

Perceptions of Secondary Alternative School Principals Educating
At-Risk Students in Regards to Leadership Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Alternative education as defined by Sable, Plotts, and Mitchell (2010), is “a public school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met at in a regular school” (p. C-1). In many public alternative schools, the individuals chosen as leaders are licensed, certified school principals. Research focusing on alternative education is emerging yet, there is limited research directly devoted to alternative school leadership (Price, 2010). With the knowledge that students attending alternative schools have needs that cannot be met in traditional school settings, what specializations can leadership preparation programs and school division sponsored professional development offer to prepare secondary alternative school principals for alternative school leadership?

Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative-based research design, secondary alternative school principals across the Commonwealth of Virginia were asked to participate in a study which employed semi-structured surveys to explore their perceptions of leadership preparation programs, division level professional development, and the impact of specialized training on leadership.

The results of the study indicated that secondary alternative school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia perceive that specialized leadership preparation is needed to effectively lead alternative schools and they were not adequately prepared by their leadership preparation programs to lead alternative schools.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Alternative education as defined by Sable, Plotts, and Mitchell (2010), is “a public school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met at in a regular school” (C-1). In many public alternative schools, the individual chosen as leader is a licensed, certified school principal. Research focusing on alternative education is emerging, yet there is limited research directly devoted to alternative school leadership (Price, 2010). This dissertation studied alternative school principals’ views of leadership preparation, division-level professional development, and the impact of specialized training on alternative school leadership. Views of professional development needs for effective management of programs educating students categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school were also discussed.

The research study discussed utilized a phenomenological qualitative-based research design, semi-structured interviews conducted to capture views of secondary alternative school principals regarding leadership preparation, professional development, and the impact of specialized training on leadership of alternative schools. Data were obtained that provided an optimal level of secondary principals’ views about what specialized training secondary school principals considered essential to effectively prepare them to lead alternative schools. Also, previous leadership experiences essential for effective alternative education environment management was part of the study. Lastly, leadership training and/or professional development necessary for individuals new to the area of secondary alternative education to be successful leaders of alternative schools was studied.

The results of the study gives insight to secondary alternative principal views of leadership program preparation, district oriented professional development, and the impact of specialized training on leadership.

Dedication

All praise, honor, glory, and gratitude to God for His son Jesus the Christ, through whom I'm *more* than a conqueror. For it is only by His grace and mercy that I'm privileged to be at this point of dedication and I'm *Grateful!*

To my mother Gloria A. Ferebee for her unwavering belief and encouragement throughout my entire life. I'm unable to remember a time when you have not supported my adventures, always saying "Fontaine don't worry about it, you can do it!" I praise God for the gift of allowing me to be your firstborn and against all odds, *Still we Rise!*

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To my best friend forever Simuel Darnell Johns Sr. thank you so very much for *ALWAYS* loving me unconditionally, seeing the best in me, and encouraging me when I didn't have the strength to encourage myself! I'm grateful to God for gifting me with you!!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“The stakes are too high – for our children, for our economy, for our country. It’s time for all of us to come together – parents and students, principals and teachers, business leaders and elected officials – to end America’s dropout crisis.” ---B. Obama

Background

School improvement continues to be a focus in political arenas throughout the United States (Gottfried, Stecher, Hoover, & Cross, 2011). Traditional and alternative school improvement is virtually impossible without the principal as the instructional leader (Price & Martin, 2011). To assist principals in alternative education (AE) schools with their role of leading the way in creating effective learning environments, it become necessary to examine the perceptions of principals regarding theory based leadership roles and actions and the manner through which they are demonstrated daily in the principal’s behavior (Price & Martin, 2011).

Alternative schools and programs are designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools (Carver & Lewis, 2010). The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure as indicated by “poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school” (Carver & Lewis, 2010, p. 1). When students have not been successful in a traditional classroom setting, alternative means of acquiring educational success must be explored (Keystone, 2014). An AE is an essential yet often ignored and miscalculated component in public education localities throughout our nation (Price, Stoops, & Martin, 2012).

Data indicating that leadership is an acute element of school improvement have accrued (Bryk, Sebring, & Allensworth, 2010). Formative research suggests that leadership qualities are developed over time and through professional development (PD) practices and performance evaluations (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2008). Principals, unlike teachers, are not specifically trained as general, alternative, or special education principals, although principal responsibilities are to oversee general, alternative, and special education programs (Elliott & Clifford, 2014). School administrators are assigned to lead schools and therefore, have the responsibility for improving schools. Throughout generations, research relating to school reform as early as the 1970’s and leading up to today exhibit a constant link between effective principal leadership and

school improvement and reform (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Preston, Goldring, Guthrie, & Ramsey, 2012). Successful school improvement models required *buy in* from teachers, making it imperative that teachers and staff have the opportunity to contribute and be empowered on all levels of decision making (DuFour, 2008). This *buy in* exemplifies the fact that principals make a difference in school improvement and student achievement, yet their impact continues to fall second to the impact of teachers (Fullan, 2008).

Overview of the Study

Alternative schools have often been ignored and shielded from accountability by educational institutions (Rennie Center, 2014). This lack of accountability has manifested itself in a variety of ways that appear to be a disadvantage for traditionally underserved students. This deficiency serves as confirmation that the need for skilled leadership as an acute element of school progress is greater than before (Bryk et al., 2010). Unprepared leaders as well as leader shortages can hinder and deem student progress insufficient at all levels of education (Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). School administrators must be prepared to practice both public and institutional leadership in order to be an audible voice for education for all children (Heifetz, 2006).

Training leaders who understand the unique characteristics of at-risk and alternative learners can help ensure success for staff and students in alternative schools. Clearly, leaders of alternative schools, with their challenging student populations, require specific, targeted training and support that may be inherently different from what is currently available to them in traditional programs (Price, 2009, p. 1)

This qualitative study used a semi-structured online survey to examine leadership preparation perspectives of secondary alternative school principals. Additionally, the study looked to provide school divisions with avenues for increasing PD trainings to strengthen alternative school leaders and stand as a premise informing colleges and universities of what skills school leaders consider to be central in their quest to enhance the educational experiences of students assigned to alternative school environments.

Historical Perspective

Historically, AE has been linked to social reform, aimed at the holistic development of youth (Miller, 2007).

Alternative Education a colorful story of social reformers and individualists, religious believers and romantics; despite their differences, however, they share an especially strong interest in young people's social, moral, emotional and intellectual development, and, more deliberately than most public school programs, they have practiced educational approaches that aim primarily to nourish these qualities. (Miller, 2007, p. 1)

Public school choice, teacher preparation tests, and graduation standards are among the many reforms or policies that have been implemented to enable students to reach their academic potential (SREB, 2010). Even with these changes, some students are not reaching the academic goals desired by parents, educators, and the public (Lang & Sletten, 2002). According to Price and Doney (2009), “Alternative education students are best described as students who are not able or willing to experience academic and personal involvement in a traditional educational environment for a variety of reasons,” (p.32) including absence of motivation and being excessively distracted. The most recent evidence provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2008) illustrates the continuing problem.

Based on data from the Current Population Survey, the status dropout rate decreased from 12 percent in 1990 to 7 percent in 2013, with most of the decline occurring after 2000 (when it was 11 percent). However, there was no measurable difference between the 2012 rate and the 2013 rate. (p.4)

The educational system has increasingly used alternative schools to warehouse underperforming students considered disruptive to traditional schools (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). The most vulnerable students, the most disadvantaged students, and the students most in need of academic intervention can be found in alternative schools (Arcia, 2006; Brown, 2007; McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Enrollment in alternative schools is increasing (Carver & Lewis, 2010), due in part to seemingly excessive use of zero tolerance policies (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force [APA], 2008; Martinez, 2009; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Traditionally underserved students are disproportionately suspended and expelled (APA, 2008;

Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008), which results in pushing them out of their traditional schools and into alternative programs. As students are pushed out of their traditional schools, alternative schools and programs must have leaders skilled in creating collaborative partnerships to provide effective temporary support (Price & Doney, 2009).

Instructional leaders must possess the required governance skills in order to create or support school excellence and advance student achievement (NASSP, 2011). There is a need for university principal preparation programs to examine and review their current practices. According to Ballenger, Alford, McCune and McCune, (2009), “Our conventional procedures for training and certifying school administrators are simply failing to produce a sufficiency of leaders whose vision, energy, and skill can successfully raise the educational standards of children” (p. 533). The literature indicates although policies and regulations are constantly revolving, school leaders are not being afforded the opportunity to experience on-going PD training needed to continue to meet state and federal mandates (Keith, 2008).

Eighty-five percent of superintendents and principals believe that reforming or restructuring college and university principal leadership preparation programs would improve school leadership (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, & Foley, 2001). The research supports the contention that in order to provide effective leadership and improve student accomplishment, principals require specific, sufficient, and suitable professional development training (Lutz, 2008).

As education evolves and technology advances, there is a growing need for school divisions to better prepare students for post-secondary education experiences and post-secondary career options (Bangser, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

University principal training programs in many states are mandated by state legislature to restructure leadership preparation programs. The restructuring is standards based and considered significant in equipping aspiring administrators for the role of instructional leader. As these programs are restructured, there continues to be no mention of the alternative school leader skill set (Miller, 2013). Moreover, there is a shortage of qualified individuals willing to assume responsibilities for leading AE environments (Price et al., 2010).

Principal preparation programs have failed to plan for the next generation of school leaders and changing responsibilities they will face. Given these underlying forces, there is an absence of qualified principals (Murphy, 2005). Principals must deal with many complex issues such as organizational changes, curriculum, instruction, pupil management, school community relationships, new technology, and knowledge of alternative paths for helping students reach graduation status. Some of the prior issues for the principal have expanded to the point that no one person alone can stand without some type of structure of preparation in AE (Price et al., 2010).

Significance of the Study

The alternative schools with optimal conditions are those where the atmosphere is warm and both students and adults are able to develop positive relationships (Darling & Price, 2004; Washington, 2008). Virtually all aspects of AE need research, especially research concerning instructional leadership (Foley & Pang, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008). The data gathered in this study was significant in exhibiting the perceptions of secondary alternative school leaders in the area of professional development, making school division superintendents aware of secondary alternative school leadership perceptions, and being able to use these perceptions in the leader selection process. Additionally, collected data may be used as a means of collaborating with universities offering educational leadership endorsements.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify secondary alternative school principals' perceptions on the impact of leadership program preparation, district-level PD, and specialized training on alternative school leadership. Perceptions of PD needs for effective management of programs educating students categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school were also examined.

General education and special education disciplines both have specialized leadership PD aimed at increasing educational achievement for students serviced. Despite the increase of research focusing on AE (Price et al., 2010), there is minimal examination of what skills are needed for alternative school leader success (Price & Martin, 2011). To date there are few studies available to address the need for specialized leadership PD for alternative program

leaders (Foley & Pang, 2006, Kim & Taylor, 2008). In this study, the data identify current alternative secondary school principal perceptions towards their leadership preparation for leading alternative schools.

Research Questions/Guiding Questions

Research questions guided this study in understanding preparation program and PD needs as perceived by secondary alternative school principals to prepare current and future alternative school leaders. This study, along with scholarly literature, assisted in investigating the research questions that follow:

1. What courses do secondary alternative school principals identify as most beneficial of the specialized training received during their principal preparation program?
2. What previous leadership experiences do secondary alternative school principals perceive to be beneficial for stimulating alternative school student achievement?
3. What leadership skills do secondary alternative school leaders indicate are necessary for individuals new to the position of secondary alternative school principal?
4. What division-level professional development do secondary alternative school principals indicate has been provided that is relevant to the position of secondary alternative school principals?
5. How do secondary alternative education principals believe their leadership preparation programs informed their work in alternative education?

Conceptual Framework

The researcher developed a conceptual framework to serve as a guide in understanding secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of how professional development impacts student performance. Figure 1 outlines how principal development is formed by participation in leadership preparation programs, division-level PD, and specialized training or outside PD (i.e., conferences or seminars). Additionally, the conceptual framework suggests that leadership skills acquired from leadership preparation programs, division-level PD, and specialized training or outside PD (i.e., conferences or seminars) have an impact on student performance.

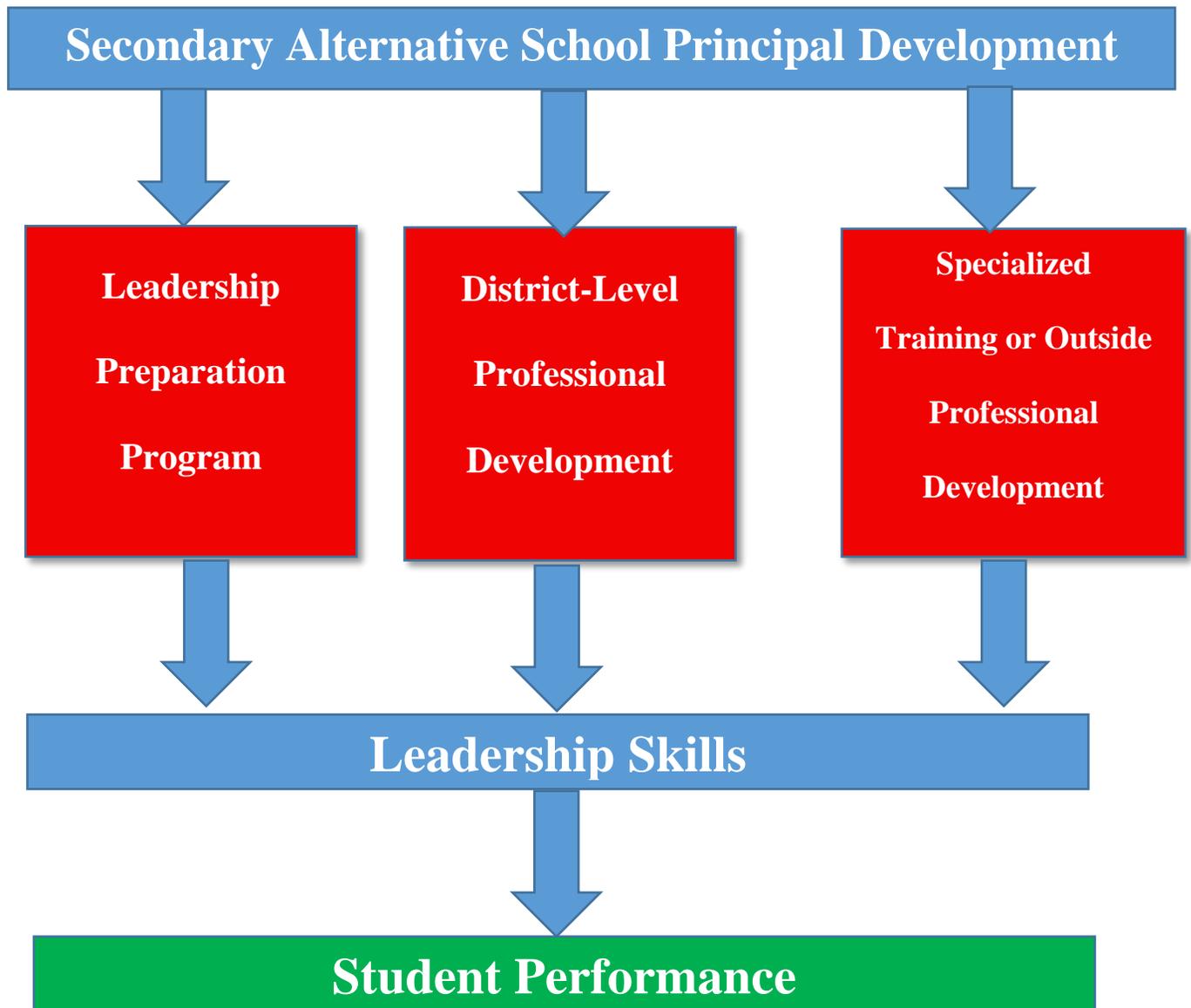


Figure 1. Conceptual framework model of perceptions of secondary alternative school leaders.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms are provided to facilitate suggested meanings throughout this proposed study.

Alternative Education (AE). A public school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met at in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special, or vocational education (Sable et al., 2010).

At-Risk Student. The student who does not pass classes with a 70% or better in the upper grades (7-12), has been retained in a grade level, is placed in Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs, expelled, on parole or incarcerated, is a parent or pregnant, has fail standardized tests two or more years, is of limited English proficiency, is homeless or in Child Protective Service custody (TEA, 2010).

Educational Leadership. The role of the principal as instructional leader expected to take responsibility for student learning in a system that uses standards based accountability measurements (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009).

Professional Development (PD). Activities that are an integral part of school and local educational agency strategies for providing educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable students to succeed in a well-rounded education and to meet the challenging State academic standards; and are sustained, intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused (Learning Forward, 2015).

Limitations/Delimitations

The scope of the study focused on the Commonwealth of Virginia's secondary alternative school administrators. The following limitations were outlined as factors beyond the researcher's control:

1. The willingness of secondary alternative school principals to be honest and accurate when exposing their feelings regarding the need for specialized alternative school leadership preparation cannot be guaranteed.
2. There is the possibility that email may be returned or undeliverable if email addresses have changed, email is filtered as spam or other information technology security

methods are in place within various school divisions throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia.

3. Principals within the population declining the opportunity to participate.
4. The research study may not be in alignment with a school division's AE goals, therefore the study is declined.

The following were delimitations of the study, which the researcher intentionally chose:

1. This study is limited to secondary school principals who are assigned to secondary AE programs in the Commonwealth of Virginia.
2. The delivery method of the research survey instrument was email. This method of delivery excluded principals with new building assignments or email addresses that changed.
3. Outcomes from this study are not associated with any other school administrators except school principals who are secondary alternative school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 presented the background, overview of the study, historical perspective, statement of the problem, significance of the study, purpose of the study, research questions/guiding questions, conceptual framework, definitions of key terms, and limitations/delimitations of the study, which focused on secondary alternative school principal perceptions of leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and the impact of specialized training on leadership. Chapter 2 reviews relevant current literature significant to the study. Additionally, the chapter details the search process used to obtain literature, which focuses on educational leadership, the history of high school education, history of AE, and AE law. Moreover, Chapter 2 presents literature that examined types of AE programs and the at-risk student. Finally, Chapter 2 presents literature to capture educational support for AE environments and leadership programs that prepare individuals to lead AE programs.

Chapter 3 restates the purpose of the study then outlines the research design, research design justification, research questions, and population. Chapter 3 also describes the methodology used in the study, including data collection procedures, data gathering procedures,

instrument design, instrument validations, data treatment, data management, and data analysis techniques.

Chapter 4 presents details of data analysis related to the study. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research. The chapter conclude with the researchers reflections on the study.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

An AE is an essential yet often ignored and miscalculated component in public education localities throughout our nation (Price et al., 2012). This literature review examined scholarly research associated with specialized leadership preparation for individuals assigned to lead schools designed to provide AE services for at-risk students. Current literature was synthesized to (a) describe educational leadership, (b) define AE, (c) summarize the history of AE, (d) examine the types of AE programs and environments, (e) describe students who generally need AE services, (f) identify leadership styles unique to alternative and traditional education leaders, and (g) identify leadership preparation programs for AE leaders.

Search Process

The search process engaged to conduct this comprehensive review of literature involved a variety of methods. Research specifically related to leadership preparation, AE, school models, at-risk, and nontraditional students aided in providing a general perspective for the current literature review. Readings related to AE leadership, principal preparation programs, and educating nontraditional students led to: (a) identification of significant AE researchers, authors, and their findings, (b) identification of factors associated with at-risk student access to AE opportunities, (c) prominent leadership styles impacting AE, and (d) the identification of leadership preparation programs (Raywid, 1990).

Peer-reviewed journal articles, resources published by national organizations such as the U.S. Department of Education, the Alliance for Excellence in Education, and the NCES, provide information regarding key terms, dropout rates, and factors influencing the need for AE options (Price et al., 2010). Online search engines used to find scholarly peer-reviewed literature published within the last 10 years were the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University online library Summon, Google Scholar, and ERIC. Key words and search terms used include (a) educational leadership, (b) alternative education, (c) school models, (d) at-risk, and (e) nontraditional students. Seminal studies conducted prior to 2005 were also included to provide a historical perspective of AE.

Purpose of the Literature Review

Effective leadership preparation is essential on every level of education, “with little formalized research in the area of AE leadership, one way of establishing a baseline for its conceptualization is to compare the leaders of AE programs to their more traditional school administrative colleagues” (Stoops & Price, 2013, p. 52). Not every student entering public school will continue throughout the traditional process of public education to graduate with a high school diploma (Aron, 2006). For nontraditional students who choose to chart another course of study, there is the opportunity to participate in AE. The term AE often embraces every educational activity that falls outside of the traditional PK-12 school system (Aron, 2006). Many nontraditional students assigned to AE programs are often assigned to alternative schools, which are educational settings designed to meet their educational needs outside of the traditional environment (Sisk, 2015). “Many students who attend alternative education programs qualify because they are behind academically” (Office of the Legislative Auditor, State of Minnesota [OLA], 2010, p.1). Teachers in traditional classrooms are normally trained to teach students that do not present behavioral or environmental challenges, thus participating in professional development designed to promote success at a pre-established rate (Aron, 2006). Because of this pre-established rate design for traditional classroom teachers, educational leaders in alternative settings are challenged with designing professional development activities and training for classroom instructors that focus on academics, teaching strategies, alternative instruction methods, and discipline techniques to be successful in an alternative setting (Aron, 2006). However, training and preparation for leaders of AE programs are not afforded similar opportunities for development of skill sets required to successfully lead nontraditional programs (Price, 2009).

Educational Leadership

Educational leadership requires skills to productively manage conflicts that arise daily (Heifetz, 2006). Moreover, leadership is considered crucial for the effective operation of organizations. Evidence indicating that leadership is a critical element of school improvement has increased (Bryk et al., 2010). Educational leaders matter to school improvement, instructional excellence, and student learning. The collective message from progressively refined research studies is that principals have strong impact on teacher recruitment and retention (Darling-Hammond,

LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2009). Current instructional leaders attempting to improve their schools often adopt current instructional models and apply those models to local needs (Ravitch, 2010).

“Students who are most likely to drop out of high school are not necessarily failing due to low intellectual ability, other contributing factors such as behavior may outweigh academic ability” (Kauffman, 2005 as cited in Siegrist, Dawdy, Leech, Gidson, Stelzer, 2010, p. 134). As stated by Menendez (2007), “Because of the uniqueness of alternative schools, it is important that teaching professionals and administrators stay abreast of best practices applicable to the students they serve” (p. 19). Alternative school program administrators are challenged with making their students believe that the assigned course curriculum is relevant and demanding (Cable, Plucker, & Spradlin, 2009). “The exploration of new understandings, the synthesis of new information, and the integration of these insights throughout professional spheres can lead future educational leaders to a broader, more inclusive approach in addressing issues of student learning and equity” (Brown-Ruzzi, 2006, p. 703). The need for specialized educational leadership is vital in environments where nontraditional high school students at risk of dropping out of high school are educated (Graczewski et al., 2009). Conventionally, educational leadership in the traditional high school viewed the role of the principal as the instructional leader expected to take responsibility for student learning in a system that used standards based accountability measurements (Graczewski et al., 2009). According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), there are 10 standards that guide the work of effective educational leaders, these standards are:

1. Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.
2. Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote *each* student’s academic success and well-being.
3. Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote *each* student’s academic success and well-being.

4. Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being.
5. Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of *each* student.
6. Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being.
7. Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being.
8. Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being.
9. Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being.
10. Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being. (NPBEA, 2015)

History of High School Education

Since its inception, education in the United States has evolved into an entity that has become the rule rather than the option. At the onset, parents taught their children in the home or if they could afford it, a tutor was hired (Watson, 2008). For many years children were allowed to stay in the home setting without being mandated to attend school or be declared truant due to non-attendance. With the formalization of education and implementation of legislative laws mandating that children attend school, a uniquely different child emerged that would be labeled nontraditional in the 21st century.

The first publicly supported high school in the United States was the Boston Latin School, founded in 1635. Initially, attendance in this high school was low due to the curriculum. The plea for capable workers during the mid-eighteenth century led Benjamin Franklin to start a new type of high school. In 1751, this new high school became known as the American Academy in the city of Philadelphia (Thattai, 2004).

The establishment of the American Academy brought about the formation of other high schools. As more were founded, the quality of education in the United States was enhanced. More rigorous courses such as geometry, algebra, American history, and bookkeeping were added to the curriculum. In geographic areas where the population was 4,000 or more, foreign languages, rhetoric, and logic were also added. By 1874, high schools had enhanced the quality of education to the point where the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that all school districts in Michigan were required to have high schools that were supported by tax payer monies. With this ruling, the number of high schools in the United States soared to 800 in 1880. By the end of 1890, there were approximately 2,500 public high schools (Yanushevsky, 2011). The embracing of high school structure and the increase in high school attendance proved to be one of the most prominent advances to U.S. education during the 20th century. At the turn of the century, approximately 6% of U.S. teenagers graduated from high school. By 1996, this number had increased to approximately 85% (Thattai, 2004).

History of Alternative Education

As stated by Price et al. (2012), “To understand the evolution of programs labeled (AE) as they exist today, it is important to recognize the origins of programs that are considered alternative” (p. 24). As education evolves and technology advances, there is a growing need for school divisions to better prepare students for post-secondary education experiences or post-secondary career options (Bangser, 2008). A student within the age range of 16 to 24 years old who comes from the lowest quartile of family income is about 7 times more likely to have dropped out of high school than his/her counterpart who comes from the highest quartile (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). According to Price et al. (2012), “Students are continuing to fall through the cracks. The dropout rate is a clear indicator of the many disconnected students. Alternative Education programs are the hope and safety net for many of these students” (p. 23). Although graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of how schools are ultimately performing, only recently have those rates been rigorously scrutinized, revealing the extent of the crisis in America’s high schools. For decades, schools and school divisions published misleading or inaccurate graduation rates, and as a result, the American public knew little of the scope and gravity of the problems faced by far too many of the nation’s high schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Students in Grades K-8, assigned to alternative programs such

as before and after school tutoring, often referred to as extended time programs, are generally impacted by these AE programs in a positive way. Their test scores generally increase more than other students. Yet, students attending these same type of programs above Grade 8, usually make less progress than their age equivalent peers, with attendance and graduation rates being lower than traditional students (OLA, 2010).

During the 2008-2007 school year, 30% of AE programs in the United States reported that their teachers were required to have specific training or credentials to teach in alternative schools and programs, along with 48% reporting that specific professional development was required (Carver & Lewis, 2010). The challenge and goal is to prepare and train leaders who can lead in special schools while implementing proven AE principles and strategies in school divisions, counties, and states across the nation that are facing their own AE and dropout crises. Academic improvement for the country's alternative schools requires that local school divisions embrace the concept that, "it's not just the children who need to learn. Strong leaders are essential to academic success, and they need to be cultivated as carefully as their students" (Samuels, 2008).

The term AE is not original to our millennium, the notion has been present in academic terminology for more than 40 years (Lehr et al., 2009). With its inception, AE did not focus on students who presented behavioral or academic challenges. The initial AE programs were developed to advance current educational initiatives (Price et al., 2012). The term AE in its broadest sense includes all activities that fall outside traditional neighborhood schooling in the K-12 school system—including home schooling, General Educational Development (GED) Options Programs, special education programs, residential and treatment programs, correctional settings, programs for gifted children, charter schools, magnet schools, charter schools, online/blended learning, etc. (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Alternative schools and programs are designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools. The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school). Alternative schools are usually housed in a separate facility where students are removed from regular school. Alternative programs are usually housed in regular schools. (Carver & Lewis, 2010)

“At their inception, alternative programs began to emerge more frequently in suburban and urban districts as opposed to rural districts” (Price et al., 2012, p. 24). According to Ron Miller (2007) in his brief history of AE,

Historians of public education described how, during the period between 1837 and the early twentieth century, a particularly narrow model of schooling became solidly established as the ‘one best system’ of public education. According to this model, the purpose of schooling was to overcome cultural diversity and personal uniqueness in order to mold a loyal citizenry and an effective workforce for the growing industrial system. (para. 2)

Since its beginning in the United States nearly three centuries ago, education has moved from being an option to being mandatory, and AE is becoming an entity that is increasingly necessary (Thattai, 2004). At the onset, parents taught their children in the home or if they could afford it, a tutor was hired (Watson, 2008). For many years children were allowed to stay in the home setting for educational purposes without being mandated to attend school or being declared truant due to non-attendance (Thattai, 2004). With the formalization of education and implementation of legislative laws came the mandate that children attend school and the emergence of the uniquely different child that would be labeled nontraditional in the 21st century.

The term “alternative” began to be linked with education during the 1960s (Aron, 2006). As the Civil Rights movement gained momentum, so did the need for specialization of educational curriculums tailored to meet the needs of the nontraditional student. This momentum was fueled by advocates that refused to buy into the “one size fits all” method of educational curriculums (Conley, 2002). Prior to the 1960s, AE was described as a variance in public education, a phenomenon that was not supposed to happen (Conley, 2002).

Education aimed primarily to discipline the developing energies of young people for the sake of political and social uniformity as well as the success of the emerging corporate economy. In the early 20th century, these goals were concisely expressed by the term “social efficiency,” which was often used by educational leaders (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Unfortunately, over the past few decades, this quest for uniformity has been disrupted due in part to an increase in fiscal demands in order to meet basic family needs (Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001).

Van Acker (2007) proposed that AE schools provide aggressive, violent, and challenging students with a setting where they would be controlled and away from the general population of students.

Similarly, Foley and Pang (2006) suggested that although AE schools are viewed as locations where unruly children and youth are sent from the school division schools, AE schools can also be identified as personalized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth who have been identified as at-risk for school failure. Others believed that by offering smaller classes, with low student to teacher ratios, and supplemental support services alternative programs could aim to decrease the likelihood of school failure and dropout by reconnecting youth to educational goals (Zweig, 2003).

According to Aron (2006), AE includes all educational activities outside of the traditional K-12 school system. In 1990, educator and author Mary Anne Raywid, classified alternative/nontraditional schools into three categories. Her classification captured the face of an educational movement that began in the 1960s and has propelled into the 21st century. With this classification, Raywid (1990) outlined alternative programs into three different types:

Type 1 programs are categorized as schools of choice, sometimes resembling magnet schools, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract students.

Type 2 programs are categorized as 'last chance' schools where students are sentenced as a last step before expulsion. These are not schools of choice and their emphasis is typically on behavior modification or remediation. These programs are usually designed for the worst and weakest of students.

Type 3 programs are categorized as schools designed with a remedial focus on academic and/or social emotional issues. These programs are designed to be therapy rather than schools of reformation (p.31).

Generally, AE programs are distinct in that they primarily offer educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 curriculum and normally provide services to students who are at risk of failing or dropping out of school. Individual states or school localities usually define and make the determination as to what type of features their AE programs or schools have. These entities have the authority to make adjustments in their AE programs that are structured to meet

community needs based upon key characteristics, such as target population, setting, services, and structure (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2014).

Historically, AE schools have evolved over the past 100 years to meet the academic needs of nontraditional students. In his 2013 dissertation “Evaluating Alternative High Schools: Program Evaluation in Action” Drew Samuel Wayne Hinds creates a historical context of alternative schools, capturing the evolution from “Constructivist Education” in the early 1900’s to “Charter Schools” in the early 2000’s (see Figure 2).

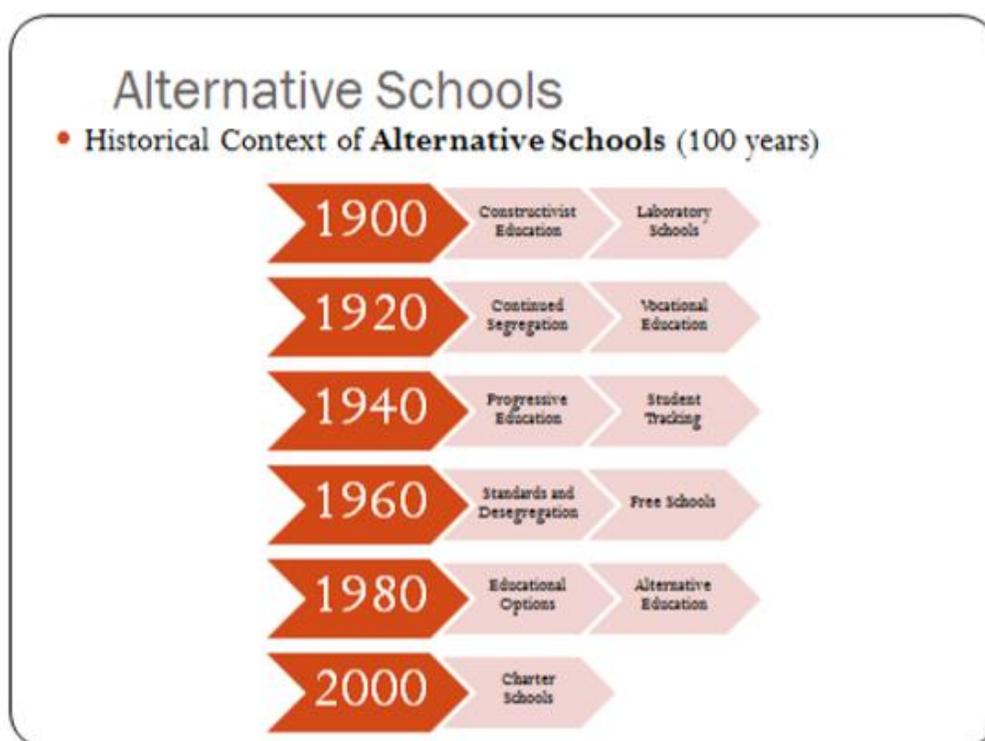


Figure 2. Alternative schools: Historical context of alternative schools over the past 100 years. Source: Hinds, 2013.

In 1975, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case *Goss v. Lopez*. The ruling stated that suspended students have a state created property right to education. The 14th Amendment and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 are both laws that inevitably protect the property right of a school age child’s education, which happens to be between ages five and 18 in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Paraphrasing, the 14th Amendment indicates that [No State shall] deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law. Its pairing with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (formerly the Elementary and Secondary Education Act),

which forced stronger accountability results to support the development of high quality educational alternatives for all youth, was paramount for students needing AE environments and support (Aron, 2006). Since its bipartisan reauthorization in 2001, there have been several cases challenging and supporting the education property rights of students requiring AE under the 14th Amendment and NCLB. Thus, the questions have been raised as to the legality of total “Zero Tolerance” in our public schools (APA, 2008).

The North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in favor of school divisions finding alternative placements and options for students suspended for long periods of time in the case of *King v. Beaufort County Board of Education* (2010). The case involved two students being suspended for the last five months of their sophomore year in high school. The students were punished with long term suspensions after their brief fight following early dismissal for a holiday weekend. Court records revealed that the fight lasted less than a minute and involved no serious injuries or weapons. Additionally, school officials were allowed to choose from several forms of punishment. School officials chose to suspend the students for the remainder of the school year. Moreover, neither student was offered the opportunity to be educated in the school division’s alternative school, which served as a resource for suspended students B. The North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that:

While the adoption of a strict scrutiny standard for disciplinary and alternative education decisions was impractical, the extremely lenient standard used in the past—which gave school administrators wide latitude to deny alternative education—is no longer adequate to protect student rights. The decision stated that ‘alternative education decisions for students who receive long-term suspensions are [to be] reviewed under the State Constitution’s standard of intermediate scrutiny’ (Legal Aid of North Carolina, 2010).

This was considered a victory for all suspended/expelled students in North Carolina and also added to case law supporting educational property rights of students nationally, because it mandated that all administrators seek and offer some type of AE resource when suspending students for long periods of time and ensuring those students receive due process hearings.

Often times school administrators are faced with disciplinary infractions that force a reaction prior to adequate research into assuring that student rights are not being violated. In *Leak v. Board of Education Rich Township High School District 227*, the Appellate Court of

Illinois First Judicial District upheld the decision of a lower court (2015). The decision upheld dismissal of the local superintendent for good cause due. The superintendent acted outside of her authority when she administratively transferred 48 unruly students to alternative schools for extended periods of time, without Board hearings.

Virginia Code (§) 22.1 governs the development of local school divisions' policies effecting the education of young people. According to Virginia Code (§)22.1-254, parents are responsible for sending children between the ages of five and 18 to school or having them homeschooled under a curriculum approved by the Board of Education and division superintendent. Within Virginia Code (§) 22.1-254, subsection G deals with students being court ordered into an AE programs. Students categorized as nontraditional, at-risk, or often times as having emotional disturbances are frequently assigned to alternative school settings equipped with resources and personnel designed to help the student become successful both behaviorally and academically. In an effort to assure that nontraditional students have the opportunity to experience a level of educational success, Virginia Code (§) 22.1-209.1:2 was initially implemented in 1993 establishing AE programs for elementary, middle, and high schools. On April 8, 2009, the General Assembly of Virginia approved an amendment to Virginia Code (§) 22.1-209.1:2, which focuses on regional AE programs for certain students. This amendment was implemented to assure compliance with subdivision D 6 of Virginia Code 22.1-253.13:1, which is specific in its inclusion of behavioral offenses of some nontraditional students.

School to Prison Pipeline

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the Commonwealth of Virginia ranks first in referring school aged children to law enforcement (Zubak-Skees & Wieder, 2015). For many students, the school-to-prison pipeline starts in the classroom (Elias, 2013). Teacher written referrals reflect a decision to have a student punished. For some students, this decision gives the push out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system (Elias, 2013). Students who are referred to school administrators for discretionary violations resulting in suspension or expulsion are three times more likely to have encounters with the juvenile justice within 12 months (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, 2011). Research supports that students "excluded from school are more likely to experience academic failure,

mental health problems, substance abuse, gang activity, and justice system involvement” (Langberg & Ciolfi, 2016, p. 9). Training and support are needed to prevent middle and high school children from being pushed out of the classroom for disciplinary infractions (Elias, 2013).

Types of Alternative Education Programs

An AE program is often characterized as being smaller, having lower teacher student ratios, and larger degrees of self-sufficiency when compared to traditional schools according to Lehr et al. (2009). Students needing alternative school placements are normally enrolled in alternative settings for shorter time intervals and receive some vocational or career and technical training (Carver & Lewis, 2010). To date there are two basic types of AE school models for students classified as nontraditional: (1) those for students who would be considered “at-risk” or who simply have not flourished in a traditional setting; and (2) those for students with disciplinary problems or disruptive behavior (Silchenko, 2005). Alternative schools that qualify as correctional institutions are maintained by school divisions to serve students who have not adapted well traditional school environments. Often times these students are identified as at-risk youth, struggling teens, delinquents, or dropouts (Thomas & Thomas, 2008).

In an effort to equip nontraditional students with a credential that allows more marketability, many school divisions in the United States now provide the opportunity for nontraditional students to earn a GED. The GED was first developed to help give World War II veterans the opportunity to complete a high school equivalency credential after returning from the war. The GED, now offered through GED Testing Services in partnership with Pearson-Vue, is a computer-based, four subtest, Common Core Standards, high school equivalency credential that can be earned by nontraditional high school students between the ages of 16 and 18 (Sisk, 2015).

Research in the area of AE and the exploration of what works is progressing throughout the country. The shift in societal views of AE schools and nontraditional students has forced researchers and policymakers to examine the characteristics of promising alternative programs (Aron, 2006). As the need AE instruction becomes more prevalent in environments outside of public school settings, so does the need for trained leaders. Environments needing individuals trained to lead in alternative settings include but are not limited to the Juvenile Justice System, substance abuse programs, and homeless youth group homes (Price, 2009). Specialization in

leadership preparation and professional development for AE programs is needed to offer more intensified services along with meeting instructional, behavioral, and organizational characteristics of traditional public school environments (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

The At-Risk Student

At-risk students are often seen as “left behind without hope, without vision, and without equal access to the excellent education that children are entitled” (Brown-Ruzzi, 2006, p. 701). Little attention is being paid to the scaled efforts to reconnect at-risk students to education options that prepare them for success in the ever changing economy (Harris, 2005). As students face more complex environmental stimuli, school divisions are challenged with providing at-risk students an equal opportunity to be educationally successful in alternative settings. Low income and minority students have been affected in disproportionate numbers in the United States (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Additionally, Bridgeland et al. (2006), reported that: (a) four out of every 10 young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 without a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001, and (b) students dropping out of high school were 8 times more likely to be in jail or prison than those staying in school and receiving a high school diploma. Students enrolled in alternative schools are usually associated with students who have been unsuccessful in the past, and the buildings housing these students are thought to be of poorer quality. Thus, alternative school leaders and instructors must be more innovative and creative (Aron, 2006).

The Department of Labor’s targeted focus of educational needs for nontraditional students developed by Brown-Ruzzi (2006), revealed that nontraditional students were in need of credit retrieval, small group learning, standards based alternative curriculums, work-based learning, evening schools, special education, and adult basic education. These key elements are in direct contrast to the needs of traditional students who are educationally focused on post-secondary education preparation goals. Twenty-four percent of Hispanic youths do not complete high school, compared to 12% of African American and 7% of White youths (Lee & Staff, 2007).

Moreover, there are times within the scope of learning for at-risk students that there is a need for modification and differentiation of instruction. According to Tomlinson and McTighe (2006), modification and differentiation of instruction adjustment should be based upon an

individualized learning profile that identifies student interests and readiness. Assessing at-risk students for learning styles, interest, and ability levels using various methods allows for ongoing teacher feedback and curriculum adjustments. These adjustments can bring about optimal levels of performance for students through formative assessments (Stiggins et al., 2005). The research on services provided for students with disabilities in alternative settings is limited “with regard to provision of direct service, IEP implementation, transition planning, assessment and evaluation” (Lehr et al., 2009, p.21).

Educational/Instructional Support for Alternative Education Environments.

Aron (2006) compiled a list of primary attributes that are key to a promising or productive AE program and require further research. According to Aron (2006), academic instruction, instructional staff, professional development, size, facility, relationships/building a sense of community, leadership, governance, administration, oversights, and student supports are essential components of AE programs. Additionally, Aron (2006) described professional development as ongoing activities that help maintain academic focus, enhance teaching strategies, and develop alternative instructional methods while also noting that “staff development involves teacher input, work with colleagues, and opportunities to visit and observe teaching in other settings” (p. 12).

Leadership Preparation for Alternative Education Programs

Leadership skills needed in AE programs can differ from those needed in traditional school settings. The preparation of school leaders requires “some new skills and likely some re-training...for effective leadership to reside in all schools, and this may be an especially critical component for leadership in alternative schools” (Price & Martin, 2011, p.71). Little research has been conducted on exactly what leaders of AE programs need in the terms of skills, preparation, and training to assist their instructional staff members with being successful in preparing nontraditional students for academic success. The challenge and goal is to prepare and train leaders who can lead in alternative schools while implementing proven AE principles and strategies in school divisions, counties, and states throughout the country that are facing their own AE and dropout crisis (Price et al., 2010).

As the dropout rate increases, so does the need for school leaders and instructors to become more innovative in retaining and recapturing students educationally. Neither universities nor school divisions are able to adequately prepare school leaders for alternative school leadership (Price et al., 2010). Preparing an individual to lead requires that the individual be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful. Yet, in contrast to special education, few universities offer courses directed at teachers or leaders of at-risk or delinquent youth (Price et al., 2010).

Quality specialized professional development is a purposeful and intentional process that can bring about positive change and improvement to an educational environment. It is recommended that instructional leaders and staff be fully aware of professional development purpose and goals (Parker, 2007). Price et al., (2010) noted the lack of preparation in higher education when stating,

Because the skills required of educators in alternative settings are not recognized as important or as priorities in the traditional higher education preparation curriculum few programs exist to meet this increasing need for trained administrators who can successfully lead in correctional education and alternative schools (p.301).

There are many variables that impact the current escalation of dropout rates. According to Cook and Cordova (2007), these variables include, but are not limited to, gender, ethnicity, negative peer influence, low value of education, low career outlook, socio-economic status, low self-esteem, language barriers, poor academic achievement, lack of parental support and involvement, teen pregnancy, low educational attainment of parents, transportation, class size, drug and alcohol abuse, school climate and alienation, boredom, isolation, and rejection in school. Additional research aimed at understanding the dropout rate revealed that lack of faculty/teacher support, lack of motivation, and inadequate educational resources are the most common reasons why students are not staying in school to earn a high school diploma or GED (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Prior to educators viewing nontraditional students as worthy of being educated, many educators implemented practices that pushed these students out by investing more time, energy, and resources into traditional students; traditional students were viewed as more worthy and in

need of extra investment. Today as the need for AE increases, there has been a shift in focus with nontraditional students being the recipients of increased investment (Alton, 2012).

In recent decades, the role of the principal was seen as a secondary factor in student achievement, (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2011). Principals were responsible for the organization and management of the school environment and providing resources so teachers could have prime conditions for teaching. More recently, research presented by Bier, Foster, Bellamy, and Clark (2008) discussed the reframed role of the principal. Bier et al. (2008) identified four functions that expand the principal's role: the partnership, preparing great new teachers, supporting inquiry to improve practice, and keeping a complex partnership focused on student learning. According to Price et al. (2010, as cited in Lezotte, 1991), research found

a clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student progress, opportunity to learn and student time on task, a safe and orderly environment, and finally, positive home-school relations led to school improvement and student learning. (p. 302)

As the needs of nontraditional AE grows, so does the need for educational leaders with specialized skills to lead staff members in alternative settings. Krentz, Thurlow, Shyyan, and Scott (2005) conducted research relating to educational program offerings in 16 states. The study found that 10 out of the 16 states had AE routes for all students (including students with disabilities). The research team examined the specific nature of the alternative routes, including the eligibility criteria, who initiates the alternative route request, who makes decisions, the process itself, and the comparability of the alternative route to the standard route. Krentz et al. (2005) found significant variations from state to state regarding the manner by which AE was being addressed.

In its report, *Alternative Schools and Programs for Public School Students at Risk of Educational Failure*, NCES (2008) reported the need for additional requirements for teaching in alternative schools and programs. According NCES (2008), to only 30% of school divisions polled reported having specific requirements for teaching in alternative schools and programs. Additionally, 48% of school divisions reported having professional development requirements for AE teaching. Parker's (2007) research also indicated that more work needs to be completed to measure quality specialized professional development. "Ultimately, the use of quality

leadership skills and a positive attitude by instructional leaders could directly influence how they relate to their staffs in the improvement of quality of staff development” (Parker, 2007, p.83).

Although the GED was originally initiated in 1942 for individuals returning home from war, by today’s standards it has become an avenue for nontraditional students. A GED releases students from compulsory attendance prior to becoming 18 years old or graduation from high school with a standard high school diploma (VDOE, 2017). The adoption of the GED as an alternative high school equivalency measurement for nontraditional high school students assures that students receive the opportunity to participate in successful academic programs with a clear focus and a culture of high expectations (VDOE, 2017). According to Aron (2006), learning has to be relevant and applicable to life outside of school and to future learning and work opportunities.

Funding for AE programs has become more lucrative in recent years. According to Aron (2006), there are a variety of funding avenues through which AE providers are able to fund programs. These funding avenues help bring about revenue for specialized professional development opportunities for instructional staff members yet, there is no mentions of funding for leadership professional development. With this in mind, AE programs are tapping into more than \$275 billion in federal, state, and local dollars originally slated for traditional public education (Aron, 2006).

Summary

A review of literature reflects that there is a growing need for secondary schools to do a better job of preparing students for post-secondary education and career options (Bangser, 2008). Likewise, there is a call for at-risk students facing adverse environmental stimuli to be reconnected to educational experiences that prepare them for success in ever-changing communities (Harris, 2005). Administrators preparing to lead traditional high schools are challenged with completing rigorous graduate preparation programs and post program assessments to be afforded the opportunity to serve as principals (Price et al., 2010). However, despite the increase the at-risk student population, there are no formal preparation programs to prepare those set to lead AE environments (Price et al., 2010). As stated by Price et al. (2012), “Alternative education is an integral yet frequently overlooked and misunderstood component in many public school divisions in the United States. Part of this situation is due to the lack of a

clear, concise definition of alternative education” (p.23). Nontraditional students, including students at-risk of dropping out of school, seeking an alternative high school credential must be afforded the opportunity to be paired with instructional leaders and staff members who have received educational preparation and professional development structured to meet their needs (Price, 2009). For students to achieve academic success, it is vital that they receive proper nurturing from leaders that have been adequately prepared to accomplish the task (Samuels, 2008). According to Price (2009),

New leaders are trained and become well versed in traditional school improvement and reform strategies, some through university programs and some in local district preparation programs. Training leaders who understand the unique characteristics of at-risk and alternative learners can help ensure success for staff and students in alternative schools (p.5).

Educational leadership in the traditional high school views the role of the principal as the instructional leader expected to take responsibility for student learning in a system that uses standards based accountability measurements (Graczewski et al., 2009). The role of the principal is multidimensional and requires leadership that is linked to many scopes, which include: instruction, mentorship, staff development, strategic planning, and being the motivator of change (Price & Martin, 2011). To better prepare educators aspiring to serve as school leaders, professional development is essential and must include the skill of collaboration, along with a way to evaluate if the skills are being demonstrated in a manner that is readily understood by teaching staff (Price & Martin, 2011).

Since their inception in 1635, high schools have become an ever increasing aspect of American culture, evolving from voluntary to compulsory with well-developed curricular expectations (Thattai, 2004). However, preparation for AE leaders “are not afforded similar opportunities for development of skill sets required to successfully lead nontraditional programs” (Price, 2009, p.5).

Based on the evolving needs of the at-risk student and gaps in the literature on principal preparation programs for AE leaders, this study examined the perspectives of secondary alternative school principals. This study sought to examine whether current levels of professional development are providing training in the skills necessary to lead schools effectively

to promote AE student success. Lastly, the study examined secondary principals' perceptions of whether appropriate and/or effective preparation has been received to lead AE schools.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

Chapter Three describes the methodology used in the study. The purpose of this study was to identify secondary alternative school principals' perceptions on the impact of leadership program preparation, district-level PD, and specialized training on alternative school leadership. Perceptions of PD needs for effective management of programs educating students categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school was also be examined.

Initially, the research design is discussed. Following the research design, the study's research questions are listed, succeeded by the population and sampling techniques. Next, data collection and data gathering procedures are discussed. Instrument design and validation follow the aforementioned procedures and the chapter concludes with an explanation of how the data were managed.

Research Design

Using phenomenological qualitative research, the researcher investigated perceptions of secondary school principals' preparedness to lead alternative programs. The study utilized a semi-structured online survey instrument to acquire data from a representative sample of secondary alternative school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Survey questions were used to obtain data reflecting secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of the impact of leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and specialized training on alternative school leadership.

Phenomenological research was used as the methodology in this study. Phenomenological research is "a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study" (Creswell, 2014, p. 292). For purposes of this study, the phenomenon research focus was secondary alternative school principal perceptions based upon their leadership experiences.

Research Design Justification

For this study, the components of analysis were principal perspectives of the impact of leadership preparation programs, division-level PD, and specialized training on alternative

school leadership. Phenomenological qualitative research permits the researcher opportunity to ask subjective questions tied to a limited system being studied (Creswell, 2014). According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are interested in “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Qualitative research allows for the “understanding of how people make sense out of their lives” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). Overall, the goal of the study was to identify secondary alternative school principals’ perceptions of leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and specialized training on alternative school leadership. This identification may serve as a point of reference for college and university educational leadership programs and school division PD offerings for aspiring school leaders of secondary alternative schools.

Research Questions

To obtain data that provided an optimal level of secondary alternative school principals’ perceptions, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What courses do secondary alternative school principals identify as most beneficial of the specialized training received during their principal preparation program?
2. What previous leadership experiences do secondary alternative school principals perceive to be most beneficial for preparation to lead alternative schools?
3. What leadership skills do secondary alternative school leaders indicate are necessary for individuals new to the position of secondary alternative school principal?
4. What division-level professional development do secondary alternative school leaders indicate has been provided that is relevant to the position of secondary alternative school principals?
5. How do secondary alternative education leaders believe their leadership preparation programs informed their work in alternative education?

Population

The population selected for invitation to participate in this study was a homogeneous group of secondary alternative school principals from the 28 regional AE programs identified by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE, 2017). Within the 28 regional AE programs in the Commonwealth of Virginia, 135 division superintendents were contacted to request

permission to survey secondary alternative school principals in their school divisions. Secondary alternative school principals were chosen to participate on the basis of their experiences as alternative school leaders. According to Merriam (2009), when a research study solicits participants to share experiences and phenomenon, interviewing is “more open-ended and less structured” (p. 90). A semi-structured survey instrument was offered for voluntary completion to licensed secondary level principals leading alternative school programs across the Commonwealth of Virginia. These alternative school leaders provided services to at-risk students between the ages of 14 and 18. Study participants selected for participation were identified using the Virginia Department of Education website, which identifies regional AE programs throughout the state (www.doe.virginia.gov). For the purposes of this phenomenological study, a minimum of 10 participants were needed to maximize information. According to Creswell (2014), “small numbers characterize qualitative research” (p. 239). Additionally, Creswell (2014) shares that phenomenological studies “typically range from three to ten” participants (p. 239). Moreover, Merriam (2009) indicates that a minimum of 15 contributors are needed to maximize information and reach a point of saturation. The researcher notes that the title designation of *principal* may vary based on school level and funding sources, but all met the study definition given for the term “educational leadership.”

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection utilizing an online survey instrument occurred during the month of December in 2016. Prior to sending the online survey to secondary alternative school principals invited to participate in the study, 135 regional AE program directors and school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia were contacted via email (see Appendix A) requesting permission to contact secondary alternative school leaders within their school divisions. Following superintendent approval, a cover letter (see Appendix B) was sent to each invitee requesting participation and explaining the research to be conducted. Included in the cover letter was an embedded web link giving the participant access the survey instrument. The cover letter explained that completion of the survey implied consent for study participation. Additionally, the cover letter explained the absence of negative risks for participating in the survey. The cover letter also informed participants of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix C) to conduct the study.

The data set consisted of precise transcriptions from the semi-structured phenomenological survey link emailed to each secondary alternative school principal invited to participate in the study. The semi-structured phenomenological survey consisted of questions designed by the researcher to gain insight into principals' career experiences and perceptions of AE leadership preparation. Open-ended survey questions resembling an interview structure were created by the researcher to capture principal perceptions and allow personal experience elaboration. The survey instrument titled, A Survey of Secondary Alternative School Leaders' Perceptions (SSASLP) (Appendix D) was designed specifically for the purpose of this research study. According to Merriam (2009), "Surveying is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p. 88). Semi-structured surveying allows the researcher to explore experiences that may not be discovered through structured surveys (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured surveys are "guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). The questions used in the semi-structured survey were reviewed and validated by a group of public school leaders enrolled in an Educational Leadership and Policy Studies doctoral cohort.

The philosophy of phenomenology was relevant to this study in that the philosophy comes from "a focus on the experiences itself and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness" (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). Use of a "phenomenological approach is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). This approach applied to this research study because secondary alternative school principal perceptions of leadership preparation were studied.

Study participants were initially asked to provide basic descriptive information about their leadership career (Merriam, 2009). This information laid the foundation for questions that accessed secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of leadership preparation. The "use of broad open-ended questions" allowed the researcher opportunity to take note of secondary alternative school principals' perceptions (Merriam, 2009, p. 104). Lastly, the survey instrument questions supported the review of literature and encouraged secondary alternative school principals to share their experiences (Downey, 2008).

Data Gathering Procedures

The IRB of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University training was completed in the fall of 2014 (Appendix E). An application for IRB approval was submitted prior to conducting the study (Creswell, 2014). Once IRB approval was granted, permission was requested from Commonwealth of Virginia AE school directors and school division superintendents to conduct research with secondary alternative school leaders in their school divisions. The request to school division superintendents was presented in email format outlining the purpose of the study and the procedures for collecting data. Upon receiving permission to conduct research in the Commonwealth of Virginia school divisions, an email was sent to secondary alternative school principals stating the purpose of the study, outlining study procedures, and requesting participation in the study. Each secondary alternative school principal was asked to complete the online survey instrument developed by the researcher via the Web-based survey tool Qualtrics®. Qualtrics® is an approved Web-based survey tool according to the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University IRB application.

Instrument Design

The survey instrument, SSASLP, was designed by the researcher specifically for the purpose of this study (Creswell, 2014). The research instrument included an email letter to introduce participants to the researcher, share the purpose of the study, provide the survey procedures, and request participation in the study. The introduction included background information for the participants and explained why the study was being conducted. The letter also informed the participants of the sample population and survey question framework. Additionally, the introduction letter gave a detailed explanation assuring the participants that their responses would be confidential.

The survey instrument utilized in this study was comprised of two sections. The first section consisted of participant background information focusing on years of experience, current assignment level, and educational background (i.e., leadership preparation programs and PD). According to Creswell (2014), “demographics and experiences may cause researchers to lean toward certain themes, to actively look for evidence to support their positions, and to create favorable or unfavorable conclusions about the sites or participants” (p. 237).

The second section of the survey instrument focused on study participants' perceptions of leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and the impact of specialized training on leadership. The semi-structured survey section of questions allowed open-ended responses. Semi-structured surveys can include two types of open-ended questions "grand tour" questions and questions that focus on emotional and mental details of an experience (Seidman, 2006). For the purpose of this study, semi-structured survey questions focused on the mental details of secondary alternative school principals' alternative school leadership preparation.

Instrument Validation

This study utilized a survey instrument developed by the researcher, SSASLP. A triangulation approach was used to establish instrument validity/quality, based on qualitative research not having the expectation of replication (Simon, 2011). Instrument quality was determined by a group of educational professionals currently enrolled as doctoral students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Instrument validity/quality can be evaluated only by examining the connection between the question and the attitude, behavior, or fact that it purports to collect (Sue & Ritter, 2007). The semi-structured survey questions were developed by the researcher to gain more discriminating perceptions from secondary alternative school principals concerning leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and the impact of specialized training on leadership. To validate the semi-structured survey instrument developed for this study, two rounds of survey reviews were used. The first round of the validation process yielded a survey question clarification rating of 17/20 (85%). This indicated that three of the semi-structured survey questions were not understood as written and could possibly yield answers unrelated to the study's purpose. Suggested survey edits which identified more precise wording structure were made and the instrument was resubmitted to the review panel consisting of public school administrators enrolled in a doctoral program. The second round of validation yielded a survey question clarification rating of 20/20 (100%).

Data Treatment

The researcher maintained data collected through the online survey instrument in a notebook and on a flash-drive; both storage tools were placed in a secure, locked location throughout the study. The flash-drive storage device was used to store data downloaded from the

Qualtrics® online survey engine into separate Excel® files for analysis. The collected data were destroyed following successful defense of the study. All personally identifiable information relating to study participants was deleted by the research prior to analysis. The collected data were destroyed following the successful defense of the study.

Data Management

The study survey instrument, SSASLP, was developed to assist with recording leadership preparation perceptions of secondary alternative school principals uploaded into the online survey tool, Qualtrics®. This online survey format helped to stimulate ease of response and encourage participants to speak freely and openly. All data received from the survey instrument were gathered and maintained by an approved survey site (www.virginiatech.qualtrics.com). Additionally, collected participant data were accessed using a password assigned to the researcher during the data analysis process.

Data Analysis Techniques

Following the accumulation of the semi-structured survey data, participant responses were downloaded from Qualtrics® into a word processing document formatted with 2-inch right margins; this helped to organize the semi-structured survey responses for analysis. Preparing data for analysis involved visually scanning collected responses and sorting into common categories (Creswell, 2014). The next phase of the analysis process required that each response be read for comprehension of what was being communicated by secondary alternative school principals. During this phase, notes were recorded in the margin area to identify commonalities (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, a reflexive journal was maintained to identify researcher preferences, values, and personal experience, such as history, philosophy, and socioeconomic status (SES) that shape interpretations formed during a study (Creswell, 2014).

Each semi-structured survey for secondary alternative school principal was organized as a data set through categorical coding (Merriam, 2009). Data sets were identified by a pseudonym determined by the researcher (Creswell, 2014). According to Merriam (2009), data organization should take place early when conducting qualitative research. As the researcher collected data through the semi-structured survey, transcribing and coding took place. Merriam (2009) described coding as “assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of data” (p.173). The coding process will allow

the researcher to “work back and forth between themes and databases until establishment of a comprehensive set of themes” takes place (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). In this study, “Each survey, set of field notes, and document [had] identifying notations to allow easy access for analysis and findings write-up” (Merriam, 2009, p. 173).

“Qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative” (Merriam, 2009, p.175). The researcher studied data sets to identify responses to research questions, observing similarities among participant perspectives (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation of data were conducted to ensure quality and dependability (Merriam, 2009). According to Creswell (2014), “triangulation occurs by examining evidence from sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes” (p. 201). In addition to semi-structured survey transcriptions and coding, triangulation sources included a review of state records reflecting student academic and discipline statistics and member checking of transcribed semi-structured surveys. Using these methods of validity and reliability allowed the researcher to gather multiple sources of data to compare when developing an explanation to the phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2014).

Data were coded using coding categories to represent principal perceptions. Coding “terms, concepts, and categories” were determined by what were “seen in the study data” (Merriam, 2009 p. 184). There may be a potential risk with coding participant responses due to researcher opinions and biases (Creswell, 2014). Reliability for the study was maintained by coding reassessments of multiple individuals. Consistent themes and patterns were developed through the analysis process (Merriam, 2009). At the conclusion of data analysis, a qualitative narrative described a detailed chronology of study events, detailing interconnecting themes with the use of tables (Creswell, 2014). Finally, an interpretation of the data analysis led to the development of the study’s findings.

Timeline

The researcher submitted an IRB application following a successful prospectus defense. Three days following IRB approval, a letter requesting permission to administer a semi-structured surveys to secondary alternative school principals was mailed to 135 AE regional directors and school division superintendents in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Study start and end dates were contingent upon the receipt of permission to conduct the research study in the school divisions receiving an invitation to participate. Once permission was received from

regional directors and school division superintendents, secondary alternative school principals were contacted via email containing an invitation to participate in the study and a link to the Web-based, semi-structured survey used for data collection. The study participation window was to conduct semi-structured surveys within four weeks of the IRB approval date. One week after the first request was distributed, a follow-up email was sent to invited participants not responding to the first request. A final reminder email was sent to non-responders fourteen days into the participation window; this email was personalized to each non-responder (Creswell, 2014). The study was considered complete when interview saturation occurred. Interview saturation occurred when there was no new information being brought forth by the homogeneous group of secondary alternative school principals (Latham, 2013).

Methodology Summary

In summary, the study sought to capture the perceptions of secondary alternative school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia concerning leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and the impact of specialized training on leadership. To obtain data, this study utilized a phenomenological research design to engage secondary alternative school principals in a Web-based, semi-structured survey via Qualtrics®. The use of a semi-structured survey allowed principals the opportunity to share experiences and phenomenon with less structure (Merriam 2009). The respondents were representative of secondary alternative school leaders in the Commonwealth of Virginia. School division protocols for electronic semi-structured surveying and data collection were followed; permission was obtained through email letters from regional alternative school directors and school division superintendents. The research was designed to present leadership preparation programs and school divisions with secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and the impact of specialized training on leadership.

Chapter 4 Analysis of Data

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify secondary alternative school principals' perceptions on the impact of leadership program preparation, district-level PD, and specialized training on alternative school leadership. Perceptions of PD needs for effective management of programs educating students categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school was also examined. Five research questions were developed in order to investigate and understand leadership perspectives of secondary alternative school principals. Data were collected and analyzed pursuant to the following research questions guiding this study.

1. What courses do secondary alternative school principals identify as most beneficial of the specialized training received during their principal preparation program?
2. What previous leadership experiences do secondary alternative school principals perceive to be most beneficial for preparation to lead alternative schools?
3. What leadership skills do secondary alternative school leaders indicate are necessary for individuals new to the position of secondary alternative school principal?
4. What division-level professional development do secondary alternative school leaders indicate has been provided that is relevant to the position of secondary alternative school principals?
5. How do secondary alternative education leaders believe their leadership preparation programs informed their work in alternative education?

This chapter reports the analysis of data collected during this study. The results are based on major themes and patterns that emerged from a semi-structured, qualitative, online survey developed by the researcher. The semi-structured survey instrument was developed specifically for this study to gather perceptions of secondary alternative school principals (SASP) in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Prior to IRB submission and approval, SSASLP instrument quality was determined by a group of educational professionals currently enrolled as doctoral students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. To validate the semi-structured survey instrument developed for this study, two rounds of survey reviews were used. The first round of

the validation process yielded a survey question clarification rating of 17/20 (85%). Suggested survey edits were made and the instrument was resubmitted to the review panel consisting of public school administrators enrolled in a doctoral program. The second round of validation yielded a survey question clarification rating of 20/20 (100%).

Study Participation

Upon receipt of the IRB approval letter from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, an email detailing the study was sent to 135 school division superintendents across the Commonwealth of Virginia to request permission for their secondary alternative school principals to participate in the study. Of the 135 superintendents emailed, 43 school divisions granted permission for study participation, four school divisions declined participation, eight school divisions did not have alternative schools, and 80 school divisions failed to respond to the request.

Survey Response Rate

The instrument, SSASLP, was developed and uploaded into the Web-based survey tool, Qualtrics®. The survey link was sent along with an introductory email detailing the study purpose and requesting participation in the study to the 43 potential study participants. Of the 43 secondary alternative school leaders invited to participate in the study, 18 (42%) principals completed the online survey. The researcher rendered the survey sample size return rate of 42% acceptable for analysis in accordance with Creswell's (2014) data collection procedures, which states "phenomenological qualitative research is characterized by small participation numbers typically three to ten" (p. 239).

Secondary alternative school principals were grouped into two categories, middle school and high school. The survey was distributed electronically and open for 45 days, December 8, 2016, through January 21, 2017. The survey was divided into two sections. The first section was four question demographic questionnaire and the second section was a 16-statement survey of AE leadership preparation inquiries. The survey used an open-ended format which allowed secondary AE school principals the opportunity to divulge complete perceptions without limitations.

At the end of the survey session, results were downloaded from Qualtrics and imported into an excel spreadsheet document for further analysis. Demographic data were collected from participants to obtain participant geographic location, degree level, years of service, and alternative school level.

In all, 43 secondary alternative school principals across the Commonwealth of Virginia were invited via email to participate in the study. The invitation email stated the purpose of the study, the reason for their selection for participation, and included a link to the online survey. The initial email request generated five responses (5 out of 43, 12%); the first reminder, sent after two weeks, yielded nine additional responses (14 out of 43, 33%); the final reminder, sent after four weeks, produced four additional responses (18 out of 43, 42%). Each participant received an electronic thank you response after submitting the survey. Data were collected over a period of 45 days.

Study Sample Population

Although both middle and high school alternative principals were invited to participate in the study, 18 secondary alternative school principals assigned to alternative high schools across the Commonwealth of Virginia voluntarily participated in this study. No secondary alternative school principals assigned to middle schools participated in the study. All schools represented were public secondary alternative schools in the Commonwealth Virginia providing educational services to students in grades nine through twelve. Permission to participate had been granted by their school division superintendents prior to the invitation to participate being extended by the researcher. Of those completing the online survey, 72.22% held Masters' degrees, 16.67% held Educational Specialist degrees, and 11.11% held Doctorate degrees (see Table 1).

Study participants were asked to indicate the number of years of experience as alternative school leaders. Of the 18 respondents, 47% of the secondary alternative school principals had less than five years of experience, 35% had more than five years of experience but less than 11 years of experience, and 18% had 11 or more years of experience (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics: Highest level of Education, Current Alternative Education Assignment, and Years of Experience as Secondary Alternative School Principal

Participants	EDUCATION			Secondary Alternative School Level		Years of Experience		
	M	Ed.S	D	Middle	High	<5	5 - 10	>10
SASP #1	X				X	X		
SASP #2			X		X			X
SASP #3	X				X	X		
SASP #4		X			X		X	
SASP #5	X				X		X	
SASP #6	X				X	X		
SASP #7	X				X	X		
SASP #8	X				X		X	
SASP #9	X				X	X		
SASP #10		X			X		X	
SASP #11	X				X		X	
SASP #12		X			X	X		
SASP #13	X				X			X
SASP #14	X				X		X	
SASP #15	X				X	X		
SASP #16	X				X	X		

(continued)

Table 1 (*cont.*)

Participants	EDUCATION			Secondary Alternative School Level		Years of Experience		
	M	Ed.S	D	Middle	High	<5	5 - 10	>10
	SASP #17			X		X		
SASP #18	X				X		X	
TOTALS	13	3	2	0	18	8	7	3
%	72	17	11	0	100	47	35	18

Table 1 describes the level of education for each secondary alternative school principal submitting a survey in the study. Moreover, the table includes the secondary alternative school level that each principal is assigned to and their years of experience as alternative school leaders as indicated in their survey responses.

Data Description

The following section describes data collected from survey questions 5- 21; questions 1-4 gathered demographic data from study participants. In all, 18 secondary alternative school principals submitted online responses to the study instrument, SSASLP.

Transcripts were created for all 18 online surveys submitted. Each survey was read to gain a general overview of the data provided by participants. The researcher worked through each survey question answered by the 18 study participants to determine recurring topics. Table 2 provides recurring areas identified by the researcher and indicates the codes they were assigned in this study. The recurring codes became the basis for themes determined by the researcher.

Table 2

Recurring Codes and Descriptions

Code	Description	Code	Description
JJ	Juvenile Justice	PE	Previous Experience
D	Discipline	S	Sensitivity
COM	Communication	D	Diversity
GEN	General Education	NO	None
R	Respect	PD	Professional Development
RS	Relationships (with students)	SPED	Special Education

Research question 1. What courses do secondary alternative school principals identify as most beneficial of the specialized training received during their principal preparation program?

To gain an understanding of secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of specialized training considered essential for preparation to lead alternative schools, survey questions five and six rendered the following results.

Survey question five asked secondary alternative school principals to list specialized alternative education courses taken during their principal preparation programs that prepared them for their current position. Thirteen stated that no specialized alternative education courses were taken during their principal preparation programs to prepare them for their current position. The combined responses of the four principals receiving specialized preparation listed the following specialization courses; "School Law, Adolescent Behavior, Special Education courses, Building Relationships, Transforming School Climate, Discipline for Difficult Students, Analysis of Educational Concepts, Classroom Management, and Working with Students with Disabilities." One participant chose to retype the survey question as a response. None of the courses listed as specialized were directly related to a specialized alternative education curriculum (see Table 3).

Survey question six asked secondary alternative school principals to reflect upon the courses previously listed and assess which are used most often in daily alternative school operations. Secondary alternative school principals responding to question five were able to respond to

question six listing School Law, Adolescent Behavior, Building Relationships, and Analysis of Concepts (see Table 3).

Additionally, the secondary alternative school principal reflecting on Analysis of Concepts course content expressed particular reflection on the study of punishment. Moreover, a probation officer turned secondary alternative school principal shared that most often, reflections center on previous corrections trainings addressing at-risk youth (see Table 3).

Table 3

Specialized Alternative Education Courses Taken While in Principal Preparation Program and Used with Daily Alternative School Operations

Participants	Specialized alternative education courses taken in Principal Preparation Program	Principal Preparation Program courses reflected upon to assist in daily alternative school operations
SASP #1	None	None
SASP #3	None	None
SASP #4	None	None
SASP #5	School law, Adolescent Behavior, Special Education Courses	School Law, Adolescent Behavior
SASP #6	None	None
SASP #7	None	None
SASP #8	None	None
SASP #9	None	None
SASP #10	None	None
SASP #11	None	None
SASP #12	None	None

(continued)

Table 3 (cont.)

Participants	Specialized alternative education courses taken in Principal Preparation Program	Principal Preparation Program courses reflected upon to assist in daily alternative school operations
SASP #14	Building Relationships, School law, Ruby Paine, Working with Students With Disabilities, Classroom Management, Discipline for Difficult Students	Building Relationships
SASP #15	None	None
SASP #16	None	None
SASP #17	None	Analysis of Concepts course content expressed particular reflection on the study of punishment.
SASP #18	Transforming School Climate	“I reflect a lot upon my previous experience as a juvenile probation officer and the numerous trainings attended to address at-risk youth”

Table 3 illustrates responses to questions five and six in the semi-structured survey. Study participants identified specialized AE courses taken while enrolled in principal preparation programs. Study participants also identified courses currently used during the daily operations of their perspective alternative schools. Although a few participants listed courses relevant to special education specialization, these individuals did have special education specialization backgrounds.

Research question 2. What previous leadership experiences do secondary alternative school principals perceive to be beneficial for stimulating alternative school student achievement?

To gain an understanding of secondary alternative school principals’ perceptions of previous leadership experiences considered vital to realize optimal student achievement, survey questions eight (Prior to becoming an alternative school leader, what student populations did you work with?), nine (Within the populations listed in question 8, were there any students identified as “at-risk”? If so, what practices were applied to assist those students with overcoming academic and behavioral challenges?), ten (Reflecting upon previous leadership experiences,

which practices do you currently use to positively impact student achievement?), and twenty (What challenges if any, do you currently face in providing equity for all students? Please list specialized trainings that have assisted you with overcoming these challenges.) rendered the following results.

Survey question eight asked secondary alternative school principals to disclose the type of student populations worked with prior to becoming alternative school leaders (see Table 4)). Prior to accepting the position of secondary alternative school principal, 11 participants in this study were general education high school administrators, three were special education classroom teachers, one was a Department of Corrections probation officer, and two were gifted education classroom teachers. One secondary alternative school principal's previous experience was student teaching.

Survey question nine asked secondary alternative school principals if within the populations listed in question eight, any students were identified as "at-risk". Principals were also asked to share practices applied to assist at-risk students to overcoming academic and behavioral challenges. Of the 18 respondents, 12 principals answered "Yes," to students being identified as "at-risk" in their previous assignments. Interventions identified by participants to assist students with overcoming academic and behavioral challenges were counseling, behavior intervention plans, 504 plans, behavior contracts, online academic recovery, summer school, ISAEF, 9th grade transition program, attendance adjustments, course work reduction, behavior modification, gentle teaching, special education strategies, and selection of academically proficient non-judgmental staff members (see Table 4)).

Table 4

Previous Experiences and Practices Applied to At-Risk Students

Participants	Previous Student Populations	Identified “at-risk” students	Academic/Behavioral Interventions
SASP #1	Gen. Ed. High School	Yes	Behavior Intervention Plans, 504 plans, Behavior Contracts,
SASP #2	Student Teacher	Yes	“Unsure, I was a student teacher.”
SASP #3	Gifted Education	No	None
SASP #4	Gen. Ed. High School	No	None
SASP #5	Gen. Ed. High School	Yes	Online academic recovery, summer school, ISAEP, 9 th grade transition program, counseling
SASP #7	Special Education	Yes	Counseling
SASP #8	Gen. Ed. High School	Yes	Special Education, hiring great teachers, parent involvement
SASP #9	Gen. Ed. High School	Yes	Tutoring, parent involvement, mentoring, behavior contracts
SASP #10	Special Education	Yes	Behavior modification, gentle teaching, and other special education strategies
SASP #11	Gifted Education	No	None
SASP #12	Gen. Ed. High School	No	None
SASP #13	Gen. Ed. High School	Yes	Selection of academically proficient non-judgmental staff members.
SASP #14	Gen. Ed. High School	Yes	None
SASP #15	Gen. Ed. High School	Yes	Attendance adjustments, course work reduction
SASP #16	Gen. Ed. High School	No	None
SASP #17	Special Education	Yes	Differentiated instruction
SASP #18	Juv. Probation Officer	Yes	Behavioral level point system

Table 4 depicts secondary alternative school responses to survey questions eight (Prior to becoming an alternative school leader, what student populations did you work with?) and nine (Within the populations listed in question 8, were there any students identified as “at-risk”? If so, what practices were applied to assist those students with overcoming academic and behavioral challenges?).

Survey question 10 asked secondary alternative school principals to reflect upon previous leadership experiences and share practices currently used to positively impact student achievement. In their reflections, secondary alternative school principals revealed that ultimately being consistent, caring and considerate of learning styles, staying positive, building relationships with students, visibility, and respecting students have a positive impact on student achievement (see Table 5). Additionally, secondary alternative school principals perceived that supporting students and parents, and working with teachers to improve instruction by finding an instructional model positively impacts student achievement.

Secondary alternative school principals also listed intervention programs and strategies that positively impact student achievement. The programs and strategies listed were: Discipline without Tears, Marzano strategies, Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS), Point Systems, counseling services, pro-active discipline, student incentive programs, and smaller student to teacher ratios (see Table 5).

Survey question 20 asked secondary alternative school principals to indicate challenges faced in providing equity to all students and specialized training that has assisted with overcoming the challenges. Participants were encouraged to view equity in a manner that focused on the students within their schools being equipped with the resources necessary for graduation skills necessary for post-secondary success. Nine of the 18 participants stated that they do not have equity challenges in their schools. The remaining nine participants expressed that their school divisions currently provide PD to address equity issues (see Table 5).

Table 5

Positive Impact on Student Achievement and Equity Challenges

Participants	Positive Impact on Student Achievement	Equity Challenges
SASP #1	Discipline without Tears, PBIS, Point Systems, caring and consideration, consistency,	None
SASP #2	Building relationships, treating students with dignity	Crisis training
SASP #3	None	None
SASP #4	None	None
SASP #5	Being visible, good listener, support the students and parents	Our district in in the process of researching ideas
SASP #6	None	None
SASP #7	Low student/teacher ratios, pro-active approach to discipline, parent support, student incentive programs	Sensitivity training is needed.
SASP #8	Marzano strategies, PBIS, parent involvement, counseling,	Socio-economic differences in our school populations. Many trainings aimed at helping ALL students, not just lower socio-economic challenged students.
SASP #9	Achieve 3000, Apex, Odysseyware	It has always been my position to operate in a fair and impartial manner.
SASP #10	Accentuating positive behaviors and down playing negative behaviors.	Students are misunderstood in the traditional school environment.
SASP #11	None	None
SASP #12	None	None
SASP #13	High expectations academically and behaviorally. Parent involvement	Addressed district wide by professional development.
SASP #14	Accentuate the positive, high expectations, parent involvement, identify, target, and develop goals	None
SASP #15	Building positive relationships, with students and parents.	None
SASP #16	Reward positive academics and behaviors	None
SASP #17	PBIS, differentiate instruction	None
SASP #18	Positive reinforcement, student de-escalation time.	None

Table 5 illustrates secondary alternative school principal responses to survey questions 10 (Reflecting upon previous leadership experiences, which practices do you currently use to positively impact student achievement?), and 20 (What challenges if any, do you currently face in providing equity for all students? Please list specialized trainings that have assisted you with overcoming these challenges.).

Research question 3. What leadership skills do secondary alternative school leaders indicate are necessary for individuals new to the position of secondary alternative school principal?

To gain an understanding of secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of leadership training and/or PD that is necessary for individuals new to the position of secondary alternative school principal, survey question 11 (What skills are considered important for new secondary alternative school administrators entering their buildings to meet the needs of "at-risk" students?) and 12 (When you were new to alternative education, did you have the skills listed in question 11? If so, how were they obtained?) rendered the following results.

Survey question 11 asked study participants what skills are considered important for new secondary alternative school administrators entering their buildings to meet the needs of "at-risk" students. Survey participant answers focused primarily on the new administrators being knowledgeable of the court system, juvenile justice system, and building relationships. Participants also perceived that new secondary alternative school principals should always have the ability to communicate well with parents and other community stakeholders to help promote more positive images of alternative schools and programs. Moreover, 10 out of the 18 (56%) secondary alternative school principals submitting the survey perceived that new administrators must embrace the concept that all students and staff members are important, thereby promoting an atmosphere where personal visions prompting independence, creativity, productivity, and contributions to society (see Table 6).

Survey question 12 asked secondary alternative school principals "When you were new to alternative education, did you have the skills listed in question 11? If so, how were they obtained?" Thirteen out of 18 (72%) study participants perceived that they did not possess the essential skills that were considered vital for new secondary alternative school principals. Additionally, the perceptions of these secondary alternative school principals were that they acquired essential skills while in their current positions.

The remaining five participants shared that they entered into their positions as secondary alternative school principals with the essential skills necessary for the role. Participants shared that the skills were obtained through previous employment experiences such as juvenile probation officers, bartenders, coaching, special education teachers, and counselors (see Table 6).

Table 6

Important Skills for New Administrators in Alternative Schools

Participants	Skills for new SASP	Present when SASP was new to alternative education	How were skills obtained?
SASP #1	Knowledge of population, State Operated Programs, and Department of Juvenile Justice	Yes	Previous work experience in Detention and Violent Juvenile Offender Programs
SASP #2	Positive personality and experience with Solid Object Relationship Model	Yes	Developed due to diverse work and personal background. The two occupations most beneficial were as a property manager and bartender/manager
SASP #3	None Noted	No	N/A
SASP #4	None Noted	No	N/A
SASP #5	Understanding of at-risk student environment, demographics, and background	No	On the job and with experience
SASP #6	None Noted	No	N/A
SASP #7	Passion for at-risk population, excellent communication skills, ability to walk in student shoes	Yes	Life experiences because these skills cannot be taught.

(continued)

Table 6 (cont.)

Participants	Skills for new SASP	Present when SASP was new to alternative education	How were skills obtained?
SASP #8	Consistency in expectations, caring attitude	Yes.	Learned and developed through teaching and coaching
SASP #9	Ability to create positive relationships	No	It is impossible to be prepared fully to lead alternative education.
SASP #10	Ability to be non-judgmental, flexible, and establish relationships with students	Yes	Special Education coursework
SASP #11	None Noted	No	N/A
SASP #12	None Noted	No	N/A
SASP #13	Open, active listener, approachable, consistent, flexible	No	Skills learned through daily experiences
SASP #14	Building and promoting relationships	No	N/A
SASP #15	Relationship building, thinking outside the box, troubleshooting	No	On the job training
SASP #16	None Noted	No	N/A

(continued)

Table 6 (cont.)

Participants	Skills for new SASP	Present when SASP was new to alternative education	How were skills obtained?
SASP #17	Strong knowledge of child development, excellent verbal and written communicator	Yes to some degree	No Response
SASP #18	Patience, compassion, ability to develop innovative ways to support positive behavior.	Yes	Job as a juvenile probation officer

Table 6 depicts secondary alternative school principal responses to survey questions eleven (What skills are considered important for new secondary alternative school administrators entering their buildings to meet the needs of “at-risk” students?) and question 12 (When you were new to alternative education, did you have the skills listed in question 11? If so, how were they obtained?).

Research question 4. What division-level professional development do secondary alternative school leaders indicate has been provided that is relevant to the position of secondary alternative school principals?

To gain an understanding of secondary alternative school principals’ perceptions of how divisional PD has enriched the position of secondary alternative school principal, survey question 13 (Have you participated in division-level professional development? If yes, please list the division-level professional development directly related to alternative education.), question 14 (How does your division determine which professional development topics are offered?), question 15 (Which division-level professional development topics align with alternative education issues unique to your student population?), question 16 (How has division-level professional development supported your goals as a secondary alternative school principal?), and question 17 (Are you able to identify professional development needs specific to alternative education that are not addressed in your school division? If so, please list these needs.) rendered the following results.

Survey question 13 asked secondary AE school principals to list division-level PD directly related to AE. Fifteen out of the 18 (83%) secondary AE school principals participating in the study shared that there has not been any division-level PD directly related to AE. Six out

of the 15 (40%) not experiencing division-level PD directly related to AE shared that they are not invited to participate in division-level PD at all (see Table 7).

Survey question 14 asked secondary alternative school principals how their school division determine which PD topics are offered. Responses to this survey question revealed that school division PD topics were determined by central office personnel (10 out of 18, 56%), survey of instructional staff (4 out of 18, 22%), general education at the middle and high school levels (2 out of 18, 11%), and Standards of Learning (SOL) and benchmark data (1 out of 18, 6%). However, one out of the 18 (6%) of principals surveyed was allowed to determine PD topics related to AE (see Table 7).

Survey question 15 asked secondary AE school principals to indicate division-level PD topics aligned with AE issues unique to their student populations. Three study participants shared that they have participated in division-level PD directly related to AE. The PD in their school divisions directly related to AE included topics such as diversity, school culture and how to change it, maximizing inclusion by mitigating the effects of unconscious bias, FBA/BIP, Response to Intervention (RTI), treat assessment training, VDOE Teacher Direct, PBIS,, EDIVATE for administrators, learning focused lesson plans, Gear Up for Administrators, special education and the law, 504 Plan, suicide invention, Achieve3000 training, and understanding poverty (see Table 7).

Survey question 16 asked secondary alternative school principals how their division-level PD has supported their goals as secondary alternative school principals. Ten out of 18 (56%) participants in the study shared that no support was given in the area of PD to support their goals as secondary alternative school principals. The remaining eight participants (8 out of 18, 44%) shared that their goals are supported by their school divisions as they are “kept in the loop of instructional needs and requirements for students returning to traditional schools” (SASP #13), introduced to instructional strategies to enhance student performance, given behavioral support through local universities, and provided training on school culture. However, there was one (1 out of 18, 6%) participant that was hopeful of being included in future PD due to a new superintendent entering the division with AE experience (see Table 7).

Table 7

Perceptions of Division Level Professional Development

Participants	Participation/ Alternative Ed. Relevance	Determination of PD Offerings	PD Alignment with Alternative Ed. Issues	Division PD support of SASP Goals
SASP #1	None	None	None	None
SASP #2	Yes/None	Central Office	Crisis Management	None
SASP #3	None	None	None	None
SASP #4	None	None	None	None
SASP #5	No	What is needed by middle and high schools	Discipline for DCV coding, special education updates, positive behavior intervention models.	Mainly keeping me in the loop of instructional needs and requirements.
SASP #6	None	None	None	None
SASP #7	Yes/None	School Board Office	Teaching Styles	None in the past but new superintendent has alternative education background
SASP #8	Yes/None	Upper management with some principal/ teacher input	None	It hasn't

(continued)

Table 7 (cont.)

Participants	Participation/ Alternative Ed. Relevance	Determination of PD Offerings	PD Alignment with Alternative Ed. Issues	Division PD support of SASP Goals
SASP #9	Yes/ Maximizing Inclusion by Mitigating the Effects of Unconscious Bias," "FBA/BIP Training," "Response to Intervention Training," "Treat Assessment Training," "VDOE Teacher Direct," "PBIS," "EDIVATE for Administrators," "Learning Focused Lesson Plans," "Gear Up for Administrators," "Special Education and the Law," "Section 504 Plan," "Suicide Invention," "Achieve3000 Training," and "A Framework for Understanding Poverty."	Executive Director of Accountability and School Improvement	Maximize the Power of Inclusion and Engagement by Unconscious Bias, Learning Focused Lesson Plans, PBIS, Response to Intervention, and FBA/BIP Training	Providing a listening ear and responding promptly and with a willing spirit of cooperation.

(continued)

Table 7 (cont.)

Participants	Participation/ Alternative Ed. Relevance	Determination of PD Offerings	PD Alignment with Alternative Ed. Issues	Division PD support of SASP Goals
SASP #10	Yes/None	Staff Development	None	It hasn't
SASP #11	None	None	None	None
SASP #12	None	None	None	None
SASP #13	Yes/ Diversity	Teacher & principal suggestions	None	Absolutely
SASP #14	No/None	What is needed in regular school buildings	None	Understanding where the base schools were for student transition back to home school
SASP #15	Yes/ School Culture	Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction	School Culture	School culture is very important especially to at- risk students who don't like school to begin with.
SASP #16	N/A	Data collected from SOL and benchmark scores	N/A	District wide professional development introduces strategies as well enhance present strategies to increase student

(continued)

Table 7 (cont.)

Participants	Participation/ Alternative Ed. Relevance	Determination of PD Offerings	PD Alignment with Alternative Ed. Issues	Division PD support of SASP Goals
SASP #16 (continued)				performance. Along with remediation and smaller class sizes this is aligned with the mission of our alternative school.
SASP #17	None	Survey of principals examining current day	PBL, use of high yield strategies, Conducting FBAs and BIPs, using data to make instructional and behavioral decisions, restorative justice principles	Helps with improving instructional practices. We also have specific PD for the alternative staff through JMU TTAC focusing on positive behavioral supports
SASP #18	No/None	I choose what professional development to attend.	Love and Logic Training	My goals have been supported by being allowed to attend numerous training's since not many are offered division-level.

Table 7 depicts secondary AE school responses to survey question 13 (Have you participated in division-level professional development? If yes, please list the district-level

professional development directly related to alternative education.), question 14 (How does your division determine which professional development topics are offered?), question 15 (Which district-level professional development topics align with alternative education issues unique to your student population?), and question 16 (How has division-level professional development supported your goals as a secondary alternative school principal?).

Survey question 17 asked secondary AE school principals to identify PD needs specific to AE that are not addressed in their school divisions. All secondary alternative school principals answering the survey question presented specific PD needs for alternative school leaders (see Table 8).

The PD needs shared by the participants included:

- Delivering engaging and challenging lessons; identify gaps in students' subject matter knowledge; employ higher-order questioning techniques; differentiate instruction based on an assessment of student learning needs and recognition of individual differences in students (SASP #9).
- Manage individual and class behaviors through a well-planned management system; respect students; model clear, acceptable oral and written communication skills; maintain a climate of openness, inquiry, fairness and support (SASP #9).
- Analyzing and applying data from multiple assessments and measures to diagnose students' learning needs, inform instruction based on those needs (SASP #9).
- Department of Justice and the Virginia Department of Education staffing analysis of educational programs in the Juvenile Correctional Centers (SASP #1).
- Sensitivity to at-risk students (SASP # 7).

Table 8

Perceptions of Professional Development Needs Specific to Alternative Education

Participants	Professional development needs specific to alternative education
SASP #1	Department of Juvenile Justice and the Virginia Department of Education complete a program staffing analysis of educational programs in the Juvenile Correctional Centers.
SASP #2	More specific legal training should be pushed out to our staff (due process, manifestation determination reviews, etc...).
SASP #3	No Response
SASP #4	No Response
SASP #5	Community support services, discipline alignments and codes, special education models for various student disabilities, etc.
SASP #6	No Response
SASP #7	The mind set of educators regarding at-risk students need to be changed; therefore, the division could offer professional development on sensitivity to at-risk students as a start.
SASP #8	How to help students who do not seem to want to try. How to help students who are significantly below grade level. How to help students who have significant anger management and self-control issues. How to help students who have little or no parental support at home.
SASP #9	Delivering engaging and challenging lessons; identify gaps in students' subject matter knowledge; employ higher-order questioning techniques; differentiate instruction based on an assessment of student learning needs and recognition of individual differences in students. Manage individual and class behaviors through a well-planned management system; respect students; model clear, acceptable oral and written communication skills; maintain a climate of openness, inquiry, fairness and support. Analyzing and applying data from multiple assessments and measures to diagnose students' learning needs, inform instruction based on those needs.

(continued)

Table 8 (cont.)

Participants	Professional development needs specific to alternative education
SASP #10	Student individuality
SASP #11	No Response
SASP #12	No Response
SASP #13	N/A
SASP #14	I would like to return to participating in the division professional development, but have not been asked nor invited
SASP #15	None
SASP #16	N/A
SASP #17	Trauma informed care
SASP #18	Integrating strategies for migrating from obedience-centered approach to discipline to a responsibility-centered approach.

Table 8 illustrates secondary AE school principal perceptions of PD needs specific to AE that are not addressed by their school divisions. Table 8 specifically answers survey question 17.

Research question 5. How do secondary alternative education leaders believe their leadership preparation programs informed their work in alternative education?

To gain an understanding of secondary AE school principals' perceptions of how leadership preparation programs have informed their work in AE, survey question seven (How could your principal preparation program have better equipped you to lead an alternative school?), question 18 (During your leadership preparation program, were you able to gain the skills needed to address the needs of "at risk students" assigned to your building? If not, please share additional skills that could have been helpful.), and question 19 (Please list supplemental workshops or resources specific to alternative education that you have participated in to assist you with bridging the gap left by your leadership preparation program and division-level professional development?) rendered the following results.

Survey question seven asked secondary alternative school principals to indicate ways by which their principal preparation program could have better prepared them to lead an AE school. Five secondary AE school principals (28%) responding the question perceived that their principal preparation programs could have better prepared them to lead alternative schools by

offering courses which focused on discipline, juvenile law, court services, juvenile delinquency, and dysfunctional families. Seven secondary alternative school principals (39%) focused on counseling of at-risk children, building relationships, nontraditional educational environments, and restorative practices in their responses. The remaining six principals (33%) did not mention modes of better preparation in their programs.

Survey question 18 asked secondary alternative school principals if during their leadership preparation programs they were able to gain the skills needed to address the needs of “at-risk” students assigned to their buildings. Seventeen out of 18 (94%) secondary alternative school principals participating in the study expressed that their leadership preparation programs did not equip them with the skills needed to address the needs of “at-risk” students assigned to their alternative schools. Approximately 33% of the participants surveyed shared the following perceptions of how their leadership preparation programs could have better prepared them to lead alternative schools:

- “Skills that would have been helpful knowing the Regulations and Statutes Relating to the Department of Juvenile Justice Division of Education and knowing the ratio for staffing special education for the Juvenile Correctional Centers and the Department of Correctional Education” (SASP #1).
- “A few courses discussing student behaviors and how it can impact the school environment/learning” (SASP #5).
- “If there were at least mention of the at-risk population would have been a little help” (SASP #7).
- “Working with diverse populations. Developing alternative school structures. How to cope with students in crisis” (SASP #10).
- “Relationship building was stressed but troubleshooting different scenarios to possibly get the student to graduate was not” (SASP #15).
- “I think more training in trauma informed care, cultural diversity, parent engagement would be helpful in potentially reducing the numbers of kids coming to alternative education” (SASP #17).

Survey question 19 asked secondary AE school principals to list participation in outside supplemental workshops or resources specific to AE that have helped to bridge the gap left by

their leadership preparation programs and division-level PD. Approximately 61% of secondary alternative school principals surveyed had not participated in any outside supplemental workshops or resources citing budgeting issues as the reason for non-participation. The remaining 39% of those participating in the study perceived that the following workshops and resources have helped to bridge the gap left by their leadership preparation programs and division-level PD:

- LRP Legal Conference
- Department of Juvenile Justice Workshops
- Gang Training
- Ruby Payne
- Trauma and Child Responses
- Safety and Productive Environments
- Restorative Justice in Education Trauma Informed Care Workshops
- Therapeutic Environments for Adolescents
- School Law
- Detention Center visits

Table 9

Alternative Education Trainings Missing from Leadership Preparation Programs

Participants	Better preparation from Principal Preparation Program	Skills gained during principal preparation program to lead alternative school
SASP #1	To provide courses on Juvenile Law, Basic Special Education Courses identifying exceptionalities, Course on Sociology, Juvenile Corrections, Juvenile Justice, Juvenile Delinquency, Virginia Family And Juvenile Laws And Rules Annotated, and At-Risk population characteristics	No, skills that would have been helpful knowing the Regulations and Statutes Relating to the Department of Juvenile Justice Division of Education and knowing the ratio for staffing special education for the Juvenile Correctional Centers and the Department of Correctional Education

(continued)

Table 9 (cont.)

Participants	Better preparation from Principal Preparation Program	Skills gained during principal preparation program to lead alternative school
SASP #2	There could have been additional focus areas such as discipline, special education, and legal course specific to alternative education.	NO! There are too many to list. I don't believe any program can effectively prepare one for the environment in which I work; however, a greater emphasis on alternative education should be a focus in such programs
SASP #3	No Response	No Response
SASP #4	No Response	No Response
SASP #5	More courses about the court services and re-enrollment process;	I was taught how to find the information and hope that my school district can provide the funds to support the program (if needed) along with a few courses discussing student behaviors and how it can impact the school environment/learning.
SASP #6	No Response	No Response
SASP #7	They could have offer at least one course for alternative education leadership.	No, there was no specific preparation for the at-risk population in the program I completed. If there were at least mention of the at-risk population would have been a little help.
SASP #8	A course on discipline, a course on working with dysfunctional families.	Learning more about teaching reading and leading and observing other teachers in teaching of reading.

(continued)

Table 9 (cont.)

Participants	Better preparation from Principal Preparation Program	Skills gained during principal preparation program to lead alternative school
SASP #9	With the exception of such courses as, but not limited to "Special Education Seminar," "Multicultural Education," "Classroom Management," "School Community Relations," and "Evaluation of Instruction," the average Educational Leadership program from most colleges/universities do not offer specific course offerings that would prepare students to lead an alternative school.	I am skilled to address the needs of "at-risk students" assigned to my building.
SASP #10	My principal preparation program could have better equipped me by offering classes that focused on nontraditional educational environments.	Working with diverse populations Developing alternative program structures How to cope with students in crisis.
SASP #11	No Response	No Response
SASP #12	No Response	No Response
SASP #13	was not mentioned	Yes
SASP #14	How to change the community and division teacher perspectives of children attending alternative schools	I need more staff or staff with educational experience in multiple areas
SASP #15	Course work regarding at-risk children	Somewhat - Relationship building was stressed but troubleshooting different scenarios to possibly get the student to graduate was not.

(continued)

Table 9 (*cont.*)

Participants	Better preparation from Principal Preparation Program	Skills gained during principal preparation program to lead alternative school
SASP #16	N/A	N/A
SASP #17	Trauma informed care, focus on restorative practices	I think more training in trauma informed care, cultural diversity, parent engagement would be helpful in potentially reducing the numbers of kids coming to alt. ed.
SASP #18	Attending trainings or courses offered by the Department of Juvenile Justice, courses on defiant, manipulative and attention-seeking students.	Not much was focused on "at-risk students" more needs to be offered to reach this 10-20% of students.

Table 9 describes secondary alternative school principal perceptions of how their principal preparation programs could have better prepared them to lead secondary alternative schools. The table also describes if participants' preparation programs afforded them the skills needed to address the needs of students categorized as at-risk. Together, these data were used to answer research question five in this study.

Table 10

Outside Supplemental Alternative Education Workshops

Participants	Outside supplemental alternative education workshops.
SASP #1	VDOE Virginia Department of Education State Operated Programs Laws and Rules workshop, Juvenile Corrections In-services, and Virginia Crime Code VCC In-service
SASP #2	Again, after 19 years, there are too many to list; however, we (SECEP employees) used to go to conferences sponsored by other alternative programs throughout the United States where people could share ideas. Due to budget cutbacks, we no longer do this. Another very informative conference is LRP, which is a legal conference.

(continued)

Table 10 (cont.)

Participants	Outside supplemental alternative education workshops.
SASP #3	No Response
SASP #4	No Response
SASP #5	DCV workshops offer by the state department on discipline, any school law courses and special education offerings, visits to detention centers, etc.
SASP #6	No Response
SASP #7	I have taken two on-line graduate level courses.
SASP #8	None
SASP #9	I have not participated in any outside supplemental workshops or resources specific to alternative education to assist me with bridging the gap left by my leadership preparation program and division-level professional development.
SASP #10	Therapeutic environments for adolescents
SASP #11	No Response
SASP #12	No Response
SASP #13	none
SASP #14	Gang training, Ruby Payne, trauma and child responses, safety and productive environments
SASP #15	None. My experience working with and teaching students has been my best teacher.
SASP #16	N/A
SASP #17	Restorative justice in education trauma informed care workshops
SASP #18	In the past 18 years I have attended numerous training's on this most were offered by DJJ.

Table 10 details SASP responses to survey question 19, which asked school leaders to list supplemental workshops or resources specific to AE participated in to assist with bridging the gap left by leadership preparation programs and division-level PD.

Data Summary

This chapter provided an analysis of data collected in the survey instrument, SSASLP. Survey data submitted by 18 principals assigned to secondary alternative schools were analyzed and grouped in accordance to the research questions it supported. Survey coding revealed 12 overarching themes in the perceptions of secondary alternative school principals concerning leadership preparation for leading alternative schools. The 12 themes were juvenile justice, discipline, communication, general education, previous experience, sensitivity, diversity, none, PD, respect, relationships, and special education (see Table 11). All 18 secondary alternative school principals participating the study were assigned to alternative high schools providing services to students in Grades 9-12.

Table 11

Overarching Themes Mentioned by Study Participants

Participants	JJ	D	COM	GEN	R	RS	PE	S	DV	NO	PD	SPED
SASP #1	X											
SASP #2			X						X			X
SASP #3										X		
SASP #4										X		
SASP #5		X										X
SASP #6										X		
SASP #7								X			X	
SASP #8								X				
SASP #9		X			X	X		X				X
SASP #10						X						
SASP #11										X		

(continued)

Table 11 (*cont.*)

Participants	JJ	D	COM	GEN	R	RS	PE	S	DV	NO	PD	SPED
SASP #12										X		
SASP #13			X						X	X		
SASP #14						X						
SASP #15						X				X		
SASP #16								X		X	X	
SASP #17			X			X	X				X	X
SASP #18	X	X						X				

Table 11 depicts secondary alternative school principals overall responses to overarching themes developed by the researcher for recurring answers relating to principal preparation to lead alternative schools.

Chapter 5

Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to identify secondary alternative school principals' perceptions on the impact of leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and specialized training on alternative school leadership. Additionally, perceptions of PD needs for effective management of programs educating students categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school were also examined. Through semi-structured survey responses, prevailing themes surfaced, revealing perspectives of secondary alternative school principals concerning alternative school leadership preparation. A phenomenological qualitative research design was used to address five research questions:

Research Question 1: What courses do secondary alternative school principals identify as most beneficial of the specialized training received during their principal preparation program?

Research Question 2: What previous leadership experiences do secondary alternative school principals perceive to be most beneficial for preparation to lead alternative schools?

Research Question 3: What leadership skills do secondary alternative school leaders indicate are necessary for individuals new to the position of secondary alternative school principal?

Research Question 4: What division-level professional development do secondary alternative school leaders indicate has been provided that is relevant to the position of secondary alternative school principals?

Research Question 5: How do secondary alternative education leaders believe their leadership preparation programs informed their work in alternative education?

Summary of Findings

After review and analysis of data collected in this study seven findings emerged. Each finding is summarized in the following section.

Finding 1. Secondary alternative school principals were unable to identify specific coursework that might have better prepared them to lead alternative schools. Five participants mentioned the need for coursework specific to alternative education and four participants mentioned the need for more information related to the law and justice systems. One participant mentioned dysfunctional families and another mentioned trauma support. Seven participants made no suggestions or comments related to what coursework might have been beneficial in their college programs. This finding aligns with research conducted by Price et al. (2010) who found that neither universities nor school divisions are able to adequately prepare school leaders for alternative school leadership. This finding answers also answers Research Question 1.

Finding 2. Secondary alternative school principals had previous career experiences with students categorized as at-risk youth. Twelve of eighteen (67%) secondary alternative school principals participating in the study had previous career experiences with students categorized as at-risk youth. Eleven of the participants had experience in the general high school setting and three had a background in special education.

Some participants also indicated various previous experiences that including those associated with counseling, behavior intervention plans, 504 plans, behavior contracts, online academic recovery, summer school, ISAEP, 9th grade transition program, attendance adjustments, course work reduction, behavior modification, gentle teaching, special education strategies, and academically proficient non-judgmental staff members to be beneficial for stimulating alternative school student achievement. There were no common experiences mentioned by all participants. Behavior related comments were mentioned most frequently, having been mentioned by four participants.

This finding aligns with Elias (2013) research supporting that training and support are needed to prevent middle and high school children from being pushed out of the classroom for disciplinary infractions. Additionally, according to Price et al. (2010), alternative school being led by leaders who understand the population being educated will amass greater student achievement. This finding answers Research Question 2.

Finding 3. Secondary alternative school principals perceive it is necessary for individuals new to the position of secondary alternative school principal to be skilled in building relationships. While six participants had no comments related to necessary skills for

the new alternative school principal, the other twelve did respond with ideas. Ten of the participants indicated relationship building, using words like understanding and caring.

These perceptions are supported in research conducted by Fabelo et al. (2011), which found that students referred to school administrators for discretionary violations resulting in suspension or expulsion are three times more likely to have encounters with the juvenile justice within 12 months. Moreover, Aron (2006) research supports that relationships/building a sense of community, and student supports are essential components of AE programs. This finding answers Research Question 3.

Finding 4. Secondary alternative school principals perceive that division-level professional development has not been provided for leaders in alternative education environments. Fifteen of 18 (83%) secondary AE school principals participating in the study shared that there had not been any division-level PD directly related to AE. Six of 15 (40%) secondary alternative school principals not experiencing division-level PD directly related to AE shared that they were not invited to participate in division-level PD. Based on the responses of three (17%) study participants who experienced division-level PD relevant to AE, specific division-level responses were diversity, school culture and how to change it, maximizing inclusion by mitigating the effects of unconscious bias, FBA/BIP, Response to Intervention (RTI), treat assessment training, VDOE Teacher Direct, PBIS,, EDIVATE for administrators, learning focused lesson plans, Gear Up for Administrators, special education and the law, 504 Plan, suicide invention, Achieve3000 training, and understanding poverty.

Finding 4 aligns with research supporting specialization in leadership preparation and professional development for AE programs is needed to offer more intensified services along with meeting instructional, behavioral, and organizational characteristics of traditional public school environments (Simonsen & Sugai, 2013). Additionally, Price et al. (2010) research supports the development of an alternative school leadership curriculum which provides “relevant student curriculum, effective instruction, appropriate school management and comprehensive collaborative efforts with community and agency partners” (p. 301).

Finding 5. Secondary alternative education leaders perceive their leadership preparation programs have not informed their work in alternative education. Seventeen out of 18 (94%) secondary alternative school principals participating in the study expressed that their leadership preparation programs did not equip them with the skills needed to address the needs

of “at-risk” students assigned to their alternative schools. Finding 5 is supported by 2010 research conducted by Price et.al. concluding there are few higher education principal preparation programs having the specialized curriculum needed to prepare individuals to lead alternative schools.

Finding 6. Secondary alternative school principals perceive that specialized leadership preparation is necessary to better prepare individuals to lead alternative schools. Ten out of 18 (56%) secondary alternative school principals participating in the study shared that no support was given in the area of PD to support their goals as secondary alternative school principals.

This finding aligns with research conducted by Parker (2007) which revealed that quality specialized PD is a purposeful and intentional process that can bring about positive change and improvement to an educational environment. Additionally, the literature recommended that instructional leaders and staff be fully aware of PD purposes and goals.

Finding 7. Secondary alternative school principals perceive that district level professional development topics were identified centrally. Ten out of 18 (56%) secondary alternative school principals’ division PD topics are determined by central office personnel. Four of eighteen (22%) school divisions surveyed instructional staff, two of eighteen (11%) determined offerings based upon general education middle and high school needs, one out of 18 (.05%) school divisions offered PD based upon SOL and benchmark data. Additionally, only one out of 18 (.05%) secondary AE school principals surveyed was allowed to determine PD topics related to AE.

This finding aligns with Price et al. (2010) study, which found the challenge and goal is to prepare and train leaders who can lead in AE schools. Price et al. (2010) further noted the challenge with AE leadership involved implementing proven AE principles and strategies in school divisions, counties, and states throughout the country. This is made more difficult while school divisions and states that are facing their own AE and dropout crisis.

Finding 8. Secondary alternative school principals perceive that, as new administrators, they lacked the essential skills in leadership of alternative education programs. Thirteen out of 18 (72%) study participants perceived that they did not possess the essential skills that were considered vital for new secondary AE school principals.

This finding aligns with the Price (2009) research that states, “New leaders are trained and become well versed in traditional school improvement and reform strategies, some through university programs and some in local district preparation programs. Training leaders who understand the unique characteristics of at-risk and alternative learners can help ensure success for staff and students in alternative schools”.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify secondary alternative school principals’ perceptions on the impact of leadership program preparation, division-level PD, and specialized training on alternative school leadership. Additionally, perceptions of PD needs for effective management of programs educating students categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school were also examined.

The findings of the study indicate that secondary alternative school principals enter into their leadership roles without formal alternative school principal preparation from their leadership programs and are not provided adequate PD within their school division to lead alternative schools. Additionally, the study found that alternative school principals are forced to rely on skills obtained through other disciplines (i.e. special education) to effectively provide support to at-risk students receiving academic services in alternative environments.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have implications for secondary alternative school leaders, school division administrators, and college leadership preparation programs as they seek to improve essential skills for alternative school principals to lead more effectively resulting in positive academic impact on at-risk youth in danger of dropping out of high school.

Implication 1. Principal preparation programs should consider including course and/or topics relevant to leadership in alternative education as part of their program. This implication is associated with Findings 1, 2, and 3. Principal preparation program adoption of curriculums that teach leadership candidates to examine societal challenges prior to referring students with disruptive behaviors to law enforcement would assist school divisions with decreasing school to prison statistics and increasing graduation rates.

Implication 2. Secondary alternative school principals should participate in specialized professional development for alternative school leaders, both within and outside of their school divisions. This implication is associated with Findings 3, 4 and 5. Secondary alternative school principals perceive that specialized leadership training is necessary to better prepare individuals to lead alternative schools. Secondary alternative school principals are leading schools educating students that have been released from traditional secondary school environments. This factor alone supports the need for change in alternative school structure. Without specialized PD, secondary alternative school principals are forced to lead their schools using traditional school models that have proven to be unsuccessful with students enrolled in alternative schools.

Implication 3. Central office school administrators should work to provide professional development topics that address the needs of secondary alternative school principals. This implication is associated with Findings 3 and 4. Secondary AE school principals perceive that division-level alternative education PD would assist leaders with helping students considered to be “at-risk” with transitioning back into their traditional home high schools. Including PD topics that address the needs of secondary alternative school principals will afford school divisions the opportunity to prepare current and aspiring alternative school leaders for educating leading nontraditional students. This preparation could ultimately lead to higher graduation rates in school divisions. Secondary alternative school principals participating in the study shared that PD topics such as trauma informed care, cultural diversity, and parent engagement would be helpful in meeting the needs of at-risk students.

Implication 4. Colleges and Universities should include courses and/or topics related educating “at-risk” students in their principal preparation programs. This implication is associated with Findings 3 and 4. Secondary alternative school principals perceive that essential training is missing from leadership preparation programs. As is the need for gifted education, special education, and adult education specializations, there is a growing need for AE specialization on higher education campuses. With the Commonwealth of Virginia being ranked first in sending students from the classroom to prison, equipping alternative school leaders specifically for educating at-risk youth could have great impact on lowering the number of youth in correctional facilities.

Implication 5. The Virginia Department of Education should consider implementing PD to train individuals new to alternative education environments. This implication is associated with Findings 4, 5, and 6. Secondary alternative school principals perceive that school divisions are not offering adequate PD to new alternative school leaders. Although colleges and universities are not offering specialized AE courses in their leadership preparation programs, it remains the responsibility of public school divisions to educate students categorized as at-risk. This responsibility should inspire school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia to create PD activities with specific visions and missions aimed at preparing alternative school leaders to lead schools educating at-risk youth.

Implication 6. Colleges and universities should consider adopting leadership curriculums that provide aspiring leaders the opportunity to earn specific endorsement credentials for alternative school leadership. This implication is associated with Findings 6, 7, and 8. Secondary alternative school principals believe that no specialized AE courses were taken during their principal preparation programs to prepare them to lead an alternative school. The adoption of specific endorsement credentials would allow aspiring alternative school leaders the opportunity to obtain leadership preparation prior to being assigned to lead AE facilities.

Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study may have implications for future research. This sections details suggestions for future research on the topic *Leadership Preparation Perceptions of Secondary Alternative School Principals Educating At-Risk Students*.

1. Future research should include qualitative perspectives of secondary alternative school teachers. This would give a more comprehensive view of alternative school principal leadership preparation as viewed by those who are current practitioners.
2. Future quantitative research to include the use of a survey using a Likert type scale to capture participant responses. This approach would allow a researcher the opportunity to present a statistical analysis of frequently practiced alternative education perceptions.
3. Future qualitative research to include at-risk students' perceptions of their secondary alternative school leaders. This approach would allow at-risk students the opportunity

- to express what they believe to be valuable in helping them to be successful in alternative education environments.
4. Review of principal preparation programs throughout the country to find out if any have alternative education focus or targeted coursework.

Conclusion

In exploring the leadership preparation perceptions of secondary alternative school principals educating at-risk students, there were several factors that prevented alternative school leaders from reaching optimal success. Data supports that alternative school principals believe there are deficits in leadership preparation programs and division-level PD for those assigned to lead alternative schools.

The role of the alternative school principal is to be an instructional leader in environments designated for students who are characterized as at-risk or nontraditional. Data supports that alternative school principals are not being afforded opportunities to participate in specialized AE courses during leadership preparation programs. Moreover, school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia are not supporting secondary alternative school principals with attainment of goals in the alternative environment.

Although 72% of secondary alternative school believe that they were not formally prepared for their positions by their leadership preparation programs, they were unable to specifically communicate coursework outside of juvenile justice that would prepare future alternative school principals.

Reflections

This study helped to enlighten me on secondary alternative school leader perceptions. I entered into this study with the perception that most school divisions would welcome the opportunity to focus on secondary alternative school leadership amidst the growing numbers of students characterized as at-risk or nontraditional. Upon submitting my request to conduct research to school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia, I learned that this type of study did not meet the goals of the division's strategic plan.

Most importantly, the study's findings confirmed that there is not an emphasis placed on relevant PD for secondary alternative school leaders. Secondary alternative school leaders are

continuing to be placed in the position of performing alternative school functions without formal guidelines to support AE students. This travesty is forcing AE school leaders to continue holding students already identified as at-risk to the some rules and guideline that caused their dismissal from their traditional high schools.

Given the opportunity to re-enact the study, I would definitely adhere to a timeline that would not activate an online survey during the month of December. Moreover, I would investigate research policies for school divisions in the Commonwealth of Virginia as it was my experience during this research study that each district has exclusive guidelines.

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Appendix A

Letter Disseminated to all Virginia Public School Superintendents.

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Fontaine M. Ferebee-Johns and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute University. My doctoral dissertation is titled, "Secondary school principals' perceptions of leadership preparation for leaders of alternative schools educating at-risk students".

The purpose of this correspondence is to respectfully request permission for me to include your secondary alternative school principals in my study. As a component of my data collection, alternative school principals throughout the State of Virginia will be asked to complete an online semi-structured survey developed to measure the potential impact of specialized alternative leadership preparation on school environments. My research topic is a direct result of my interactions with secondary principals who are responsible for leading alternative programs within my school division. Please be assured that responses from school principals will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be reported in aggregate at the state-level, and neither the name of your division nor the name of your secondary alternative school principal(s) will be released.

This study is highly confidential and information obtained will be kept strictly private. No identifying information linking your school district to this study will be included in the data reporting. If you have questions regarding this study you may contact me at [REDACTED]. Additionally, my committee chairperson is [REDACTED]. Lastly, I have obtained official approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University to conduct this study. Should you have questions or concerns about the study's conduct, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, [REDACTED]

With your permission, I would like to contact individuals assigned to lead secondary alternative schools in your district to participate in my study. At the completion of my study, (should you desire) I will be happy to share the results of my findings.

Thank you in advance for your support and assistance with completing my dissertation study. If I do not hear from you within two weeks of receiving this correspondence, I will assume that you are comfortable with your secondary alternative school principals being a part of this important study.

Sincerely,

Fontaine M. Ferebee-Johns

Appendix B

Letter to Secondary Alternative School Principals that includes online survey link

December 14, 2016

Dear Colleague:

I am doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. As part of my dissertation study, I am researching leadership preparation of alternative school leaders. My study focuses on the potential impact of specialized alternative leadership preparation on the school environment. My research topic is a direct result of my interactions with secondary principals who are responsible for leading alternative programs within my school division. The title of my Dissertation is: Secondary School Principals' Perceptions of Leadership Preparation for Leaders of Alternative Schools Educating Nontraditional and At-Risk Students. This study is designed to exam the impact of specialized leadership preparation and professional development on alternative schools.

To complete my study, I am conducting semi-structured online surveys with alternative education principals in Virginia public middle and high schools. By clicking on the link below, you will have access for participation in the online survey. The purpose of this study is to examine secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of leadership preparation programs, district-level professional development, and specialized training or outside professional development. Additionally, the study will probe secondary alternative school principals' perceptions of the effect of acquired leadership skills on the performance of students at-risk of dropping out of school.

It is my hope that you will agree to be a participant in this study. The online survey will take approximately 25 minutes to complete. The first section of the survey will collect demographic information followed by the survey questions in section two which focus on your alternative education leadership experience. This study is highly confidential and information obtained will be kept strictly private. No identifying information linking you to this study will be included in the data reporting. You may withdraw from the study at any time. If you have questions regarding this study you may contact me at 757-717-5974. Additionally, my committee chairperson is Dr. Ted S. Price. Lastly, I have obtained official approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University to conduct this study. Should you have questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore at moored@vt.edu or (540) 231-4991.

The deadline for submission of the survey is January 15, 2017. If I have not received a response from you by the week of January 5, 2017, a reminder email will be sent. If you prefer to respond using the paper/pencil method, please contact me by email and I will send you a hardcopy of the survey.

Thank you in advance for agreeing to participant in this study.

Sincerely,

Fontaine M. Ferebee-Johns

Follow this link to the Survey:

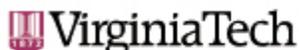
[Take the survey](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

https://virginiatech.qualtrics.com/SE?Q_DL=1Us4nL4c9eDVZCR_4Ttcnpqsoxe03nn_MLRP_cXUWRUSJaY3joN&Q_CHL=email

Appendix C

IRB Approval Memo



Office of Research Compliance
 Institutional Review Board
 North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
 300 Turner Street NW
 Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
 540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
 email irb@vt.edu
 website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 30, 2016

TO: Ted S Price, Fontaine Monique Ferebee-Johns

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Secondary School Principals' Perceptions of Leadership Preparation for Leaders of Alternative Schools Educating At-Risk Students

IRB NUMBER: 16-1022

Effective November 30, 2016, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at: <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 2,4
 Protocol Approval Date: November 30, 2016
 Protocol Expiration Date: N/A
 Continuing Review Due Date*: N/A

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

Invent the Future

Appendix D
Perceptions Survey

“A Survey of Secondary Alternative School Leaders’ Perceptions”

Thank you for your time and commitment to completing this survey. Completion and submission will be considered your consent to participate. If you do not desire to participate please close the survey window. There are no more than minimum risks to participate in this study. There are no major benefits to you for your participation, but a potential benefit may result in gathering of information necessary for preparing future secondary alternative school leaders. Do you agree with the statements above and desire to participate in the survey?

- Yes
- No

Part 1: Demographic Information:

1. School District/Alternative School:
2. Highest degree held:
3. Years or experience as a secondary alternative school principal/leader.
4. Please check your current assignment level:
 - Middle School
 - High School

Part 2: Alternative education experience:

5. What specialized alternative education courses taken during your principal preparation program prepared you for your current position?
6. From the list of courses previously listed, which courses do you reflect upon most often to assist with daily alternative school operations?
7. How could your principal preparation program have better equipped you to lead an alternative school?
8. Prior to becoming an alternative school leader, what student populations did you work with?
9. Within the populations listed in question 8, were there any students identified as “at-risk”? If so, what practices were applied to assist those students with overcoming academic and behavioral challenges?
10. Reflecting upon previous leadership experiences, which practices do you currently use to positively impact student achievement?

11. When welcoming new administrators into your facility, what skills do you consider important for meeting the needs of “at-risk” students?
12. When you were new to alternative education, did you have the skills listed in question 11? If so, how were they obtained?
13. Have you participated in division-level professional development? If yes, please list the district-level professional development directly related to alternative education.
14. How does your division determine which professional development topics are offered?
15. Which district-level professional development topics align with alternative education issues unique to your student population?
16. How has division-level professional development supported your goals as a secondary alternative school principal?
17. Are you able to identify professional development needs specific to alternative education that are not addressed in your school division? If so, please list these needs.
18. During your leadership preparation program, were you able to gain the skills needed to address the needs of “at risk students” assigned to your building? If not, please share additional skills that could have been helpful.
19. Please list supplemental workshops or resources specific to alternative education that you have participated in to assist you with bridging the gap left by your leadership preparation program and division-level professional development?
20. What challenges if any, do you currently face in providing equity for all students? Please list specialized trainings that have assisted you with overcoming these challenges.

Appendix E
Training in Human Subjects Protection Certificate

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Certificate of Completion

This certifies that

Fontaine Monique Ferebee-Johns

Has completed

Training in Human Subjects Protection

On the following topics:

Historical Basis for Regulating Human Subjects Research

The Belmont Report

Federal and Virginia Tech Regulatory Entities, Policies and Procedures

on

September 4, 2014



David Moore, IRB Chair

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