools to strictly adhere to the attendance policy and procedures outlined by the division. The data for this study were obtained from the division's central data processing office. This office is responsible for collecting attendance information from all schools in the division. This information is later recorded on the students' report cards.

A one-way analysis (ANOVA) was used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in attendance between the three classes. The findings of this study revealed the mean score on absences for the CAPP group was 5.59. The Split-grade level English class received 13.04 and the Bridge class received 13.50 absences. The students in the CAPP group with special qualified teachers and a number of incentives received 7.45 days less absences than the Split-grade level English class and 7.91 days less absences than the Bridge class (Fisher, 1994).

Smith (1998) investigated the attendance from the school year 1995-1996 with the newly implemented attendance policy of 1996-1997 school year. The purpose was to determine if the new policy affected high school attendance. The new attendance policy specified five as the number of days a student could be absent in a marking period, and 18 as the number of days a student could be absent in a school year. Given this policy, students who were absent from school more than five days without an acceptable excuse failed for that marking period. Those students who missed over 18 days in a school year were not promoted to the next grade level.

The subjects of this study were 4,236 students from three high schools. A stratified random sample was used in the selection process. In addition, data regarding their perception of the attendance policy were collected from parents of the students who participated in this study. The students were administered a survey questionnaire with 16 questions. Likert scales with five responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree served as the measurement for data analysis. Parent and teacher surveys contained 18 questions (Smith, 1998).

The findings revealed that grade level and gender did have some effect on high school attendance. Analysis of the results showed that overall student attendance increased as a consequence of the new attendance policy. Concerning gender, the data showed that male high school students attended school more than female high school students; however, there were no significant differences between the male and female students' pass rates. The data also showed that parents, teachers, and students agreed that the new attendance policy was needed (Smith, 1998).

### *Parental Involvement*

Most of the dropout prevention research in this review of literature has a parental involvement component. Educators have discovered that the parent is a vital constituent in student academic and social achievement (Coulombe, 1995). Coulombe stated, "Research demonstrates that staff members who enjoy strong parental support have parental involvement programs in place; they actively seek to involve parents and frequently demonstrate to them how to get involved" (p.72). Schools that do not encourage parental involvement as a part of the school improvement plan will most likely experience problems. If parents are not working for the school programs and are not regularly informed of the daily operations of the school, they tend to work equally as hard against the school program (Coulombe). The support of parents as an inspirational and motivational partner for their children will result in tremendous long-term benefits (Coulombe).

The National Household Education Survey of 1996 revealed important data on parental involvement of 1st through 12th-grade students. This survey is unique because it investigated children living in nontraditional families and those living with their

biological parents. Most research on parental involvement does not distinguish between nontraditional parents and biological parents. The survey further intensified the study by dividing the inquiry into types of biological parents. These categories included:

- 1) Two biological or adoptive parents
- 2) Biological mother/step mother or adoptive father
- 3) Biological father/stepfather or adoptive mother
- 4) Mother only
- 5) Father only

Each of these categories had subcategories to better define the category. One example is, under “Mother only” the subcategories are biological mother, adoptive mother, or stepmother.

The data were collected from parents or guardians of 20,702 children from age 3 to 12th-grade of high school. The focus of this study was to report the extent parents are involved in their child’s education. There were four scheduled activities for parent participation during a school year. These activities included “attendance at a general school meeting, attendance at a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference, attendance at a school or class event, and serving as a volunteer at school” (p.15). A scale was used ranging from a low of zero to a high of four to collect data on each of the categories. Parental involvement was classified by those receiving a zero, as low involvement and a four as high involvement (NHES:96).

This report’s findings reveal that 57 % of students live with both of their biological parents and 43% have other family arrangements. Students living with both of their biological parents generally do well in school academically and socially. One or

both of these parents attended three or four school sponsored events. Parents of nontraditional families varied in their participation; however, of the family types, those students living only with their biological fathers were most likely to do well in school and complete their high school education. The students living with only their mother were less likely to graduate from high school (NHES:96).

Research from de Carvalho (2001) shows parental involvement both as the problem and the solution to student academic performance by at-risk social groups. This study focused on the family as an influential entity in a child's life. Those parents, who placed high expectations on their children's education, encouraged school learning and reinforced educational values; tend to be well educated and associated with higher levels of income (de Carvalho). On the other hand, low-income parents are less likely to get involved in the education of their children. According to de Carvalho, normally, parents with high incomes have extensive education and a better knowledge base from which to assist their children with homework and other academic matters. Conversely, parents with low paying jobs seem to have lower levels of education and feel unprepared to assist their children academically (de Carvalho).

In this study, school and parental involvement were described as an interrelated and interdependent social institution. Both the school and the family have diverse needs, have specific goals, and are limited in time and space. The school sees the family as the key ingredient to increase student academic performance. In conclusion, de Carvalho (2001) stated, "Family and school educational responsibilities have evolved historically in the direction of increasing extension and specialization of the school role. However,

the dynamic articulations between these institutions still need to be conceptualized without specific settings, circumstances, and practices” (p.23).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2001) conducted research on how parents are involved in their child’s education. This study investigated the efforts school systems employ to encourage parental involvement and the efforts parents make to assist their children in school and at home. The study was limited to K-8 schools. Both the schools and parents were administered separate surveys that gave different perspectives of their involvement.

The data included two national surveys. The first survey was the First Response Survey System (FRSS) that gathered data on the ways schools engaged parents in the education of their children and the response by the parents to take advantage of the opportunities to participate. The second survey was the Parent and Family Involvement in Education/Civic Involvement Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program, 1996 that gathered data from parents on school related activities sponsored by the school for the purpose of soliciting parental involvement. A total of 810 public schools were represented in the study. There were 20,792 children attending these schools with a 62.5 % parental response rate. Parents of children from ages 3-12 were contacted by a telephone interview (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

The data on the FRSS and PFI/CI-NHES:1996 survey reports revealed that school systems were consistently providing opportunities for parents to participate in school activities; however, the parents disagreed on the percentage. For example, the school systems said that they provided information to parents about children’s school performance at a 100-percentile rate. The parents rated that question at an 89-percentile

rate. Another example is that 96 % of the school systems reported that they gave parents information concerning the school's performance rate on standardized test. Only 57 % of the parents said they received this information. Throughout the study there were several discrepancies between the school systems and the parents.

A t-test with a predetermined alpha level of .05 was used to test for statistically significant differences between variables. The findings of this study revealed that the credibility of both the school systems and the parents created uncertainty. Because of the vested interest by educators and parents to show positive outcomes, the study may have been distorted on both sides (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

### Strategy Programs for Dropout Prevention

Strategy programs are established to reduce the number of students leaving school before graduation. The strategy programs presented in this study, the Three-N-Two, three years into two years, program and the Advanced Achievement Academy (AAA) program, gave many students the resources to remain in school and graduate. These programs are similar in structure in that they make extensive use of technology, accelerated learning techniques, and have a strong parental involvement component.

#### *T-N-T Program*

Ruppert and Smith (1996) described a program that promotes middle school 6th-grade students to 9th-grade in two instructional years. Students enrolled in the program were over-aged or had been retained once prior to entering the 6th-grade. The T-N-T Program was an intensive technology-based program where students received instruction in a self-contained setting. Students were administered course work for two years and at

the end of the second year, those students who were successful were promoted to the 9th-grade, skipping their third year of middle school.

It was evident that parental involvement had a profound effect on student achievement and behavior, while these students were in the T-N-T Program, because the parent was the key to their success. During an initial interview procedure, it was explained what the parents' roles would be in the program. They signed an agreement stating their willingness to check homework each night, work with their child's teachers in classroom monitoring, attend quarterly parent meetings, chaperone field trips, assist the classroom teachers with incentive activities, and provide funds for extra supplies when needed. As part of their agreement, parents also had to speak highly of the T-N-T Program in the community.

A sample of eight successful students who had participated in the T-N-T Program and their parents were administered a survey to determine success in high school. The findings showed that these eight students were not applying themselves to their class work and rarely returned homework. Both the students and the parents agreed that the contract they signed at the middle school influenced their participation and that teachers encouraged the students to achieve. The students stated that their parents stopped supporting them when they entered high school. One positive note recorded by the authors was that the students were still in school and were optimistic about staying in school. The students stated that their experience and encouragement in the T-N-T Program persuaded them not to drop out of school.

In conclusion, this study shows the commitment of the parents was determined by the contract they had signed at the middle school to be a part of the T-N-T Program.

During the period these students were in the T-N-T Program, their parents supported them and they were successful. However, when they went to high school, the parents did not continue their support, and consequently, six of the eight students passed only half of their courses at the end of the semester. One out of the eight received several disciplinary referrals and was the only student who failed all but one course. It was evident that parental influence and support made a difference in the lives of those students (Ruppert & Smith, 1996).

### *AAA Program*

Groth (1998) conducted research on a dropout prevention program called the Advanced Achievement Academy (AAA). The program offered over-aged students an opportunity to bridge the academic gap by catching up with their class in credits towards graduation. Students were allowed to enroll in the AAA program only for one year. All students attending the school did so voluntarily and did not require permission from the principal or other school officials. The program was designed to accept only students who seriously committed themselves to completing their high school studies. Students' names were placed on a list and each summer a limited number of students were allowed to enter the program.

Students in the program received credits from computer-based instruction that tracks the progress of each student and tabulates quiz and examination scores. Students were allowed to complete as many courses as they could by moving at their own pace. Students had the option of taking several subjects or just taking one until it was completed. Although all subjects were computerized, there was a teacher assigned to each computer lab to assist students who were not computer literate. The computer-based

instruction program gave a student the opportunity to move several grade levels in one school year.

The findings of this study indicated that students who were enrolled in the AAA program were self-motivated and successful. Even though the findings also showed that the students wanted to remain in the program for two years, the program parameters prevented them from doing so. Improved attendance and student behavior were positive outcomes of the program. Many students completed several courses in one school year, receiving credits towards graduation (Groth, 1998).

#### Chapter Summary

While reviewing the research on dropout prevention, the researcher found that several domains, student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement, relevant to the study were frequently discussed. These domains were deeply embedded in the design of these studies; thereby, adding to the success of the literature. Research literature on dropout prevention suggests that poor student achievement, poor attendance, and low parental involvement are factors that lead to a student dropout problem.

The research emphasized poor student achievement as the primary reason for students' not finishing high school. These students, after being retained one or more school years, became discouraged and later dropped out of school. Truancy and poor attendance were given as another indicator of potential student dropout. Students not attending school eventually fall behind in class work and fail the course. The compulsory attendance policy also impacted students' passing or failing a class. The lack of parental involvement played a major role in the poor performance of dropouts in academics and attendance. Students who did not have strong family support were at increased risk of

Table 2

Domains Emerging from the Review of Literature and Descriptions as Pertaining to this Study

The Three Domains Emerging From the Review of Literature

<u>Domains</u>	<u>Descriptions</u>
Student Achievement	Student achievement is defined as the progress towards completing ones high school education.
Attendance	Attendance is defined as the days present in a regular school schedule.
Parental Involvement	Parental involvement is defined as the engagement of the parent in the instructional and non-instructional activities of the school.

\*Definitions of the domains of this study

dropping out of school. Table 2 shows the three domains identified from the research, student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement that may lead to student dropouts.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to present the qualitative methodology selected to examine the perceptions of the students who participated in the Preparatory Academy, a dropout prevention program. The qualitative design was the primary method used through focus group discussions to collect data on successful student perceptions, experiences, and understanding of the Preparatory Academy. A telephone interview was used to collect data from staff members of the Preparatory Academy and a field test of the focus group questions and protocol was used to rehearse the focus group questions for clarity and understanding.

In this chapter, the researcher has included a discussion of the research design, development of focus group and telephone interview questions, focus group protocol, the setting, the participant selection, the procedure for data collection, the data analysis, the confidentiality of the data, trustworthiness and credibility, the triangulation of the data, the collection and use of demographic data, document analysis, document approval, role of the researcher, focus test group, and the chapter summary. The primary question of this research is: How do students perceive the Preparatory Academy as a dropout prevention program? The following sub-questions were used to investigate student perceptions of the Preparatory Academy: (a) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy account for their increased academic success or lack of academic success? (b) In what way did the Preparatory Academy influence school attendance for those enrolled in the program? (c) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy describe their parents' involvement while enrolled in the program? (d) How do students who

participated in the Preparatory Academy perceive their likelihood of dropping out of school? (e) What other factors do students describe as important about their experiences in the Preparatory Academy?

### Research Design

The researcher used a qualitative design to assess perceptions of students who successfully completed the Preparatory Academy and were successful in moving from the 8th-grade to the high school in one school year. Telephone interviews with students who did not complete the program were planned; however, data showed that students who did not meet the criteria for promotion were retained in the program. Interviews with the staff were added to clarify statements made from focus group meetings.

According to Hatch (2002) qualitative methods will reveal areas of inquiries missed by quantitative methods such as the detailed descriptions obtained through focus groups. Focus group discussions and telephone interviews gave information regarding the students' perception of the accelerated learning model, parental involvement, attendance, and overall feelings about the Academy. Hatch stated, "Focus group interviews are often used to supplement other qualitative data, but they can be the basic data collection strategy of a qualitative study" (p. 24).

While quantitative research focuses on statistical data, qualitative research focuses on descriptive data, such as participants' insights, beliefs, and experiences (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Creswell (2003) stated, "Qualitative researchers look for involvement of their participants in data collection and seek to build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study" (p. 181). Today, qualitative researchers are focusing on a study that develops a consistency of trustworthiness and credibility while

providing procedures to ascertain information that cannot be conducted in a totally quantitative design (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

According to Gall, Borg, and Gall, (1996), “Qualitative researchers have become interested in the use of focus groups to collect data in recent years. These researchers are finding that the interactions among the participants stimulate them to state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually” (p. 308).

Educators have found that it is important to know what students are feeling and thinking about the issues that directly impacts their lives. Students’ feelings and perceptions of their experiences give educators important information that supports existing procedures. These students are challenging educators to include them in the decision-making process. They accuse educators of not respecting their ability to think or make mature decisions. Some educators believe that by soliciting student perceptions, the rapport between student and staff improves.

Information regarding successful completers of the Academy was obtained through three separate focus groups of Academy graduates who were asked questions relevant to their experiences while in the program. Concerning focus group size, Krueger and Casey (2000) stated, “The ideal size of a focus group for most noncommercial topics is six to eight participants” (p. 73). The 24 students participating in this study were divided into three focus groups of eight students from three high schools located in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This focus group design benefited this study by providing insight into the impact the Preparatory Academy had on these students’ learning experience.

## Focus Group Procedures Criteria

A focus group is a group of individuals assembled to discuss their perceptions from a carefully designed set of questions presented in a non-threatening manner (Merriam, 1998). Krueger and Casey (2000) stated, “A focus group isn’t just getting a bunch of people together to talk. A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures” (p. 3). In developing procedures for focus groups, there are several factors that must be considered. First, the researcher must decide which individuals are in the position to know the information required for the study (Anderson, 1998). Secondly, the researcher must know what specific information to retrieve from the group (Anderson).

The researcher planned the activities of the focus group by selecting three types of questions; (a) main questions, which are open-ended questions designed to guide the discussion; (b) probes, which are used to request more details or to get clarity; and (c) follow-up questions which are designed to pursue explanations of the main ideas and central themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Group interviews should not be confused with focus groups. In a group interview, a pre-determined set of questions is asked to get a single response or answer (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). However, in a focus group, a pre-determined set of questions is used to stimulate discussion and interaction among the members of the group (Bloor et al.). Finch and Lewis (2003) stated, “In responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study. The language they use, the emphasis they use, and their general framework of understanding is more spontaneously on display” (p. 171).

The main questions in a focus group take the most time to develop and bring the most information. These questions are open-ended to entice the focus group to discuss in detail the central thoughts of the question (Anderson, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Krueger and Casey (2000) stated, “The open-ended approach allowed the subject ample opportunity to comment, explain, and share experiences and attitudes” (p. 6). Main questions are the foundation of the focus group and were worded to encourage the participants to freely discuss their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of the question (Anderson). In addition, each of the main questions was related to the research design, the research questions, and the conceptual model (Anderson).

The probes and follow-up questions were designed to keep the participants discussing the main question in more detail (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). A good probe may be saying, “tell me more, a pause or gesture, please explain, or why did you say that” (Langer, 2001). These questions are used to bring the group back to a topic, or to reinforce something that has been said. These questions also provide more information and explain comments made by the group. While follow-up questions were anticipated, these questions were not used if the information was covered during the main discussion. To ensure that the discussion flows smoothly, each question was sequenced to transition one to another (Rubin & Rubin).

#### The Discussion Protocol

The goal of focus group questions is to collect data expressing the beliefs, experiences, motivations, attitudes, and accomplishments of the participating students (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The different types of discussion questions (see Appendix A), such as main questions, probes, and follow-up questions, yield a diverse amount of

information. Focus group questions are designed for clarity and comprehension and written for an appropriate level of understanding (Merriam, 1998). The questions in this study are written on the reading level for middle school students. According to Microsoft Word (2002) readability statistics, the Flesch Kincaid grade level is 7.4 for the discussion questions and survey questionnaire. Non- threatening questions help to establish rapport by setting the members of the focus group at ease (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

### Setting

The setting for this study included three high schools that received 8th-grade students from the four middle schools who enrolled in the Preparatory Academy in the 2004-2005 school year. Table 3 gives the race/ethnicity of the four middle schools and enrollment per school. The majority of students enrolled in these schools are African-American (2566) followed by Caucasian students (1159). American Indian students (4) are the least represented in this school division.

Table 4 shows the number of students enrolled in each of the four middle schools and the respective number of students enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. It also shows the number of teachers and administrators assigned to the school. The students are bused from several communities surrounding each school. The curriculum includes all subjects that are taught in a regular comprehensive accredited middle school such as physical education, fine arts, and the core subjects. In each of the middle and high schools in the division, a Preparatory Academy program is provided for eligible students. This program offers students who are more than one year behind in school the opportunity to move up one or two grade placements in one academic year. Students entering the Preparatory

Table 3

Race/Ethnicity and Total Enrollment in the 2004-2005 School Year

<u>Middle School</u>	<u>AmerInd</u>	<u>Asian</u>	<u>Afro-Amer</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Caucasian</u>	<u>Total</u>
Middle School <u>A</u>	3	21	711	12	398	1135
Middle School <u>B</u>	0	0	537	0	236	773
Middle School <u>C</u>	1	9	806	9	309	1134
Middle School <u>D</u>	0	2	512	5	216	735
Totals	4	32	2566	26	1159	3757

\*Division A website (2004)

Academy programs must submit an application and be interviewed with their parents during the summer after students have received report cards. The selection committee and the principal determine acceptance into the Academy.

Telephone Survey of Unsuccessful Students

It was the researcher's sincere desire to interview students who participated in the Preparatory Academy and did not complete the program with a telephone survey. Creswell (2003) stated, "A survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (p. 153). It was important to know the perceptions of these students who were unsuccessful in the program. This information could assist teachers and administrators of the Academy to understand student issues. During the staff interviews, inquiries were made concerning students who did not complete the Academy. According to

Table 4

Populations of the Middle Schools Preparatory Academy in the 2004-2005 School Year

<u>Middle School</u>	<u>Enrollment</u>	
	<u>Traditional Program</u>	<u>Preparatory Academy</u>
Middle School (A)	1135	55
Middle School (B)	773	56
Middle School (C)	1134	89
Middle School (D)	765	63

\*Division A website (2005)

administrators, teachers, and counselors of the division, students who did not meet the requirements to complete the Academy were retained in the program. These students were monitored and given special individualized attention to assist them in developing the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully complete the Academy.

Focus Group Participant Selection

The students participating in this study were 9th-grade students who were enrolled in one of the three high schools. The students selected for the focus groups were chosen from a computer printout of all students who successfully completed the Preparatory Academy. A random sample by school, as suggested by Merriam (1998), was used to select eight students from each of the three high schools. Names of students who successfully completed the Preparatory Academy in the 2004-2005 school year, were placed in a hat and randomly selected until eight students from each of the three high schools were chosen. Students who successfully completed the program had knowledge

of its totality and were in a position to describe their beliefs and perceptions of the overall program.

Parents of these students received a letter (see Appendix A) requesting permission for their child's participation in the study. The parents' letter included a brief introduction of the researcher, the reason their child was chosen, assurance of confidentiality, assurance that participation was voluntary, a statement informing them to expect a telephone call from the researcher to answer any questions, a request to review their child's attendance and academic records, and a space for their signature. Once the permission forms were received, parents were sent an additional letter (see Appendix B) informing them of the time and place of the focus group meeting and a follow-up telephone call to verify the student's attendance. If a parent decided not to allow his or her child to participate in this study, that child's name was removed from the list of participants and an alternate name was selected.

#### Procedures for Data Collection

The primary data collection method used in this study was focus groups with students who successfully completed the Preparatory Academy program in the 2004-2005 school year. Each student was asked to fill out a data sheet (see Appendix C) that requested demographic and school data not covered in the focus group discussions. A focus group protocol (see Appendix D) was developed based on the conceptual model and the research questions of the study. Since the focus groups were conducted in the high schools, permission was requested from all three high school principals to hold the discussions in their schools (see Appendix E). It was important for the participants to be as comfortable as possible in a familiar environment (Merriam, 1998; Krueger & Casey,

2000). These students responded orally to a set of questions designed to gather information about their experiences while attending the Preparatory Academy. Students were placed in focus groups of eight. Fern (2001) stated, "It is generally acknowledged that focus groups should be composed of 8 people, give or take 2" (p. 161). Special attention was placed on encouraging all students in the focus group to contribute to the discussion (Anderson, 1998). A conference room was secured for three hours in each building for the focus group discussions. This time also included setting up, conducting the focus group discussion, reviewing statements for clarity, and time for the participants to relax and enjoy snacks. The researcher anticipated the focus group time as two hours, depending on the interaction of the group. Snacks were served to the students after the focus group session was over. A follow-up thank you letter was mailed to the participants and their parents (see Appendix F).

All focus groups were administered the same discussion questions with one focus group meeting per day. To ensure student confidentiality, a number was assigned to each student who participated. This number was used to identify students in the place of their names. It was necessary for the researcher and research assistant to identify statements made by individual students. No other identifying information was associated with students during data collection. A tape recorder was used to record the data and the research assistant wrote down non-verbal responses and significant statements and body language interactions from the focus group sessions. Significant statements included those statements that had a direct association with the research questions or domains. There also were moments in the interview process where participants showed their support for other speakers by verbal or nonverbal gesturing in a positive or negative

manner. Given this, the research assistant also noted body language that showed disagreement or support for another speaker. Body language could be in the form of a facial expression, a laugh, a head gesture, or a hand signal (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). It was also important for the research assistant to recognize the participant who made the remark or gesture. When analyzing the data, verbal and non-verbal communication responses could have an impact on the overall results of the data (Bloor et al.).

The researcher was the moderator of the focus group discussions. As a classroom teacher and an administrator, the researcher has a vast amount of experience in counseling and interviewing students. The researcher and research assistant met prior to each session and reviewed key words and nonverbal responses that signified a notation. Key words and nonverbal responses are any references to the three domains; student achievement, attendance, parental involvement, and other words related to dropout prevention. In a focus group discussion format, both significant and insignificant statements are made by participants and recorded on the tape recorder. The research assistant ensured that significant statements were noted and marked by a counter located on the tape recorder. At the end of each session, the research assistant reviewed with the focus group what was said by reading back statements and phrases from the notes, for clarity and accuracy.

The research assistant for this study was a retired social worker supervisor who had extensive experience in note taking and interviewing techniques. While she was not interviewing, her experiences had prepared her for assisting the researcher. As a research assistant, her primary responsibilities were to set up the discussion room, take notes,

operate the tape recorders and give a summary of the information received. Note taking included verbal and non-verbal communications. Information sharing and data collection procedures, including confidentiality were discussed and recorded on audiotape prior to the focus group meetings. By having a research assistant, the researcher was free to focus on leading the discussion (Langer, 2001).

### Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the data analysis process begins as soon as data are collected (Anderson, 1998). Analyzing data according to Hatch (2002) is a difficult task that should be performed by the researcher. He stated, "It is fair to say that the only way to understand the data analysis process is to do it" (p. 54). Following each focus group discussion, the researcher transcribed and wrote a summary report of the discussion from the audiotapes. After all of the focus groups were completed and summaries written, the researcher read and re-read the reports to identify trends and patterns, issues that occurred several times (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This process took several readings of many pages of transcripts to be analyzed (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). A procedure called indexing was used to accomplish this task. While indexing the transcription, an index code was assigned to each theme of similar responses and appropriate sub-categories of data were narrowed down (Bloor et al.).

During the readings, the researcher focused on the participants' comments that directly related to the research questions. Every verbal response by the participants was considered important and valuable to the success of this study; however, conflicting information was disregarded if there were not any supporting comments from the other participants (Anderson, 1998). Although this process focused on detailed analysis and

was time consuming, this task resulted in meaningful and relevant information. Through the interaction of the focus group there was information relating to the operation of the Academy that the researcher did not anticipate. Student discussions generated supporting or conflicting comments that added categories to the data analysis. The researcher understood that the process of taking audio sounds from a tape recorder would take many hours of focused listening and re-listening to the same statement in order to get a full understanding of what was said. While transcribing this information, emphasis was placed on identifying the thoughts and experiences described by the participants.

In qualitative research, the focus group as a means of data collection could be considered the most difficult method in terms of transcribing the data (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). In a focus group there are several participants interacting together in a group discussion (Bloor et al.). The purpose of the focus group is to initiate discussion among the participants about a specific topic (Bloor et al.). Sometimes several group members spoke at the same time and other times group members interrupted or overlapped another member. When this occurs it was very complicated to transcribe the data without repeatedly listening to the tapes. In addition, there were times when the dialect or accent of the speaker made it difficult to determine what was said and by whom. It was the responsibility of the researcher to make a dedicated effort to recover these data. This means that the researcher focused on recorded comments and replayed the comments until the understanding became clear. It was important to have a tape recorder with a counter feature. As the researcher transcribed the taped statements, he recorded the number, from the counter on the tape recorder, with each statement. This procedure made it easier for the researcher to review recorded information (Bloor et al.).

The audio taped discussions were listened to and student perceptions were coded by theme. Common themes were identified to categorize similar ideas and perceptions of the participants (O'Brien, 1993). While transcribing the focus group results, the researcher numbered each line of the transcription for future review. As the data were analyzed, the researcher categorized the information that directly related to the research questions. After careful examination of the data, it was necessary to add subcategories to better define expressed concepts (O'Brien). As data were retrieved and transcribed, four photocopies of each transcript and a filing system were used to identify and store data. This system included putting all related subcategories on the same index card. These data were placed in a folder labeled by focus group number, paragraph number, and page number. Indexing and systematic filing of the data assisted in retrieving the data for comparisons (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001).

In preparing the written report of the data analysis, it was important to write a narrative summary with actual quotes from participants to illustrate experiences, perceptions, and beliefs from the participants' own words (Anderson, 1998). Programs are often implemented and presumed to be successful by school administrative reports; however, the student point of view is seldom requested and in most cases is given no credence (Anderson).

Through the years, students have not been invited to give their opinions and values of established educational programs; consequently, administrators have missed valuable information and opportunities for improvement. Allowing students to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions of a program will give administrators an inside view

of what is actually happening in the program. The participants in this study were given an opportunity to articulate their perceptions of the Preparatory Academy.

### Documents

Documents were used to provide information and materials that were necessary to analyze the data. Documents reviewed in this study included student cumulative records, student attendance reports, program proposal, the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act known as the Buckley Amendment, and demographic data sheets. These documents were pertinent to the data collection process and understanding of the research. Each of these documents provided information about the participants that added relevance to the study. Creswell (2003) stated, “During the process of research, the qualitative investigator may collect documents. These may be public documents (e.g., newspapers, school board policies, minutes of meetings, official reports) or private documents (e.g., personal journals and diaries, letters, e-mails)” (p. 188). These documents identified how the data were organized, selected, and analyzed.

### Documents for Approval

Other documents associated with this study included documents used for approval. These individual documents are to protect the student, the school, the school division, or the university. A permission letter was sent to the students’ parent requesting consent for their child to participate in the study. A Child Assent Form (see Appendix G) was sent to the student for his or her consent. A letter was sent to the building principals (see Appendix E) requesting the use of a classroom, identifying the students who were participating, and describing the logistical details of the visit. Before this researcher could collect data in the school division an “Application Form for an External Research Study”

(see Appendix M) was submitted and approved by the school division. Document for approval of the study (see Appendix N) and a document of extension of the study were submitted to the Institute Research Board (see Appendix O) of the university.

### Triangulation

Triangulation is defined by most researchers as multiple sources that help the reader to understand a phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Creswell (2003) agreed with Johnson and Christensen that triangulation assists the reader in receiving a complete understanding of the data and research process. Patton (1990) introduced triangulation as a means to strengthen a study and limit bias. Triangulation involves using three or more methods to collect data. In this study special effort has been made to limit bias by the use of focus group discussions, a survey questionnaire of the focus group (see Appendix C), telephone interviews of unsuccessful students of the Academy (see Appendix J), Academy graduation results, document analysis, focus test group, and question review by a forum of experts.

### Confidentiality of the Data

Confidentiality of the participants and schools was a priority of the study. Berg (1989) stated, "Confidentiality is given to mean an active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the subjects' identities" (p. 138). Kruegar and Casey (2000) argued that members of the focus group should respect confidentiality and the moderator should outline the expected behavior before the discussions. In this study special attention was given to the security of the focus group responses recorded on audiotapes. These tapes will remain in the possession of the researcher. Schools in this study were assigned a letter and the subjects of this study were

assigned a number. At no time in this study was a school's name or student's name recorded. The researcher was extremely careful of the discussions of subjects and settings in this study as it refers to student and school names. The most effective means of assuring confidentiality is to take precautions by locking up the data so that it does not become available to others or the public (Berg).

### Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, emphasis is placed on developing a database that is trustworthy and credible. The quantitative terminology of reliability and validity are similar to the qualitative terminology of trustworthiness and credibility (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Both paradigms, trustworthiness and credibility, are used to reduce bias in the data collection process.

To establish trustworthiness of this study a forum of experts reviewed each question to be used in the focus group to determine content, purpose, and clarity. This forum consisted of principals, teachers, and central office personnel in the field of education who are enrolled in a dissertation seminar class. The forum gave suggestions for the improvement of the focus group questions. They read each question and voiced agreement or disagreement of wording, understanding, clarity, and content. Several rewrites were made. Through this process, the questions were tested for trustworthiness and credibility and from these questions eight to ten questions were selected for the discussion groups.

At the end of each focus group discussion, the research assistant read to the focus group "significant statements" for clarity and accuracy. Two audio tape recorders were used to record the interactions among the group to ensure that the feelings and emotions

were noted as the transcripts were written. The process of indexing and systematic filing of the data further assisted in establishing trustworthiness (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Another approach in developing trustworthiness was having a rich thick description of the data collection process and a systematic method in which it was recorded and analyzed (Bloor et al.).

### The Role of the Researcher

During the researcher's tenure in the school system, he served as an administrator for 12 years, five as an assistant principal and seven as a principal. As an assistant principal he was heavily involved with the daily routines of the students. Many of these students were frequently truant from school that lead to students dropping out of school before graduation. As a principal, this researcher implemented strategies to get parents involved in their child's education, whereby, limiting absenteeism in the school.

Letters were sent home to all parents informing them of the Parent Teacher Student Association meetings and that buses would be sent to public housing communities to transport them to the meetings. Many parents took advantage of the offer, which increased parental involvement in the school. The researcher and some of the teachers went to the community centers to meet with the parents who could not get to school and again the meetings were successful. Through many years of successfully encouraging students and parents to take advantage of the education system, the researcher believes he is an expert in retaining students in school. This is why the researcher is conducting a study on the Preparatory Academy as a dropout prevention program.

It is essential that students are encouraged to attend school. The researcher believes that students only step up to the plate when they are continuously encouraged and rewarded for good behavior. On many occasions, students who otherwise would have dropped out of school graduated and enrolled in college.

#### Focus Test Group

A focus test group was designed to test the instrument and procedures intended to be used in the data collection process. Testing the questions and procedures of the focus group was a necessity operation before using the instrument (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researcher used this resource to test the validity and reliability of the focus group instrument and procedures.

The focus test group was conducted on August 24, 2005, at one of the three high schools in the study at 12:00 p.m. The meeting was held in the guidance conference room adjacent to the main office of the high school these students attended. The room was equipped with one long table with twelve seats. The researcher sat at the end of the table with the three participants sitting two on one side and one on the other side at the same end of the table. The research assistant was located three seats down from the participants. The research assistant set up two tape recorders, one on each side of the table, close to the participants. The participants were students who successfully completed the Preparatory Academy in the school year 2004-2005. The gender of the participants was two females and one male. The young man was 14 years old, one female was 15 years old and the other female was 16 years old. All students were African-American and enrolled in the 9th-grade.

Before the focus group discussion began the researcher assigned letters for participants' names. The letters and number were assigned as A1, B1, and C1 and by the number 1, also indicating the students are enrolled in a high school. The participants were informed to give their letter name prior to answering a question or making a statement. The researcher also reminded the participants not to mention their school's name or their classmates' name.

The purpose of the focus test group was to determine the strengths and weakness of the instrument and procedures. It was necessary for the researcher to discover areas of weakness and make the changes before performing the actual focus group discussions. In reviewing the procedures utilized and the transcripts of the focus test group discussion there were several areas that needed improvement; (1) the procedure for contacting students, (2) the survey instrument, (3) the number of discussion questions that directly related to the research questions, (4) the focus group protocol, (5) the researcher's handling of focus group discussion, and (6) the procedure for recording data. All of the problems observed by the researcher were corrected. The changes that were made improved the data collection process and made the focus group procedures more organized.

There were 30 letters sent to parents and students to secure eight participants for the focus test group discussion. Only three parents responded by signing and sending the approved permission forms back, which was an indicator of a potential problem. The researcher was concerned about the response from the student letters sent out and because of the poor response had decided to make a telephone call to each parent explaining the letter and to answer any questions the parent or student might have prior to sending the

letters out. Extreme efforts such as, telephoning parents before and after the mailings or taking the forms to the parents' house for a signature, were performed to secure qualified participants for future focus group discussions. The Parent Permission Form and the Child Assent Form approval were needed for participation in the focus test group discussion.

Another letter was sent to these three parents and students informing them of the place and time of the focus group meeting. Transportation to and from the focus test group meeting was an option for participants; however, only one student requested transportation. A follow-up telephone call was made to each of the participants the morning of the focus test group meeting. All participants were contacted and each requested transportation. The researcher was elated to offer the transportation to and from the focus test group meeting, because it provided a means to control the starting time of the meeting and assure that all participants were present.

Each participant was asked to complete a brief informational survey. As a result of this survey, it was determined that three questions were inappropriate and needed to be changed. The first question that needed to be changed asked for the age of the participant; however, the ages on the survey were too high. The ages on the survey began at 16 to 20, but B1 and C1 were 14 and 15 years of age. The researcher changed the response options to begin at 14 years old. The second question that needed to be changed asked how many brothers and sisters were in the household and the survey started with one. There was one participant who did not have any siblings living in the household. The response option to this question was changed to start at none. The third question asked how many times the

participant was not promoted to the next grade and the answer started with one. The response option to that question on the survey was changed to start at none.

Another problem observed was the method in which the researcher facilitated the focus test group protocol. Several times the researcher responded to participants' questions with an "ok" or "that's a good response." Responses from the researcher should always be neutral and not approving or disapproving of a comment (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researcher also used leading questions to generate discussion such as, "my understanding is that the parents had to sign a contract. Do they still have to sign a contract?" The researcher changed the question to state; were your parents required to sign a contract in order for you to participate in the program? Leading questions are not appropriate for a focus group discussion.

The discussion questions were written in a manner to retrieve information relative to the research questions that guide the inquiry of this study; however, the organization of these questions was inappropriate. The questions were arranged to ask one question related to student achievement, the next question on parental involvement, and another question on attendance. The questions were changed to establish a coherent order of questioning by placing questions in categories. All questions and follow-up questions on student achievement, parental involvement, or attendance were asked at the same time.

The focus test group also revealed a lack of consistency in the procedure for recording data and the number of focus group questions. There were four questions on student achievement, two questions on parental involvement, and two questions on attendance. The questions were changed to reflect three questions for each category with three follow-up questions. Another question was added to give the students a chance to

describe experiences in the Preparatory Academy that were not discussed during this session.

The data collection results from the focus test group are not included in the final study. The focus test group was designed to test the instrument and procedures of the focus group, not to generate data. After the completion of the focus test group discussion refreshments were served to the participants and a thank you letter was sent to each participant two days after the focus group discussion session.

The success of the actual focus group discussions was determined by the results of this focus test group. The changes made to the instrument and focus group procedures strengthen the focus group discussions and enhanced the data collection process. The researcher was gratified to discover and correct problems with the focus group instrument and procedures before presiding over the discussion sessions. The use of the focus test group was a vital tool needed to improve the reliability of this study.

#### Chapter Summary

In this study, focus groups and staff telephone interviews were used to identify student perceptions of the Preparatory Academy. During the focus group sessions and staff telephone interviews, the students and staff were asked a set of questions designed to give relevant information about the Preparatory Academy. The methodology, research design, setting, sampling, participant selection, data analysis, document analysis, trustworthiness and credibility, and the role of the researcher were fully explained in this chapter. This chapter also included a discussion of how the data were collected, analyzed, and protected during this study, and a focus test group summary. In Chapter IV

the researcher will report the research findings and in Chapter V conclusions, recommendations and implication of future research will be presented.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULT OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of students who participated in a dropout prevention program named the Preparatory Academy. The question; How do students perceive the Preparatory Academy as a dropout prevention program, was used to frame the direction of this qualitative study. The following sub-questions were used to frame the direction of this study: (a) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy account for their increased academic success or their lack of academic success while enrolled in the program? (b) In what way did the Preparatory Academy influence student attendance for those enrolled in the program? (c) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy describe their parents' involvement while enrolled in the program? (d) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy perceive their likelihood of dropping out of school? (e) What other factors do students describe as important about their experiences in the Preparatory Academy?

The Preparatory Academy has been in operation since 1999 and it is important to know what perceptions the students have of the Academy. The data collection process for this study included three focus group discussions with students who completed the Academy, telephone interviews with school administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors, and a document review of Academy students who subsequently graduated from high school. The participants gave their perceptions of the Preparatory Academy based on their beliefs and experiences. The data were collected between August and

November 2005. The data collection process was organized around several domains; student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement.

The results of the three focus group discussions showed compelling evidence that the Preparatory Academy has changed from its original design. There were also contradictory statements made by individual student participants that according to school officials were not true. Many of the participants in all three focus group discussions were very negative about how they were placed in the Preparatory Academy. Several cited false promises made by their teachers, concerning the grade they were in and the grade they would be enrolled in upon entering high school. After reviewing the transcriptions, the researcher with approval from his committee chairman, decided to seek additional interviews with school administrators, teachers of the Academy, and guidance counselors that would confirm, deny, or explain many statements made by the students during the focus group hearings.

#### Participants of the Study

The participants of the study included 17 students, three administrators, two teachers, and two guidance counselors. The number of student participants was smaller than anticipated for several reasons. First, four students were absent from school on the day of the focus group discussions. Second, two of the parents refused to sign and return the permission forms, and third, one student did not report to the conference room as instructed. The student participants' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Demographic Characteristics of the Student Participants (17)*

Characteristics	N
<b>Race</b>	
Caucasian	2
African-American	15
American Indian	0
Asian or Pacific Islander	0
Hispanic	0
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	7
Female	10
<b>Parents in Household</b>	
Mother and Father	4
Mother	9
Father	1
Grandparent	1
Other: Aunt 1; Sister 1	2
<b>How many brothers and sisters are in the household?</b>	
None	0
1	8
2	2
3	5
4 or more	2
<b>How many school-aged children are in the household?</b>	
None	2
1	2
2	7
3	4
4 or more	2
<b>Do you receive reduced or free lunch?</b>	
Yes	9
No	8
<b>Do you plan to remain in school and graduate or drop out of school?</b>	
Remain in school and graduate	17

Drop out of school	0
What is your age?	
14	2
15	5
16	10
17	0
Where do you live?	
Private house	12
Apartment	1
Community housing	4
Camper Park	0
Other	0
How many times were you not promoted to the next grade?	
None	2
One time	14
Two times	1
Three times	0

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#### Data on Unsuccessful Students

The data on the students who were not successful in completing the Academy showed these students were retained for another semester. The researcher interviewed seven staff members of the division and inquired about the students who were released from the program, failed, or dismissed for disciplinary reasons. Each response was the same; students in the Preparatory Academy were not dismissed from the program. If a student did not meet the promotion standards he/she continued in the program for another semester. This answer was also confirmed by the students during the focus group discussions. One hundred percent of the students participating in the three focus groups agreed that students were not put out of the Academy for failing classes or disciplinary reasons.

One issue essential to this study was the number of students who had graduated from high school after completing the Preparatory Academy. The Preparatory Academy was established in the 1998-1999 school year and implemented in four middle schools in the 1999-2000 school year in a 7th/8th-grade class. After a year of intense study, these students went to an 8th/9th-grade transition class in the high school for another semester of instruction. The students who enrolled in the Academy in 1999 should have graduated in 2004.

According to the Director of Research for this division, there were 87 students who graduated from high school after completing the Preparatory Academy. There was no data given to address the number of students enrolled in the program during this year. The data on Academy graduates are inconclusive, because several elements were not available to confirm the percent of Academy students who enrolled in the program, completed the program, and continued in school and graduated. The data showed that 87 students who were at-risk of graduating from high school remained in school until they graduated. According to the Director of Research, the school system is elated that they were able to retain 87 students from dropping out of school.

#### Demographics of Student Participants

After the researcher received the student participants in all three focus groups a demographic survey was administered to each participant for completion. The purpose of this survey was to attain personal information not attainable from the research question. Collecting these data were to get a sense of where these student participants lived and how they adjusted to their home life.

The first question related to the ethnicity of the student participants. Eighty-eight percent of the student participants were African-American (n=15) and 11% of the participants were Caucasian (n=2). There were seven male and ten female student participants including one Caucasian male and one Caucasian female. Under the category, “parents in household”, the results were diversified. Only four students were living with both parents; nine with their mother and one was living with her father. Two student participants were living with a sister or an aunt and one was living with his grandmother.

In the next categories the student participants responded to the question; “How many brothers or sisters are in the household?” Forty-seven percent of the student participants reported they had one brother or sister in the household, 11% reported they had two siblings in the household and two others student participants reported they had three siblings in the household.

Forty-one percent of the student participants answered the following question; “How many school-aged children are in the household” by saying two. Twenty-three percent student participants said three, while two stated two and two other student participants said four or more.

The following question, “Do you plan to remain in school and graduate, or drop out of school?” This question was in keeping with the primary purpose of the Preparatory Academy as a dropout prevention program. One hundred percent of the student participants responded they plan to remain in school and graduate.

The next two questions dealt with the student participants’ age and where they lived. The majority of the student participants were 16 and lived in a private house. When

the student participants were asked how many times they were not promoted to the next grade, eighty-two percent replied once. Two of the student participants said they had never failed a grade; however, it is the policy of the Preparatory Academy to only enroll students who are one or more years behind in grade level. There was one participant who said she had failed twice.

### Results of Focus Group Discussion

The focus group discussion meetings provided a vast amount of data from the perceptions of the participants. The data were analyzed by domains and research questions. There were additional categories and themes that emerged from the data that were not anticipated. These subcategories were analyzed and placed in the study as supporting evidence of the focus group discussion results or placed in Chapter V for further study.

The following codes were used to identify a personal reference from a participant. A focus group was identified as (FG) and the schools are (A, B, or C) according to the order in which the school's focus group met. The participants were identified by their letter and number name (A1), School A, the first to meet and 1 represents the participant's name in the group. The date was identified by the month and year of the focus group meeting (10/05). School officials were identified by a number (1, 2, or 3) according to the order they were interviewed.

### Focus Group Discussion by School A

#### *School A*

School A had a student population of 1,232, with 28 of these students considered un-graded (8th/9th-grade) that were Preparatory Academy students in the 2004-2005

school year. There are four administrators including one principal, three assistant principals and 91 certified faculty members (Virginia Department of Education Web, 2005). During the 2004-2005 school year, School A was labeled “Accredited with Warning;” however, at the end of the school year, the rating changed from “Accredited with Warning” to “Fully Accredited”. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, school accreditation is based on overall student performance on the state Standards of Learning (SOL) test assessments in English, mathematics, science, and social studies/history (VDOE Web, 2005).

The school facility is newly built with the latest available technology. The student population is 96% African-American, three percent Caucasian, and one % other. According to the VDOE School Report Card, School A has a 3.8 overall dropout rate.

School A was indeed a challenge to get the students to return their permission forms and attend the focus group meeting. The researcher sent out three mailings to the participants, with two participants returning their forms signed. Later, the researcher called the parents of the participants explaining the focus group’s purpose and procedures. The researcher spoke with ten parents who agreed to sign and return the forms within a week; however, only one permission form was received. Another telephone call was made to the same parents who again promised to return the forms, and no forms were received.

The researcher decided to seek assistance from the school office manager. She was requested to give another set of forms to the students to return to her signed if they agreed to participate. The office manager called the students in and gave them the forms

to take home. Six students returned the signed forms and a focus group meeting was scheduled. When only one student attended the meeting the meeting was rescheduled.

The researcher scheduled a conference with the principal of the school and discussed other options. It was agreed to schedule the focus group meeting during the last class of school. The office manager informed the students of the new schedule; six students were present the day of the focus group meeting and participated in the discussion.

As the students entered the conference room they were very talkative and began to socialize. The researcher called the group to order and explained the purpose and procedures of the focus group discussions. One student requested permission to return to his class and permission was granted. When the student began to leave, the researcher asked if he had any information concerning the Preparatory Academy that he wanted to share with the group before he left. He replied yes and returned to his seat. The researcher then passed out the demographic survey to the participants, and gave brief instructions.

The focus group discussion was informative; however, some participants used the questions to vent only negative experiences. The researcher, on several occasions, had to remind the group to discuss both positive and negative experiences during their enrollment in the Academy. Many of the participants expressed distrust of the teachers who recommended them to the Academy. They said they were placed in a 9th-grade class for one semester and then after they had completed the program they were placed back in the 9th-grade taking the same subjects. Other participants disagreed with their statements and explained that they were placed in an 8th/9th-grade preparation class and then put in the 9th-grade.

During the focus group discussion, several themes were introduced that were not anticipated by the researcher. Under student achievement, the participants discussed disappointment in receiving only one elective credit for the semester they were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. These students were enrolled in four academic classes that included English, mathematics, science, and social studies. They did not receive any high school academic credits for these classes; however, they did receive credit for an elective class. Several participants voiced disappointment that they did not receive credit for the 9th-grade classes they passed. Other participants explained that they were in a transition class and were not supposed to receive any academic credits. Participant A2 stated, “Well, we were still considered 8th-graders, so we knew that we were not getting credit for those classes” (FGA/A2/10/05). Another participant felt she should have received credits for high school classes taken while she was in middle school.

Some participants expressed concern regarding their high school status upon entering the Preparatory Academy; they felt they had been misinformed. There was disagreement on how they were initially enrolled in the program. A5 stated, “They demanded me to sign the papers. They said sign the papers and what they told my parents was your child is getting skipped up to the 9th-grade. They didn’t say anything about the Preparatory Academy” (FGA/A5/10/05). A1 agreed and stated, “They forced me to sign that paper” (FGA/A1/10/05). A4 commented that he thought he was going into the Preparatory Academy because he was failing one class. All participants said they were enrolled in the 8th-grade and their teacher informed them about the Preparatory Academy at the beginning of the second semester. They were all excited about leaving the middle school and going to the high school.

## Response to the Focus Group Questions from Students in School A

*Question 1: Did the Preparatory Academy help you develop good study skills? Explain.*

The majority of the participants said the Preparatory Academy helped them develop good study skills. A5 said she is doing great in Algebra because her teacher in the Preparatory Academy was a good teacher. According to her, he taught her everything she needed to know to pass the class. A4 agreed and stated that he was also doing well in Algebra because his teacher prepared him for the class. One participant, A3 disagreed and stated, “No, because it’s boring and they didn’t teach us nothing” (FGA/A3/10/05). In response to the follow-up question, when was the last time you read a book for pleasure, several participants stated they did not like to read. Others thought the question was facetious and began to laugh. A4 yelled, “For pleasure” (FGA/A4/10/05) and A1 stated she last read a book for pleasure in the 3rd-grade. Most of the participants agreed that they like to read Black expression books, but they do not like to read school books.

Do you know the area you need to develop in order to become a better student, was another follow-up question. All of the participants agreed they needed assistance in one of the four subjects they were taking. Three stated science or mathematics, two stated English, and one said keyboarding. A1 stated that she was having problems in her keyboarding class because the teacher did not know how to teach. Her rationale was the teacher does not assist the student comparable to the other teachers in the Preparatory Academy.

*Question 2: Explain how the Preparatory Academy’s accelerated learning pace affected your ability to pass classes.*

This question was confusing to many of the participants. A6 stated, “What do you mean” (FGA/A6/10/05)? The researcher replied, “Did you like the fast pace of learning?” One participant said she liked the fast pace of learning, because she did not get any Ds. A2 stated, “I did because I catch on quick and I don’t like it when I’m in a class with a whole bunch of people that learn slow and you must go slow to keep up with them” (FGA/A2/10/05). Another participant said she did not like the fast pace, because it was too fast.

*Question 3: Did the small number of students in class assist with your success in school?*

The first participant who responded stated the class was as large as a regular class. Another theme was added when A5 mentioned the classes were combined at the end of the day, which made a large class. According to the students, the Preparatory Academy was divided into two main classes of ten students and at the end of the day the classes were combined for enrichment exercises. Some of the participants in this focus group did not like the small class size or the combined classes. A6 stated, “It was boring to me because you get tired of looking at the same teachers everyday. It was boring” (FGA/A6/10/05). When asked, were you able to ask more questions. A4 said no, followed by A6 who commented that the students had to sit quietly and could not speak. A3 disagreed and stated, “We did have the opportunity to ask questions when we needed help because it was not that many kids in the classroom” (FGA/A3/10/05).

A follow-up question was asked by the researcher; “Was it an advantage to have a smaller number of students in class?” The participants used this question to vent other concerns and open other categories about the Preparatory Academy. A4 stated, “No, I felt retarded” (FGA/A4/10/05). A6 stated, “I did too, if you keep going back to the same class

you feel retarded” (FGA/A6/10/05). Four of the six participants felt the small class size was not an advantage and elaborated on how other students reacted to them being in one class all day. A3 and A5 voiced their concerns that the students in the Preparatory Academy did not have any freedom. They said the classes were in a corner and across from the restrooms, so when they had to go to the restroom they did not have freedom to leave the area. These participants were very concerned with the limited space they had to endure; along with not being able to participate in gym or have outside activities. A2 stated he was disappointed because they could not participate in physical education and when they went to their locker they had to be extremely quiet. The other two participants were supportive of the small class size and felt it enhanced their ability to advance in the class.

Several themes emerged from this discussion. One was the perception of the participants that they were viewed by other students as being retarded or slow. A3 stated, “And we look slow because we got our report card with only two grades” (FGA/A3/10/05). Another perception was concerning lost credits from the middle school. A1 stated, “If we are coming from middle school we need to keep your credits. They bungled my credits. They bungled my credits because I had two credits and they are flushed down the toilet and I’m a little upset” (FGA/A1/10/05).

Next, a comment was made concerning the grade placement of students in the Preparatory Academy. All of the participants in this focus group stated they were misinformed on the purpose of the Preparatory Academy in regards to their grade classification. Several participants stated they were in the 8th-grade, while others said because they were located at the high school, they thought they were in the 9th-grade.

One participant stated he was told by his teacher that he was being skipped to the 9th-grade.

Other themes surfaced from this discussion were that Preparatory Academy students were not able to attend pep rallies or participate in extracurricular activities of the high school. A3 stated, “How could they take us out of middle school and take away all our middle school activities and don’t let us go to pep rallies and if we are in high school” (FGA/A3/10/05)? A6 commented, “I don’t understand why we can’t try out for the band, track, and other sports teams. We can’t do any activities once we are in Prep” (FGA/A6/10/05).

*Question 4: What do you think about the Preparatory Academy’s policy on attendance?*

The majority of the participants said the attendance policy for the Preparatory Academy was the same as the regular school policy. One participant stated she thought the policy was dumb. A follow-up question was asked; “Did the attendance policy of the Preparatory Academy influence you to come to school regularly?” Two participants said no, it did not influence them to come to school. Two other participants stated the policy was just like summer school. A3 stated, “Like in summer school you can’t miss but four days and every time you get two tardies, it counts as one absence” (FGA/A3/10/05).

Another theme emerged from the statement regarding summer school. Several participants indicated they were told if they went to summer school, they would be skipped to the 10th-grade. A4 said, “I thought I was going to be in the tenth grade this year” (FGA/A4/10/05). A3 replied, “Me too. We went to summer school and wasted our money” (FGA/A3/10/05). Both participants said their teacher told them if they went to summer school they would be in the 10th-grade in the fall.

An additional follow-up question was; what do you think about the consequences for missing a day from school? One participant called the consequences dumb and another called them stupid. The participants explained that when you missed a day from school, one of the teachers would give you the work on Friday to complete as homework. They were upset because after completing the homework and turning it in on Monday, the teacher did not check it. They stated the mathematics teacher was a good teacher because he helped the students understand the problems.

*Question 5: Did the rules of the Preparatory Academy persuade you to come to school? Explain your answer.*

Three of the six participants only said no to question five without explaining their answer. A4 replied he only enrolled in the Preparatory Academy to get girls and to be in high school. The other two participants responded to the question by indicating they came to school regularly before entering the Preparatory Academy.

*Question 6: Do you feel the attendance rules are too hard?*

Only one student responded to this question and she indicated the rules were dumb. She explained her comment by saying, “By it I mean that in Preparatory if you miss a certain amount of days you fail. I find that dumb, because it should be the same thing as you missing the same amount in regular school” (FGA/A6/10/05).

*Question 7: What were some of the things your parents did to assist you while you were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy?*

All of the participants made favorable statements concerning the assistance they received from their parents. Several stated that their parents made sure they got up in time for school and accompanied them to the bus stop. One participant, A5 stated, “My mother

would get me up and make me go to school, she would not allow me to stay at home” (FGA/A5/10/05). When the question was asked how do you feel about your parents coming to school? Several participants said it was not necessary for their parents to come to school. That lead A6 to again vent her frustrations concerning the lack of assistance she received from the Academy. A2 and A3 supported her by giving their concerns about the Academy and how the teachers misinformed them. A3 stated, “And they lied, they didn’t have to lie. They don’t have to psych our heads up like that. They should have just said you are going to be in Prep next year. You are not going to be directly in the 9th-grade” (FGA/A3/10/05).

*Question 8: Do you feel your parents had an impact on your success while in the Preparatory Academy?*

Most of the participants agreed that their success in the program was a direct result of the help and assistance they received from their parents. One participant remarked no, because the work was easy and two others said it was like kindergarten. The researcher asked a follow-up question concerning parents coming to school. Two participants responded that parents only had to come to school on parent/teacher day. A3 acknowledged that the teacher would call the parents if they needed to talk with them. One participant said the teacher had her phone number on speed dial because she called her house so often.

While the discussion was about parents coming to school A6 said, “I feel like the program is just dumb. I’m not trying to be rude or nothing. I mean it did help me a little bit, because in Algebra right now I have a B, a 96 B” (FGA/A6/10/05). Another participant began talking about their disappointment in not going to the 8th-grade prom.

Another participant began talking about the number of credits she received at the end of the year. A6 stated, “On our report card at the end of the school year it’s supposed to say how many credits you have. On the card it says zero credits” (FGA/A6/10/05). The researcher asked the group did anyone fail a class and as a result did not pass the program? The participants acted surprised to the question. Several participants responded by saying you cannot fail the program. According to the participants, students who do not meet the promotion requirements were retained in the Academy. A2 stated, “When I first got here I had an F and then I had a D. After that I had all Cs on my report card. At first I was not doing the work because I thought that being in Prep was stupid, and then I began doing my work” (FGA/A2/10/05).

*Questions 9: How did you feel about the policies of the accelerated learning model and the attendance policies?*

In answering this question many of the participants stated they were in favor of the accelerated learning model; however, they would rather have one teacher for each class than two teachers for all four of the classes. Other participants viewed the accelerated learning model as a positive step in learning their academic skills. One participant felt the fast pace was too fast for students to learn and understand. Several participants commented on the attendance policy by saying they always come to school so the policy did not affect them.

*Question 10: Do you feel you are on track to graduate from high school?*

Two participants said they were on track to graduate from high school, but they would be 19 years old when they graduated. One responded to the question by criticizing the Preparatory Academy for keeping him in the 9th-grade for two years. Another

participant stated she could graduate at 18 if she went to summer school each summer. She also said she would do what she had to do to graduate. There were several participants who agreed in support of her statement. The researcher followed up this question by asking if any participant felt they might drop out of school. One of the participants stated they felt like dropping out of school at one point in their life, but they changed their minds. One participant was very emphatic about staying in school. She felt that if you drop out of school it would be difficult for her to be successful in this society. She indicated that she was having a hard time passing, but she was going to stay in school until she graduated.

Another follow-up question from the researcher was what do you have to do to motivate yourself to stay focused? Several of the participants expressed techniques they used to stay focused. One participant stated that she would just do her work while another said she would stay focused because she did not want to look dumb in front of her classmates. A2 stated, "I'm just ready to get out of high school so I can go to college and get my professional education" (FGA/A2/10/05). A1 followed by stating, "Basically, what motivates me is where you come from in life and you can't come from anything unless you have an education" (FGA/A1/10/05).

#### Focus Group Discussion by School B

School B had a student population of 1,753 in the school year 2004-2005. The school is Fully Accredited and received this accreditation in 2003. There were 107 certified teachers, three assistant principals, and one principal during the school year 2004-2005. The school is located in a middle class neighborhood and has a 95 %

attendance rate and a 2.6 % dropout rate. There were 28 Preparatory Academy students enrolled in the program during the school year 2004-2005.

The principal and assistant principal of School B were extremely helpful in securing students to participate in the focus group discussion and providing a place to hold the meeting. The assistant principal was given 30 letters and forms to send to students for their signature and their parents' signature. None of the students responded to the first mailing. The assistant principal then used the procedures that were successful with School A. The letters and forms were distributed to the randomly selected students, and requested the forms to be signed and returned, if they agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. Eight signed forms were returned and a date was scheduled for the focus group discussion.

On the day of the focus group meeting, two of the eight participants were not in school. The meeting was held in the main office conference room during the fourth block of school. Participants who reported to the conference room were very excited and had to be cautioned by the researcher to settle down. One participant reported after the discussion had started and was allowed to participate. The discussion was started with a brief statement explaining the purpose, procedures and expectations of the focus group. The participants received and completed a demographic survey and were also given assigned number names, using the same procedures as with School A. The letter B represented the school name, which was the second school the researcher met with for the focus group. These assigned names were used by the participants in answering or responding to questions asked by the researcher and the responses were recorded verbatim.

The participants from School B were argumentative and used many vernacular terms that were unfamiliar to the researcher. The transcription to School B was a challenge for the researcher in spelling the terms and understanding their meanings. The researcher on several occasions had to intervene between participants who were verbally attacking one another. Many of the unfamiliar terms were not used in this study for better understanding and clarity for the reader.

Although the participants digressed in several instances, the researcher worked hard to keep the discussions on task. This allowed the participants to speak freely about their experiences and feelings of the Preparatory Academy.

#### Response to the Focus Group Questions from Students in School B

*Question 1: Did the Preparatory Academy help you develop good study skills?*

This was the first question asked the participants and they were reluctant to respond. Only two participants made statements. B3 felt that good study skills would assist students to graduate early. Another participant, B1 felt that the teachers pushed the students a lot harder in the Preparatory Academy than the regular school teachers.

The researcher asked a follow-up question to stimulate more discussion. The question was; “When was the last time you read a book for pleasure?” Several participants stated they enjoy reading; however, they like reading books such as comic books and adventure books. B1 said she reads a book twice a month and visits the public library and bookstores. She also said, “I read Black books” (FGB/B1/11/05). B4 stated, he reads books that he can relate to at least three times a month. Many of the participants at School B state they read books, but not necessarily school books. B2, like B1, reads comic books and adventure books. She asked the question, do comic books count as a

book? There was no response from the other participants, so she continued to say that if comic books count, then she reads a lot.

The researcher asked; “Do you know the area you are weak in and need help?” Areas of need were identified as mathematics, keyboarding, science, and English. B1 stated, “I think you need math most importantly because that’s what you need for life” (FGB/B1/11/05). Another participant felt that the teachers only taught subjects that would get you out of “Prep” but he felt the students should take other classes. All of the participants felt they needed assistance in one or more areas.

Responding to the question, “Do you believe that homework is important for passing class?” there were several participants who made comments. The first response was by B5 who felt that homework was just something to do and really didn’t help. B4 further stated, “I really don’t think homework helps you because if I don’t know how to do it at school, how am I supposed to know how to do it on my own” (FGB/B4/11/05). Several participants agreed with B4 and made comments in support of her statement. Many of the participants had something to say about homework; however, they did not agree. B1 took an opposite position and stated, “Well, I think that in the beginning of the class, a time period is given for the teacher to help you. And she said, if you don’t understand, you tell the teacher you don’t understand and she will give you homework so you can catch up on your needed skills. Like she’ll say, well, I’m going to give you a worksheet on this tonight, see how much you know and just bring it back to school tomorrow. We’ll going to go over it or something like that. It’s basically helping you more in your study skills” (FGB/B1/11/05).

*Question 2: Explain how the Preparatory Academy's accelerated learning pace affected your ability to pass classes.*

This question was confusing to most of the participants and B3 stated, "What are you talking about" (FGB/B3/11/05)? At this point the researcher explained that accelerated learning was a fast paced learning design. In responding to the question, a number of themes emerged. The first responder began talking about how she was not impressed with the fast pace model, because her schedule was not what she intended it to be and she was not supposed to be in the program. She further stated that the program was hindering her from advancing because she was supposed to be a junior and the Preparatory Academy is a freshman class. Several other participants agreed and the discussion introduced another theme which is academic credits not transferred to the high school. B4 stated, "They put you back in classes you already passed and that makes you still qualified for 9th-grade. I passed history, I passed with a B and I'm in history, in the same class this year, and I passed" (FGB/B4/11/05).

It was quite evident that the participants were more interested in venting how they felt about losing credits than discussing the accelerated learning design. The researcher tried to get the group back on task by asking; "So this fast pace of instruction was it an advantage or a disadvantage?" Although some of the participants responded to the question, their focus was still on lost credits or what grade they were supposed to be in after completing the program. B2 stated, "I didn't think it was an advantage at all. I think it was a disadvantage to be sitting the whole semester in a class that we've already passed and then for them to put us into 9th-grade and us be all backed up to where we wouldn't graduate" (FGA/B2/11/05). Another comment made by B4 had some negative and

positive observations. She felt that she was being challenged for no reason, since she had already passed those classes, but on the other hand, she admitted that she learned more from the Academy than she already knew.

*Question 3: Did the small number of students in class assist you in your success?*

The question was not answered directly; however, responses indicated the group felt isolated from the other regular classes. A typical response was from B5 who stated, “Because it was a small class it wasn’t too much work for the teachers to get around to every single student to help, if needed” (FGB/B5/11/05). B1 continued with an observation of himself by first saying, the smaller classes were good for him because he didn’t have his friends in class playing and joking around. The second point he made was that with the smaller classes, the teachers could better serve the students, one on one, when needed.

As the discussion continued, the researcher asked, how many teachers did you have in class and it was unanimous that there were three teachers in the class. Another participant confirmed that she had five subjects including four academic classes and one elective. During the discussion, another theme emerged which introduced the computer-based program used in the Academy. B2 said the computers were rarely used because they were broken most of the time. B3 commented that she enjoyed working on the computers and it was fun learning what she called, little stuff. Several participants began explaining in detail the process and logistics of the computer program. B1 explains that everyone had their personal password and had to log-in on the computer. B2 cut across B1 and began explaining the logistics of the program. She stated, “Yeah, they would give

you a test in the beginning to see where you were. Like in whichever subject you were logging in and then they would put you at work for that grade level” (FGB/B2/11/05).

*Question 4: What do you think about the Preparatory Academy’s policy on attendance?*

The participants disapproved of the policy. They believed there should be an appeal process for the Preparatory Academy students. Most participants felt it was unfair and should be changed. The researcher asked the group, what happens if you missed five days from school? There were no comments at first then B5 stated, “I think that’s not really fair because something in the semester could have happened where you could have got sick and been out for that much of time and then you come back to school to fail. Because the work is so fast in there, you get an F everyday and so your grade drops pretty fast” (FGB/B5/11/05). B1 replied no, and then basically summed it all up by saying, that in regular classes if a student missed a day from school, he or she would need a letter from a parent stating why they missed and they are excused. Even if the student did not bring documentation that would excuse him/her, it is recorded as an unexcused absence. Either way, the student would have to keep up with their homework and class assignments. B1 also cited the Preparatory Academy’s rule on absences as, if a student missed a day from school; it is the responsibility of the student to go to the teacher for the work they missed. B1 felt the policy was good because it made the students more responsible.

*Question 5: Did the rules of the Preparatory Academy persuade you to come to school?*

Three participants said “No” to the question; however, two explained their response. B1 stated, “No, cause it felt like whatever I did, I was going to end up failing it anyway, because sometime you can get an F for anything. In something, like when we do

the writings if they are not right, you get a low grade. You get a point taken off, so I don't see nothing" (FGB/B1/11/05). Some participants said the policy did not affect them because they attend school regularly.

*Question 6: Do you feel the attendance rules are too hard?*

Question 6 was a follow-up question on attendance; however, some of the participants in question 5 indicated they did not have a problem coming to school. The participants did not attempt to answer this question. Several participants only said they have answered that question and the researcher went to the next question.

*Question 7: What was some of the things your parents did to assist you while you were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy?*

The participants were diverse in their response to the idea of their parents assisting them during their enrollment in the program. B1 was the first to answer, but she was still venting about how she was misguided about what grade she would be in after she had completed the program. For the participants who did address the question, B4 said, "I think my parents motivated me because they thought that I was going to pass to the tenth grade, like I did. The teachers made it look like it would make us graduate with more credits or graduate in a higher class than we suppose to" (FGB/B4/11/05). B5 stated her mother was a teacher and could not come to school to see about her, but she did want her to have a good reputation around school. B3 was defiant when she was asked by the researcher if her parents assisted her and said "NO". The researcher followed that question by asking B3 what about assisting with your homework. She did not answer.

*Question 8: Describe how your parents were involved in your education while participating in the Preparatory Academy.*

B3 said that the classes in the program were easy as a result she made all A's and did not understand why she was placed in the Preparatory Academy. B5 commented that her mother would ask if she needed help and she would refuse assistance. She told her mother that she could do it herself. B4 stated, "The books made it easier for my grandmother to help me because in the books we had this semester was different from the books we had in "Prep" except for the history books" (FGB/B4/11/05). B1 was the only participant who said she enjoyed when her mother would come to school.

*Question 9: Describe your relationship with your parents and how it affected your schooling.*

The researcher was confused concerning the participant's attitude towards their parents. Question nine was avoided by most of the participants and resulted in "no comment" when asked to respond. One participant, B1, again responded freely concerning her mother and how she helped her through the program. She stated, "I am proud of my mother because she always encouraged me to do good in school. She would make sure I do my homework and stuff. I like when my mother comes to school because she brings me things to eat" (FGB/B1/11/05). The researcher discontinued this line of questioning and proceeded to the next question.

*Question 10: Do you feel you are now on track to graduate from high school?*

The participants were enthusiastic about graduating from high school. They all had positive ideas of how they would finish school. Some expressed a concern that they would be 19 or 20 years old, but were confident that they were going to remain in school until they finished. One participant said she would go to summer school each summer to

finish early. Another said she had already gone to summer school and she was taking English 10 this semester and next year she will be a junior.

Many of the participants attributed their graduation likelihood to their teachers for preparing them for graduation. B4 felt they were all taught at their own pace and that allowed them to learn sufficient knowledge to increase their potential to graduate. B1 followed by stating, "Every teacher have different teaching skills, so it was just about that teacher when the teacher is the Preparatory teacher. Their teaching skills were to give us anything they thought would help us get out of Preparatory and help us make it to the next level. That's what I think" (FGB/B1/11/05). B3 added positive comments about the Academy teachers. He felt the key to his success was the hands-on learning, something that was not received in regular classes. In his opinion the class size made a major difference in the Preparatory Academy classes over the regular classes. He mentioned that in normal classes there are too many students for the teachers to give one on one attention and hands-on learning.

#### Focus Group Discussion by School C

School C had a student population of 1,298 in the school year 2004-2005 with 98 certified teachers. There were four administrators including one principal and three assistant principals on staff. The school was accredited with warning in 2004, but became Fully Accredited in 2005. School C had an 86 % graduation rate, an 8% dropout rate, and a 95 % attendance rate in the school year 2004-2005. This school is located in an urban middle class neighborhood.

The office manager located the participants for the focus group discussion and gave them passes to the main office conference room. The participants entered the room

one by one and surprisingly they were very quiet. After five participants were seated the researcher gave a brief statement concerning the procedures and expectations of the focus group discussion. Still waiting for the sixth participant, the researcher passed out the demographic survey for the participants present to begin answering. While the participants were completing the survey the office manager informed the researcher that she could not locate the sixth participant. She said the young lady had left the class, but did not report to the office.

#### Responses to Focus Group Questions from Students in School C

*Question 1: Did the Preparatory Academy help you develop good study skills?*

Several participants responded to the first question with positive comments. C3 stated, “My role was to do my work and sit and listen and try to get a hold on the information real quick and learn fast with it” (FGC/C3/11/05). C2 credited the Preparatory Academy with helping to develop an ethic of understanding hard work. Her rationale was that the teacher always gave her too much work and she perceived this as a positive method to make her cultivate good study skills. There also was one participant who did not appreciate the question. C1 stated, “I don’t got nothing to say” (FGC/C1/11/05).

The researcher asked the group when was the last time they read a book or the newspaper for pleasure. Again the comments were positive and reflected on the teaching at the Preparatory Academy. C2 stated that she enjoyed reading because her teachers forced her to read more and she felt she learned from her reading. Other comments focused on reading material that was of interest to them, i.e., the newspaper and books they could identify with. As the discussion continued C3 stated, “I like to read the book

Manly and the three text books and what ever books we got to read” (FGC/C3/11/05).

There was one participant who did not enjoy reading at all. C4 responded to the question by saying, “I don’t like to read. I hate reading. My teacher has tried to encourage me to read, but I just can’t enjoy reading” (FGC/C4/11/05). Most of the participants complained of having to read thirteen books within the school year. Some said they actually felt like stopping but didn’t because it was an assignment.

Another follow-up statement was presented to the focus group. Describe the area you need to work on to become a better student. It is evident by the data that most of the participants were in need of assistance in their academic studies. All but one participant agreed that there was need for improvement in their study skills or reading. C5 stated, “I don’t like to read, so I need to work on reading. Why do we have to read all the time? I don’t, I can’t remember that stuff anyway” (FGC/C5/11/05). C2 expressed her confusion by stating, “I need help in all my areas, especially English and mathematics. Sometimes I think my teachers don’t understand me. Sometimes they just go too fast. I need help” (FGC/C2/11/05). C2 indicated that her greatest need was in the area of mathematics. She pointed out that her father tries to help her, but he also has problems with the new mathematics.

When the researcher asked a question concerning homework, the participants were divided. Some stated they enjoy doing homework, while others opposed the idea. Although two participants loudly said “NO,” they agreed they would do homework because it was part of their grade. C5 gave recognition to her mother for assisting her with her homework. She stated, “I really need help in math and she would help me with

it. Now if she don't help me then my sister would help me" (FGC/C5/11/05). Four out of five of the participants agreed that their mother helps them with their homework.

*Question 2: Explain how the Preparatory Academy's accelerated learning pace affected your ability to pass classes.*

One out of five participants thought the fast pace of learning was good and helped in achieving more in class. This participant was very vocal about how the fast pace helped her. C3 stated, "I like the really fast pace sometimes. It depends on what we are actually learning. If we didn't get it first, then they would sit down and help us. And sometimes they would break it down so someone would know what we did the first time" (FGC/C3/11/05). C1, C2, and C4 did not approve of the fast pace and agreed that they could not keep up and would rather take their time. C1 responded by saying, "I didn't like the fast pace cause ain't no fast learner. You got to take time with me. I ain't slow, but I'm not fast like everybody else. Like they can jump up and go like that, but I ain't like that I got to take my time. If I'm going to learn how to do it, that fast pace, I won't down with that" (FGC/C1/11/05). When the researcher asked C5 to respond to the question, he refused to agree or disagree with the fast pace of learning. He did say however that he passed all of his classes. The researcher asked the focus group to compare the fast pace of learning to the regular pace of instruction they were presently receiving. There were several comments supporting the Preparatory Academy's technique of teaching and responding to students. C3 stated, "Well when we were in the Preparatory Academy then it didn't feel like it was going faster, it felt like it was going at normal speed" (FGC/C3/11/05).

*Question 3: Did the small number of students in class assist with your success in school?*

The researcher asked the participants to discuss the advantages of having a small class. C2 began the discussion by stating, “I think that if we had less students it allows you to do more focus with your work instead of looking at the stuff around you” (FGC/C2/11/05). Several of the participants agreed that small classes are more conducive to learning, especially in a program such as the Preparatory Academy. C3 stated, “The advantages of the small classes we have in the Preparatory Academy, like the teachers were able to get around and help each of us individually if we needed it. We didn’t have like so many people like crowding you in and making you frustrated” (FGC/C3/11/05). Other participants spoke positively concerning the smaller classes. One participant, in particular, felt that had he not been in the Preparatory Academy he would not have passed to the 9th-grade; while another participant felt that the smaller classes enabled students to concentrate and focus more on their work.

*Question 4: What do you think about the Preparatory Academy’s policy on attendance?*

Attendance was a topic that many of the participants did not want to discuss. The researcher asked several follow-up questions to the focus group and there were no responders. As applying to the main question, there were three comments made about the attendance policy which included explaining the policy and expressing personal feelings about the policy. C2 explained the policy as very strict and students were not allowed to miss ten days or they would fail. C3 stated, “Before I went into the Preparatory Academy I could miss like twenty days all year. And when I came into the Preparatory Academy they lowered it to ten days a semester. It was like a big dramatic change” (FGC/C3/11/05). The researcher asked C2 if she had anything to add to what C3 said. C2 added that the biggest change comes about when you have missed more than ten days.

They were told that you would fail and have to go back through the Preparatory Academy.

*Question 5: Did the rules of the Preparatory Academy persuade you to come to school?*

Again, attendance was not a strong conversational piece for this focus group. The researcher accepted a few responses on question 5 and then went to question 6 which is also concerning attendance. Responding to question 5 was C3 who stated, “It’s more like the rules of the school persuaded me cause you can’t miss more then ten days of school. The last thing I need is to miss too many days and fail again” (FGC/C3/11/05). C5 said no to the question and when asked by the researcher why no, he said the rules of the Preparatory Academy did not persuade him because he comes to school anyway. C2 agreed with C5, however, she said that when she wants to stay home, her mother makes her go to school. C3 added to her statement by saying she believes the rules of the Academy did make her come to school because if you miss a day the teachers would give the students a lot of work. She said it is better to come to school than to do all that extra work.

*Question 6: Do you feel the attendance rule is too hard?*

Most of the participants stated they did not have an issue with coming to school. One voiced her opinion by saying the reason she comes to school is to avoid the makeup work the teachers give them when they miss a day of school. Another participant said she came to school because she liked school. The questions on attendance were saturated and probing seemed not to impact the responses, so the researcher went to the next question.

*Question 7: What were some of the things your parents did to assist you while you were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy?*

Some of the participants were eager to share comments about their parents while others refused to comment. C1 stated, “They, well my mother she like, like when my teacher said to read every night, she’ll like tell me to read. If we had homework, she’ll like, when we had homework in math class, the teacher lets your parents know, so eventually we would have to do it” (FGC/C1/11/05). Most of the participants gave their mother credit for assisting them with their homework or coming to school. C3 was the only participant who recognized her father as the parent who assisted her through the Preparatory Academy. C3 stated, “If I had issues that’s too hard I would go and ask my dad, but mainly since I kept up with my work and understood it mostly, I really didn’t have to ask my dad for much help. It just means I just read a lot” (FGC/C3/11/05). Another participant’s remarks were just the opposite of C3’s comments and very disappointing to the students. The participant said the parents were always too busy to help with homework, so they didn’t really know what role the parents played.

*Question 8: Describe how your parents were involved in your education while participating in the Preparatory Academy.*

All of the participants who responded to this question spoke positively about their parents and what assistance they received during the time they were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. Many of them said their parents gave them money when they did well in the program and others would go out to celebrate. C3 stated, “My parents stayed on me to make sure I reached the standard that we had to get up and out there to get back where I’m supposed to be. Like, if I had to go to summer school they paid my way. And if I needed to stay after school then I would if I had to, they would do what ever they had

to do to ensure I had the supplies I needed” (FGC/C3/11/05). One participant said her brother would encourage her to stay in school because he dropped out of school.

*Question 9: Describe your relationship with your parents and how it affected your schooling.*

The participants were shy in answering more questions concerning their parents. One participant spoke of her parents as her friend and how they would do anything to make her happy. Other participants did not want to speak further about their parents; however, C1 wanted to share with the group how her mother loved her. She said, “When I get good grades I get paid for it. Like, if I forget them and stay inside, I’ll sit down and ask my mother could she help me. And she’ll, she dropped out in the 9th-grade, but she will try to help me” (FGC/C1/11/05). One participant asked the researcher to discuss the way students entered the Preparatory Academy and it was added as question 10.

*Question 10: Describe how you entered the Preparatory Academy.*

This question was evidently a concern for all of the participants and they all responded with deep feelings. Each participant had a different experience entering the Academy. C1 stated, “The guidance, they called you down if you were too old. I guess they say you are too old for middle school. And they call you down and you got a little envelop and it said that you have been brought to high school and they gave you a certain date and that date you can go. And then that’s when I came back here and got enrolled” (FGC/C1/11/05). C2 followed by stating, “My guidance counselor gave me a choice whether I wanted to come here or not, because of my age. I took the papers home and my mother filled them out. I brought them back and then I came back here and got enrolled” (FGC/C2/11/05).

There were several participants who responded to this question, but later the focus went to broken promises by Preparatory Academy officials. Some participants said their guidance counselor misled them by saying they would be in the 10th-grade after they completed the program. C1 stated, “They said it was 8th and 9th Prep and they said we were supposed to be in the 10th-grade this semester. We supposed to be in the 10th-grade starting this September. The people that were in Prep, some of them got 9th-grade classes and 10th-grade classes and some still have only 9th-grade classes” (FGC/C1/11/05). According to C1, she received a 10th-grade schedule; however, she had only 9th-grade classes. Many participants were upset about the grade placement after they completed the Academy. When asked how you are doing in the classes you are taking now, all of the participants stated they were passing classes because of the hard work done in the program. C1 summed it up for all of the participants. She stated, “Prep taught me a whole lot. Because, I think in middle school we didn’t learn none of all of this stuff that we are learning about now. But when I got to Prep, it was like Prep was teaching us mostly 9th-grade stuff anyway. So I’m doing good. Prep gave me a head start” (FGC/C1/11/05).

#### Interviews with the Staff

The researcher interviewed several staff members of the division which included three administrators, two teachers, and two guidance counselors. These interviews were added to this study, with permission from the committee chairman, after holding the focus group discussions to bring clarity to the findings. Several statements made by the participants needed clarification and confirmation. The staff was asked a sequence of ten questions relative to the researcher questions, domains, and statements made by focus group participants. The telephone interviews with the staff took place during the month of

January. The three administrators were the first to be interviewed followed by the counselors, and teachers.

The rationale for selecting the staff members of the division was to interview professional educators who have expertise in the area of the Preparatory Academy. The administrators were knowledgeable of the policies and procedures of the overall program. The guidance counselors were experts in the area of scheduling and enrolling the students into the Preparatory Academy. The teachers were involved in the day to day activities of the program.

Table 6 shows the demographics of the staff members interviewed for the purpose of verifying statements made by the student participants. The three administrators included one high school assistant principal and two middle school principals. One female was included in the administrator category. The two guidance counselors were both female one on the high school level and one on the middle school level. The two teachers were both on the high school level, however, one was a male and the other was a female who was the only Caucasian interviewed with this group.

#### Responses to the Interview Questions from the Staff

*Question 1: Describe how students are selected for the Preparatory Academy.*

The selection of the students for the Preparatory Academy was described by the individual staff members with little discrepancy. It can be noted that one teacher responded to this question by saying he did not know how the students are selected. He said he receives the students and instructs them to the best of his ability to pass the course. According to the staff, students are selected who are one or two years behind in grade level with no academic success, over-aged, or have severe reading and mathematics

Table 6

*Characteristics of Staff Participants (7)*

Characteristics				
Staff Participants	Gender	Race	Yrs. Experience	Middle/High School
Administrator 1	Male	African-American	7	High School
Administrator 2	Female	African-American	27	Middle School
Administrator 3	Male	African-American	18	Middle School
Counselor 1	Female	African-American	15	High School
Counselor 2	Female	African-American	28	Middle School
Teacher 1	Male	African-American	3	High School
Teacher 2	Female	Caucasian	15	High School

problems. One administrator made it clear that these are not the only criteria these students must meet. They are also screened by the Preparatory Academy coordinator to ensure they do not have disciplinary problems and that they do, in fact, meet all the other qualifications for the program.

The student participants of this study voiced a different view of the way they were selected for the program. There were several accounts of how the selection process was handled in the middle school. All of the participants of the three focus groups were enrolled in the middle schools and sent to the high school to enter the Preparatory Academy. Some participants said they were sent to the guidance office by their teacher

and told they were being skipped to the 9th-grade. These participants also said that their parents were given same information. Other participants said they were told by their 8th-grade teacher they were transferred to the 9th-grade because of their age. One participant said she was given an option to enter the program or remain in the 8th-grade. She said her mother thought the Preparatory Academy would put her in her regular grade.

The selection process does not limit responsibility for the student's success only to the student, but holds the school and the parents equally responsible. The students are given two letters to be signed. One letter is a contract between the parent and school that the parent would be active in assisting their child through the program and assisting with homework and other school related assignments. The second letter is a contract for the students, stating they would follow the rules and regulations of the Academy. Both letters must be signed and returned to the school before they can be accepted and enrolled into the Preparatory Academy.

*Question 2: How are students promoted?*

There were several different answers given by the staff participants concerning student promotion. Two administrators said the students in the Preparatory Academy had to pass all four core subjects to be eligible to proceed to the next grade. One administrator said the students had to pass all core subjects with at least a "C" to be promoted. One of the teachers said the students had to pass English and mathematics to be promoted. The guidance counselors said the students needed to pass all their subjects with a "D" or better to be promoted.

The participants of the focus groups stated they only had to pass English and mathematics to complete the program. There was a great concern from the participants

that they were told by their teachers that if they went to summer school they would be promoted to the 10th-grade. Two participants said they went to summer school, passed their classes, but were not promoted. They felt the teachers misinformed them and returned them to the 9th-grade.

*Question 3: What role does the parent play in the Preparatory Academy?*

All staff participants supported the concept of the parents' role in the Preparatory Academy. The administrators felt the parents played an important role in the program because they agreed to assist the teachers and help the students with their homework. According to the administrators, the parents were an essential part of the success of the students. However, the teachers thought that parental involvement would be a great motivation factor to both the student and teacher; they wanted to see more parental involvement. The contract, for some, was seen as nothing more than a piece of paper. Many of the parents never came to school as stated in the contract and the teachers seldom saw a parent assisting in the classroom. One guidance counselor responded by saying she did not deal with the parents; however, whenever you have parents assisting students in their educational activities, the outcome is good.

*Question 4: How many credits will a student receive while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy? And are they allowed to transfer credits into the Academy from middle school?*

Student participants from the three focus group meetings were concerned about the credits they received while in the program. Each participant felt they should receive more than one credit after passing the four core subjects and an elective. All staff participants agreed that the students enrolled in the Preparatory Academy would receive

one credit for the elective class, but none for the core subjects. The guidance counselors explained that the students are taking an accelerated designed program of four core subjects that are used to transition the students to the 9th-grade. These classes are not intended to give students full credit but used to better prepare them for the 9th-grade and help them to be successful in their classes.

The high school guidance counselor answered the questions about transferring credits into the Academy. According to the counselors, any student having high school credits while in middle school would not lose them, the credits would automatically transfer once the student enrolls in a high school program. Consequently, the students who are selected for and enrolled in the Preparatory Academy are academically challenged; therefore, they would not have any high school credits to transfer.

The guidance counselors suggested that many students mistake elective credits for academic credits. Students who are enrolled in elective classes such as music and art can not transfer those credits. If a student is enrolled in a high school academic class such as Algebra I that credit would transfer to the high school.

*Question 5: What is the attendance policy of the Preparatory Academy?*

The attendance policy was not a long discussion for the staff participants. They all said the attendance policy is the same policy for the regular student body. According to the staff participants, if a student misses more than ten days from school they will receive an “F” for their classes. There is an appeal process for students who feel they have adequate documentation to justify their absences. All students are subject to this policy including the students enrolled in the Preparatory Academy.

*Question 6: Explain the accelerated learning model used in the Preparatory Academy.*

The accelerated learning model, also known as, fast paced learning was designed to move the student through the material in one semester. According to the teachers of the Academy, this design made it possible for them to cover a whole year of studies in a small amount of time. One teacher said the students are covering materials they might not have gotten in the 8th-grade and materials they need to prepare them for the 9th-grade. An administrator described the computer-based program as part of the accelerated learning model. He said that the students are required to master certain academic skills on the computer program before they can continue to the next grade. According to him, emphasis is placed on the mathematics and reading skills. Another administrator described the fast pace as being necessary to prepare the students for the 8th-grade SOLs, which have to be taken by each student at the end of the semester.

*Question 7: Describe the impact computer-based instruction has on the academic growth of the students.*

The teachers described the computer-based instructional program as one of the resources they have to monitor the students' progress. The teachers explained that students were given a password and they logged on the program and begin working where they left off the previous day. The program covers several levels of work and grades the students as they complete an assignment. The students are monitored by the teacher, but the student must do their work independently of the teacher. All of the staff participants felt this program was student friendly and provides the students with material that encourages them to do well in the regular courses.

The focus group participants placed different values on the computer-based program. In School B the students said they did not use the program on a regular basic

because the computers were dysfunctional most of the time. At School A the participants felt that the computer-based instructional program was a good program, but many of them only wanted to go to the computer lab to avoid class work. The participants of School C enjoyed working with the program and credited it for increasing their mathematics and reading skills. Participants in all three focus groups agreed that they were better mathematics students because of this computer-based instructional program.

*Question 8: Explain the advantages or disadvantages of small classes.*

All of the staff participants agreed that small classes help improve instruction and give students a better opportunity to understand the material. One guidance counselor said one advantage of small classes is that it affords the students a better teacher-student ratio in terms of being available when students need assistance. She also said the disadvantage of small classes could be if a student has a problem with another student in the class and refuses to reconcile. An administrator said that he has experienced students in the Preparatory Academy complaining about the size of the Academy classes; the small classes gave them the feeling as though they were special education students.

Many of the student participants were concerned how the small class size was perceived by the student body. One participant stated it makes her look like she was in a special education class and retarded. Another participant stated that small classes sometime give the impression that something is wrong with those in the class. Other participants were very positive about being in a small class. They expressed delight in having teachers available to assist the students in understanding the material.

*Question 9: What is the advantage for students to enroll in the Preparatory Academy?*

The staff participants describe the Academy as a second chance for many students. The program was designed to give students who had not been successful in their academics the opportunity to catch up to grade level. These students are at-risk of dropping out of school because of their age and sometimes their behavior. The Preparatory Academy was a transition program to prepare these students for the 9th-grade and to give them the feeling of succeeding academically. The experience of academic success would, in turn, give them the motivation to want to remain in school and graduate. One administrator said he has several former students who completed the Academy and went on to graduate from high school.

Some student participants in all three focus groups exhibited a negative attitude when responding to this question. Their concern was not the quality of education they received from being enrolled in the Preparatory Academy, but the fact that they received only one high school credit for the time they were in the program. Others used this question to show their frustrations about not being able to participate in extracurricular activities. The majority of the participants agreed the Academy helped to prepare them for their 9th-grade subjects.

*Question 10: Are students allowed to participate in extracurricular activities?*

The students were adamant about participating in extracurricular activities while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. The teachers felt that their main concentration should be on their subject matter and not other activities. They explained that the learning pace was fast and the students would have homework most evenings. Extracurricular activities would not allow the students proper time for doing homework; which must be completed. It was also said that many of these students have had problems in the past

making good quality decisions. One administrator acknowledged that the Academy students at his school could participate in extracurricular activities. He cited two students who participated on the junior varsity football team and others who played other sports.

Extracurricular activities were a major factor for some of the student participants of the focus groups. They felt the students in the program should be allowed to play sports or join the band. They could not understand why they were not allowed to participate. One participant stated that he felt if a student kept up his grades why could he not participate in extracurricular activities.

The above section described the findings from the data collection of the focus group discussions from the three high schools. The next section will describe the findings for the research domains including major themes emerging from the focus group discussions.

## Findings of the Research Domains

### Student Achievement

During the discussion of academic achievement the participants were positive about the instruction they received during the time they were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. Several participants gave comments about the care and assistance they received from their teachers and the lack of that nurturing in their regular classes. However, the data indicated that the Preparatory Academy had a positive and negative impact on student achievement for the participants in this study. Participants from each of the three high schools stated their deep feelings and experiences during the time they were enrolled in the program. As a result, several themes emerged from the data, such as; (1) academic credits, (2) the selection procedure for the Academy, (3) computer-based

instruction, and (4) the promotion process. These overwhelming emerging themes were deep rich concerns for the participants that could not be overlooked.

#### *Academic Credits*

As the discussion developed in all three focus group meetings there were statements made to indicate the participants were displeased with the limited academic credit they received in the program. According to the participants they only received one credit for an elective course. All participants felt they should have received credit for the 9th-grade classes they passed while in the Academy. The participants argued that it was embarrassing for them to only receive two grades on their report cards. One participant said it made her look like she was retarded.

#### *The Selection Process*

The next emerging theme was the selection processes that led to a serious discussion by all participants. It appeared that students who are selected for the Preparatory Academy are not processed the same way. Many of the participants stated they were told by their teacher to go to their guidance counselor to receive some forms to take home. These students believe they were misinformed about the purpose of the Preparatory Academy and what grade they would be promoted to subsequent to their completing the program. Other participants said they were given a letter to go home to be signed by their parents and told they would be going to the 9th-grade in the high school. The only explanation given was that they were too old for the middle school. There was a great deal of conversation making reference to this topic at all three focus group meetings. Many of the participants stated they were given the impression that they were

being skipped to the 9th-grade and then they would be promoted to the 10th-grade after completion of the program.

### *The Computer-based Instructional Program*

Another emerging theme was the computer-based instructional program. The students were divided on how they felt about this program. In School B the students complained that the computers were inoperative most of the year and they did not get enough time on the computers to make an impact on their academic progress. In School C the participants enjoyed going to the computer lab and credited the computer-based program for improving their mathematics skills. The focus group in School A argued among themselves about the benefits of the program. Some said they only enjoyed going to the computer lab because it prevented them from doing assigned class work. Others said the program helped them to improve their academic skills. These participants were adamant that each level of the program scale helped them in their course work, especially reading.

### *The Promotion Procedure*

One of the greatest concerns of the participants was the promotion procedure of the Preparatory Academy. The participants of all three focus groups were upset about what they perceived to be a misconception of what grade they were to pass to after completing the program. These students strongly believed they were promised they would pass to the tenth-grade after they completed the Preparatory Academy. The students are taking 9th-grade classes again this semester. One participant felt she gave up a year by enrolling into the Academy. She believed she would have passed the 8th-grade and would be taking 9th-grade classes at any rate.

Another issue was the suggestion by teachers that Preparatory Academy students should attend summer school to be promoted to the 10th-grade. Several participants stated their teachers told them that they would be in the 10th-grade if they enrolled in English and mathematics in summer school. One participant said they only allowed her to enroll in English and another said he enrolled in mathematics. Neither student was placed in the 10th-grade and both felt they wasted their money.

### Parental Involvement

The data indicated parental involvement played a major role in the success of the participants enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. Participants credited their parents for getting them up in the morning and making them go to school. Others said their parents would not come to school, but would assist them with their homework at night. Many of the participants stated their parents were not actively involved in the program; however, they were encouraging and assisted them, sometimes, with their homework.

The participants were very shy in answering questions concerning parental involvement; several did not offer comments at all. Many of the participant felt their parents should not have to come to school. The participants in School C were elated when their parents were involved in their education. One participant said that when she does well in school her mother would take her out to celebrate. Another said her mother always comes to school to speak with her teachers and she likes the attention. Although parents were interested in helping their child, the data shows that 94 % of the parents never came to school to assist their child during the time they were in the Academy.

### Attendance

The data indicated that attendance had a strong impact on the participants' success in the Preparatory Academy. Most students stated they had to attend school because of the mandatory attendance policy. As a result of the questioning, data showed that there was no separate attendance policy for the Academy students, as previously indicated in this study. Data also showed that 82 % of the students in the Preparatory Academy were encouraged by their teachers to attend school on a daily basis. Many participants said their parents encouraged them to come to school and refused to allow them to miss a day unless they were ill. There were two participants who were confused about the number of days a student could miss during a semester. However, attendance in all three focus groups was viewed by the participants as not a real concern. They said the attendance policy did not have an impact on them, because they came to school regularly.

#### *Extracurricular Activities*

Another key theme that emerged was being able to participate in extracurricular activities while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. The participants felt they should have the privilege of participating in an extracurricular activity, such as sports, musical ensembles, cheerleading, or marching band. One participant stated that if the school officials wanted to improve attendance then it is mandatory for students who participate in extracurricular activities to come to school. Other participants stated they felt like they were in prison and had no rights. They felt that when they entered the Preparatory Academy they lost all of their freedom.

#### Chapter Summary

In this study, the findings of the data collection from the three focus group discussions were analyzed and reported in detail using student perceptions, beliefs, and

experiences of the Preparatory Academy. In analyzing the data the researcher took special efforts to transcribe the data from the tapes to identify deep feelings, perceptions, and beliefs discussed by the participants. The results of the study, participants of the study, research results, focus group discussion by schools, responses to the research questions by School A, B, and C, responses to the interview questions from the staff, findings of the research domains, and major emerging themes were fully explained in this chapter. This chapter also included a discussion of the student demographics survey and a Chapter summary. In Chapter V, statement of introduction, summary of the study, discussions of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further research will be presented.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

#### Statement of Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of the students who participated in a dropout prevention program named the Preparatory Academy. The study reflects how the students described their academic achievement, parents' involvement, and their attendance while enrolled in the program. It is essential to consider the perceptions of students who were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. Their perceptions could identify strengths and weaknesses of the program and this is seldom done in regards to gathering data on the effectiveness of academic programs.

This study involved the collection of data from three focus group discussions conducted at three high schools in the same school division. The focus group questions were guided by the review of literature of this study. The same focus group questions were administered to each discussion group. Staff interviews were also held with administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors to clarify questions or issues that arose from the focus group discussions.

This chapter discusses conclusions drawn from the data collection process. A summary of the rationale of the study and a discussion of the findings will be presented followed by the conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

#### Rationale for the Study

The Preparatory Academy was implemented in 1999 in the middle schools of the school division of this study. The emphasis was to establish a program that would improve the academic skills of students who were at-risk of dropping out of school; thus giving them the skills necessary to complete their high school education. The Academy was designed to be a second chance for these students to move closer to their grade level and obtain a high school diploma. There has not been a formal evaluation of this program since it was implemented. The current study investigated the Preparatory Academy through the perception of the students.

### Discussion of the Findings

The research questions guided this study. The overarching research question was: How do students perceive the Preparatory Academy as a dropout prevention program? The following sub-questions were used to frame the direction of this study: (a) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy account for their increased academic success or their lack of academic success while enrolled in the program? (b) In what way did the Preparatory Academy influence student attendance for those enrolled in the program? (c) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy describe their parents' involvement while enrolled in the program? (d) How do students who participated in the Preparatory Academy perceive their likelihood of dropping out of school? (e) What other factors do students describe as important about their experiences in the Preparatory Academy?

The discussion of the findings starts with the students' perceptions of the Preparatory Academy. Next the discussion addresses the sub-questions and the findings of the three domains, student achievement, parental involvement, and attendance.

Participants were given an opportunity to discuss issues that were not addressed by the researcher, but were perceived as important by the participants. These findings are identified in the conclusions section of this chapter. The data collection for this study were from three focus groups, a demographic survey, and telephone interviews with seven staff members of the division. To provide the reader with a deep rich understanding of the findings the researcher utilized a narrative format.

The literature review was based on dropout prevention research with emphasis on student achievement, parental involvement, and attendance. The findings of this study have similar results as the literature review presented in Chapter II.

*Finding 1: The Preparatory Academy was perceived positively by the students participating in this study.*

The majority of the participants felt the Preparatory Academy met their academic needs and improved their chances of graduating from high school. The Academy provided an atmosphere conducive to learning. The program included teachers who encouraged class participation. According to the participants, graduating from high school became a priority. Overall the findings showed that the greater number of students were generally satisfied with the Preparatory Academy program and felt that participation in it was beneficial and they planned to continue their education.

*Finding 2: Participants were concerned regarding the lack of freedom in the Academy.*

There were some concerns about the Academy as noted by the participants. The participants felt the program was academically sound; however, believed it took away all of the rights and freedoms of the students, such as, leaving the assigned class area to use the restroom and participating in extracurricular activities. During the focus group

discussions, four participants stated they would not recommend other students to the Preparatory Academy. They were disappointed with the enrollment process and the credits they did not receive while enrolled in the Academy. Major emerging themes surfaced during the focus group discussions that identified dislikes of the procedures and policies of the Academy; however, overall, participants perceived the Preparatory Academy as the primary reason for their subsequent school success.

The findings of this study on students dropping out of school before graduation are not consistent with the National Center for Educational Statistics (1992). The NCES states, "Students who attend an urban school in the South are highly at-risk of not graduating from high school, while students attending private schools across America are more likely to graduate from school." Research from the NCES also revealed that students living in urban cities have a dropout rate of 8.9 %. This national dropout rate is higher than the rate reported in School A with a 3.8 % dropout rate, School B with a 2.6 % dropout rate, and School C with an 8.0 % dropout rate. Other findings revealed that private religious schools have a dropout rate of 0.4 % (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992).

*Finding 3: The accelerated learning model of the Preparatory Academy was viewed positively by the participants.*

There were several findings that were addressed by the focus group participants regarding how they perceived their success as it relates to the accelerated learning model of instruction. The participants of the three focus group discussion meetings were unanimous in that the instruction they received while in the Academy helped them to understand information faster in their current classes. Their grades had improved and all

agreed that they were passing their classes because of the instruction and training they received in the program.

Many attributed their academic success to the same factors that determine stamina to remain in school and graduate. Factors include improvement in overall academic performance, consistency in receiving passing grades, a positive attitude about school, acceptance of responsibility, self-motivation, self confidence, and self esteem. The data showed that many participants of the Preparatory Academy believed these factors would assure their ability to stay focused and stay in school.

Generally, most students perceived themselves as having a positive change in their self esteem and self confidence due to their participation in the program. A majority of the participants at all three schools perceived that their acceptance of responsibility increased or improved due to their participation in the Academy. There was only one participant who felt that he should not have been placed in the Academy and did not credit the Preparatory Academy for his success in school.

Hancock (2001) stated, "Student achievement is an important learning outcome. As a result of their experiences in an academic course, students are expected to master specified content as evidenced by their performance on in-class examinations" (p. 284). These statements are consistent with the participants of this study who credit the Preparatory Academy for their academic success in passing the 8th-grade SOLs and their Academy classes.

*Finding 4: The attendance policy of the Preparatory Academy is the same as the regular school policy.*

Schools A, B and C showed that the majority of the participants felt that the attendance policy did not have an influence on them because they attended school regularly. Other participants felt the attendance policy was the same as the regular students' policy. There were four participants who felt the policy was too hard and limited their ability to pass. One compared the policy to the summer school policy that stated if a student missed four classes they would fail the class. The staff participants confirmed the policy was the same as the regular school's attendance policy. Many of the student participants agreed that the policy did not affect them because they enjoyed coming to school and seldom missed a day.

The findings of this study as it related to attendance are consistent with the research data in the literature review. Fisher (1994), Smith (1998), and Hite (2001) found that attendance in school has a significant impact on student achievement. Although the participants of this study did not find the attendance policy of the Preparatory Academy a negative concern it was evident by the review of attendance documents, these participants were regular school attendees. Their academic achievement improved and their attitudes towards staying in school were apparent by the analysis of the data and therefore suggest that other factors contributed to these improvements.

*Finding 5: The parental involvement portion of the Preparatory Academy's contract is not being followed or enforced.*

There were mixed opinions on the impact parents had on the daily operations of the Preparatory Academy. Ninety-four percent of the participants stated their parents did

not visit the school or attend any classes. One out of 17 participants said her mother would come to school on a regular basis to assist teachers. In signing the contract, the parents agreed to come to school on a regular basis to assist teachers in the classroom or on field trips. According to the findings, most parents did not comply with the policy neither were there any consequences for failure to adhere to the policy. A few participants felt that parents should not come to school unless it was on parent/teacher conference day.

The finding on noncompliance by parents is not consistent with the literature review and the findings of Hite (2001). Hite's parental involvement data revealed that parents were engaged in the classroom activities and impacted the school atmosphere with their presence. However, the participants of this study agreed that their parents were not involved in daily classroom activities due to occupational restraints and obligations.

*Finding 6: The parents were involved in their child's education at home.*

While the lack of parental involvement during the school day was not present, it did not hinder student improvement at the Preparatory Academy. Ninety-four percent of the participants agreed that their parents did not come to school, but tried to assist them with homework and encouraged them to attend school. Other participants made favorable statements concerning the assistance they received from their parents at home. Most of them agreed that their success in the program was a direct result of the assistance and support they received from their parents. Many of the participants said their parents rewarded them with monetary gifts when they received positive recognitions in the program, while others indicated their parents would take them out to celebrate.

*Finding 7: The participants were motivated by the computer-based instruction program.*

The computer-based instructional program was an integral part of the accelerated learning model of the Preparatory Academy. The participants felt this program assisted them in mathematics and reading. Several participants boasted of the advanced levels they had accomplished during the semester. The computer-based instructional program was designed to advance a student to the next level based on their successful completion of the current level of work. The academic levels of the program are not equivalent to the grade levels of regular school. One participant stated she moved to the eighth level and another said she had advanced to the ninth level. Many of the participants only were able to reach the sixth level of the program. There were several participants who recognized this program as a major factor in the academic success they received in the Preparatory Academy.

The research agrees with the majority of the participants of the Preparatory Academy. Computer-based instruction is a valuable resource in developing academic skills at a fast pace. Groth (1998) describes how a computer-based instructional program motivates students to remain in school until graduation. This dropout prevention program used computer-based instruction as an incentive to encourage students to develop good academic skills. Students were free to choose their curriculum and move at their own pace; however, the program was only for one year. Students were promoted according to the number of credits they received in that school year. The students were motivated by the opportunity to move closer to their grade level and enjoyed the freedom of working with the computer-based instructional program, Groth (1998).

*Finding 8: The participants of this study indicated they planned to stay in school until graduation.*

The participants of this study did not give any indication they would drop out of high school. Some of them had different opinions of how they would accomplish this task. One participant said her brother is her encourager because he did not finish high school, so he refuses to allow her to make that same mistake. Participants of the three focus groups were confident that they will graduate from high school. Another participant said she will go to summer school each year to catch up with her class. She felt her age will not make a difference if she remains focused and continues to encourage herself. There were other participants who also cited age as a factor that could hinder them from graduating; however, they were convinced that through hard work and dedication they could accomplish the goal of graduating from high school.

The findings showed that a majority of participants felt that participating in the Preparatory Academy improved their overall academic performance. They perceived that their overall academic performance increased in the areas of mathematics and English. Many acknowledged their teachers for preparing them for Algebra I and all stated they were passing with an “A” or “B”. The data from the demographic survey identified how participants perceived their potential of graduating from high school. One hundred percent of the focus group participants (n=17) acknowledged that they plan to continue their education through graduation.

The review of literature by Fisher (1994) and Hite (2001) confirm the data on dropout prevention. There were several indicators of students remaining in school until graduation. Each indicator was evident in the Preparatory Academy’s implementation of

a program that included increasing student academic skills, increasing parental involvement, and increasing student attendance. The participants of this study agreed that these factors were significant to their success and promised to remain in school and graduate.

*Finding 9: The participants felt the small class size was an advantage.*

When the researcher asked if there was an advantage to having a smaller number of students in class, the participants were divided. Some felt that the small class size was not an advantage because it made them look like they were in a special education class. One participant noted that the small classes made her feel retarded. Others thought the small class size was an advantage and felt the teachers made an effort to assist them when needed. The majority of the participants agreed that the teachers were available to assist them and made special efforts to assure they understood the material.

Class size has been considered as a factor in whether a student can achieve in school. The participants at all three schools attributed their desire for staying in school to the small class sizes. The class size of the Preparatory Academy was 10 to 15 students in a class. The research on small class size varies concerning its impact on student achievement. Dharmadasa (1995) research study concluded that class size did not show evidence that the smaller the class size the more students learn. It did show however that teacher planning, attitude, and instructional techniques contributed to student achievement (Dharmadasa). Le's (2002) research study contradicts Dharmadasa by suggesting that small class size has a major impact on student achievement. Le also indicated that small classes allowed individualized instruction, less disciplinary problems, and an increased teacher awareness of student academic progress. The findings are

comparable to the findings of Le (2002) by the suggestion that small class size has an essential role in the academic achievement of our children.

*Finding 10: Participants did not feel that the larger combined enrichment classes were effective.*

According to participants from three focus groups, the Preparatory Academy was divided into two main classes of ten students. At the end of the day the classes were combined for enrichment activities. The participants in the study did not like the larger combined classes. They felt the combined classes were not academically motivating and the additional students interfered with the close relationship that had been created with their teachers.

*Finding 11: The participants were confused and concerned about the awarding of the academic credit.*

The participants discussed their disappointment with the credits received for classes taken the semester they were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. They were enrolled in four academic classes; English, mathematic, science and social studies. However, they did not receive any high school academic credits for any of the classes with the exception of the elective class. One participant acknowledged that her disappointment of the one credit was, because other regular students viewed her as retarded or “slow.” Another participant stated that she felt slow because when she got her report card it only reflected two grades and the regular students receive four grades. The participants believed the lack of credits delayed their date of graduation from high school.

*Finding 12: The participants were confused and concerned about grade placement.*

The participants expressed concern about the grade to which they were assigned when they entered the Preparatory Academy program. Most of the participants stated they were confused in regards to their grade classification in the Preparatory Academy. Several participants stated they were in the 8th-grade while others said because they were in a high school building they thought they were in the 9th-grade. This concern was prevalent in the data collection with 88 % of the participants stating they were not clear regarding their grade placement when they entered the Academy. Once these participants were enrolled in the program they discovered they were in an 8th/9th-grade transition class.

*Finding 13: The participants felt the policies regarding participation in physical and extracurricular activities were unfair.*

Physical activities and the extracurricular activity policies were concerns for a few participants. These participants were disappointed that they could not participate in the band or play on an athletic team. They expressed the fact that other 8th-graders could join the football and basketball teams, but as an Academy student they were denied the opportunity to participate. They also had concerns that they had no physical activity during the day. According to the participants they were not allowed to take physical education.

*Finding 14: The promotion policy of the Preparatory Academy was not understood by the participants or their parents.*

The promotion policy of the Academy was not understood by the participants and some of the staff. According to the teachers, Academy students were promoted to the 9th-

grade if they successfully passed English and mathematics. One administrator during his interview stated the students must pass all core subjects with a “C” or better. A guidance counselor stated the students had to pass all core classes to be promoted. The printout of students who successfully completed the Preparatory Academy reviewed by the researcher had students who had passed all four core classes and some who only passed English and mathematics.

The other component of student promotion was the ability of students to move to the 10th-grade after completing the Academy. Some participants said their teacher told them if they went to summer school they would have sufficient credits to go to the 10th-grade. Two of these students went to summer school and were placed in the 9th-grade. These students stated they felt they wasted their money by paying for summer school. The participants did not understand the promotion policy. The Academy students only had one credit from the Academy and they could only receive two credits in summer school which is not sufficient to be promoted to the next grade.

*Finding 15: A communication problem existed between students, parents, and staff.*

There were several communication problems between the students and staff. Participants expressed concern that teachers told them misleading information about grade placement and the promotion process. Seven participants stated their teachers told them that they were being skipped to the 9th-grade. When they arrived at the Academy they were in an 8th/9th-grade transition class. Other participants complained that the teachers promised them that after they completed the Preparatory Academy they would be in the 10th-grade and they were not.

*Finding 16: The Preparatory Academy teachers were dedicated and committed to their students.*

The majority of the participants stated their teachers demonstrated a sincere desire to teach in a manner that would enable them to comprehend the material. Several participants mentioned the patience and dedication their mathematics teacher had in breaking down the information so they could better understand the material. During the focus group discussions one participant stated her mathematics teacher was the only teacher who showed her how to improve her overall academic skills. She agreed that the other teachers assisted her, but this teacher was special in the way he treated the students. Many of the participants credited their teachers with preparing them for the classes they are presently taking. The overall consensus of the participants was that they had teachers who cared and wanted to see them succeed in their future classes. According to the document review, these participants passed all core subjects while enrolled in the Academy.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study there are several recommendations. These recommendations are based on the perceptions of the participants of three focus groups in the high schools of this school division. The focus group discussions, the staff interviews, the demographic survey, and the document review revealed perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Preparatory Academy.

#### *Recommendation 1: Continue the Preparatory Academy program*

It is recommended that the Preparatory Academy be continued. The Preparatory Academy program, according to the data collected, is perceived by the participants as

successful in preventing students from dropping out of school and improving their academic skills. The Academy since its implementation has had 87 students who were potential drop outs to graduate. The current participants of this study unanimously stated that they plan to graduate from high school which is a positive reflection of the experience they received during their enrollment in the Academy.

*Recommendation 2: A thorough review of the structure of the Preparatory Academy needs to be initiated.*

It is recommended that the staff of the Preparatory Academy evaluate the concerns of the Academy students and make the necessary changes to improve the operation of the program. The perception of the Preparatory Academy was tainted by the lack of communication between students and staff and the lack of physical activities.

*Recommendation 3: Continue the accelerated learning model of instruction*

It is recommended that the accelerated learning model used by the Academy be sustained. The accelerated learning model is an asset to the program according to the participants of this study. This model was designed to move the students through their core subjects in a semester. All of the participants felt the fast pace of instruction helped them in their 9th-grade subjects.

*Recommendation 4: The attendance policy will be removed from the Academy's contract.*

It is recommended that the school division continue to encourage students in the program to attend school regularly. However, the attendance policy of the Academy is ineffective in its present form. It was confirmed by the staff participants interviewed that the attendance policy for the Preparatory Academy was the same policy for the regular students. The student participants were not affected by the policy because they enjoyed

coming to school. This statement could be seen as a reflection on the manner in which the Preparatory Academy teachers operated the program.

*Recommendation 5: The Academy staff should implement evening and weekend hours in an effort to increase the involvement of working parents.*

It is recommended that the staff arrange a flexible schedule that would accommodate working parents who cannot attend school during the day. A flexible schedule would enable parents to meet with the instructional staff to discuss their child's performance in the program. According to the contract parents signed, each parent is obligated to spend time in the classroom assisting the teacher. Eighty-eight percent of the participants had parents who had day time occupations which prevented them from coming to school during working hours.

Given that previous research suggests that parental involvement positively impacts student success, this facet of the program should not be eliminated. Rather, a flexible schedule that includes evening or weekend hours might accommodate many of these parents. One of the findings revealed by the focus group discussions was that working parents were not available to assist teachers during the day time hours. According to the participants, their parents did not deliberately violate the contract they signed at the start of the program; an alternate schedule could develop into a more productive relationship between parents and teachers of the Academy.

*Recommendation 6: Continue to encourage parents to assist their child at home.*

It is recommended that the parents of the Academy students continue the after school parental involvement. According to the participants of this study, their parents assisted them with homework and other school related activities after school hours. These

participants also recognized their parents for rewarding them for good grades and positive accomplishments at school. The parents were not available to come to school during the day, but they showed their support for the program by assisting their child after school hours. It would be beneficial to the school division to provide training for parents on how they could help their child at home.

*Recommendation 7: Continue the computer-based instructional program.*

It is recommended that the computer-based instructional program be continued. The computer-based instructional program is perceived by the participants as beneficial to the success of the Academy. These participants commented that their reading and mathematics skills improved during their enrollment in the Academy.

*Recommendation 8: Dropout prevention encouragement should remain a priority of the Academy*

It is recommended that the Preparatory Academy continue to encourage students in the program to remain in school until graduation. The participants of this study were confident that they would graduate from high school. One hundred percent of the participants stated they intend to attend college or enter the armed forces. According to the participants, teacher encouragement and the components of the Preparatory Academy had a profound influence on their decision.

*Recommendation 9: Continue the emphasis on small class instruction.*

It is recommended that small classes remain as a component of the Preparatory Academy. The participants felt that small class size was an asset to the students of the Academy. The majority of the participants felt the small classes assisted them in

understanding the material and receiving passing grades. They also appreciated the individualized instruction and special attention rendered to them by their teachers.

*Recommendation 10: Eliminate the combined enrichment classes*

It is recommended that the Academy discontinue or restructure the combined enrichment classes. The participants felt these classes were not academically gratifying. The division needs to discontinue the classes or replace them with classes that meet the academic and physical needs of the students.

*Recommendation 11: A revision of the policy on the awarding of academic credits to provide multiple units of credits.*

It is recommended that the school system review the current policy on awarding the academic credit received by the Academy students. All participants of this study were disappointed that they only received one credit for a semester of work. One of the incentives to recruit students for the Academy was to move them closer to their age appropriate grade. Additional academic credits will assist in this effort and prevent students from dropping out of school. It is recommended that the staff inform the students and their parents regarding the awarding of credits during the information briefing. By informing them when they are selected for the Academy, students and parents can make a more educated decision about participation.

*Recommendation 12: A consistent channel of communication between students, parents, and staff needs to be developed.*

It is recommended that efforts be made to explore new approaches to communication between the teachers, counselors, administrators, students, and parents. An area of communication that seems to demand immediate attention is the dissimulation

of information regarding grade placement and promotion requirements. This lack of communication has confused the students and created a sense of distrust between the students and staff.

*Recommendation 13: A physical education course or provisions for physical activities should be provided for Academy students.*

It is recommended that all the participants in the Preparatory Academy have a physical education class incorporated into their curriculum. This class will reduce stress created by their daily routine in an accelerated learning structure. By incorporating the physical education class into the program it could reduce tension and improve their academic performance. Many of the participants complained that they were forced to remain in one room without having an outlet to discard their energy. In general, 8th and 9th-graders tend to be highly energetic. A physical education class would also help solve the credit problem. The students could receive an additional credit for physical education. There are three reasons this recommendation could benefit the Academy. First, it would give the students an additional academic credit. Second, it would give the students physical exercise, and third, it would give students a retreat from the intensive academic studies of the Academy.

*Recommendation 14: The policy relating to extracurricular activities should be reviewed.*

According to the data, participation in extracurricular activities was denied in two of the three high schools. One administrator acknowledged that at his school students in the Academy could participate in extracurricular activities. The school that allowed their students to participate in these activities did not report any negative effects on the students' academic performance. To eliminate the inconsistency of the policy relating to

this aspect of the curriculum, it is recommended that the policy be amended to ensure the implementation process is consistent at all the high schools.

*Recommendation 15: A systematic method of communicating the promotion policy to students and parents should be developed.*

It is recommended that the staff of the Preparatory Academy review their method of communicating information to the potential Academy students. Several participants did not understand the promotion policy. According to the participants, their teachers told them that they would be promoted to the 10th-grade if they enrolled in summer school. This policy must be clarified and each student should know how the Preparatory Academy defines promotion.

*Recommendation 16: Group and individual sessions with students and parents should be conducted prior to students enrolling in the program.*

It is recommended that once the potential participants have been selected, a meeting should be held with the staff, the students selected for the program, and the parents of the students to discuss the Preparatory Academy's policies and procedures. At this meeting, the parents should be given a handout outlining the curriculum, the participant's grade placement, requirements for promotion, the distribution of academic credits, attendance policy, and parental involvement expectations.

It is recommended that proper communication between the staff ensuring each student is properly advised of the policy applicable to the grade placement of the student is discussed during the meeting. One of the findings of the study was the lack of coordinated or consistent information provided to the students on how they would be classified academically upon entering the Academy. This meeting would eliminate

inconsistent information given to the parents and students. All students and their parents should know the grade they will be assigned prior to signing the contract as well as the grade they will be promoted to after completing the program.

*Recommendation 17: Continue the practice of hiring competent teachers who enjoy working with at-risk students.*

It is recommended that the Academy continue the close relationship between the teachers and students. One of the positive attributes of the Preparatory Academy is the teacher and student relationship. The participants of this study recognized their teachers as caring and dedicated to their success in the program. When students perceive their teachers care, they will work harder and demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning.

*Recommendation 18: Professional training for Preparatory Academy teachers should be conducted before they enter the classroom.*

It is recommended that Academy teachers be given professional training on how to pace instruction in an accelerated program. Several participants reported their teachers were hesitant in the delivery of instruction, which made it hard for them to understand. Special training will ensure that all teachers would know the learning characteristics of at-risk learners.

*Recommendation 19: Ongoing professional training should be conducted during the time teachers are in the classroom.*

It is recommended that the staff of the Preparatory Academy receive ongoing staff development training on the operation of the Academy including policies and procedures. Staff development training is a vital instructional tool to enlighten the staff of the current policies and procedures of the Academy. Each teacher should understand the promotion

process for successful students. The staff members who interview potential Academy students should communicate the same information in all schools of the division.

*Recommendation 20: Technical support for computers should be available for teachers.*

It is recommended that the school system provide technical support for the computers in the Preparatory Academy. Participants in School B stated during the focus group discussion that the computers in their school were consistently inoperative and hindered their academic growth. Regular maintenance on the computers will increase academic performance and ensure mathematics and reading skill development for the Academy students. This is extremely important in light of the students' perceptions of the computer-based instructional program.

*Recommendation 21: A system of data collection and assessment for Academy students should be developed and implemented.*

It is recommended that the school division collect data that monitors the progress of Academy students. The school division also needs to monitor student progress toward graduation by recording the ratio of students enrolled to those who graduate. Furthermore, the school division needs to include an exit interview for students who separate from the program. This information is essential to the division to confirm the success or failure of the program.

### Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the perceptions of the participants and the findings of this study. The findings of this study indicated that students perceived the Preparatory Academy as an effective dropout prevention program. Communication and trust, a strong academic program, committed teachers, small class size, the computer-

based instructional program, and supportive parents were identified as essential components to the success of the Academy. The findings revealed that these components suggest that the Preparatory Academy has created a program for at-risk students that improve their chances of graduating from high school. Another key consideration of the Preparatory Academy is that it needs to be staffed with teachers who care about the students' success.

The program had some weaknesses such as a current lack of communication and trust between students, parents, and staff, which was discussed previously in this chapter; however, the program met the needs of the students. The image of the Academy will appear more favorable to potential Academy students and parents if additional credits were implemented in the program and a flexible schedule for parents would be put into practice. Students' perceptions are a valuable tool in evaluating a program. The participants of this study were candid and expressed strengths and weaknesses of the program.

#### Limitations of the Study

Although the perception of the Preparatory Academy was viewed positively by the student participants who were involved in the focus group discussions, there were several limitations to this study. These limitations could have influenced the findings of this study. Two of the limitations related to the student sample, one related to the parents, and one related to the data collection procedures.

1. The first limitation of this study was the student sample that included 17 participants from three high schools in one school division. The small sample size

might have influenced the results of the study such that the small sample size leads to limited generalization.

2. The second limitation was the study only included the three high school Academy programs and disregarded the middle school programs. By including the middle school programs the student sample would have been larger. The added student sample might have provided the study additional insight and a broader perspective.

3. The third limitation was the lack of cooperation from the parents. Several parents agreed to sign the permission form and return it to their child's school, but the school never received the form. If the parents had complied and returned the forms to the school the student sample would have been larger. The increased number of participants might have influenced the results of the study.

4. The fourth limitation was the method used to collect the data. Focus group discussions were utilized to collect data for the study. Student participant responses could have been persuaded by statements verbalized by other participants. Using a focus group format with high school students who are easily influenced by other comments might have impacted the results of the study.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

The Preparatory Academy was established to give students a second chance by teaching them those skills that would improve their chances of completing their high school education. Prior to their enrollment in the Academy most of these students were having difficulties in their academic subjects leaving them with a negative view of school. This study investigated the Preparatory Academy from the perceptions of the

students. These students were housed in three high schools and entered the program with conflicting understanding of the Academy. Although the policies of the Preparatory Academy were found to be accommodating to the students; there were concerns about the lack of communication during the briefing stage of the program.

Through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, students, and administrators, a clearer description of the dropout prevention programs could produce valuable information. This study only investigated the Academy from perceptions of students.

1. Further research is needed to evaluate classroom procedures in the high schools and middle schools of similar dropout prevention programs.
2. Further research could also include other grade levels such as 6th-grade and 7th-grade at-risk programs.
3. Extensive research is needed to examine the influence of teachers who care on academic achievement of at-risk students.
4. More research is needed to investigate parental involvement as it relates to at-risk students versus parental involvement as it relates to gifted students.
5. Further research is needed to investigate other school systems with high dropout rates without a dropout prevention program.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggested that the perceptions of the participants were reflective of their experiences while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. According to the findings, the Preparatory Academy is operating at a high instructional level and meeting the academic needs of the students. However, further examination of the impact that the lack of physical activity has on academic success

needs to be reviewed. The participants of this study gave perceptions of their experiences and beliefs of the Preparatory Academy that can be considered reliable.

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Appendix A

Parent Release Form

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is William E. Gibson, Jr. and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. The purpose of this letter is to secure permission for your child to participate in a study I am conducting on the Preparatory Academy. As you know, your child successfully completed the Academy. My research is on students' perceptions of the Preparatory Academy. The findings of this study will assist other school districts in dealing with student dropout and the implementation of a dropout prevention program.

Your child's participation in this study will be strictly voluntary. There will be several questions asked pertaining to the operation of the Preparatory Academy. These questions will center on attendance, student achievement, computer-based instruction, parental involvement, and class size. Also, your child will be asked to fill out a short survey before the discussion period. The discussion will be limited to a focus group that includes eight students. I will ask ten questions with follow up questions where appropriate. I plan to get started on time and anticipate two hours of discussion. The discussion will be conducted at your child's school and I will be responsible for arranging his or her transportation if needed. To assure accuracy of the responses, I will tape-record the discussion. **I will not use your child's name in this written report.**

To insure confidentiality, the discussion tapes will remain in my possession. During the discussion there will be another person assisting me with note taking and the operation of the tape recorder. If you agree with the above information, please sign this Student Release Form. Your signature will give permission for your child to participate in this study as explained in this letter. It is also necessary for your child to sign in the appropriate space.

Thank you for your cooperation and assistance.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

Yes, my child may participate in your study\_\_\_\_\_

No, my child cannot participate in your study\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

### Time and Place of Focus Group Meeting

Dear <<Student's Name>>:

This letter is to inform you of where to meet me for the focus group discussion. We will meet in room <<room number>> at <<time>>. Please arrive on time that we may begin promptly. Remember that I will need you to fill out a short survey sheet before we began the focus group discussion. Thank you for agreeing to participate and I will see you on <<date>>.

Sincerely,

William E. Gibson, Jr.

## Appendix C

### Student Questionnaire Survey

Please circle the appropriate letter that describes your family life.

1. Race

- a. White
- b. African-American
- c. American Indian
- d. Asian or Pacific Islander
- e. Hispanic

2. Gender

- a. Male
- b. Female

3. Parents in Household

- a. Mother and Father
- b. Mother
- c. Father
- d. Grandparent
- e. Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. How many brothers and sisters are in the household?

- a. None
- b. 1
- c. 2
- d. 3
- e. 4 or more

5. How many school-aged children are in the household?

- a. None
- b. 1
- c. 2
- d. 3
- e. 4 or more

6. Do you receive reduced or free lunch?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
7. Do you plan to remain in school and graduate or drop out of school?
  - a. Remain in school and graduate
  - b. Drop out of school
  
8. What is your age?
  - a. 14
  - b. 15
  - c. 16
  - d. 17
  
9. Where do you live?
  - a. Private house
  - b. Apartment
  - c. Community housing
  - d. Camper park
  - e. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
10. How many times were you not promoted to the next grade?
  - a. None
  - b. One times
  - c. Two times
  - d. Three times

## Appendix D

### Focus Group Protocol

Statement to the Focus Group:

Good evening, my name is Mr. Gibson and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech University. I have asked you to come here today, because you have information that I need. I am conducting research on the students' perceptions of the Preparatory Academy in which you were a successful participant. I will be asking you several questions about the program and I want you to answer them as directly as possible. If I ask you a question that you feel uncomfortable answering, please let me know and I will go to the next question. As a member of this focus group, you have the option to leave this group at any time without fear of reprimand. Remember, you volunteered to participate in this focus group. To assure accuracy of your statements, I will tape-record your responses. And to insure confidentiality, I will not use your names in the study. Prior to our discussion questions, I will mention what is expected, while questioning is in progress, from focus group members. I will also need you to fill out a short survey.

During the focus group discussion, I have included follow-up questions to initiate continuous interaction between focus group members. These questions are intended to provide interest and motivation in order to keep you talking. At no time are any of these questions intended to embarrass or belittle you. Please respect the opinions of others and try not to speak when someone else is talking. The information I receive from the discussion group, I believe, will strengthen my research. Before we get started, please describe your hobby; what you enjoy doing in your spare time.

## Discussion Questions

1. Did the Preparatory Academy help you develop good study skills? Yes or No; If so, explain.
  - a. When was the last time you read a book for pleasure?
  - b. Do you know the areas you need to develop to become a better student?
  - c. Do you believe that homework is important for passing class? Explain
2. Explain how the Preparatory Academy's accelerated learning pace affected your ability to pass classes.
  - a. Did you find the fast pace of instruction challenging?
  - b. Compare the fast pace of instruction in the Preparatory Academy with the classes you are taking now at the high school.
  - c. What were your feelings about the fast pace?
3. Did the small number of students in each class assist with your success in school? Yes or No; If so, how or why?
  - a. Was your teacher able to work with you independent of your classmates?
  - b. Were you able to ask more questions with fewer than twenty students in the class?
  - c. Did you participate more in classroom discussions than in the past?
4. What do you think about the Preparatory Academy's policy on attendance?
  - a. Did the attendance policies of the Preparatory Academy influence you to come to school regularly?
  - b. How did you feel about the consequences for missing days from school?

- c. Do you feel all students in all programs should be held to a minimum attendance requirement?
- 5. Did the rules of the Preparatory Academy persuade you to come to school?
  - a. Did you feel the rules were too strict or too lenient?
  - b. What were some of the reasons you did not come to school?
  - c. Have you ever been to court for not coming to school, if so, how did it make you feel?
- 6. What issues made it difficult to come to school regularly?
  - a. If your attendance improved, what did the Preparatory Academy do to improve your attendance?
  - b. How far do you have to walk to school?
  - c. Discuss how the weather has an impact on your decision to come to school?
- 7. What were some of the things your parents did to assist you during your attendance at the Preparatory Academy?
  - a. What were some of the events your parents participated in while you were enrolled in the Preparatory Academy?
  - b. How did you feel about your parents coming to school?
  - c. Do you feel your parents participation in school events motivated you to work harder?
- 8. Describe how your parents were involved in your education while participating in the Preparatory Academy.
  - a. How did your parents prepare you to go on field trips with the school?

- b. What were some of the things your parents did to encourage you through the academy?
  - c. Were your parents able to assist you with your homework?
9. Describe your relationship with your parents and how it affects your schooling.
- a. How do your parents view your role as a student?
  - b. Discuss your home environment as it relates to doing your homework.
  - c. How do your parents reward you for receiving good grades?
10. Do you feel you are on track to graduate from high school?
- a. What are the goals you have set to accomplish this task?
  - b. Do you feel the Preparatory Academy contributed to your current success?  
Why?
  - c. Describe how you intend to motivate yourself to stay focused on your school work.
11. Discuss other occurrences you experienced while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy that we have not discussed, but you feel are important.
- a. Do you have any opinions concerning the future of the Preparatory Academy?
  - b. What changes would you make to the Preparatory Academy operation?
  - c. What policies would you change and why?

## Appendix E

### Letter to Principals

<<FirstName>> <<LastName>>  
<<JobTitle>>  
<<SchoolName>>  
<<Address>>  
<<City>>, <<State>>

Dear <<Title>>. <<FirstName>> <<LastName>>:

I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. As a doctoral candidate, I am conducting research on the Preparatory Academy. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of the students who attended the Preparatory Academy. Dropout prevention programs are needed to assist students in meeting their educational requirements in a nontraditional setting.

Several students in your school have successfully completed the Preparatory Academy. Data collection will only include the successful students who completed the Academy. The data collection design used in this study will be ten focus group discussion questions. The subjects of this inquiry will be eight students from each of the three high schools.

I am writing this letter requesting permission to use your building to meet with these students. The students will be assigned to one focus group of eight students. I will need two dates and a designated secure location for confidentiality of the students. A letter is prepared to send to the parents and students for their permission to participate in this study. All students must volunteer for this study and I assure you that the identity of participants and schools will not be mentioned in any written or oral presentation or report.

If you have any questions or concerns about this letter, please call me at 483-2365. I will wait for your response to this letter. My address is 4548 Ashland Dr., Chesapeake, VA 23321. Thank you for your careful consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

William E. Gibson, Jr.

## Appendix F

### Students' Letter of Thanks

Dear <<Student's Name>>:

I am writing this letter to thank you for your participation in this study. The information you shared with me is valuable and I know will enhance my research. Please relay my gratitude to your parents and best wishes on your endeavor to complete your high school education. Again, thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

William E. Gibson, Jr.

Appendix G

Child Assent Form

Dear<<FirstName>>:

My name is William E. Gibson, Jr. and I am attending Virginia Tech University working on my doctorate degree. The purpose of this letter is to ask for your help in giving me important information about your experiences while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy. My research is on the students' awareness of the Preparatory Academy.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may quit at any time during the session. There will be several questions asked about the way the Preparatory Academy works. These questions will center on attendance, student achievement, computer classes, the involvement of parents, and class size. Also, you will be asked to fill out a short survey before the discussion period. The discussion will be limited to a group of eight students. I will ask ten questions with follow up questions where appropriate. I plan to get started on time and I anticipate two hours of discussion. You will be given an opportunity to ask me questions at the end of the session. The discussion will be conducted at your school and I will be responsible for arranging transportation if needed. To make sure I understand what is said, I will tape-record the discussion. **I will not use your name in this written report.**

If you agree with the above information, please sign this Child Assent Form. Your signature will give permission for you to participate in this study as explained in this letter.

Thank you for your cooperation and assistance.

Sincerely,

Yes, I would like to participate in this study\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Student (Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix H

### Unsuccessful Students of the Preparatory Academy Telephone Survey Questions

1. Were you satisfied with the quality of instruction you received while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy?
  - A. Yes \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. No \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I have no opinion \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. How did your attendance in the program compare with previous school years?
  - A. My attendance improved while in the program \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. I missed too many days from school \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. My attendance during the program was the same as previous years \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I had good attendance \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. What instructional experiences did you dislike while enrolled in the program?
  - A. Too many rules \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. Too much class work \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Did not like my teachers \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. Too much homework \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. How did your parent/guardian assist you while you were enrolled in the program?
  - A. Assisted me with my homework \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. Spoke with my teacher on a regular basis \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Seldom assisted me with homework \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. Seldom communicated with my teachers \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. How do you feel about the mandatory attendance policy?
  - A. It is a good policy \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. It is a bad policy \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. If you pass the class, you should get credit \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I have no opinion \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. How many parent/guardians are in your household?
  - A. My mother only \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. My father only \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Both my mother and father \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I live with my grandparents \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. While enrolled in the program did you enjoy coming to school?
  - A. Yes \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. No \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_

- D. School is boring \_\_\_\_\_
8. What instructional experiences did you enjoy while enrolled in the program?
- A. Working with computers \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. Small class size \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Fast learning pace \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. Other activities \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you believe the Preparatory Academy is a good program to prevent students from dropping out of school?
- A. Yes \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. No \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Maybe \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I have no opinion \_\_\_\_\_
10. How are you doing now in school?
- A. I am passing all of my classes \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. I am failing all of my classes \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. I am passing some of my classes \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I will not pass because of too many absentees \_\_\_\_\_
11. What motivated you to attend school?
- A. I wanted to learn \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. To see my friends \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. To eat breakfast and lunch \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I liked my teachers \_\_\_\_\_
12. Was your parent/guardian upset when you left the program?
- A. Very upset \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. A little upset \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Showed no concern \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I do not know \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you feel good attendance is importance for academic success?
- A. Attendance is very important \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. Attendance is not important \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. Attendance does not affect academics \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. I have no opinion \_\_\_\_\_
14. What was the reason you did not complete the program?
- A. I had disciplinary problems \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. I missed too many days from school \_\_\_\_\_
  - C. I could not keep up with the class work \_\_\_\_\_
  - D. Other personal reasons \_\_\_\_\_

15. Which parent/guardian assisted you with your homework?

- A. My mother \_\_\_\_\_
- B. My father \_\_\_\_\_
- C. My grandparent \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Others \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Information:** This data will be used for descriptive purposes only.

16. How old are you?

- A. 16 \_\_\_\_\_
- B. 15 \_\_\_\_\_
- C. 14 \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Over 16 \_\_\_\_\_

17. Where do you live?

- A. In a house \_\_\_\_\_
- B. In an apartment \_\_\_\_\_
- C. In a trailer/campsite \_\_\_\_\_
- D. In community housing \_\_\_\_\_

18. How many brothers and sisters living in your house?

- A. 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- B. 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- C. 3 \_\_\_\_\_
- D. More than 3 \_\_\_\_\_

19. Do you receive free or reduced lunch?

- A. Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- B. No \_\_\_\_\_

20. How do you get to school?

- A. School bus \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Parent/guardian \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Walk \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Drive \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix I

### Trustworthiness and Creditability of the Telephone Survey Questions

THE GIBSON FAMILY  
4548 Ashland Dr.  
Chesapeake, Virginia 23321  
Telephone: 757-483-2365 Fax: 757-483-8106  
E-Mail: [wgibso9910@aol.com](mailto:wgibso9910@aol.com)

Dear Colleague:

My name is William E. Gibson, Jr. and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. The purpose of this letter is to request your assistance in sharing your professional knowledge with me by evaluating a telephone survey composed for my study. My research is on students' perceptions of the Preparatory Academy, a dropout prevention program. The findings of this study will assist other school districts in dealing with student dropout and the implementation of a dropout prevention program.

In September of 1999, a school division on the East Coast of Virginia implemented a non-traditional program of accelerated study designed to bridge the gap for students who were more than one year behind their chronological grade placements, 6th through the 8th-grade, in the four middle schools. The school division was experiencing a high rate of student dropouts. Most of these students were behavioral problems and because of frequent suspensions and being over-aged, they were potential drop outs. This program was started as a means of drop out prevention. The goals of this program were: (a) to provide each student the opportunity to achieve academic success in the four core subject areas, mathematics, social studies, science, and English, and (b) to reduce the number of potential dropouts in grades six through nine. Known as the Preparatory Academy, this program was designed to use a flexible schedule of core courses, computer-based instruction, combined with an accelerated academic focus. The academy also caters to small clusters of students. It has a parental involvement component where each parent or guardian is required to sign a contract. Their signature confirms their agreement to be an integral part of the accelerated program by assisting their child with homework, serving as a volunteer at their child's school, and attending each monthly school-based parent workshop (A Parental Guide to the Preparatory Academy, 2001).

My primary method of collecting data will be a qualitative design using both focus groups and telephone interviews. The focus groups will collect data from students who successfully completed the Academy. The attached telephone survey form will collect data from students who were unsuccessful and failed to complete the program. The results of the surveys will give the researcher a more in-depth look at the operations of the Academy. Please review each question and answer for clarity, understanding, and

its association with the three domains of the study, which are student achievement, attendance, and parental involvement.

Thank you for your prompt return of this survey. Please return your review to Bill Gibson's mailbox in the mail office.

Appendix J

Unsuccessful Students' Perceptions of the Preparatory Academy

Trustworthiness and Creditability of the Telephone Survey Questions

Directions: Circle the appropriate number

Clarity Rating: (1) delete (2) not clear [revise] (3) clear

Domains: (1) Attendance, (2) Student Achievement, (3) Parental Involvement, (4)

Student Perceptions, and (5) Important Factors to Students

Association to Domains: (1) Weak, (2) Strong, (3) Very Strong

Discussion Questions	Clarity	Domain	Association
1. Were you satisfied with the quality of instruction you received while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy? A. Yes _____ B. No _____ C. Sometimes _____ D. I have no opinion _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
2. How did your attendance in the program compare with previous school years? A. My attendance improved while in the program _____ B. I missed too many days from school _____ C. My attendance during the program was the same as previous years _____ D. I had good attendance _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
3. What instructional experiences did you dislike while enrolled in the program? A. Too many rules _____ B. Too much class work _____ C. Did not like my teachers _____ D. Too much homework _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
4. How did your parent/guardian assist you while you were enrolled in the program? A. Assisted me with my homework _____ B. Spoke with my teachers regularly _____ C. Seldom assisted me with homework _____ D. Seldom communicated with my teachers _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
5. How do you feel about the mandatory attendance policy? A. It is a good policy _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3

<p>B. It is a bad policy _____</p> <p>C. If you pass the class, you should get credit _____</p> <p>D. I have no opinion _____</p>			
<p>6. How many parents/guardians are in your household?</p> <p>A. My mother only _____</p> <p>B. My father only _____</p> <p>C. Both my mother and father _____</p> <p>D. I live with my grandparents _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>7. While enrolled in the program did you enjoy coming to school?</p> <p>A. Yes _____</p> <p>B. No _____</p> <p>C. Sometimes _____</p> <p>D. School is boring _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>8. What instructional experiences did you enjoy while enrolled in the program?</p> <p>A. Working with computers _____</p> <p>B. Small class size _____</p> <p>C. Fast learning pace _____</p> <p>D. Other activities _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>9. Do you perceive the Preparatory Academy as a good program to prevent students from dropping out of school?</p> <p>A. Yes _____</p> <p>B. No _____</p> <p>C. Maybe _____</p> <p>D. I have no opinion _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>10. How are you doing now in school?</p> <p>A. I am passing all of my classes _____</p> <p>B. I am failing all of my classes _____</p> <p>C. I am passing some of my classes _____</p> <p>D. I am not doing my best to pass _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>11. What factors made you enroll in the program?</p> <p>A. I am over aged for my grade placement _____</p> <p>B. I am two grades levels behind _____</p> <p>C. I did not pass my SOL test _____</p> <p>D. My teacher encouraged me to enroll _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>12. How did you perceive your teachers' dedication to the program?</p> <p>A. All of my teachers were dedicated _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3

<p>B. Some of my teachers were dedicated _____</p> <p>C. Some teachers did not like the students _____</p> <p>D. Some teachers loved the students _____</p>			
<p>13. What motivated you to attend school?</p> <p>A. I wanted to learn _____</p> <p>B. To see my friends _____</p> <p>C. To eat breakfast and lunch _____</p> <p>D. I enjoyed my teachers _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>14. Was your parent/guardian upset when you left the program?</p> <p>A. Very upset _____</p> <p>B. A little upset _____</p> <p>C. Showed no concern _____</p> <p>D. I do not know _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>15. Do you feel good attendance is important for academic success?</p> <p>A. Attendance is very important _____</p> <p>B. Attendance is not important _____</p> <p>C. Attendance does not affect academics _____</p> <p>D. I have no opinion _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>16. What was the reason you did not complete the program?</p> <p>A. I had disciplinary problems _____</p> <p>B. I missed too many days from school _____</p> <p>C. I could not keep up with the class work _____</p> <p>D. Other personal reasons _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>17. What was your perception of the computer lab?</p> <p>A. I enjoyed working on the computers _____</p> <p>B. I did not like the reading _____</p> <p>C. The computer programs had a lot of good information _____</p> <p>D. I did not like going to the computer lab _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
<p>18. Which parent/guardian assisted you with your homework while in the program?</p> <p>A. My mother _____</p> <p>B. My father _____</p> <p>C. My grandparent _____</p>	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3

D. Others _____			
19. What factors hindered you from completing the program? A. The learning pace was too fast _____ B. I did not focus on my class work _____ C. The teachers did not assist me _____ D. I did not like the program _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
20. How did you feel about leaving the program? A. I was glad to get out of the program _____ B. I did not want to leave the program _____ C. I want to return to the program _____ D. I need to return to the program _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3

**Demographic Information:** This data will be used for descriptive purposes only.

21. How old are you? A. 16 _____ B. 15 _____ C. 14 _____ D. Over 16 _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
22. Where do you live? A. In a house _____ B. In an apartment _____ C. In a tailor home _____ D. In community housing _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
23. How many brothers and sisters living with you? A. 1 _____ B. 2 _____ C. 3 _____ D. More than 3 _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
24. Do you receive free or reduced lunch? A. Yes _____ B. No _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3
25. How do you get to school? A. School bus _____ B. Parent/guardian brings me _____ C. Walk _____ D. Drive _____	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3

## Appendix K

### Staff Interview Questions

#### Administrators and Teachers

1. Describe how students are selected for the Preparatory Academy.
2. How are students promoted?
3. What role does the parent play in the Preparatory Academy?
4. How many credits will a student receive while enrolled in the Preparatory Academy? Are they allowed to transfer credits into the Academy from middle school?
5. What is the attendance policy of the Preparatory Academy?
6. Explain the accelerated learning model used in the Preparatory Academy.
7. Describe the impact computer-based instruction has on the academic growth of the students.
8. Explain the advantages or disadvantages of small classes.
9. What is the advantage for students to enroll in the Preparatory Academy?
10. Are students allowed to participate in extracurricular activities? Explain

Appendix L

**PORTSMOUTH PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
**Researcher's Promissory Form**

I understand that acceptance of this request for approval of a research proposal in no way obligates the Portsmouth Public Schools to participate in this research. I also understand that approval does not constitute commitment of resources or endorsement of the study or its findings by the school system or by the School Board.

I acknowledge that participation in research studies by students, parents, and school staff is voluntary. I will preserve the anonymity of all participants in all reporting of this study. I will not reveal the identity or include identifiable characteristics of schools or the school system unless authorized by the Director of Planning, Evaluation, & Accountability

If approval is granted, I will abide by all the policies and regulations of the Portsmouth Public Schools and will conduct this research within the stipulations accompanying any letter of approval. At the completion of the study, I will provide the Portsmouth Public Schools with a copy of the results.

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Applicant's signature

---

Date

---

Professor or Faculty Advisor's signature

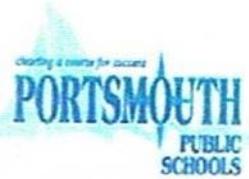
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Date

**FORWARD ALL REQUESTED MATERIAL TO:**

Planning, Evaluation, & Accountability  
Portsmouth Public Schools  
801 Crawford Street  
Portsmouth, Virginia 23704

Appendix M



**Portsmouth Public Schools**

**Office of Research and Evaluation**

3651 Hartford Street • Portsmouth, Virginia 23707  
(757) 393-8840 • FAX (757) 393-8233

June 8, 2005

Mr. Williams E. Gibson, Jr.  
4548 Ashland Drive  
Chesapeake, Virginia 23321

Dear Mr. Gibson:

I am pleased to inform you that your request to conduct your study entitled "*Students' Perceptions of the Preparatory Academy. A Drop Prevention Program*" in our school division has been given conditional approval. This study should be done on a voluntary basis upon approval of the high school building principal. Parental consent must be obtained before any student is contacted to participate, and students must be given the option to withdraw at anytime. A copy of the results of your study must be forwarded to the Office of Research and Evaluation, Portsmouth Public Schools upon completion.

We are sending the personnel suggested a copy of this letter to inform them that this study has been approved and that you will be contacting them to request their participation.

Best wishes for continued success.

Sincerely,

Derrick Nottingham, Director

## Appendix N



Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board  
1880 Pratt Drive (0497)  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-4991 Fax: 540/231-0959  
E-mail: moored@vt.edu  
www.irb.vt.edu

FWA00000572( expires 7/20/07)  
IRB # is IRB00000667.

DATE: June 12, 2006

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Travis W. Twiford  
William Gibson

Approval date: 7/11/2006  
Continuing Review Due Date: 6/26/2007  
Expiration Date: 7/10/2007

FROM: David M. Moore 

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Continuation 1:** "Students' Perceptions of the Preparatory Academy, A Dropout Prevention Program", IRB # 05-358

This memo is regarding the above referenced protocol which was previously granted expedited approval by the IRB. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. Pursuant to your request, as Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval for extension of the study for a period of 12 months, effective as of July 11, 2006.

Approval of your research by the IRB provides the appropriate review as required by federal and state laws regarding human subject research. As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

cc: File



**Institutional Review Board**

Dr. David M. Moore  
IRB (Human Subjects) Chair  
Assistant Vice President for Research Compliance  
CVM Phase II- Duckpond Dr., Blacksburg, VA 24061-0442  
Office: 540/231-4991; FAX: 540/231-6033  
email: moored@vt.edu

DATE: July 11, 2005

MEMORANDUM

TO: Travis W. Twiford ELPS oc 0302  
William Gibson ELPS 0302

FROM: David Moore 

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval: "Students' Perceptions of the Preparatory Academy, A Dropout Prevention Program" IRB # 05-358**

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective July 11, 2005.

Virginia Tech has an approved Federal Wide Assurance (FWA00000572, exp. 7/20/07) on file with OHRP, and its IRB Registration Number is IRB00000667.

cc: File

## Appendix P

### Literature Review Matrices

Author/Date	Topic	Purpose	Methodology	Results
The National Center for Education Statistics (1992)	Eighth to Tenth Grade Dropouts	The purpose of this study was to determine the types of schools that were likely and unlikely to have a high dropout rate for eight grade students.	Methodology: t-test Sample: 24,599 eighth grade students from 1,052 schools.	The results of this study revealed that students living in an urban school district located in the south have a greater potential of dropping out of school with a dropout rate of 5.9%. While students attending a private school with a dropout rate of 0.4% at highly likely to graduate from high school.
Tanner, Krahn, and Hartnagal	Fractured Transitions from	The purpose of this study was to show the	Methodology: Semi-structured interviews	The results revealed that students who had dropout of

(1995)	School to Work: Revising the Dropout Problem.	impact dropouts have on the economy.	and a quantitative survey Sample: N=168 dropouts	school earned less money, had fewer opportunities to secure a good job, and earned from 12 to 18% less than high school graduates.
Baditoi (2005)	Students Placed At-risk of School Failure In An era of Educational Reform	The purpose of this study was to assess the amount of staff development districts nationwide provided for K-12 educators who taught students at-risk of school failure.	Methodology: Quantitative Data collection was from the 100 largest school districts in the nation.	The findings of the study revealed that school districts that held a high amount of staff development the teachers were better prepared to teach students who were at-risk of failure.
Roderick (1998)	The Path to Dropping out: Evidence for	The purpose of this study was to address trends that lead to	Methodology: multivariate analyses, student	The results of this study revealed that students who dropped out of school the

	Intervention	student dropping out of school before graduation.	transcripts, 1000 students participated in the study	first year of high school had severe academic problems that lead to below average performance and one or more grade level retention. It also revealed that late grade dropouts had average grades; however, demonstrated tendencies of high absenteeism.
Farmer and Payne (1992)	Dropping Out: Issues and Answers	The purpose of this study was to investigate trends that lead students to drop out of school.		The results showed that parents must play an increasing role in the lives of their child by teaching them the important of a high school diploma.

Dharnadasa (1995)	Class Size and Student Achievement in Sri Lanka	The purpose of this study was to determine the impact small class size had on the subjects mathematics and mother tongue.	Methodology: t-test and descriptive statistics Sample: 610 fourth grade students	The results revealed that the subject mother tongue had a statistically significant difference in achievement favoring the smaller classes 20-30 students. However, the subject mathematics had a statistically significant difference in achievement favoring the larger class size of 41-50 students.
Fisher (1994)	The Effects of an Urban Middle School dropout prevention program on the	The purpose of this study was to investigate the CAPP program as a dropout prevention program.	Methodology: one-way analysis (ANOVA) Sample: CAPP (n=32), Split-grade	The results for this study revealed that the CAPP group had an average of 7.45 days less than the Split level group and 7.91 days less than the

	Academic Achievement, Attendance, Attitudes, and Conflict Resolution Skills of At-risk Students		level English class (n=24), and Bridge Class (n=18)	Bridge class.
Smith (1998)	An Evaluation of the Attendance Policy and Program and its Perceived Effects on High School Attendance in Newport News	The purpose of this study was to determine if the new attendance policy affected high school attendance.	Methodology: 2-way ANCOVA student survey, parent and teacher survey A stratified random Sample: 4,236 students	The results of this study showed no significant interaction between grade level and gender with respect to the 1996-97 high school attendance.

	Public Schools			
National Center for Education Statistics (2001)	Fathers' and Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools Family Type and Resident Status	The purpose of this study was to report the extent parents are involved in their child's education.	Methodology: The National Household Education Survey of 1996, 20,792 telephone interviews	The results of this study revealed that parental involvement usually has a positive outcome for the child whether resident or nonresident. The research indicated that students whose parents are involved with their education do better in school.
de Carvalho (2001)	Rethinking Family-school Relations: A Critique of Parental	The purpose of this study was to investigate the involvement of parents in the academic performance of at-risk	Methodology:	The results indicated that there still a need of the family and school to have consistent dialog concerning the direction of the at-risk

	Involvement in Schooling	students.		student.
The National Center for Education Statistics (2001)	Efforts by Public K-8 Schools to Involve Parents in Children's Education: Do School and Parents Agree?	The purpose of this study was to investigate the efforts school systems employ to encourage parental involvement and the efforts parents make to assist their children in school and at home.	t-test (p=.05) Sample: schools (810), Children (19,337), parents (9,741)	The results of this study revealed that the credibility of both the school systems and the parents created uncertainty. Because of the vested interest by educators and parents to show positive outcomes, the study may have been distorted on both sides.
Ruppert and Smith (1996)	Ensuring Success for At-risk Students at the High School	The purpose of this study was to examine the progress of eight students who	Methodology: case study, interviews, surveys, and a questionnaire	The results of this study revealed that the eight students did not work up to their potential and their

		successfully completed the T-N-T dropout prevention. program		parents were not involved in the schooling at the high school level.
Groth, (1998)	Dumping Ground or Effective Alternative Dropout-Prevention Programs in Urban Schools	The purpose of this study was to determine if computer-based instruction could have an impact on keeping students in school.	Methodology:	The results of the study showed that the students were self-motivated and desired to stay an addition year. Also attendance and student behavioral were positive outcomes of the program.
Cervantes (1965)	The Dropout: Causes and Cures	The purpose of this study was to investigate and analyze the social background and personality	Methodology: Kolmogorov-Smirnor two-sample, one-tailed test with a predetermined alpha	Results of this study revealed that students dropped out of school when they were two or more years behind in reading and arithmetic, had

		characteristics of 300 students.	level of .001 (P<.001) Sample: 300 students	academic performance that was consistently below standards, and had feelings of not belonging.
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