An Examination of Alternative Educational Leadership Practices in Southeastern Virginia

Millicent Denise Tyler

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

Doctor of Education
In
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Ted S. Price, Chair
Carol S. Cash, Co-Chair
Jodie L. Brinkmann
Lisa M. Perkins

March 24, 2022
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: alternative education, alternative educational leaders, at-risk, dropout, high school credential, traditional school

An Examination of Alternative Educational Leadership Practices in Southeastern Virginia

Millicent Denise Tyler

ABSTRACT

Traditional public-school settings are not meeting the needs of all students. Alternative educational settings have been established for students who struggled in traditional public schools. According to research by Beken et al. (2009); Cotton (2004); and Groves (1998), traditional schools often lack an understanding of social issues, positive peer relationships, personal interactions with teachers, and a school-wide emphasis on maturity and responsibility. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs.

Alternative education program leaders from four public high schools in Southeastern Virginia were asked 11 interview questions regarding their leadership practices in developing and implementing an effective program and practices to increase alternative student outcomes as it relates to staff characteristics, attendance, positive behavior, and graduation rates. The alternative school leaders' interview responses were analyzed and coded for themes.

The study findings suggest alternative educational program leaders who share their school vision, select competent and compassionate staff, and have an atmosphere of high academic expectations that foster positive relationships with at-risk students effectively increase positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. The researcher proposes that the study's findings could contribute to research on best practices and strategies for promoting success in alternative education programs.

An Examination of Alternative Educational Leadership Practices in Southeastern Virginia

Millicent Denise Tyler

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. Alternative education program leaders from four public high schools in Southeastern Virginia were asked eleven interview questions regarding their leadership practices in developing and implementing an effective program and practices to increase alternative student outcomes as it relates to staff characteristics, attendance, positive behavior, and graduation rate.

The study findings suggest alternative educational program leaders who share their school vision, select competent and compassionate staff. They have an atmosphere of high academic expectations that foster positive relationships with at-risk students effectively increase positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. The researcher proposes that the study's findings could contribute to research on best practices and strategies for promoting success in alternative education programs.

Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved late parents, Paul F. Cook and Lillian P. Cook, and the village that raised me. Mom, I love you. I appreciate your constant encouragement to strive for excellence and teaching me that there are no boundaries to what can be accomplished through faith in GOD, consistency, hard work, and perseverance. I carry you everywhere I go. Dad, I appreciate you teaching me to be strong, brave, adventurous, confident, and always to be true to myself.

To my late Auntie Elmira A. Parker, thank you for shattering the glass ceiling and showing us that education opens doors to unlimited possibilities. To my late Auntie Mabel P. Ware, your presence embodied grace and an essence of femininity that was noticed by all when entering a room. Your confidence, determination, and strength taught me to be assertive while maintaining my femininity. Thank you, Auntie Miriam M. Henry, for being my first prayer warrior and showing me that God is truly a whisper away. Auntie Maddie A. Parker, my teacher, my friend, and my soror. Thank you for accepting me exactly as I am and instilling confirmation that I am enough.

Without the support and influence of my parents and village, I would not be here. I am thankful with an overflowing heart of gratitude and love.

Acknowledgements

I can do all things through Christ, which strengthen me. Philippians 4:13

First and foremost, I must give God Almighty all the praise and glory. It was God's Grace and Mercy that I made it this far. I want to thank my husband, William, who is my steady rock. This would not have been possible without your never-ending love, patience, sacrifices, and encouragement to stay the course. You believed in me and never doubted I could do it! I love you, always and all the time. I want to thank my three children, who fill me with an overflow of joy. I am blessed to be your mom. Morgan, thank you for being an inspiration and role model. Tre', thank you for always reminding me to see the lighter side. Michael, thank you for dropping everything to fix my computer and retrieving work I thought was deleted. You have been a lifesaver. A special thanks to Fire, our family dog, for keeping me company while I worked on my paper and creating chaos when I needed to take a break.

To my sister, Deborah Boykins, and my cousins, Penny Parker Shores and April Marie Henry. Thank you for being patient and understanding, especially during times I couldn't be there for family gatherings or times I was distracted, and it seemed every other sentence was "I can't because I have VT work to do." I am grateful to my "Doctoral Besties," Le-Zondra Alexander, Taiia Clark, and Monica Williams, for your prayers, support, and friendship. To my prayer warriors, Paullette Diaz-Reed, Shelette Carlisle, and Audrey Ross, you are my sisters and forever friend. Your morning texts and prayers were always in perfect timing and filled with words of encouragement and an overflow of faith that I could do this. Thank you for the prayers and for loving me unconditionally.

Last but not least, I am deeply indebted to my dissertation committee. Dr. Ted Price, thank you for challenging me to think more critically. Dr. Carol Cash, thank you for bringing clarity to my confusion and gently guiding me through. Dr. Jodie Brinkmann thank you for agreeing to be a part of my committee and providing constructive criticism. Finally, Dr. Lisa Perkins, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement.

To my 2017 Hampton Roads VT doctoral cohort, I am thankful for the lifelong relationships developed. I cannot begin to express my sincere gratitude to the countless people who have supported me on this journey, as there are far too many people to mention individually.

But please know I love and appreciate each and everyone person who supported me, encouraged me, comforted me, and believed in me.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Chapter One

Introduction

Traditional public-school settings are not meeting the needs of all students (Beken et al., 2009; Cotton, 2004; Groves, 1998). These researchers also indicate students who struggle in traditional public schools have been placed in alternative educational settings. According to Riordan et al. (2011), traditional schools frequently lack the understanding of social issues, positive peer relationships, personal interactions with teachers, and school-wide emphasis on maturity and responsibility that alternative schools frequently provide. Bridgeland et al. (2009) revealed that students who drop out of public high schools are increasing. McGee and Lin (2016) found that previous grade retention from low grades, disruptive behavior, truancy and suspension issues, and social and emotional problems are often the root cause of at-risk students' academic failure. Suh et al. (2011) defined at-risk as having a low socioeconomic status, belonging to a particular minority group, being homeless, living in a violent neighborhood, having a disability, or having a low education level. Teachers and administrators in public high schools recognized that changes are necessary to address the growing number of students who drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2009). The issue was that traditional schools failed to meet the academic needs of all students, and as a result, students were at risk of dropping out without earning a high school diploma. Alternative education programs were established to assist students on the verge of dropping out of high school (Gregg, 1999). According to Jordan et al. (2017), alternative placements became more prevalent.

According to a fact sheet published by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), high school students who dropped out were three times as likely to be unemployed as peers who earned a college degree. To decrease students' odds of becoming a potential dropout, school administrators often refer at-risk students to an alternative school to complete their education. These alternative programs provide the last chance for at-risk students to finish high school (Leone & Drakeford, 1999). A study conducted by Rumberger (2001) examined the impact of high school dropouts on society. This study concluded that failure to obtain a diploma or graduate equivalency degree (GED) could have considerable negative implications for the student and society, along with highlighting the inter-related economic and educational implications for being a dropout. Rumberger's study also revealed that due to the need for a

higher-skilled work force, dropouts experience higher occurrences of economic hardship compared to non-dropouts. This resulted in a larger student population from poor or low-income families, and a higher population of minority ethnic students of which English is a second language. Rumberger also predicted that the trend of increased accountability in U.S. schools would result in policies to end social promotion and introduce high school graduation exit examinations – both of which could contribute to an increased number of high school dropouts.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. According to Johnson and Perkins (2009), most research on why at-risk students drop out of school focused on a lack of school retention intervention strategies. Alternative education programs were established to assist students on the verge of dropping out of high school (Gregg, 1999). Alternative school leaders play a critical role in addressing the unique needs of at-risk students. While Price (2009) asserted that alternative education research had gained traction, there was still a lack of studies on the subject. At the national level, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2001 Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) report conducted by Kleiner et al. (2002) stated that limited research had been conducted on the influences of alternative education leadership practices. Mills-Walker (2011) suggested that "it would be beneficial to examine various types of alternative education programs to determine whether some are more effective than others at increasing graduation rates" (p. 103).

Furthermore, Natriello et al. (1990) identified a dearth of research and scientific evidence demonstrating the efficacy of alternative programs and schools. Young (1990) emphasized the importance of developing a set of critical identifiers that defined an alternative school or program and added to the body of alternative research by identifying critical areas for the success of an alternative school or program.

Historical Perspective

Ravitch (2001) asserted that the roots of alternative public schools can be traced to John Dewey and Francis Parker's progressive movement in the 1900s and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Her research indicated that alternative education was thought to provide an option

for individuals who believed the teachings in public-schools were restrictive and lacked educational equality for all students. Lange and Sletten (2002) reported that though these schools operated outside public schools as Freedom schools and Open-Schools, they did not survive. Early alternative schools, much like public schools of their era, operated under the belief they were providing students with quality education. As education evolved, the implementation of initiatives, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA: U.S. Department of education, n.d.), and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were put in place to promote teachers' and students' educational accountability. Unfortunately, not all students met the standards of excellence requirements to obtain a high school credential and graduate with their cohort (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], n.d.). The realization of not graduating can cause students to believe their only option is to drop out of school. The federal government declared alternative education's purpose is to serve students who are "at-risk" of academic failure (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

The Progressive Movement

In the early 1900s, John Dewey and Francis Parker started an influential endeavor in the United States, which focused on interdisciplinary studies and programs that would later be termed as Progressive Movements (Ravitch, 2001). The Progressive Movement's emphasis incorporated ideas and practices intended to reform school systems in America by making schools more effective agencies of a democratic society. Educators who were part of this movement shared the idea that democracy implied active citizen involvement in social, political, and economic choices that impacted their lives. The progressive movement's basic tenants were the respect for diversity and growth of critical socially engaged intelligence. These "child-centered" and "social reconstructionist" approaches enabled citizens to contribute to their community in a collaborative manner to achieve a common goal (Ravitch 2001).

Progressive Movement Shortfalls

During the 1940s and 1950s, Americans were fixated on the Cold War and the Soviet Union's unprecedented achievement in launching and orbiting of the world's first space vessel (history.com Editors, 2010). By the late 1950s, the merit of John Dewey's Progressive Education Movement ideology began to decline as public schools in the United States were being criticized

for not integrating more rigor into its programs (Young, 1990). The culmination of these events led to a change in educational practices that replaced Dewey's philosophy of individualized child-centered education to structured academic education mandated and subsidized by the federal government through the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (Smith, 1974; Young, 1990).

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s advocated for academic equality for all school children – regardless of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. To address these issues, President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty through the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 into law. This act facilitated education funding to districts of low-income students, subsidized educational material, and made college scholarships available to low-income students. Upon signing the ESEA, President Johnson was quoted as saying, "The answer for all our national problems – the answer for all the problems of the world – comes down to one word, that word is education" (Lyndon B. Johnson Quotes, n.d.). As a result of this charge to provide an equitable quality education for all students, the U.S. alternative education movement was born – and federal funding for alternative schools that targeted disadvantaged and minority students snowballed (Kelley, 1993).

One of the first alternative schools of the 1960s, Freedom Schools, operated in homes, churches, and storefronts. Freedom Schools were a major element of the Civil Rights Movement that overtly targeted minority students (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990). Developed under a mission to neutralize the "sharecropper education" administered to low income White and Black students, the Freedom Schools were created by an organization known as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The curriculum of these schools was designed by a committee of educators worldwide and was embedded in the lives of young Black Mississippians. According to research by Lange and Sletten (2002), as well as Young (1990), the Freedom Schools were comprised of two parts – the *Citizenship Curriculum* and the *Guide to Negro History*. The Freedom School curriculum was devised to help students analyze their racial discrimination encounters and recognize their broader perspective in Mississippi's closed society. According to Lange and Sletten (2002), although Freedom Schools were short-lived, they helped "advance the notion that a fixed, inflexible education system that alienated or excluded major segments of the population would no longer be tolerated," (p. 4) and subsequently prompted U.S.

school districts to start offering other options to the traditional classroom environment (Tissington, 2006).

Open-Schools and Alternative Education

Lady Bridget Plowden, a prominent British education reformer who chaired England's Central Advisory Council for Education, published a 1967 report*, Children and Their Primary Schools*, which endorsed open education in all British schools. As Plowden's report reached the United States, American educators visited England's schools to observe this informal education model in practice. England's open classroom model, which incorporated an individualized student learning approach of learning by doing, resonated with American critics who believed that America's formal, teacher-led classrooms were suppressing students' creativity (Cuban, 2020). Open classrooms or open education – as it came to be known – would be accepted as the answer to the criticism of student's education in the United States and its impact on America's society.

Many of America's alternative schools of the 1960s and 1970s were "Open Schools" that took a student-centered, non-competitive methodology to education. Students were in a self-paced learning environment. Academic achievement was based on the student's progress and their course selections within the curriculum. The teacher's role was to assist in enhancing the student's knowledge. Open schools of this type, which included public magnet, multicultural, and charter schools, were embraced by teachers, parents, students, and their communities (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990). Alternative schools were categorized under the umbrella of open schools and were established under various intra-school programs such as schools within walls, schools within a school, and multicultural schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Smith, 1974; Tissington, 2006; Young, 1990). Raywid (1994) asserted that school reforms of the current day are the product of early alternative schools.

Alternative Education in the 1980s

The 1980s brought about the transformation of education due to new social and political conservatism in the United States (Young, 1990). Early on during this decade of the (President) Reagan era, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, under the direction of T. H. Bell, Secretary of Education, published a 1983 report titled, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for*

Educational Reform (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.*)*. The Commission's report findings criticized education quality in public and private primary, secondary, and undergraduate learning institutions. The recommendations included in the report shifted education from an experimental approach – prominent in the open school concept—to a "back-to-basics" methodology. As a result, alternative education's focus began to narrow with an increased emphasis on remediation and dropout prevention. Researchers Lange and Sletten (2002), along with Tissington (2006), point out recommendations published in the Commission's *Nation at-risk* report centered mostly on remediation of skills rather than creativity and independent education as a result of national and state academic standards of learning, and the conservative mindset of this period.

Alternative Education in the 1990s

The 1990s brought about long-term federal and state-mandated student expulsions and suspensions due to increased violence within public schools. State and county education offices in many school districts were urged to utilize alternative education programs to meet students' needs. A study conducted by U.S. Government Accountability Office noted:

> Contain groups of students are overrepresented at alternative schools-public schools with a disciplinary or academic focus that serve students who have been expelled or suspended from school, or are risk of educations failure compared to their enrollment at nonalternative schools. (Nowicki, 2019, p. 12)

Though federal and state alternative school initiatives were established to reduce student dropout, juvenile delinquency, and truancy, these schools acquired a negative stigma as a dumping ground for students who were forced out of the mainstream classroom (Ross & Mathison, 2008).

21st Century Education Initiatives and Alternative Education

Education legislative initiatives of the early 21st century such as Goals 2000, NCLB Act of 2001, the IDEA of 2004, and ESSA of 2015 were enacted to promote educational accountability for students of all backgrounds, abilities or disabilities, and ethnic backgrounds. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act, passed under President (Bill) Clinton, established eight goals to improve the Reagan era education system standards-based reforms (Archived: Goals 2000: Educate America Act, n.d.). According to Tissington (2006), Goals 2000 increased

accountability in the public-school education system. Students and teachers were to be held to a high standard of excellence in reading, science and mathematics. Under this legislation, the objective was to ensure that America's students would be the world's most accomplished in math and science, have a graduation rate of 90%, and eliminate violence, drugs, alcohol, and firearms from school grounds (The Education Coalition, n.d.). This Act provided guidelines for measuring and supporting student achievement against a world-leading academic standard by 2000.

Smith (1974) proclaimed that instruction in the classrooms of American public-school systems has historically been a single standardized instruction model where not all students can fair well. Smith reported that those who required curriculum modifications to succeed in the standardized model were ignored. With concerns that America's students were no longer globally competitive, this act took a one-sided interpretation of education that would no longer contain vocational studies as part of the learning environment. As a result, students were expected to select and pass a specified number of courses in mathematics, English, social sciences, and science in order to receive a high school diploma to be competitive in post-secondary school (Cuban, 2001). In the year following his inauguration, President George W. Bush replaced Goals 2000 with the NCLB Act in January 2002 and further increased accountability measures for administrators, teachers, and students through a nationwide mandate of U.S. common core standards or state standards of learning aimed to boost the academic performance of minority students, poor children, English-language learners, and special education students (Allensworth et al., 2009; Cuban, 2001).

Tissington (2006) asserted that as student failure in traditional school environments increased, so did student enrollment in alternative schools. A majority of the alternative school enrollment growth can be credited to a rise in student suspensions and expulsions from their traditional school environment (Lehr et al., 2009). Between 1990 and 2013, the United States saw a 335% increase in the number of alternative schools across public school systems—from 1,151 schools to 5,986 schools. A statistical study published in 2015 noted a 420% increase in alternative school enrollment over the same 23-year period, from 134,161 students to 575,805 students ("Number and Enrollment," 2015).

Historically, alternative schools have operated with the goals of student segregation, the elimination of school-based drugs and violence, and academic performance improvement. Barr (1980) stated that alternative schools were created specifically to serve students on the verge of

dropping out of high school. Although alternative education has taken on a variety of forms (e.g., separate schools, schools within schools, and part-time programs), it has remained a viable option for students seeking to complete their high school education.

Educational Leadership

The National Alternative Education Association (2014) defined the characteristics of an effective leader in alternative education. 2.0:

> The school administration constantly seeks out ways to publicize program success and strategically incorporates community, business, and the media into celebrations. All stakeholders including administrators, teachers, and staff must be committed to full implementation of the mission and core values of the school. On-site leadership utilizes and engages in a collaborative approach that ensures shared decision-making, high expectations and continuous monitoring of program quality. The superintendent/designee sustains the independence of the school and allocates sufficient resources (i.e., financial or other necessary resources) to protect the integrity of the program. (p. 5)

Stogdill (1974) indicated that “There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have attempted to define the concept” (p. 7). Various literature suggests student achievement is directly affected by school leaders' actions (Kafka, 2009). The building principals, according to Evans and Teddie (1993), are change facilitators. They are in charge of bringing about cultural, instructional, and personnel changes in the school. “The challenge and goal is to prepare and train leaders who can lead in special schools while implementing proven alternative education principles and strategies in districts, counties, and states throughout the country” (Price et al., 2010, p. 4). Fullan (2003) assert that "only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement in student achievement" (p. 16).

Statement of the Problem

The problem is traditional schools are not meeting the needs of students at-risk of academic failure. As a result, students become at-risk of dropping out of school without a high school credential (Berliner & Barrat, 2009). School districts historically have developed alternative programs to serve students at-risk of not graduating (Beken et al., 2009). The

establishment of public alternative education programs, such as alternative schools, enabled school districts to address the issue of students dropping out of school without earning a diploma (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). Furthermore, alternative education schools frequently offer flexible scheduling, multiple pathways to high school credit, differentiated instruction, and individualized instruction (Aron, 2006). While the term "alternative school" refers to a variety of educational options, it typically refers to change and innovation in comparison to more traditional schools (Knutson, 1996). According to Poole (2016), "Alternative schools provide students who are struggling in the traditional classroom with additional opportunities to learn through more individualized methods. Alternative schools can provide a different environment that enables at-risk students to succeed " (p. 18). Despite the potential benefits of alternative schools, there is concern that students who attend them are (a) stigmatized, (b) segregated racially, and (c) appear to be holding tanks for disruptive students (Amove & Strout, 1980; Cox et al., 1995). In describing some alternative school programs, Kellmayer (1995) noted:

> a great many of these programs are alternative in name only and are in reality "soft jails" designed to isolate difficult students from the mainstream. Unfortunately, the mindset of many of those in positions of authority to create alternative programs is such that punitive programs are common. (p. 12)

The leadership practices of alternative school leaders are essential to address the unique needs of at-risk students. Barr and Parrett (1997) identified the following characteristics of effective alternative schools: shared vision; educational diversity; innovative instructional approaches; student assessment; and caring and demanding teachers. As more at-risk students choose alternative education, more research is needed research is needed on the leadership practices of administrators leading alternative education programs.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that information provided in the study could impact the success of alternative education programs and reduce the student dropout rate. Typically, students who are referred or encouraged to attend alternative public schools have low grades, disruptive behavior, truancy, suspension, past grade retention, social challenges, or emotional problems, and are at risk of failure or dropout (Beken et al., 2009; McGee & Lin, 2016; Schwab et al., 2016). While research on students' adverse outcomes in alternative education programs is

readily available, there is a knowledge gap regarding what factors contribute to students' success in alternative education programs. Henderson et al. (2018) and Perzigian et al. (2017) indicate alternative students meet success in alternative education programs when improvements in course or behavior occur. Additionally, the literature review indicates that any student who successfully completes the requirements for high school graduation is considered successful (Beken et al., 2009; Burdick, 2014; Perzigian et al., 2016; Wilkerson et al., 2016). This study may assist leaders in meeting the sensitive, educational, social, and emotional needs of at-risk students in order to promote their success.

Cassidy and Bates (2005) suggested knowledge of alternative education program leader best-practices and behaviors may provide effective strategies that all education leaders can use to better support at-risk students and contribute to helping educators provide an equal and equitable education for disenfranchised students. Educational leaders can use this study's findings to formally assess their alternative school practices with other alternative education programs to improve practices. Lehr et al. (2009) stated leadership practices and instructional strategies can be identified to meet students' needs at-risk of dropping out of high school or for students who do not function well in traditional classroom settings. This study may increase educational leaders knowledge of predominant educational practices in alternative education programs for at-risk students. This will be significant because it may provide innovative strategies and approaches for improving at-risk student outcomes. Knowledge of leadership practices and instructional strategies could aid in implementing leadership practices that school administrators need to support their teachers and students. Additionally, the study adds to the existing research concerning best practices and strategies for fostering success in alternative education programs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify the leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. Traditional public-school settings are not meeting the needs of all students (Beken et al., 2009; Cotton, 2004; Groves, 1998). Beken et al. (2009), Cotton (2004) and Groves (1998) also suggested students who struggle in traditional public schools have been placed in alternative educational settings. As a result, students who have fallen behind academically and lack the necessary credit for graduation are at-risk of leaving high school

without a high school credential (Berliner & Barrat, 2009). Public schools offer alternative school programs for students who are at-risk of leaving school without a high school credential. Mills-Walker (2011) suggested, "it would be helpful to examine different types of alternative programs to determine whether some types of programs are more effective than others in increasing graduation rates" (p. 103).

Justification of the Study

This study's findings were used to inform alternative educational leaders of the prominent alternative leadership practices that are indicated as effective practices in increasing positive outcomes for at-risk students. This study provided policymakers at the district, county, state, and federal levels with important information regarding future decision-making regarding alternative education. As alternative schools were considered placements for at-risk students, research was essential in shedding light on alternative education program leadership practices and their impact on student outcomes (Atkins et al., 2005; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Lehr et al., 2009).

Research Questions

Students in alternative school settings have needs beyond those typically available in a traditional school setting. The following research questions will guide this study to determine the leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs.

1. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are essential leadership practices in developing and implementing an effective program?
2. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?
3. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?
4. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?

Conceptual Framework

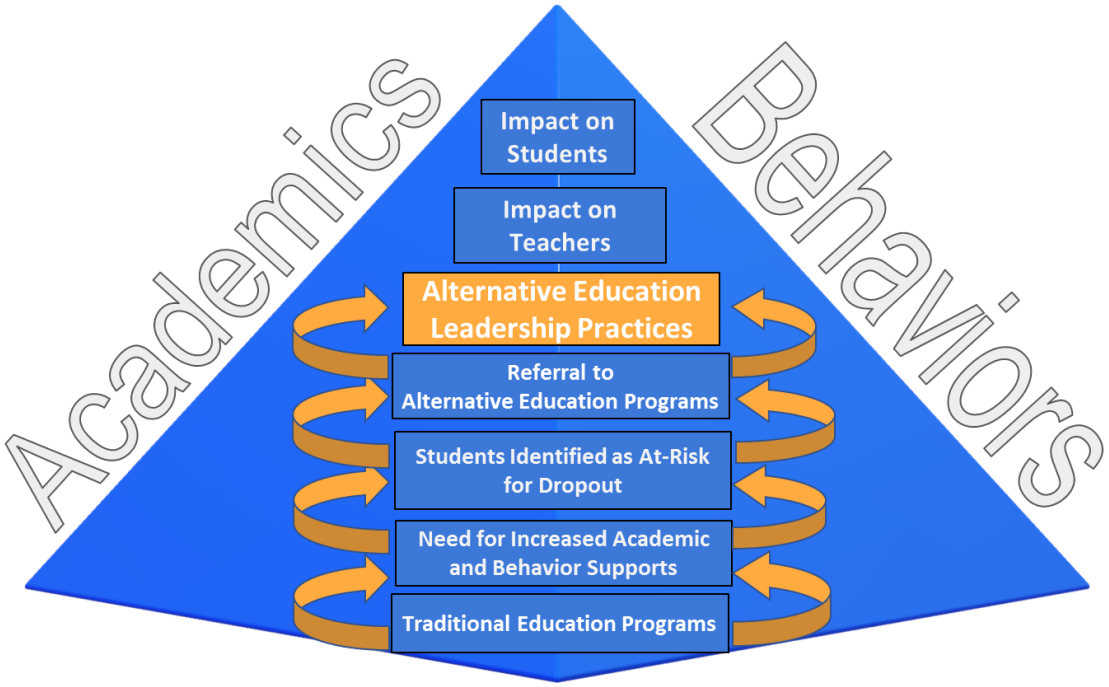
The conceptual framework for this study was developed after conducting a literature review on at-risk students, dropouts, alternative education programs, and alternative education

program leadership practices. According to McGee and Lin (2016), students identified as at-risk of dropping out have disruptive behavior, truancy, low grades, suspension, previous grade retention, emotional problems or social issues. Research indicates students who fail to obtain a diploma or GED are economically and educationally disadvantaged and have increased economic hardship (Rumberger, 1987). The research of Darling and Price (2004) and Fairbrother (2008) suggest at-risk students are more likely to overcome academic challenges and acquire positive relationships in an effective alternative program. Samuels (2008) reported that strong leaders who are developed as thoroughly as their students are crucial to alternative school academic success and growth. Leone and Drakeford (1999) stated if alternative programs are the last chance for at-risk students to obtain a high school credential, then leadership practices must be examined to determine their impact.

The triangle's base and sides in Figure 1 represent the academic and behavioral difficulties faced by at-risk students in traditional schools and the student outcomes associated with alternative leadership practices. Based on the needs of at-risk students, there are obstacles and opportunities for growth. McGee and Lin (2016) define students in traditional schools who face academic difficulties, behavioral difficulties, or both as being at risk of dropping out of high school. At-risk students are referred to alternative education programs to address needs that cannot be met in traditional schools and to provide a final opportunity for at-risk students to earn a high school credential. The framework's primary focus is to demonstrate the impact of alternative educational leadership practices on teachers' ability to address the academic and behavioral needs of at-risk students, as well as their effect on student outcomes. The framework for this study suggests that alternative education leaders practices may impact alternative education programs and the outcomes of alternative school students.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Educational Leadership and its Impact on Alternative Students



Definition of Terms

The following definitions will assist readers to understand the educational environment and the factors that influence the components of an alternative-education school. The definitions used throughout the study are consistent and may apply to other educational programs that use slightly different terms or contexts. For this study, alternative education program students have any combinations of being at-risk for dropping out of school, needing highly structured and small class enrollment, and exhibiting disruptive and detrimental behavior to a positive school atmosphere.

Term	Definition
Alternative education:	*Alternative education.* education that offers choices in terms of time, location, staffing, and programs, and is designed to help students acquire the knowledge and develop the skills and attitudes reflected in the goals of education for Virginia's public schools (8VAC20-330-10. Definition, 1980).
Alternative education program:	*Alternative education program*. an education program that provides a non-traditional classroom education choice for students and families outside of the traditional education setting. Differences from the traditional classroom setting include limited to time, location, staffing, curriculum, a variety of means to earn high school credits, instructional technique, and behavioral expectations (Aron, 2006; Poole, 2016).
Alternative education program students:	a student that is at-risk for dropping out of school, requiring a highly structured school setting and small class size for academic and social skill success, and having behaviors defined as disruptive and detrimental to a positive school atmosphere. (Porowski et al., 2014).
Alternative Learning Environment:	*Alternative Learning Environment.* a classroom or educational facility that provides educational opportunities separate from the traditional classroom or school settings.
Alternative school:	*Alternative school.* a public school with a mission to provide middle or high at-risk students with comprehensive support as part of a school district's dropout prevention program ("National dropout prevention center," n.d.).
At-risk student:	*At-risk student.* a student who is considered to be on the verge of dropping out due to low grades, truancy, suspension, disruptive behavior, previous grade retention or emotional problems (Raywid, 1998). (McGee & Lin, 2016).
Cohort:	*Cohort.* a group of ninth-grade students who enter together with the expectation of graduating within four years. (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.).

Term	Definition
ESSA:	*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).* federal legislation passed in 2015 that governed K-12 public education policy. ESSA replaced NCLB and eliminated provisions relating to periodic standardized tests given to students and provided flexibility to States in education. (https://oese.ed.gov/families/essa/).
Goals 2000: Educate America Act	*Goals 2000: Educate America Act.* an education legislative initiative, passed under President (Bill) Clinton to established goals to improve the Reagan era education system standards-based reforms intended to emphasize math and science, increase graduation rates, and eliminate criminal activity from school grounds (Archived: Goals 2000: Educate America Act, n.d.).
High school credential	*High school credential.* either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate ("COE - Status dropout rates," n.d.).
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):	*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). legislation that ensures students with disabilities are provided with free and appropriate public education tailored to their individual needs. ("Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (ACT)," n.d.)
NCLB:	*No Child Left Behind Act.* a federally passed law under the George W. Bush administration law for K-12 general education in the United States from 2002-2015. The law held schools accountable for how students learned and achieved. NCLB represents legislation that attempts to accomplish standards-based education reform (Lewis, 2014).

Limitations

Limitations are situations or conditions the researcher has no control over. Creswell (2012) defined limitations as potential weaknesses or problems in the study that the researcher cannot control. In this investigation of leadership practices and their impact on student performance, there are several limitations to the research. One significant limitation was that the researcher was limited to conducting virtual or phone conference research study interviews as a result of social-distancing requirements posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Other study limitations included the following:

1. School divisions had limited access to participants due to the pandemic. This limitation is drastically different from how data were collected in previous years.
2. The sample was specific to alternative school programs in Virginia and thus affected its generalizability to other states' alternative education programs.
3. It was assumed that all information provided by participants was provided in the most accurate manner.

Delimitations

Delimitations are conditions and intentional choices made by the researcher to define the boundaries of the study. Intrinsic to case study research is a choice of what is studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research study had the following delimitations:

1. The researcher chose only to interview alternative school leaders in Virginia school divisions; no alternative school leaders of private institutions were included in the study.
2. School divisions in Virginia employ the participants.
3. In this study, the alternative school leaders interviewed only included leaders of alternative school schools with students in Grades 9–12.
4. Students will not be interviewed for the study.
5. Students court-ordered to attend an alternative education program are not eligible for the study.

Organization of the Study

This study included five chapters, as well as references and appendices. Chapter One discusses the historical context, leadership styles, a statement of the problem and justification, the study's national, state, and local significance, the study's purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, definition of terms, and the study's limitations and delimitations. Chapter Two conducts a literature review on at-risk students, alternative programs, and alternative leadership practices. The study's methodology is described in Chapter Three. This chapter also covers the data sources, participants, setting, and data analysis used by the researcher. The findings are summarized in Chapter 4, which is followed by an analysis of the data gathered through one-on-one interviews with each participant. Chapter 5 is a summary of the findings, including the research's implications for practitioners and policymakers, and the researcher's reflections.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Traditional public-school settings are not meeting the needs of all students (Beken et al., 2009; Cotton, 2004; Groves, 1998). Additionally, these researchers claim that students who struggle in traditional public schools have been placed in alternative educational settings. Riordan et al. (2011) suggest that traditional schools lack the understanding about social issues, positive peer relationships, personal interactions with teachers, and school-wide focus on maturity and responsibility that alternative schools often provide. Bridgeland et al. (2009) revealed that students who drop out of public high schools are increasing. McGee and Lin (2016) found that previous grade retention from low grades, disruptive behavior, truancy and suspension issues, and social and emotional problems are often the root cause of at-risk students' academic failure. Suh et al. (2011) associate the term *at-risk* with low socioeconomic status, a specific minority group status, homelessness, living in a violent neighborhood, having a disability, or a low education level. Public high school teachers and administrators recognize that change is needed to address the increase of students who drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2009). The problem is that the traditional school is not meeting the academic needs of all students, and as a result, students become at-risk of dropping out of school without a high school credential (Berliner & Barrat, 2009). Alternative education programs were introduced to serve students at-risk for dropping out of high school (Gregg, 1999). Jordan et al. (2017) reported that alternative placements are a growing phenomenon.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (October 2019) report indicated that full-time workers aged 25 and older with no high school credentials earned a weekly wage of $606 compared to $749 for high school graduates with no college, and $874 for workers with some college and up to an associate degree. A fact sheet presented by Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) provided detailed statistics showing that high school dropouts are nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates. Additionally, the fact sheets asserts that adults employed without a high school diploma earn about $8,000 a year less than high school graduates and approximately $26,500 a year less than college graduates.

Bowers et al. (2012) define a student as at-risk when he/she is not likely to complete high school in four years or is apt to drop out due to school performance, attendance, behavior problems, alcohol or drug problems, family issues, or other social issues. While there is existing

research on at-risk students, more research is needed to examine pedagogical effectiveness and teacher expectations related to at-risk students. Johnson and Perkins (2009) stated that

> Much of the research on at-risk students indicates that a lack of school engagement is a major contributing factor leading to adolescents dropping out of school. A lack of school engagement was found to be a major contributing factor leading to other serious issues such as drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and crime. (p. 128)

This literature review aims to identify prominent leadership practices that alternative education program leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students.

Search Process

During the research for this literature review, a variety of data collection methods were used. The search was conducted using search engines through Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's (VT) online library services. Scholarly peer-reviewed literature was gathered using online search engines such as Sage Education full-text, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, EBSCOhost, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, and Virginia Tech's Summon online library. In addition, resources published by non-profit and national organizations such as the Alliance for Excellence in Education, the NCES, and the U.S. Department of Education were used. Searches were conducted using terms: principal characteristics, leadership, effective alternative education, alternative school, alternative education, alternative program, dropouts, traditional high school, non-traditional school, and at-risk student.

Historical Review

Review of the literature indicates there has been little national data reported on alternative education programs since the NCES 2001 FRSS report. Kleiner et al. (2002) reported that the NCES conducted its first study survey of United States alternative education programs for at-risk students. The 2001 “District Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs” FRSS report included only programs that were for at-risk students, administered by public school districts, and alternative programs where most of the students attended at least 50% of their instructional time. As the time of their reporting, it was acknowledged that there was minimal knowledge about the nation’s current state of alternative education. Six years after NCES’s 2001

FRSS report, Price (2009) again iterated little research on what leaders of alternative education programs need to know about improving outcomes in their programs. Despite reported alternative education program successes reported by advocates, Kleiner et al, (2002) iterated Lange and Sletten (2002) claim that there is no consistent and broad evidence of the program's effectiveness due, in some measure to lack of clearly established and standardized guidelines for alternative school programs.

Tissington (2006) asserted that as student failure in traditional school environments increased, so did student enrollment in alternative schools. A majority of the alternative school enrollment growth can be credited to a rise in student suspensions and expulsions from their traditional school environment (Lehr et al., 2009). School districts historically have developed alternative programs to serve students at risk of not graduating. The development of public alternative education programs, including alternative schools, offers a strategy for school systems to combat the problems associated with students dropping out of school prior to obtaining a diploma (Fuller & Sabatino, 1996). 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).

Poole (2016) states, "Alternative schools offer other opportunities to learn through more individualized methods to students who are not performing well in the traditional classroom. For at-risk students who struggle, alternative schools can provide a different environment that allows them to succeed" (p. 18). Gregg (1999) assert that alternative education schools were first created to provide academic options for students who were not successful in regular or traditional schools.

Barr (1980) contends that the structure of alternative education has taken different forms (e.g., separate schools, schools within schools, and part-time programs), it continues to provide students with an alternate path to complete their high school education. Despite the potential benefits alternative schools may offer, there is concern that students who attend alternative schools (a) are labeled negatively, (b) are racially isolated, and (c) appear to be holding tanks for disruptive students (Amove & Strout, 1980; Cox et al., 1995).

Due to standards-based accountability and the curriculum's rigor, traditional public schools are not meeting students' needs (Beken et al., 2009; Cotton, 2004; Groves, 1998). Some

students begin to exhibit poor grades, have an increase in school absences, may have an increase in suspensions (in-school and out-of-school), or unique experience circumstances that lead to risk factors that contribute to dropping out of school (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Rumberger (1987) reports this is a problem because research shows that students who drop out of school are economically and educationally disadvantaged and further state the social consequences and cost of dropping out extend beyond income and revenue. High school dropouts are more likely to require social services, including welfare, medical, and unemployment assistance. They are also more likely to engage in crime, have poorer health, and lower political participation rates (Carswell et al., 2012; Rumberger, 1987): however, the NCES (2015) indicated that one in every five high school students do not graduate on time with a high school diploma.

Ozalp and Snyder (2016) indicate that in late 2015, lawmakers in Congress collaborated in the most major revision to the NCLB since its enactment in 2002. The reauthorization of NCLB became known as ESSA. According to Saultz et al. (2019), ESSA was intended to fix the injustices of the NCLB. The ESSA provided states more control of their school reform efforts by reducing federal government's top-down engagement in education reform and school accountability (Ozalp & Snyder, 2016). In the making of the ESSA, federal policymakers worked with state level allies to create a more cohesively coupled system (Saultz, et al., 2019). Ozalp and Snyder reveal that there is no change to the basic orientation of federal school reform under the ESSA, which is defined as a standards-based accountability that uses student standardized test performance to influence underperforming schools to improve on measures of student progress. Under NCLB, standardized test scores were heavily emphasized as a measure of performance rating in teacher evaluations, and federally imposed mandates for schools with low test score performance or high achievement gaps (Ozalp & Snyder, 2016; Rand Education, 2007). The Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants programs were enacted as a result of ESSA. The program provides federal funding to the State educational agencies, local educational agencies, and communities to allow students access to a well-rounded education, improve conditions for student learning, and to facilitate coordination efforts to address facets of school climate that contribute to student dropout, such as school-based violence and disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) *Non-regulatory guidance: Student support and academic enrichment* (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Research has demonstrated that zero-tolerance policies can lead to harmful effects on individuals, higher rates of exclusionary disciplinary action, and are not associated with improved school safety and academics (Skiba et al., 2006). From its inception during the Reagan era, the zero-tolerance policy, as stated by Skiba, was primarily intended as a means of incorporating predetermined and severe penalties to send a message to society that specific negative behaviors would not be accepted. Skiba also noted the general language outlined in the zero-tolerance policy fueled the publics' imagination over a growing tide of violence and prompted early 1990s educators to press for a straightforward response to the issue of drugs, weapons, and gangs in schools. Under this Superintendent Donald Batista directive, Yonkers Public Schools was the first public school to recommend a broad-based program of zero-tolerance against disruptive school students.

In the years prior to 1990, the Orange County, California and Louisville, Kentucky school districts enacted policies of zero-tolerance that mandated expulsion for gang-related activity and drugs (Skiba & Peterson,1999). Within 5 years of the zero-tolerance policies promulgated in New York, California, and Kentucky school districts, school boards across the United States adopted zero-tolerance policies that were broadened to include smoking and school disruption in addition to drugs and weapons. Widespread popularity of the zero-tolerance approach led the way to legislation of zero tolerance as national policy under President Clinton's Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (Skiba et al., 2006). Under this act, states receiving ESEA federal funds are required to: (1) enact State law to require local education agencies to expel from school a student who is determined to have brought a firearm to school for a period of at least one year a; (2) have State law in effect to allow the chief administering officer of the local educational agency (e.g., the principal or assistant principal) to modify the expulsion requirement on a case-by-case basis; and (3) forward information on such expulsions to the U. S. Department of Education annually (Skiba et al., 2006). Skiba et al. also examined the Zero Tolerance Task Force that was commissioned by the American Psychological Association to examine evidence concerning the effects of tolerance policies. The findings of the examination revealed evidence that zero tolerance polices had failed to achieve the goals of an effective system of school discipline.

The Role of School Administrators

Public school districts in the United States are regulated by state and federal laws that impact the education system and help schools to successfully meet the guidelines of state and federal standards. Educational leaders must be knowledgeable of the constitutional rights of students while being versed in their state's educational codes and laws under which they are practicing. Knowledge of school law issues and legal decision-making is essential to be an effective leader (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

The roles and responsibilities of the school administrators have changed throughout the years. Studies conducted by Cuban (1985) and Devono and Price (2012) imply that school superintendents are influential and can lead the transformation of schools into effective learning environments. Cuban assert superintendents developing an effective learning environment include: (a) the "manager" that makes best use of available school district fiduciary and human capital resources, (b) the "teacher" who provides group instruction to principals and teachers throughout the school year to help sharpen supervisory and evaluation skills, substitute teach for a day or week, or even to help new school board members learn the routine of running the school district, and (c) the "politician." Of these three roles, many superintendents have learned that the most perceptive form of leadership comes from one aspect of the teaching role – "that is, instructional management aimed at improving the performance of students" (Cuban, 1985). Institute for Educational Leadership (2000, as cited by Kafka, 2009) reported in her research:

> Being an effective building manager used to be good enough. For the past century, principals mostly were expected to comply with district-level edicts, address personnel issues, order supplies, balance program budgets, keep hallways and playgrounds safe, put out fires that threatened tranquil public relations, and make sure that busing and meal services were operating smoothly. And principals still need to do all those things. But now they must do more. (p. 2)

In previous years, principals were primarily focused on overseeing school safety, personnel, students, and operating within a budget. Today, principals maintain the same responsibilities as their predecessors in addition to being tasked with implementing national, state, and local school improvement reforms. Principals are expected to serve as instructional leaders in their schools, helping translate standards-based changes into practice and merge teachers into high-functioning teams (Sawchuck, 2008). According to Stegall and Linton (2012),

instructional leadership has been noted by pedagogical scholars as being more effective in increasing student engagement in learning. In addition to the tasks mentioned above, principals are also confronted with addressing diversity in the school setting. A great deal of literature suggests a perceptible relationship between school leaders' actions and student achievement (Kafka, 2009). Howard (2007) indicates a rapid growth in culturally and linguistically diverse students, students from low-income families, and students of color in school districts nationwide. Howard further adds administrators, parents, and teachers view the increase of diversity in schools as a problem. Howard also suggests education leaders in diversity-enhanced schools working to transform themselves and their schools to serve all of their students should implement professional development in five phases: (1) gaining trust, (2) appealing to cultural heritage, (3) challenging issues of social dominance and injustice, (4) changing instructional practices, and (5) communicating with the school's community. According to Glickman et al. (2009), diversity in the United States is growing, and the achievement gap between different groups is widening. This gap is exhibited in data related to racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic achievement disparities (NCES, 2005). Principals seeking to provide teachers with vital tools to effectively meet all students' needs while ensuring their teachers are invested in the belief that "all students can learn" requires that principals operate schools from the perspective of transformational leadership. Bass (1985) states transformational leadership suggests leadership skills that facilitate change and the desired outcome outside of the educational setting. The transformational leader is one who motivates followers to perform above expectations.

Educational Leadership

The National Alternative Education Association (2014) defined the requirements for an effective leader in alternative education in exemplary practice 2.0:

> School leadership purposely engages in opportunities to promote program success and strategically includes community, business, and media in celebrations. All stakeholders including administrators, teachers, and staff must be committed to fully implementation of the mission and core values of the school. On-site leadership utilizes and engages in a collaborative approach that ensures shared decision-making, high expectations and continuous monitoring of program quality. The superintendent/designee sustains the

independence of the school and allocates sufficient resources (i.e., financial or other necessary resources) to protect the integrity of the program. (p. 5)

Stogdill (1974) indicated, "There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have attempted to define the concept" (p. 7). Various literature suggests student achievement is directly affected by school leaders' actions (Kafka, 2009). Evans and Teddie (1993) observe that building principals serve as change agents tasked with implementing cultural, instructional, and personnel changes in their schools. According to Price et al. (2010), the objective and priority is to cultivate and train leaders capable of leading in special schools while incorporating validated alternative education concepts and strategies across the country's districts, counties, and states.

The literature suggests student achievement is directly affected by school leaders' actions (Kafka, 2009). Fullan (2003) states that "only principals who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement in student achievement" (p. 16). They are responsible for bringing about change in the school relating to culture, instruction, and personnel. A study conducted by Poole (2016) on effective alternative schools in Georgia found overarching attributes of alternative school leadership promoting student success were "having the right staff in the right place and starting school without prejudice" (p. 92). According to Harris et al. (2003), a building principal's leadership style affects the school's effectiveness and efficiency. Similarly, findings by Heck et al. (1991) indicate that an educational leader's ability to establish a safe and supportive environment through respectful relationships and consistent enforcement of social expectations and discipline codes determine an alternative school program's successful effectiveness. Since alternative schools are optional for at-risk students, school leadership practices must be examined to assess the efficacy.

Transactional Leadership

As described by Wegner (2004) and Zaleznik (1977), transactional leaders please their subordinates by understanding their needs. Transactional leaders are individuals who reward performers, punish non-performers, and manage their personnel through goal-setting and distributing responsibilities. The leadership style consists of two elements, contingent rewards and reprimands (Hauserman & Stick, 2013). According to Bass (2008), "the leader must assign a

task or obtain agreement from the followers on what needs to be done and arranges for psychological or material rewards of followers in exchange for satisfactorily carrying out the assignment" (p. 623).

Transformational Leadership

The Transformational Leadership concept was introduced in James McGregor's book, *Leadership,* in 1978. As discussed by Ross and Gray (2006), this leadership style enhances an organization by boosting its members' values, encouraging selflessness in supporting organizational goals, and realigning their demands with organizational preferences. Measures of transformational leadership are: nurturing the recognition of the group, expressing a vision, offering individual consideration and support providing intellectual inspiration, and setting high performance expectations (Podsaksaoff et al., 1996).

Lowe et al. (1996) consider transactional and transformational leadership as similar leadership styles where each leader gains support through the exchange of rewards. Each leader encourages supporters to perform as expected and offer performance-based rewards (Burns, 1978). According to Gardner and Stough (2002), leaders may possess transactional and transformational leadership characteristics; however, transformational leadership is a more effective leadership style. Kafka (2009) adds that leaders will be more successful in bringing about desired outcomes, such as better teaching and learning, as well as collaborative decision-making and more responsive environments, if they are more transformational than transactional.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed Leadership parallels shared, collective, and extended leadership practices that build the capacity for change and improvement (Harris, 2013). Spillane et al. (2004) describe distributed leadership as "[the leadership] distributed over leaders, followers and the school situation or context" (p. 11). They contend that the distribution of a leader's role does not weaken that of the principal's position but rather demonstrates that leadership is more a joint effort than an individual practice.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is an unorthodox form of leadership where the leader achieves organizational goals through overwhelming respect for other subordinate personnel (Bell &

Habel, 2009; Ehrhard, 2004). Greenleaf (1977), a pioneer of servant leadership, stresses the servant leader's obligation towards organizational success, including the leader's moral responsibility to subordinates and stakeholders (Peterson et al., 2012). Furthermore, studies by Carter and Baghurst (2013) suggest servant leadership stimulates positive employee engagement, yields satisfied high-performing employees and cultivates a perception of an ethical work environment.

Green (2013) states that leaders allow their staff to make decisions in a manner that fosters a culture of collective participation through shared power, distribution of leadership responsibilities, inspiration of others, and implementation of academic programs that meet the needs of all students. Johnson and Perkins (2012) found that research in alternative education has recurring themes that emphasize the importance of caring and nurturing environments as indicators of effective programs. They further contend that there is a correlation between school climate and servant leadership by indicating that:

> This is important in that the relationship between servant leadership and school climate is highly congruent in key areas such as respectful engagement, shared school vision, and modeling and nurturing the benefit of relationships revealed a significant position correlation between the perceptions of servant leadership and the perception of school climate. (Johnson & Perkins, 2012, p. 32)

Contributing Factors to High School Dropouts

Aron (2003) indicates there are many aspects of students' lives that place them at risk for dropout. Additionally, Aron (2003) cites a variety of circumstances that can place students at-risk as identified by Wells (1990). These circumstances are stated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Contributing Factors to School Dropouts

School Factors	
• disregard of student learning styles • difference between home and school culture • ineffective discipline methods • negative school climate • inadequate counseling • irrelevant curriculum • low expectations from staff	• lack of language instruction • low expectations • low parent/community involvement in school • retentions/suspensions • passive instructional strategies • segregation by ability grouping or tracking
Community Factors	
• high incidences of criminal activities • lack of community support for schools • lack of community support services or response • lack of school/community linkages	• unsafe neighborhoods • exploitation of youth, including sex trafficking • increase use of controlled substances
Family Factors	
• dysfunctional homelife • frequent change of residency • homelessness • ineffective parenting/abuse • low parental expectations	• low socioeconomic status • low educational attainment of parent(s) • no parental involvement • numerous family responsibilities • non-English-speaking home
Student Factors	
• attendance/truancy • behavior/discipline problems • drug abuse • friends have dropped out • illness/disability • low ability level	• low self-esteem/self-efficacy • nonparticipation • poor peer relationships • poor school attitude • pregnancy

Suspensions are usually imposed by the principal or assistant principal due to school rule or procedure violations. Expulsion—also known as long-term suspension—restricts the student from attending school for an indefinite period of time and is usually greater than 10 consecutive days. Expulsion is a perpetual removal of a student for a severe violation of school rules or policy. Students who are not attending classes are not learning valuable skills, therefore, are at a higher risk for failure and/or becoming a dropout. Johnson and Perkins (2009) define at-risk as

> students who could potentially drop out of school or engage in self-destructive behaviors

> that interfere with academic success. Behaviors including absenteeism, performing below academic potential or participating in activities that may be harmful to self and or others such as substance abuse, threats and intimidation, and physical violence are some behaviors that place students at risk. (p. 123)

According to Williams (2012), schools are experiencing an increasing number of discipline problems and principals spend a large portion of their time dealing with discipline issues. The Gallup polls rated disciple at the top of public concern. In the best-case scenario, the discipline problem will be minor and will not result in out-of-school suspension or expulsion. Additionally, Williams argues suspensions and expulsions are among the most commonly used disciplinary tools in public schools. While courts consistently uphold educators' authority to use suspensions and expulsions as punishment, procedural requirements (i.e., a notice, hearing, etc.) must be provided to ensure students are afforded impartial and fair treatment. States have recognized that students have a property right to an education, but students may be deprived of this right if they violate school rules (McCabe et al., 2013).

The Center for Promise conducted a study 3-year collaborative study with America's Promise Alliance and Pearson through the GradNation State Activation Initiative (GradNation) that centered on increasing high school graduation rates through leverage of statewide changes in Minnesota (Jones et al., 2018). The aim of the initiative was to improve graduation rates to 90% in two target states through the collaborative partnerships of local and non-profit, governmental, and business sectors. The intended outcome was to encourage collaboration and innovation statewide, and accelerate adoption of proven strategies and models that all states could replicate through shared knowledge. The collaborative study identified exclusionary discipline as an area of examination. The study examined student exclusionary discipline practices and why it leads students to disconnect from school.

The GradNation qualitative study involved 38 students ages 11 to 19 years of age from three Minnesota communities whom had experienced exclusionary discipline (Jones et al., 2018). Participants of the study were asked to share the details of their exclusionary discipline, to include circumstances surrounding the incident, those involved with the resolution (disciplinary hearing) process, and school experiences after returning to school after the exclusionary period. Findings indicated discipline among the study-group began early as elementary school and continued to the present day. The GradNation study also revealed the community schools'

disciplinary interventions were unsuccessful at addressing the root causes of negative student behavior and resulted in student feelings of unvalued and unwelcome. Students of the study group stated the disruption of learning resulting periods of disciplinary intervention caused their disconnect from school (Jones et al., 2018).

California Assembly member Reggie Jones-Sawyer addressed the stigma associated with the label at-risk by changing reference of "at-risk youth" to "at-promise youth" in the Penal and Education Code. "The label at-risk youth comes from a mindset of deficit, and focuses on what children lack…we must move away from this mentality that tells our children they are likely to fail," (Inside Higher ED, 2019, para. 15). California's Education and Penal Codes were approved and is a collection of laws applying to public K-12 schools. The bill does not change the definition of at-risk, it replaces it with at-promise (A.B. 413, 2019).

Henderson (2013) examined the pedagogical methods implemented in a classroom of at-promise Black males. The researcher examined and assessed the effectiveness of teachers' pedagogical methods on Black male classroom engagement through mastery achievement goal, self-categorization, and critical race theory frameworks. Additionally, the researcher examined teachers' beliefs about Black males to determine whether there was a relationship between these beliefs and their choice of pedagogical practices when working with this group of students.

The study by Henderson (2013) posed two hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that there is no substantial difference between the levels of engagement among students when taught with collaborative pedagogies over those of tutorial and direct instructional methods. The researcher believed addressing this question could reveal reasons for factors that influence students to disconnect themselves from the classroom and eventually lead to dropping out of high school. Answers to these questions could identify indicators for dropout prevention and characteristics of students who may be in most danger of leaving school without graduating. The second hypothesis was that there is no enhancement of teachers' instructional practices involving Black students when they are made aware of African-American culture. The researcher indicates effective teaching is associated with a teacher's ability to connect to the whole child (Lasley et al., 2002). Answers to this question may reveal information that could improve and enhance the quality of instructional practices of teachers in schools with large Black male student populations.

The study was conducted at a non-profit public school in Chicago, Illinois. The school is one of 23 charter schools and the only charter school in Illinois solely dedicated to serving the population of dropout and at-promise students. Approximately 69.9% of students enrolled in the Illinois school system are Black; all 200 students enrolled in the research site were Black. Among the grade levels served by the charter school. 121 students were female and 79 students were male. The researcher used purposive sampling because it allowed a selection of a sample that provided data that was needed. Fifty male participants between the ages of 15 and 19 and in Grades 10 through 12 were chosen for the study. The 50 Black males were representative of the qualities and attributes of at-promise students. Because of the disparity in academic ability, a task-based curriculum that focused on student engagement, individual instruction and culturally relevant materials was used. The ethnicity distribution of teachers at the school included 19.5 % Black, 42.4% White, 14.2% Hispanic, 3.3% Asian, and 0.2% American Indian. Female teachers dominated the system at 76.3% compared to males teachers only representing 27% of teaching staff.

The Henderson (2013) mixed-methods study focused on at-promise Black students. In the study, the Cognitive Engagement Self Report (CESR) instrument was administered to three groups of students in classroom that employed direct, tutorial and collaborative modes of instruction. The CESR, comprised of three overlapping student perceived qualities that provides data on self-perception of current task engagement; self-rating of task engagement effort and persistence, perceived loss of environmental awareness by the learning task. Henderson's CESR instrument assessment utilized a 5-point Likert scoring scale consisting of close-ended questionnaire responses: 5 (very true for me), 4 (true for me), 3 (neutral), 2 (not true for me), and 1 (not true at all for me). The results reveal no significant differences between the levels of engagement among students when taught with collaborative pedagogies over tutorial and direct instructional methods is supported. Students report teachers are not presenting classroom lessons that are of great interest to students. The data also shows that students in this study are only inclined to persist in the classroom when stimulated with subjects they find useful and interesting. The results validate previous research on school and classroom engagement that indicates that Black students in general thrive in scholastic settings, which are characterized by active learning (Lasley et al., 2002).

The Teacher Culturally Relevant Belief Survey (TCRB) was used to determine the impacts of teachers' beliefs about at-promise Black males on their choices to use certain pedagogical methods when engaging them in mastery goal structured classrooms. Five dimensions of teacher beliefs as classified by Love and Kruger (2005) were measured: (a) beliefs about knowledge; (b) recognition of students race in regard to planning and teaching curriculum; (c) beliefs about social relations inside and outside the classroom; (d) beliefs concerning teaching practice and (e) beliefs regarding students' strengths and needs. A 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used for scoring. In regard to the impact of teacher cultural competence on fostering effective pedagogy for Black males findings indicate there is no enhancement of teachers' instructional practices involving Black males when made aware of African American culture.

Interestingly, although there is no enhancement of teachers' instructional practices involving Black males when made aware of African American culture. However, Henderson (2010) study indicate some teachers were very perceptive and seemed well informed as how to devise a plan of action that could possibly yield life changing outcomes for at-promise Black male students. These teachers exhibit certain personality attributes that enable them to accurately discern unique needs of students and act accordingly (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Henderson (2010) state that students who are impacted by high performing teachers often describe them as nurturing as they perceive that these teachers genuinely care and want the best for them. This deep care for students' well-being encourages such high performing teachers to explore and do *whatever is necessary* to assure students learn. Henderson (2010) further contends:

> Utilizing unorthodox pedagogical methods may require teachers to "go against the grain" and "break rules," that is policies and procedures that may not necessarily be popular among mainstream educators. One such "rule breaking" action as noticed in the data from this study includes placing a high emphasis on planning for and employing customized instruction (most of today's classrooms are set up to view and teach all students the in same way). Another example includes modeling concepts, ideals and skills learned in the classroom through active learning examples. (p. 125)

Henderson (2013) references 30% of high school students as not graduating, with Black students making up 50% of this percentage. Henderson further contends added factors of institutional and societal racism cultivate stereotypes that result in inadequate classroom

instruction. Black students' cultural norms, expectations, and perceptions of education are often in conflict with those of mainstream. This disparity in ineffective instruction is often due to educators' refusal to rethink their standardized approach to teaching and to consider the whole child.

Institutional Efforts to Address School Dropouts

In addressing the dropout issue, schools are focusing considerable effort on reaching students who are identified as at-risk of becoming future dropouts due to poverty, behavior, and/or academics. In many instances, the traditional school setting has not benefitted at-risk students for varying reasons (Bridgeland et al., 2009). At-risk students have needs that are different and perhaps more challenging in comparison to the traditional students (McGee & Lin, 2016).

Students learn in an environment where they feel a sense of belonging. Smith (1991) suggests thinking of students as being on a student engagement scale from marginal-disengaged to member-engaged. Newmann (1992) makes a distinction between student engagement and student motivation. *Academic motivation* refers to the aspiration or temperament to academically succeed in the specific assignments of school, where *student engagement* is the inner quality of the student's concentration and effort to learn (p. 13). Newmann further iterates that schools, particularly at the secondary level, will require substantial changes in design in order to increase student engagement in their learning and sense of belonging. Finn (1989) utilizes a template of identification and participation as elements of for justifying student dropouts. Finn also found that student participation in the school classroom and extracurricular activities are necessary for positive outcomes such as a sense of organizational belonging and sharing the value of school-related goals. Finn further added that a student's sense of belonging or identification with school signifies a view of equality the way of the values shared with the school. This research suggests this sense of belonging, commonly known as school membership, is bonding with the school that happens when a student forms an emotional, intellectual, and social connection to the institution. Finn further asserts that schools are responsible for fostering an environment in which students feel a sense of belonging. In agreement, Newmann's research contends that schools that reflect a sense of fairness, individual support, opportunities for achievement, purpose, and a caring environment have an enhanced student sense of belonging.

Gay (2002) suggests instructional practices and culturally responsive teaching work well with students of color and included:

- getting students personally involved in their own learning
- using varied formats, multiple perspectives, and novelty in teaching
- responding to various learning styles
- modeling in teaching and learning
- using cooperation and collaboration among students to achieve shared learning outcomes
- learning by doing
- incorporating different types of skill development (e.g., intellectual, social, emotional, moral) in teaching and learning experiences
- transferring knowledge from one form or context to another
- combining knowledge, concepts, and theory with practice
- students reflecting critically on their knowledge, beliefs, thoughts, and actions (p. 196)

Wehlage et al. (1989) confirmed a personalized learning environment benefits at-risk students socially and academically. Individualized instruction and adaptation of teaching practices to meet the unique demands of at-risk students have a positive academic effect on students' mindsets, dedication to school, inclination to take risks in their education. Wehlage et al. (1989) further affirm teachers who understand their students, take time to clarify and reteach when necessary, promote and help students' learning efforts, are doing what it takes to make a difference. They further argue that schools that create a "supportive environment that helped students overcome impediments to membership and engagement" have successfully reduced or prevented student dropout (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 223). Reduction of at-risk student alienation, disaffection, and subsequent dropout requires personalization of the students' learning experience and necessitates improving the student's "attachment to valued adults in school" (Fashola & Slavin, 1997, p. 3).

Croninger and Lee (2001) labeled teachers as a crucial resource of social capital for students that decrease the likelihood of dropout by almost 50%. They noted, "Positive social relationships can create powerful incentives to attend school, even when schoolwork is difficult and classroom expectations are troublesome" (p. 551). An earlier study by Wehlage et al. (1989)

focused on social relationships as a criteria for judging the school by stating something to the effect that, "this school is better because the teachers here care about me." Wehlage et al. (1989) further clarify the study's theme by asserting, "This caring attitude is revealed in different ways, but it is always communicated by active and demonstrated interest on the part of adults for the welfare of students" (p. 131).

Perceptions of the Alternative School Option

In many instances an alternative setting is often viewed as an option in supporting and fulfilling the needs of at-risk students Gregg (1999). Sekayi (2001) conducted a one-year single site qualitative examination of the effectiveness of a high school alternative education program and how students in alternative school struggle with the labels attached to them. The study was voluntary, and students were invited to participate. Sixty-four of the 75 students participated in the study. Records indicate the students were enrolled in a public-school district that was located in a mid-western city suburb. The composition of a school's student body was an even composition of Black and White students; however, overwhelming percentage of the alternative education program students were Black males. Students enrolled were in the alternative education program were academically underachieving but capable. The researcher visited the school on 25 occasions. The data was collected from classroom observations and interviews with teachers, students, and the administrator (Sekayi, 2001).

Sekayi (2001) contends the term *alternative education* elicits a range of interpretations. Sekayi states that alternative education denotes deviation from the norm, and for many, alternative education equates to bad children. When considering an alternative school, Sekayi iterates it must have some characteristics that distinguish it from traditional schools. Additionally, the study indicates that alternative schools follow a variety of philosophies, including but not limited to theme-based education, cultural immersion, and religious affiliation. Alternative schools must incorporate choice and be distinct from the community's traditional school. Remedial/compensatory programs intervene in the at-risk students' regular educational program to address learning deficiencies and increase the likelihood that students will improve their performance in a traditional classroom setting (Sekayi, 2001). The school is a second chance for students to experience success. This research reflects that there was resistance from the students when given a choice to attend the alternative school because the students believed

the school would be different from their previous school. The author used *intellectual indignation* to describe the student's behavior (Sekayi, 2001).

Characteristics of the school in Sekayi's (2001) study included a curriculum that could be categorized as traditional and taught on a ninth-grade level. The students started school believing that they were capable of doing the work but understood they had not demonstrated their academic ability—sometimes due to higher priority issues. Some students felt the work was not challenging because it was their second time seeing the presented material and that the teacher pedagogy (instruction delivery) was similar as teachers in traditional school settings. Resistance was a major theme that emerged from the researcher's observations. Students resented being pulled out of their regular environments and felt ostracized and resented the structure of the school, labeling it *babyish*. Students complained about teacher attitudes, the size of the school, the length of the classes, and the number of students in their classes and/or school (Sekayi, 2001). Staff described the climate where students have negative expectations of alternative schools as an atmosphere of resistance since the students did not want to be in the school. Teacher feedback categorized student resistance in the forms of verbal expression and aggressive/passive-aggressive behaviors. On the first day of school, students blatantly expressed dissatisfaction with the school, the teachers, and the situation overall. Much of the resistance manifested through student-teacher relationships. Teachers expressed concerns about blatant disrespect encountered when asking students to please sit down. Students complained about the tone of the request and often challenged simple requests because they felt the tone used in making the request was disrespectful. Sekayi (2001) contend the real conflict in the program is misperception based on lack of effective communication between adults and students. Not all of the conflict revolved around academics. The teachers were provided general information about the students' performance, but were not always privy to the reasons for the poor performance. This gap is fertile ground for misinterpretation and misperception on the part of both the adults and the students.

Smyth (2006) stated that interactive trouble is what occurs when the communication between the teacher and student occurs. Students lack comprehension of the cues in the teacher's speech, which causes the teacher to misunderstand the student. The term *interactive trouble* refers to the process by which cultural discontinuities manifest themselves in the daily experiences of a school, its students, and its curriculum (Smyth, 2006).

Smyth (2006) examined educational policy and students' disengagement from school, concluding that a focus on accountability, high-stakes testing, standards, and measurement have negatively affected classroom learning. The educational system reforms of NCLB have made the classroom a less hospitable learning environment for students and teachers. Smyth argues that when students perceive their aspirations, experiences, cultures, and lives as being disregarded, underestimated, or marginalized, they develop a dislike for the institution of education. As a result, an increasing number of students of color, particularly those from urban, working-class, and minority backgrounds, are actively choosing not to attend school. Smyth (2006) argues that students withdraw from school for various factors, including educational, emotional, psychological, and eventually physical reasons. To understand the phenomena of *dropping-out or disengaging* from school, one should explore the student's perspective (Smyth, 2006).

Similarly, Slaten et al. (2015) found that ineffective communication between at-risk students and teachers creates a barrier for affecting learning. The research examined students' perspectives who have experienced marginalization in the formal education system and considered at-risk for academic failure. In this qualitative study, the students agreed to transfer from their traditional high school to non-traditional school voluntarily. The study was conducted in a small alternative high school with 60 participants. Of the study participants, 86% identified as White and 66% were female. Additionally, 19% of the student population were identified as teen parents. The school served predominately low-income families and 85 of the students qualified for free or reduced-price meals (Slaten et al., 2015).

Slaten et al.'s (2015) findings reveal that students at-risk for of dropping out bring about different academic, emotional, and mental demands to the educational system. Administrators and teachers frequently lack the resources necessary to adapt traditional practices to meet at-risk students' unique needs. As a remedy to this issue, the study suggested utilizing the services of experienced school counselors because they possess the necessary skills and competencies to address the social and emotional needs of at-risk students experiencing academic failure. Schools that utilize the school counselor's ability to reach this at-risk population have a better chance of meeting school-wide academic and behavioral goals (Johnson & Perkins, 2009).

Slaten et al. (2015) iterate that those students labeled as at-risk are susceptible to an array of social and emotional difficulties, including emotional and physical trauma, family difficulties, and low socioeconomic status. Slaten et al. (2015) contend that 20% of students satisfy the

benchmarks for an emotional or mental disorder, with less than a 5% receiving treatment for their suffering and an even smaller percentage obtaining in-school care. They also found school-based mental health services to be just as effective as outpatient/inpatient clinical setting services.

Slaten et al. (2015) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) agree in their findings regarding the aftermath of the push for academic accountability and the NCLB. These legislative initiatives have impacted and changed the role of school counselors. This push has moved education and counselors away from humanist ideals. As the rate of academic failure for at-risk students increases, so does the necessity to improve their public education experience to diminish the possibility of becoming a dropout. In addressing why students disconnect from public school, Slaten et al. (2015) found that the best predictors of student classroom participation and school completion were the students' opinion of teacher support. Results of the study stressed the impacts of flexible learning and strong teacher-student relationships on engaging and retaining students. At-risk students can benefit from a school culture that is aware of the unique needs of this population and a school that operates from a humanistic view while considering the students' uniqueness both in learning styles and personal experiences. They suggest that school personnel should give students the chance to express their view on their education, how school personnel listen to them, and how the school community responds to their needs. Their research also indicates that limited research has been conducted on students' views and their perspectives related to their education. Lastly, Slaten et al. (2015) emphasize the significant role of the school counselor in accommodating students at risk for academic failure by serving as consultant, an advocate, and practitioner to other personnel.

Socioeconomic Status of At-Risk Students

Muñoz et al. (2015) conducted a study that examined removing non-academic barriers that hinder the academic success of at-risk students in an urban middle school. Researchers believed that if middle schools addressed the child's basic needs, mental health, and other critical areas, students could perform better academically and have a greater chance of succeeding in high school. The overarching theory is if students' unmet needs are met then learning will occur.

A Smrekar (1998) qualitative study focused on school-linked social services in middle school where students and their families were provided single-point access to a range of services

and support through local schools. Schools were chosen as a location because they serve as a major location for a multitude of services provided to students and services can be delivered in a less stigmatizing manner Smrekar (1998).

Muñoz et al. (2015) contend that while social, emotional, physical, intellectual, mental, and health-related issues have roots in poverty that place students at-risk, at-risk students are not exclusively poor students from urban neighborhoods. Chaskin and Richman (1992) emphasize the importance of families and children receiving health and social services (such as tutoring, family planning, counseling, job training and placement, and daycare facilities) within their social environment. Conversely, there is debate over which model of service integration is most effective. One model is a community-based model composed of a diverse group of service providers, administrative contexts (i.e., principals, educators, social workers, etc.), and institutions that work collaboratively to address the needs of at-risk students. The school plays a lesser role in this model. In the school-based model, the school is an interconnected partner. According to Muñoz et al. (2015), the school-based model is the more successful model.

Muñoz et. al. (2015) examined the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act's *ecological model* implementation of schooling that sought to link schools, families, and communities. The Family Resource and Youth Centers seek to link schools, families, and communities with needed resources not only to at-risk students, but also to the families of at-risk students. In the ecological model, the school serves as a location hub and coordinators serve in the role of linking students to services. Muñoz et. al.'s examination of the Family Resource and Youth Centers revealed that dedicated, caring, and well-intentioned individuals fill these (coordinator) positions. The coordinators seek to eliminate the barriers that impede students' academic progress and meet the needs of the whole child. Slaten et al.'s (2015) findings agree with their stance regarding humanistic and whole child theorists and the methods used to address the needs of at-risk students. Muñoz et. al. focused on school-linked social services in the middle school, which addressed reducing problem behavior and enhancing academic achievement for at-risk students. The premise is that when the child's basic needs, mental health, and other critical areas are addressed during middle school, students have a greater chance at success in high school and beyond. Teachers and administrators in Muñoz et al.'s study agreed that if mental counseling and basic needs services were discontinued, it would negatively impact the students. In addition, they asserted that implementation of counseling services and the Drum Corps, an informal mentoring

program for students interested in learning to play drums, had a positive impact on student behavior and suspension issues. Muñoz et al. (2015) also reported that teachers and administrators noted that students participating in the Children Have Options in Choosing Their Experiences in Their School Program had the greatest positive impact on student behavior and student issues.

Cassidy and Bates (2005) examined an education center that was purposely created as a place of attentiveness for a student population of 12 to 18-years old who were often marginalized, labeled *troublemakers*, or had chronic occurrences of academic failure and dropping out of school. Many of the students in the study had challenging home environments and were on probation for criminal behavior. The students in a study by Cassidy and Bates (2005) were of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and labeled as having a *severe behavior disorder*. They were also reported to have varied combinations of learning disability diagnoses, issues of mental health, and substance abuse. This study aimed to provide insight on how the school members (administration, teachers, and staff) and an intentionally caring community perceive and enact policies and care of at-risk students and their families. In addition, students were encouraged to participate and share their voices and perspectives as it related to improving their educational experience. They found that students' opinions are all but rarely heard in debates concerning the failures and successes of schools. The student perspectives from these overlooked communities are even more hidden and have resulted in being referred to as *the silenced ones* (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

Previous researchers have indicated the importance of creating a learning environment that is socially and emotionally positive and supports the needs of its students in order for them to thrive. Cassidy and Bates (2005) expressed that the idea of caring in schools of today is seldomly the center-point of policies and practices, mainly because administrators and teachers are overly concerned with current legislation and increase academic performance. As a result, administrators and teachers are unable to foster caring and supportive relationships with students. Cassidy and Bates (2005) contend that caring is a universal need—and children suffer when schools become less compassionate places. Their study reiterates that students whose academic history and social background predispose them to school failure or dropping out of high school are the ones that can least afford to be in an uncaring environment.

When students do not feel that they are cared for or say their teachers "don't care," it is an indication the caring process is not in place (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). Their study reveals previous researchers indicate that little attention has been given to the act of caring or the opinions of students and teachers. Noddings (2002) *references apprehending the other's reality* and being committed as two essential elements of caring for one another. Cassidy and Bates (2005) acknowledge that it is people, and not administrations, that care, and contend that schools should employ their ability to be organized in a way that supports the endeavor of teachers and others to care for young and adolescent children when they say, "the primary aim of every educational institution and every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring...[this aim] establishes a lens which all practices and possible practices are examined" (p. 68). They state the present-day structures of schooling oppose the efforts of care—and concurrently, the necessity for care may be greater than ever. Cassidy and Bates (2005) further iterate that education with caring at its foundation gives adolescents the ability to develop into persons themselves, making education more than simply an academic quest. They maintain that *caring* is fostered when school administration and teachers engage in meaningful dialogue with students, provide opportunities to practice care, model caring, and confirm and applaud caring.

Cassidy and Bates' (2005) research examines the social approach to working with at-risk students. They refer to the paradigms of education that confront and counteract the disadvantaged and address the embedded inequalities between social groups that negatively influence students' capacity to thrive. The social approach recognizes both, the difficulties experienced by individual families, and inseparably bound up cultural groups with larger social inequalities of marginalization, disadvantage, and poverty. Their research reveals the school system's discriminatory school practices and policies may reflect these disparities. They iterate that helping at-risk students through identification of the societal challenges at-risk students face, then changing the underlying community and school barriers so that these students can succeed prevent blaming the student and mitigate the negative message associated with the label of *at-risk*. According to Cassidy and Bates (2005), governmental regulations that control today's schools pressure many students to drop out—and refers to the situation these students are in as *push-out*. Cummins (1986, as cited in Cassidy & Bates, 2005) contends that "children of disadvantaged groups in all societies perform poorly in school in ways directly linked to the unequal social relationships in the society as a whole and that teachers can help redress these

inequities by creating alternate situations in their classrooms that disrupt, rather than reflect, these dynamics" (p. 70).

Cassidy and Bates (2005) propose that bridges built between students and other high-achieving peers, and successful adults will act as strong support systems in helping them thrive in school. They stress that the school's emphasis must be on those students who do not match the mainstream academic pattern and how to restructure the school to meet their needs. Cassidy and Bates (2005) make another point that "… as hard as it may be to change the school to match the student, it is a more promising strategy than trying to fit the student to the school" (p. 70). In their study, the staff did not view students as having a series of problems that required correction; they sought to build student-teacher relationships while developing their strong suits and talents and walked along with them to facilitate positive futures. They defend that schools with a focus on creating an environment of care in which students can thrive are those that work with families and their community to change the atmosphere outside the classroom and create education methods and strategies that are in students' best interests.

Summary

While the articles in this literature review are in agreement with the established criteria set forth in describing characteristics of at-risk students as it relates to academic failure and becoming a dropout, it is crucial to realize that not all of the researchers are in agreement on how to remove those barriers so that educational establishments can effectively meet the unique and varying needs of at-risk students not only academically, but also in supporting their social and emotional needs. In most cases, at-risk students enter educational institutions with predetermined expectations established by states and a federal bureaucracy that has labeled them as being at-risk. Carrying the label at-risk has impacted administrators, teachers, counselors, and those interacting with them (students) outside of the community. Unfortunately, many of these interactions have been detrimental. Preconceived attitudes of administrators and teachers combined with low expectations and a lack of interest in the underlying reasons why students are at-risk seem to have overshadowed the urgency to address the needs of at-risk students long before they become at-risk. Given that traditional schools do not meet all students' academic needs and expose students to the risk of dropping out without a high school diploma, perhaps

additional research in the area of non-traditional learning environments and the impact of establishing a caring environment on at-risk students is necessary.

Chapter Three
Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. Traditional public-school settings are not meeting the needs of all students (Beken et al., 2009; Cotton, 2004; Groves, 1998). As a result, students who have fallen behind academically and lack the necessary credit for graduation are at-risk of leaving high school without a high school credential (Berliner & Barrat, 2009). Public schools offer alternative school programs for students who are at-risk of leaving school without a high school credential. Mills-Walker (2011) suggested that "it would be helpful to examine different types of alternative programs to determine whether some types of programs are more effective than others in increasing graduation rates" (p. 103).

Research Design/Methodology

This study seeks to understand the effects of leadership practices in alternative education and their impact on student outcomes. The researcher utilized a qualitative methodology to obtain data gathered through interviews with selected high school leaders of alternative education programs from the VDOE Superintendent's Region II. Tools developed and used to gather the qualitative data consisted of four research questions and 11 aligning interview questions to examine the effects of leadership practices in alternative education and their impacts on the outcomes of at-risk students in the alternative education setting. Information collected during the researcher’s interviews included development and implementation of an effective program and practices that are effective in positive student attendance, behavior, and graduation in the alternative school setting. The collected data were subsequently analyzed, coded, and organized to develop findings based on themes and categories indicated by the study’s participants. Findings of this study may provide school division and school building leaders best practices and strategies for improving alternative education student outcomes.

Research Design Justification

While qualitative research and quantitative research have certain parallels, each has its own objective, technique, and final outcome, according to several researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Merriam 2009). Quantitative analysis, according to Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2013), collects and analyzes numerical data in order to uncover relationships and medians, make predictions, evaluate underlying linkages, and generalize conclusions to larger populations. Qualitative research constructs are formed from interpretations of the participant's experiences. Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009) agree there may be multiple interpretations and realities of an experience, and iterate knowledge is not found by researchers—it is built by researchers.

Creswell (2013) indicated a qualitative study is an appropriate qualitative method because it uses various approaches such as conducting interviews, reading documents, videos, or visiting places and events to understand the participants' experiences from their perspective. Moustakas (1994) defined qualitative (phenomenological) methodology as an innovative subdivision of philosophy that investigates human awareness experiences. Moustakas (1994) further explained phenomenology as a study of how people make meaning in their lives. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology is a preference process used in circumstances when the goal is to solve the underlying nature of mankind's life experiences through research objective statements. Qualitative research allows for a more in-depth knowledge of an issue or phenomenon by supplying rich data and eliciting feedback from the research study participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative studies use an inquiry method of understanding to investigate societal issues.

Merriam (2009) stated, "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (p. 1). Qualitative research in this study was used to identify the leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. According to Sparkes and Smith (2013), the advantages of qualitative research include (a) a notion of standardized exploration of the participants' life experiences, (b) use of open-ended questions to generate more topics, and (c) gains in understanding behaviors of assumptions, beliefs, and values. Conversely, Sparkes and Smith (2013) point out the major weaknesses of qualitative research, which include: (a)

nonobjective unsupported results, (b) requisite expert interview skills during the entire process of interviewing, (c) time consumption requirement to conduct interviews, and (d) a high number of generated themes.

The data for this study came from open-ended questions provided during individual interviews with alternative school leaders. Merriam (2002) described two types of interviews – structured and semi-structured interviews. Structured interviews were described as a conversation where the interviewer asks an interviewee a set of premeditated questions in a standard order to gather information. Semi-structured interviews, as indicated by Merriam (2002), are a series of predetermined but open-ended questions. The researcher developed a written interview guide in advance of the study. For this proposed study, each administrator was asked a series of identical questions in a standardized open-ended format. A semi-structured interview technique was most appropriate for this study because it encouraged two-way communication. Semi-structured interviews allow interviewees the flexibility to convey their thoughts in their own words and provide researchers with comparable and reliable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). To collect data and develop findings based on themes and categories, a semi-structured interview method with open-ended questions was used.

Research Questions

According to Roberts (2010), "Researchers seek a holistic picture – a comprehensive and complete understanding of the phenomena they are studying" (p. 143). For this study, the researcher gathered, analyzed, interpreted, and reported data in order to address the following research questions:

1. What are the essential leadership practices of an alternative educational leader in developing and implementing an effective program?
2. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?
3. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?
4. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?

Site/Sample Selection

Participants for this study were leaders of public high school alternative education programs in Southeastern Virginia, currently held an administrative license, and had three or more years in administration in an alternative education environment. Data collected during the researcher's study were obtained from high school alternative education program leaders in the VDOE Superintendent's Region II. The VDOE Superintendent's Region II was comprised of 15 Virginia school divisions with alternative education programs for students who are at-risk of leaving school without a high school credential. The importance of identifying qualified participants for this proposed study was crucial in ensuring that the quality of responses aided the researcher's analysis and comparison of the collected data. Purposive sampling, sometimes referred to as judgment sampling, was the sampling strategy employed for this research. Purposive sampling has the advantage of allowing the researcher to choose cases rich in information for comprehensive examination (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling was justified by Patton (2002) primarily on the assumption that the researcher possessed specific knowledge about the areas to be evaluated and could use this knowledge to select participants. Gay and Airasian (2000) contended that the researcher must understand the population being sampled prior to sample selection. In this study, the researcher employed professional experience and knowledge to select the participants.

Purposive sampling, a goal-directed method of sampling, was utilized to decide the point at which the collected participants' data provides no added value to the research questions. For a study using qualitative methodology, Creswell (2013) recommended three to 10 participants, while Morse (1994) suggested at least six. According to Bowen (2008) and Kerr (2010), the inability to achieve the data goal, known as data saturation, can negatively impact the study's quality of the investigation and subject accuracy. Burmeister and Aitken (2012) suggested that data saturation is about data quality, not quantity, because neither a large nor small sample size will ensure data saturation. Based on the data presented by Burmeister and Aitken (2012), the researcher invited participants from the 15 VDOE Region II school divisions and developed predetermined interview questions designed to provide quality data saturation.

Data Collection Procedures

The goal of data collection is to gather sound information to answer the study's research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher received a Certificate of Completion after completing the requisite Human Subjects Protection training (Appendix A). The researcher applied to the VT Institutional Review Board (IRB) to comply with federal regulations and procedures relating to conducting research with human subjects after gaining approval from the doctoral committee. The IRB was utilized to certify that the researcher had gained approval to conduct the study and created protocols to safeguard the study participants' identities (Roberts, 2010). Upon receipt of approval from VT IRB (Appendix B), the school divisions selected to participate in the study received a Division Request Letter (Appendix C). Upon approval to conduct research in the identified division, the respective school administrators received a Participant Recruitment Letter (Appendix D) to acknowledge their consent (including permission for video/audio recording) and opt-out instructions. Consenting study participants received an Interview Scheduling Letter (Appendix E) and Interview Verification Letter (Appendix F). The recruitment letter and informed consent form included the following elements from Leedy and Ormrod (2010, p. 102):

- a detailed description of the expectations of the participant,
- the researcher's name and other relevant contact information,
- the purpose of the study,
- an overview of the study,
- a guarantee of no conflicts of interest,
- a statement of voluntary participation and right of the participant to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative repercussions,
- guarantee of confidentiality and privacy, and
- an offer to receive detailed information on the study upon its completion.

Additionally, Alternative educational leaders are selected based on the following criteria:

- Must hold an administrative license.
- Must have three or more years in administration in an alternative education environment.

The proposed data collection occurred during the Fall of 2021. The data set consisted of verbatim transcripts from Zoom video-conference platform recordings of the personal interviews

conducted with each school administrator. A complete list of the questions asked during each interview can be found in (see Appendix G). Seidman (2013) requested researchers preserve the participants' original words by recording talks of each interview, then transcribe the recordings of the interviews to text. The researcher reviewed each transcription to verify accuracy of the recorded information to discover themes and patterns of the participants' responses.

The interview protocol began with introductory questions which extricate background information, such as background information leading to engagement (see Appendix G). To begin the interview, the participants were asked an ice breaker question in the form of an open-ended question, which allowed for some connection building. The question merely inquired about the interviewee's day to date. This method prepared respondents to think about their answers to questions on alternative education programs. According to Hatch (2002), good qualitative interviews are "dynamic, interactive, social events" (p. 115). Hatch believed that interviewees should be invited to participate in a two-way discourse in which they are treated with dignity and respect. Hatch (2002) also stated that interviewers should always begin an interview with a brief conversation or explanation of the study's objectives and the informant's significance to the research process.

The interviews' guidelines were based on research conducted by Seidman (2005) that outlines strategies to ensure successful interviewing. To have the best interview experience, Seidman (2005) shared you must first understand the significance of listening. This researcher also contended that the key skill for study interviewers is active listening. Seidman (2005) further iterated that active listening forces us to focus on a level above what is normally required in daily life. A second guideline for a successful interview, as stated by Berg (2008), was for researchers to remember the purpose of their research. Hatch (2002) stated that "having a purpose in mind before the interview begins will help keep the interview on track and productive" (p. 115).

Instrument Design and Validation

The researcher designed open-ended questions for this study. When conducting a program evaluation, Hinds (2013) stated that obtaining general information on each alternative school is beneficial and required. Patton's (2015) open-ended question study included queries involving experience, emotion, belief, knowledge, and physical sensation questions. Open-ended

questions draw responses from the participants involving detailed recollections of their experiences concerning the area covered in the study (Patton, 2015). When designing meaningful semi-structured interview research questions, McNamara (2009) suggested the following: (a) use open-ended wording that allows respondents to respond in their own words; (b) post interview questions one at a time; (c) ask neutral questions that will not influence the interviewee's judgment; (d) avoid asking *why* questions; and (e) use precise wording, which requires a good understanding of the study participant's culture. Creswell (2003) asserted that "regardless of the designation used to express the concept of validity, whether it is trustworthiness, authenticity, or credibility; it represents the cornerstone of qualitative research" (p. 195).

Conventional validity is a term referenced in quantitative studies that compares factual reality against the described reality under study (Merriam, 2009). One of the theoretical foundations of qualitative research is that a phenomenon may have numerous realities (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). To validate the research and interview questions, the researcher had a panel to review pilot questions for clarity to remove any possible bias. The primary goal of peer review is to ensure that the themes, findings, and research questions are all connected (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Following a review by the panel, the questions were modified to be more concise. The panel consisted of cohort members and district leaders with expertise with survey questions. Peer review, according to Creswell and Guetterman, is a method for establishing validity because it entails an independent audit of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that participant checks are "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" of qualitative studies (p. 314). Creswell & Guetterman contended that qualitative studies that utilize triangulation and a cross-reference of findings for accuracy are means of establishing validity. Member checking is where the researcher allows the transcribed interview and related analysis to be read by the participants to ensure accurate reporting and interpretation of the participant's experience (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). During this process, the study's participants assisted researchers by providing feedback to more accurately report their experience (Merriam, 2009).

The following pre-designed interview questions were employed for collecting data in this proposed study:

1. Describe your leadership practices in creating a school vision and philosophy for the alternative education program.

2. What are the characteristics of potential staff applicants you look for when conducting interviews?
3. What would you want to see in the alternative learning environment that you do not currently see in your program?
4. How do you support positive attendance as a school leader?
5. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding attendance.
6. Describe how you assist your staff in connecting with diverse populations.
7. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding positive behavior.
8. What leadership practices and school incentives have you found effective in increasing alternative student positive behavior?
9. What staff development trainings are provided to improve alternative student outcomes?
10. How effective have these leadership practices been in improving alternative student graduation rates?
11. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding graduation rates.

Alignment Between Research Questions and Interview Questions

Roberts (2010) suggested aligning research questions with interview questions. This alignment process is to verify that the interview questions will provide appropriate data to answer the research questions. Table 1 below illustrates the relation between each research question below and the corresponding interview question(s).

1. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are essential leadership practices in developing and implementing an effective program?
2. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?
3. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?

4. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?

Table 1

Research and Interview Question Alignment

	Interview Questions	Research Question Correlation			
		R1	R2	R3	R4
1	Describe your leadership practices in creating a school vision and philosophy for the alternative education program.	☒	☐	☐	☐
2	What are the characteristics of potential staff applicants you look for when conducting interviews.	☒	☐	☐	☐
3	What would you want to see in the alternative learning environment that you do not currently see in your program.	☒	☐	☐	☐
4	How do you support positive attendance as a school leader?	☐	☒	☐	☐
5	Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding attendance.	☐	☒	☐	☐
6	Describe how you assist your staff in connecting with diverse populations.	☐	☐	☒	☐
7	Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding positive behavior.	☐	☐	☒	☐
8	What leadership practices and school incentives have you found effective in increasing alternative student positive behavior?	☐	☐	☒	☐
9	What staff development trainings are provided to improve alternative student outcomes?	☐	☐	☐	☒
10	How effective have these leadership practices been in improving alternative student graduation rates?	☐	☐	☐	☒
11	Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding graduation rates.	☐	☐	☐	☒

Data Treatment

According to Merriam (2009), each participant's privacy is of the highest priority for qualitative research. Researchers conducting qualitative studies must ensure there are procedures in place to prevent ethics-related breaches during each part of the study when taking ethical issues into account (Creswell, 2013). To prevent breach violations, the researcher obtained approval from VT's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study. Next the researcher obtained approval from the school districts involved in the study (see Appendix A). Using informed consent, participants understood that participation in this study was voluntary and that they could discontinue participation in the study at any time (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The interviews were recorded using the Zoom video-conferencing platform to ensure accurate transcription. Field notes were taken during the interview to record any observations and narratives provided by the interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher assigned pseudonyms to each study participant to preserve any information potentially leading to their identity in all reported data analyses.

Data Management

Data collection occur during the Fall/Winter semester of 2021. Interviews were scheduled with each participating alternative education program leaders according to their specified preference, video conferencing or telephone conferencing at a mutually agreed-upon time. Each interviewee was provided with an interview procedure that detailed the interview setting, the study's aim, and the interviewee's involvement within the study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) and Seidman (2013) reiterated that all files pertaining to the study's interview data were maintained in a secure location accessible only to the researcher and members of the researcher's committee and were destroyed following the researcher's successful doctorate defense.

Data Analysis Techniques

Clark and Creswell (2014) emphasized that "the findings that emerged from the data analysis process should be accurate and credible representations of the gathered data and participants' experiences" (p. 364). Qualitative data analysis, according to Trochim and Donnelly (2001), entails assessment, entry, storage, and coding of the collected data. To ensure accurate interpretation of collected data for this qualitative study, the researcher conducted data entry,

storage, and semi-structured coding of the data for categorization. To connect the responses of the respondents, the researcher employed coding and themes to relate interview study participant responses. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined coding as a set of single words, letters, numerals, phrases, or colors. Microsoft Office software applications were used to help manage collected data. Coding is the process of breaking down a large amount of data into manageable parts that can be quickly accessed and used (Bailey, 2006). The information gathered during the study were maintained on a password-protected computer, with hard copies filed in a locked document storage cabinet.

Timeline

After receiving permission from the dissertation committee, IRB, and the participants, the researcher anticipated that participant recruitment would take from one to four weeks. Participant interviews began as soon as participants confirmed eligibility to participate in the study, implied consent was provided, and interviews scheduled based on participant preference. Participant identification and the interview process occurred concurrently until data saturation had been achieved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Methodology Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify the leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. This study comprised 15 school divisions with alternative education programs for students who are at-risk of leaving school without a high school credential. Data gathered from participants in the study were public high school alternative education program leaders in Southeastern Virginia (VDOE Superintendent's Region II). Each alternative education program leader held a current administrative license and had three or more years' experience in an alternative education environment. To validate research and interview questions, the researcher had a panel to review pilot questions for clarity to remove any bias. As explained by Creswell & Guetterman (2019) a peer review was conducted by of cohort members and district leaders with expertise with survey questions to ensure that the themes, findings, and research questions were connected. All interviews were conducted through Zoom video-conferencing platform and served as a transcription of the audio recording. The researcher

ensured steps were taken to protect confidentially of research participants throughout the study. After completion of transcription the interview responses, the participants were encouraged to conduct a member check to ensure accurate reporting and interpretation of their responses as indicated by (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The researcher coded and categorized the coded data for emergent themes. The data gathered during the research were organized, managed, and stored in secured electronic and physical locations.

Chapter Four
Analysis of Data

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify the leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. The following research questions served as a framework for data collection and analysis.

1. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are essential practices in developing and implementing an effective program?
2. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?
3. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?
4. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?

The findings from this study provide insights for alternative educational leaders in developing programs that increase at-risk student graduation rate and improve at-risk student outcomes.

Study Participant Selection

The study participants were selected from solicitation of 15 division superintendents in the Southeastern Region II of Virginia. The researcher requested permission to conduct a recorded 45-minute interview comprised of 11 questions with each of the division's public high school alternative educational leaders. Upon receipt of consent from school division superintendents, the researcher contacted the high school alternative educational leader in each consenting division via a participant request email containing a survey link. The survey contained professional experience and general school demographic questions to ensure only alternative educational leaders of public high school grade levels were selected for the study. Participants for this study were required to be currently serving as a high school alternative school leader; have a minimum of two years of alternative education leadership experience; and hold an Educational Leadership endorsement for the Commonwealth of Virginia. Four of the six consenting alternative school leaders participated in the research study interview.

Research Questions and Interview Questions Alignment

Merriam (2009) stated, "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (p. 1). This study sought to understand the effects of leadership practices in alternative education and their impact on student performance; therefore, a qualitative study was utilized. Semi-structured interviews allow interviewees the flexibility to convey their thoughts in their own words and provide researchers with comparable and reliable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used to collect data and develop findings based on themes and categories. An alignment of interview questions for each research study question is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Research and Interview Question Alignment

Research Question	Interview Question(s)
1. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are essential practices in developing and implementing an effective program?	1. Describe your leadership practices in creating a school vision and philosophy for the alternative education program. 2. What are the characteristics of potential staff applicants you look for when conducting interviews? 3. What would you want to see in the alternative learning environment that you do not currently see in your program?
2. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?	4. How do you support positive attendance as a school leader? 5. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding attendance.

(continued)

Table 2 *(cont.)*

Research Question	Interview Question(s)
3. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?	6. Describe how you assist your staff in connecting with diverse populations. 7. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding positive behavior. 8. What leadership practices and school incentives have you found effective in increasing alternative student positive behavior?
4. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?	9. What staff development trainings are provided to improve alternative student outcomes? 10. How effective have these leadership practices been in improving alternative student graduation rates? 11. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding graduation rates.

Data Collection

The study was conducted during the fall and winter academic semester of 2021, using the online platform Zoom for video conferencing. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used to collect data and develop findings based on themes and categories. Field notes were taken during the interviews, and additional reflective comments were added to the notes after each Interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the research data for noted patterns, then categorized the patterns into hierarchical lists of major themes using coding. The resulting common themes served as the framework for describing the identification of the leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. Clark and Creswell (2014) emphasized that "the findings that emerged from the data analysis process should be accurate and credible representations of the gathered data and participants' experiences" (p. 364).

Data for Research Question 1

What do alternative educational leaders indicate are essential practices in developing and implementing an effective program?

Respondents were asked three interview questions concerning their practices in developing and implementing an effective alternative education program. The education leaders echoed a common theme of relationships with their staff, students and community as an essential element in implementing an effective program. The leaders also indicated empathy and transparency as essential practices in developing an effective alternative education program.

Interview Question 1: Describe your leadership practices in creating a school vision and philosophy for the alternative education program.

Relationship with Staff, Students, and Community. All four of the alternative education leaders interviewed expressed sub-themes of relationships between leadership, staff, students, and community in describing development of their visions and philosophy for the alternative education program. P1 stated that their primary practice is, "to understand that everyone has a story and that when developing and maintaining relationship with my staff, students, and community, I have to keep in mind I am not to be judgmental" (P1 *l*12-15). The philosophy shared by P4 was that "life is all about relationships" (P4 *l*70).

Three of four of the interviewed participants indicated having empathy of the population being served as a philosophy for their alternative school program. P1 iterated, "My primary leadership practice is to understand that everyone has a story. When developing and maintaining relationships with my staff, students, and community, I have to keep in mind I am not to be judgmental" (P1, *l*12-15). P3 reiterated similar words to P1's statement in declaring, "Putting yourself in someone else's shoes and trying to understand you know what some of these kids might be going through" (P3 *l*154-155) is part of understanding the population served.

P3 and P4 shared similar philosophies for the alternative school program in that each of these leaders believe in sharing their vision and expectations with staff. P4 further iterated, "I have shared my vision from the first day of meeting with my staff, officially, of what my vision was; what I expected from my staff; what I expected from our students; where I felt the school was; where we are; and where I want us to be" (P4 *l*40-45. The leadership practice expressed by P2 was through the establishment of a sense of ownership and leadership for all stakeholders involved in the program, staff and community. P2 stated, "My style is I want to foster a sense of

ownership and leadership among the staff and any community stakeholders that are involved with my program. Making them feel they are a part of the program" (P2 *l*19-22).

Interview Question 2: What are the characteristics of potential staff applicants you look for when conducting interviews?

Right Fit / Character Attributes. Desired qualities of selected alternative education staff indicated by the study participants were equally split. P1 and P3 consider honest and transparency as traits sought when seeking potential alternative school staff. P1 stated, "I look for honesty, I look for integrity, an individual exhibited they are going to be fair and non-judgmental," (P1 *l*20) while P3 stated that they seek to try to make some connection so that they can get the applicant to open up to see who they really are. (P3 *l*31-32) P2 and P4 iterated self-confidence, belief in alternative students' abilities, and enthusiasm for teaching as desirable traits for potential staff. P2 echoed the statement of confidence and passion mentioned by P2 and P4, but also expressed that prospective staff members must have, "… a genuine belief students can be successful" (P2 *l*31-32). P3 explained, "AE school is different. You have to be a different kind of individual. We want people with certification, and licensure and very competent" (P3 *l*65-67).

Interview Question 3: What would you want to see in the alternative learning environment that you do not currently see in your program?

Central Office Support. Two of the four respondents expressed a desire to see some indication of concern for alternative students from the district administration office. P1 and P4 were most vocal of their disappointment of treatment towards at-risk students. P1 said, "I would like to see a central office administration that is generally concerned about the learning needs of alternative education students", (P1 *l*26-27). P1 further proclaimed that at-risk students are tucked away with the hopes that they do not request instructional support. P1 also expressed difficulty in obtaining out-of-building resource support. P3 stated that alternative students must see that the staff are empathetic and open even when being disciplined. P2 expressed a desire to have student advocate services in alternative education settings. Under the services rendered, the advocate could connect parents to child protective services, a social worker, therapy or mentor program.

General Equality. Three of the four alternative education leaders agreed that an equal environment is what they would want to see in their program. P1 iterated having an environment that is comparable to the general education environment and cited, "In our case, they would have

a cafeteria where they are able to go get their food and sit in the cafeteria rather than having to come back to their classes to have their meal" (P1 *l*31-33). P2 would like for alternative education programs to have the same extracurricular activities seen in traditional schools. P2 further shared that many students in the alternative school environment are placed there due to behavioral or discipline problems and would like to see expansion of "opportunity for students to not only come to AE program because of discipline problems" (P2 *l*39-40). P4 summed up the statements of P1 and P2 by stating a desire to see "True equity," (P4 *l*127).

Table 3 provides response themes from interview questions aligned under research question 1. Themes captured include relationships and transparency, sub-themes of sharing of vision, understanding of population, honesty, and sharing expectations were echoed by the group. In addition, AE leaders desired the following traits in potential staff: integrity, confidence and compassion, transparency in the form of honesty. Lastly, while two of the study respondents desire to see more concern for AE student needs, three of the four alternative education leaders interviewed expressed a lack of equality between the traditional and AE school environment.

Table 3

Alternative Educational Leader Response Themes to Developing and Implementing an Effective Program

Theme	Sub-Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4
Relationship with Staff, Students, and Community					
	Empathy / Understanding of Population	X	X	X	
	Shared Ownership, Vision, and Expectations			X	X
Right Fit / Character Attributes					
	Honesty / Transparency	X		X	
	Confidence / Compassion		X		X
	Competence			X	
Central Office Support		X	X	X	
General Equality		X	X		X

Data for Research Question 2

What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?

Respondents were asked two interview questions concerning their practices to improve at-risk student attendance in the AE environment, and the monitoring instrument(s) used to track student attendance. Each school leader's practice varied from online attendance options to continuous flow of staff communication with students and parents. Similarly, the tools used to monitor student attendance were also varied to include online state database tools, computer software, and face-to-face manual tracking methods.

Interview Question 4. How do you support positive attendance as a school leader?

Diverse Opportunities for Attendance. P1 offers an option for in-person, virtual, and blended instruction to accommodate the schedules of alternative education program students. P1 further declared, "We are willing to work with them during the regular day as well as evening hours they are able to log in if something occurred during the regular school day and they were unable to get to the classroom setting" (P1 *l*45-47). Using the Learning Management System enables students to conduct a virtual login and serves as an in-person attendance substitute.

Staff/Student/Parent Communication and Relationships. Two of the four participants revealed support through staff communication and relationships with students and parents. Communication methods to support alternative student attendance may be through verbal communication between the school staff (educational specialist, counselors, and teachers), students, and parents, or through written communication in the form of daily progress reports on the student's behavior, grades, and assignment completion status. P2 stated, "We develop a rapport with the parents and student, … that is the number one thing. Having that transparency to be able to assist whenever needed because life happens. AE program leaders deal with some difficult situations. Transparency is important" (P2 *l*48-52). P3 echoed P2's statement by asserting that their staff of education specialists, administrators, counselors, and teacher specialists are continuously in contact with parents.

Student Recognition Programs and Attendance Incentives. P4 detailed a unique approach to supporting positive attendance in their alternative education program. P4 regularly recognizes achievements of students in the alternative education school. Specifically, P4 indicated, "I always try to recognize students at the end of every quarter, even if it's something as

simple as a blow-pop – just to acknowledge those students in their class who have good attendance" (P4 *l*146-147). P4 believes that the students look forward to the impromptu visits and gifts by the alternative education administrators.

Interview Question 5. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding attendance.

Computer-Based Database Attendance Tracking. Three of the four alternative education leaders uttered use of computer software database applications (i.e., learning management system, Synergy, and MS Excel) to track alternative student attendance. A learning management system allows students flexibility to log-in to complete assignments outside of the classroom environment. Schools can monitor account activity to determine attendance within the assigned course(s). Synergy is an online software databased used to track student attendance that allows office staff to verify attendance of those students that are logged as absent by the classroom teacher. Two of the three participants indicated use of Synergy to track alternative student attendance. P3 utilizes MS Excel to monitor positive attendance in addition to Synergy. P2 stated that in addition to the student support specialist, "…, we keep up [with attendance] with Synergy," (P1 *l*56). As indicated in the response by P1 in Interview Question 4, P1 takes advantage of any means of monitoring student attendance and stated, "We also consider attendance any meaningful interaction the teachers are able to have with the students. Virtual login as an opportunity for students and teachers to be face to face" (P1 *l*55-57).

Manual Attendance Tracking. In addition to the use of the computer applications previously stated, P2 and P3 also utilized manual means of tracking attendance through verbal and written communication between staff and parents. P2 indicated, "In our alternative education program, students have to sign out and are escorted everywhere so that we know exactly what is going on" (P2 *l*59-62). Participant 4 stated that he had not been able to really do as much with the attendance as they would have liked due to change in priorities caused by the COVID pandemic.

Table 4 provides response themes from interview questions aligned under research question 2. While the respondents shared multiple practices to increase student attendance in their programs, computer-based database attendance tracking was the most utilized method to increase student attendance. Other themes captured included diverse attendance options, communication and relationships, recognition programs and attendance incentives and manual

attendance tracking. Due to interview script limitations, the researcher did not obtain amplifying details of P4's response to Interview Question 5.

Table 4

Alternative Educational Leader Response Themes to Increase Student Attendance in the Alternative School Setting

Theme	Sub-Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4
Diverse Attendance Options		X			
	Learning management system	X			
	Virtual	X			
	In-Person	X			
Staff/Student/Parent Communication and Relationships			X	X	
Student Recognition Programs / Attendance Incentives					X
Computer-Based Database Attendance Tracking		X	X	X	
	Learning management system	X			
	Synergy	X	X		
	MS Excel			X	
Manual Attendance Tracking			X	X	
	Logs		X		
	Verbal/Written Communication		X	X	

Data for Research Question 3

What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?

Three interview questions were posed to respondents regarding their practices for increasing student positive behavior in the alternative school setting. The leaders discussed how they assisted their staff in connecting with diverse populations, the data sources used to track students' progress toward positive behavior, and their practices and incentives to promote positive behavior among students. The themes shared among the respondents to promote positive student behavior included family, relationships and connections, and use of behavioral goal models.

Interview Question 6. Describe how you assist your staff in connecting with diverse populations.

Concept of Family. While all the respondents implied a common theme concept of family in helping their staffs connect with diverse alternative student populations, there were three sub-themes indicated by the group. P1 experienced no issues with staff connecting with diverse student populations since staff members with similar tribal values are selected during the interview process upfront. P1 stated, "that has never been an issue as far as the connection piece because upfront staff members are chosen that are passionate about teaching and have expressed the ability to connect with diverse populations. Here we have all ethnicities. We have individuals with social and emotional issues, LGBTQ community" (P1 *l*60-65). P2 and P4 echoed similar sub-themes of sharing experiences, having uncomfortable group topic discussions, and training covering situations involving minority ethnic groups. P2 mentioned development of a "culture of family" where staff must be willing to be in uncomfortable situations and have difficult conversations. P4 similarly supports the staff through voluntary book studies and diverse population topics are part of staff discussions. Lastly, P3 indicated that creating a positive workplace for staff will help foster empathy with diverse populations when stating, "if you treat people well, it trickles down. […]. Create a positive work environment that will manifest in the kids and staff interacting little bit better" (P3 *l*131-143).

Interview Question 7. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding positive behavior.

Behavioral Goal Achievement Model. Two of the four study participants utilize behavioral goal models that reward alternative education students for continuous positive behavior. P2 implemented a five-tiered point system approach where the student must accumulate a specific number of points before advancing to the next level. Levels are assigned to five ranges of points accumulated. Points are given and accumulate based on continued positive student behavior. The level achieved dictates what additional privileges the student can receive. Upon mastering Level-5, the student is granted privileges much like those granted to students in the traditional school setting. P2 justified the program when stating, "…, ultimately, the students want to get back to their traditional school setting" (P2 136-143). P4 employs a similar monitoring approach through grade-level cohorts. Each teacher monitors up to five students and provides periodic performance metric updates to their respective cohort. P4 explained the three-colors by indicating, "Green, meaning they're doing what they need to do – they're successful; red, meaning they're not being successful – we need to get other people involved with them; and yellow, are kids that we need to work with, but they just need some motivation" (P4 *l*391-100).

Behavioral Software and Monitoring Reports. P3 uses a discipline incident module within Synergy to monitor positive behavior. P3 also sends behavioral monitoring reports in the form of daily or weekly progress reports. P3 explained, "We take behavior on the kids all day long. With my older population [redacted], weekly progress reports that tell the parents the grades and any behavior that jump out and don't rise to the level of discipline incident" (P3 *l*115-125).

P1 reported, "We really don't have a source of data to measure student progress regarding behavior. The reason we have not found this to be necessary in our program because of our staff member being able to connect with the students personally. We haven't the need to have a source to monitor that data" (P1 *l*76-79).

Interview Question 8. What leadership practices and school incentives have you found effective in increasing alternative student positive behavior?

Relationships and Connections. All four of the respondents echoed themes and sub-themes of relationships and connections with the students. P1 stated, "Forming relationships, actually seeing the individual as an individual and recognizing that there is no one size fits all" (P1 *l*72-73). P2 has a shared philosophy of looking at each student as an individual with unique needs. P2 emphasized that each student needed support and empathy when stating, "The high

school students understand life is about to slap them in the face. When they have somebody that's not going to give up on them; somebody that is not going to turn their back on them. […] to support them through thick and thin - they start to see that they can be successful" (P1 *l*108-166). P3 stated, "If I don't have a healthy relationship or teach teachers to have a healthy relationship with a kid or parent, the chances of it being successful is very low" (P3 *l*172-173). P4 maintains healthy relationships by speaking with a select group of alternative education students over lunch each quarter.

Incentives and Recognition Rewards. In addition to maintaining healthy relationships, P3 and P4 provide incentives and recognition rewards to promote alternative student positive behavior. P3 has a budget that allows them to provide incentives for the students. P3 iterated, "We have kids who are rewarded with drinks, water, whatever it may be – they can work towards that" (P3 *l*181-182). Incentives provided by P4 include lunch for students selected for the principals' list each quarter. P4 additionally provides incentives for alternative education program honor students.

Table 5 summarizes key themes from participants' responses to Research Question 3. The table contains themes and sub-themes pertaining to effective practices for increasing student positive behavior in the alternative school setting. The concept of family was a recurring theme among all respondents, as were relationships and connections. Two of four participants shared the implementation of behavioral goal models, and incentives and recognition rewards as practices to increase positive behavior in the alternative school setting. Behavioral software and monitoring reporting tools was the least mentioned practice indicated by the participants.

Table 5

Alternative Educational Leader Response Themes to Positive Behavior in the Alternative School Setting

Theme	Sub-Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4
Concept of Family		X	X	X	X
	Selection of Staff with Tribal Values	X			
	Uncomfortable Group Discussions and Training		X		X
	Create a Positive Workplace			X	
Behavioral Goal Models			X		X
	Tiered Point System		X		
	Color-Code System				X
Behavioral Software and Monitoring Reporting Tools	Synergy			X	
Relationships and Connections		X	X	X	X
	Empathy		X		
	Support		X		
Incentives and Recognition Rewards				X	X

Data for Research Question 4

What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?

Interview Questions 9 through 11 were designed to obtain participant responses concerning AE leader practices to increase graduation rates. Responses under these interview questions include AE leader practices for staff development and monitoring tools used to assess student progress toward graduation. All four respondents disclosed the use of in-service trainings as a development tool for staff. Three out of the four respondents indicated that the knowledge gained through trainings attended by their staff have resulted in increased student graduation rates in the alternative school setting as confirmed by either national or state web-based monitoring systems or return of students to their home-school.

Interview Question 9. What staff development trainings are provided to improve alternative student outcomes?

In-Service / In-House Training. Each alternative educational leader in the study utilizes in-service or in-house training to train their staff. P1 receives training from the VDOE and mandates staff participation for in-house and state level Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). P2 provides surveys to the staff before deciding what trainings are needed. P3 capitalizes on the staff's experience as college level professors to conduct in-service. P3 further shared, "[redacted] does a really good job of providing online professional development training from the Office of Professional and Continuing Education (OPCE) for our special education students" (P3 *l*310-311). P4 iterated, "We do our individualized in-house training" (P4 *l*310).

Conferences. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, P3 used out of district conferences in addition to in-service training to develop the staff and iterated,

> We used to send a lot of people (teachers and administrators) to conferences, and they would bring back stuff (materials) because we are regional program from Virginia (P3 *l*93-96). I am fortunate that I can reach out and get resources to get training, but we do a lot of it internally. (P3 *l*207-208)

Intervention Training. P4 employs intervention trainings in addition to in-house training. The types of intervention training include Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and social emotional training. P4 also indicated, "…, in our safe school program here in [redacted] also provides Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) training" (P4 *l*320).

Interview Question 10. How effective have these leadership practices been in improving alternative student graduation rates? Three of the four alternative education leaders (P1, P2 and P3) indicated their leadership practices as being a catalyst in improving graduation rates for alternative education students. P1 iterated that the implementation of individual programs or plans have proven to be very effective in getting alternative students to graduation. P2 reported a 94% graduation rate and increased GED Ready scores. While students in P3's alternative education program are transferred back to their traditional (comprehensive) school setting when they are ready to graduate, P3 suggested that the leadership practices implemented have directly contributed to increased retention of students who would otherwise drop out from the traditional school setting. P4 offered that they could not provide a response concerning graduation rates due to insufficient time as the alternative education leader at the school. (No theme or sub-themes were obtained from this interview question.)

Interview Question 11. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding graduation rates.

Online State Reporting Systems. P1 reported use of national and state level graduation rate monitoring sites. The National Reporting System is an outcome-based accountability system designed by the U.S. Department of Education that provides student progress, by age, ethnicity, starting level of education status, and other academic performance metric data at the federal level. The VDOE provides state graduation monitoring and assessment tools from which P1 uses to monitor alternative student progress towards graduation. Three of the four respondents reported utilization of the National Reporting System to monitor graduation progress of alternative education students. P1 stated use of the VDOE site to obtain "student progress regarding graduation by age, gender, and initial [grade level] classification when entering the program" (P1 *l*94-95). P3 reported additional use of homeschool graduation data to monitor graduation progress.

Local/District Level Graduation Data. P2 stated periodic review of the alternative education students' attendance, behavior, and progress in the program. P3 reported that since the students in the alternative education program returned to their comprehensive high school when ready to graduate, there are no state level graduation data monitored. P4 was unable discuss graduation progress data due to having less than one academic year in the districts' alternative education program.

Table 6 summarizes the themes identified in participants' responses to Research Question 4. The table contains themes and sub-themes on effective staff development practices and high graduation rates as identified by study participants. Various forms of staff in-service and in-house training were frequently cited as an effective strategy for increasing student graduation rates by respondents. All participants, with the exception of one participant's alternative students who are returned to their home school prior to graduation, used online reporting systems to monitor alternative student graduation rates.

Table 6

Alternative Educational Leader Response Themes to Positive Graduation Rates in the Alternative School Setting

Theme	Sub-Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4
In-Service / In-House Training		X	X	X	X
	Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	X			
	Online Career Development Training				X
Conference Training				X	
Intervention Training					X
Online Reporting Systems		X	X	X	
	Virginia DOE	X			
	National Reporting System	X	X	X	
	Homeschool Graduation Data			X	
Local / District Level Graduation Data			X		
No Graduation Data				X	X

Emergent Themes

Interview data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes under each interview question. Emergent themes from the research and interview questions are outlined in Table 7. With exception of the themes under Alternative Student Graduation Rates, the emergent themes listed are themes derived from at least two research study participants. Emergent themes under Alternative Education Program Development and Implementation were relationships, transparency, compassion, empathy and understanding of population, staff development, and equity. Themes that emerged under the alternative student attendance were communication, Learning Management System (LMS), Synergy, Excel spreadsheets and manual tracking. Emergent themes under positive alternative student behavior were staff training, empathy, goal systems, incentives, and rewards. Themes that emerged under alternative student graduation rates were (staff) trainings and conferences, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), National Reporting System (NRS), and state and in-house monitoring data.

Table 7

Emergent Themes

Alternative Education Program Development and Implementation	**Positive Alternative Student Attendance**	**Positive Alternative Student Behavior**	**Alternative Student Graduation Rates**
Relationship with Staff, Students, and Community	Diverse Attendance Options	Concept of Family	In-Service / In-House Training
Desired Alternative Education Staff Qualities	Staff/Student/Parent Communication and Relationships	Behavioral Goal Models	Conference Training
Central Office Support	Computer-Based Database Attendance Tracking	Behavioral Software and Monitoring Reporting Tools	Intervention Training
General Equality	Manual Attendance Tracking	Relationships and Connections	Online Reporting Systems
		Incentives and Recognition Rewards	Local / District Level Graduation Data

Summary of the Data

Main themes for Research Question 1 were relationships with staff, students and community, caring and enthusiastic staff, central office support, and general equality. Research participants interviewed for this study had similar responses concerning their leadership practices to increase positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. In response to Research Question 2, the main themes for leadership practices to increase student attendance were diverse attendance options for alternative school students, communication and relationships between staff, students and parents, computer-based database attendance tracking, and manual attendance tracking. Themes indicated under Research Question 3 included relationships and connections between community, students, and staff. The study respondents also determined that staff training, behavioral goal systems, and positive reinforcement and recognition rewards were key in increasing alternative student positive behavior. Finally, AE leaders in the study indicated employment of intervention training, conferences, and in-service trainings to develop staff as themes under Research Question 4. Chapter Five will contain a summary of the findings, their implications, recommendations for future research, and reflections on the study.

Chapter Five

Findings and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify the leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. The findings from this study provide insights for alternative educational leaders in developing programs that increase at-risk student graduation rates and improve at-risk student outcomes. This study sought to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the essential leadership practices of an alternative educational leader in developing and implementing an effective program?
2. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?
3. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?
4. What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?

Participants for this study were selected high school leaders of alternative education programs from the VDOE Superintendent's Region II. Qualitative interviews were used to gather data which were analyzed and coded to identify common themes alternative education leaders indicate improve positive outcomes for alternative students The researcher proposed that the findings of this study could aid in the development of best practices and strategies for promoting success in alternative education programs. The following are the findings of the study.

Summary of Findings

The data were gathered, analyzed, and summarized to address the study's research questions. Based on the analysis, emerging themes were identified. The findings are identified and connections to the reviewed literature are made in the following paragraphs.

Finding 1

Alternative Educational leaders indicated that having a relationship with staff, students, and the community is essential in developing and implementing an effective

alternative education program. All (100%) of the alternative education leaders interviewed expressed the importance of relationships in developing an effective alternative education program. The foundation of these relationships includes transparency, positive relationships, and shared school vision with staff, students, and the community served. Three (75%) of four interviewed participants indicated empathy for the population served as a philosophy for their alternative school program. Two (50%) of the alternative educational leaders believed that sharing their vision and expectations with staff was an essential practice in implementing an effective alternative education program. P1 iterated, "My primary leadership practice is to understand that everyone has a story. When developing and maintaining relationships with my staff, students, and community, I have to keep in mind I am not to be judgmental" (P1, *l*12-15). P2 stated, "My style is I want to foster a sense of ownership and leadership among the staff and any community stakeholders that are involved with my program. Making them feel they are a part of the program" (P2 *l*l19-22).

Research from Heck et al. (1991) indicate that an educational leader's ability to establish a safe and supportive environment through respectful relationships and consistent enforcement of social expectations and discipline codes determine an alternative school program's successful effectiveness. Effective alternative schools, according to Barr and Parrett (1997), have a common vision, relevant and focused curriculum, educational diversity, caring and demanding teachers, creative instructional approaches, and student assessment. The study participants' responses collected under this finding align to the research data in Table 3.

Finding 2

Alternative Educational leaders indicated that empathy and understanding of the student population are essential in the effectiveness of alternative education programs. All of the alternative educational leaders interviewed suggested that staff members who can emotionally connect and form relationships with their at-risk students play a significant role in students' success in their programs. P1 shared that forming relationships and realizing that relationships between each student are not a one-size-fits-all. P2 believed that alternative education staff must be in-tuned with the social and emotional needs of their students. P3 conveyed that if alternative education leaders and staff do not have a healthy relationship with a student or parent, the chances of obtaining positive student behavior are very low. P4 stated "…,

all students need to be treated fairly and equally, … it's about the mutual trust. You can't get trust for free, … you have to earn trust" (P4 *l*77-83).

Cassidy and Bates (2005) expressed that the idea of caring in schools of today is seldom the center-point of policies and practices, mainly because administrators and teachers are overly concerned with current legislation and increased academic performance. Johnson and Perkins (2009) stated that much of the research on at-risk students indicates that a lack of school engagement is a major contributing factor leading to adolescents dropping out of school (p.128). The social emotional connections and equal treatment of at-risk student populations indicated during the study iterate the data indicated in the research literature review.

Finding 3

Alternative Educational leaders indicated that staff selection has an impact on positive student behavior in the alternative school setting. Selection of staff with a disposition conducive to the alternative education environment directly correlates with at-risk student behavior and outcomes. Two (50%) of the four leaders interviewed look for honesty and transparency when seeking potential alternative school staff. The other half of the leaders prefer self-confidence and compassion for teaching alternative students. P1 seeks individuals that possess honesty, integrity, fairness, and competence to be on their staff. P2 shared a preference for people that express self-confidence and confidence in the abilities of at-risk students. P4 shared, "We need people who have passion, and they're actually feeling their need to work with students" (P4 *l*117-118).

Henderson (2010) states that students who are impacted by high-performing teachers often describe them as nurturing as they perceive that these teachers genuinely care and want the best for them. This deep care for students' well-being encourages such high-performing teachers to explore and do whatever is necessary to assure students learn. In addition, a study conducted by Poole (2016) on effective alternative schools in Georgia found overarching attributes of alternative school leadership promoting student success were "having the right staff in the right place and starting school without prejudice" (p. 92). The study participant’s recorded responses indicated in this finding is consistent with the research literature review.

Finding 4

Alternative educational leaders indicated they would like to see more concern for alternative students' needs and programs comparable to those offered to students in the traditional school setting. All (100%) of the four alternative educational leaders desired to see more support for the needs of alternative school student learning by the school district office and equality of offered activities and facility privileges provided to students in the traditional school setting. Three (75%) of the participants agreed that there is a lack of central office resource support and unequal treatment towards alternative school students. P1 indicated, "I would like to see a central office administration that is generally concerned about the learning needs of alternative education students" (P1 *l*26-27). P2 expressed the need for student advocate services to connect parents to child protective services, a social worker, therapy, or mentor program. P4 summed up sentiments of the group in response to desired change for alternative school students when saying, "True equity" (P4 l127).

Finn (1989) found that student participation in the school classroom and extracurricular activities are necessary for positive outcomes such as a sense of organizational belonging and sharing the value of school-related goals. In agreement with Finn, Newmann's (1991) research contends that schools that reflect a sense of fairness, individual support, opportunities for achievement, purpose, and a caring environment enhance students' sense of belonging. The desired resource support and treatment of students in the alternative school setting expressed by the study participants are consistent with positive alternative school program outcome requirements presented in the research data.

Finding 5

Alternative Educational leaders indicated that trained staff who connect with diverse populations have positive AE program outcomes. All (100%) of the four alternative educational leaders attributed staff in-house (in-service) training, social-emotional and intervention training, PLCs, and conferences as tools to assure successful alternative education program outcomes. P1 requires staff members to participate in in-house and state-level PLCs and hosts state-level training conducted by the Virginia State Department of Education. Staff development training by P3 included region and state-level conferences and other in-service training. P3 iterated shared, "I do believe in conferences and in-services, even if you only take

one or two things from them and implement them right away - it's successful (P3 *l*199-202). P4 utilizes intervention training in addition to in-service trainings, and online career development courses for the development of staff. P4 shared, "We have a lot of social-emotional training, so [redacted] provides a lot of training in our safe school program here in [redacted] also provides Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) training" (P4 *l*310-319).

Price et al. (2010) indicate that the challenge and goal are to prepare and train leaders who can lead in special schools while implementing proven alternative education principles and strategies in districts, counties, and states throughout the country (p. 4). Mills-Walker (2011) suggested that "it would be helpful to examine different types of alternative programs to determine whether some types of programs are more effective than others in increasing graduation rates" (p. 103). (1990) identified the lack of research and scientific evidence on the effectiveness of alternative programs and schools. Slaten et al. (2015) found that ineffective communication between at-risk students and teachers creates a barrier for affecting learning. Professional staff development training effectively ensures positive alternative education program outcomes as iterated in the research data.

Implications of Findings

The study's findings have a variety of useful implications for practitioners. The accompanying discussion analyzes the study's implications for improving students' outcomes in alternative education programs.

Implication 1

Leaders of alternative educational programs should develop relationships with staff, students, and the community to ensure the implementation of an effective school vision and mission for the alternative education program. Leaders of alternative educational programs that develop relationships with staff, students, and the community are able to ensure the implementation of an effective school vision and mission for their alternative education program. Once a shared vision for student success has been developed and adopted by staff, students, and the community, the administrator's role shifts to establishing conditions that enable teachers to make decisions that benefit student learning and are responsive to students' diverse needs. This implication is linked to Finding 1.

Implication 2a

Leaders of alternative educational programs should hire and retain a committed and caring staff who want to work in alternative education. Alternative educational leaders believe hiring caring and committed staff that is adaptable, energetic, and capable of understanding students' backgrounds is the right fit for working with at-risk students. Furthermore, alternative educational leaders believe that meeting students' social-emotional needs is just as crucial as subject-area expertise. Lastly, teachers should understand the needs of at-risk students versus the needs of a regular student. This implication is linked to Findings 2 and 3.

Implication 2b

Alternative educational leaders should provide opportunities for staff and students to engage in experiences that foster positive relationships between the staff and the students. Alternative educational leaders should invest time and effort in fostering students' self-worth and sense of belonging by meeting their behavioral, academic, and emotional needs. This implication is linked to Finding 2.

Implication 3

Alternative educational leadership should focus attention on creating a customized, supportive, and adaptable learning environment that meets the academic and personal needs of all students. Alternative educational leaders should create schools with an atmosphere of high academic expectation and implement programs that foster positive relationships which integrate structures to support academic and behavioral success. Alternative schools have a reputation for being welcoming learning environments that are educationally weak and lack a strong academic rigor. Alternative educational leadership should develop rigorous and flexible student learning plans that include options for morning or evening in-person, virtual, or a combination of these class options.

Alternative educational leaders should develop rigorous instructional programs that require higher-order thinking skills and incorporate community involvement. If alternative education is to be a viable alternative to traditional instructional models, it should provide ample opportunities for students to participate in meaningful activities outside of school. Additionally, alternative educational

leaders should establish curricula that make learning meaningful and relevant to the community, including mentorships, field experiences, and opportunities for students to connect with their communities. Additionally, students who work or volunteer in the community have the potential to positively influence community members' perceptions of students attending alternative schools. Alternative school leaders are responsible for fostering an academic climate conducive to success. This implication is linked to Findings 1 and 2.

Implication 4

School district leaders should support alternative educational leaders' efforts in advocating for equitable facilities and programs offered in traditional school settings for true equality for alternative school students. Individuals outside the school—both within the district and in the community—often have a negative attitude toward alternative schools. Leaders of alternative schools should advocate for equitable facilities and programs. Although alternative school leaders described the accomplishments and successes at superintendent's meetings, they felt advocating for equity was difficult because they were often the only alternative leader at the meeting. Additionally, alternative education programs are frequently viewed as a low priority fiscally. They perceived a lack of district support and, at times, powerlessness to obtain the resources necessary to strengthen their program. Alternative educational leaders should advocate for the needs of their program in order that the school division make intentional efforts from the alternative school viewpoint for equitable facilities and programs. This implication is linked to Findings 2 and 4.

Implication 5

Leaders of alternative educational programs must ensure their staff receives requisite training to assure staff members acquire techniques for helping at-risk students succeed. Alternative school leaders should use their abilities to foster an environment in which teachers are empowered to make instructional decisions that benefit students. To ensure that staff members receive training in working with at-risk students, alternative educational institutions should employ various strategies, ranging from individual teacher training to large group staff development sessions with consultants, to develop programs that enhance teachers' skill set. Alternative educational leaders should incorporate frequent staff trainings and conferences, professional learning communities (PLCs), and targeted staff development to ensure that staff

members are equipped with the skills necessary to assist at-risk students in succeeding. This implication is linked to finding four.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. This study findings suggest that leaders of alternative educational programs that share their vision and mission with the community, staff, and students are able to implement an effective program. Alternative educational leaders that hire caring and committed staff that are adaptable, energetic, and capable of understanding students' backgrounds are the right fit for establishing relationships and ensuring positive outcomes for at-risk students. Alternative education programs with an atmosphere of high academic expectation and foster positive relationships are conducive to academic and behavioral success. Advocacy from district leaders for equitable facilities and programs in alternative schools is important to increasing student attendance, positive behavior, and student graduation. Lastly, alternative education program leaders that participate and incorporate a variety of staff training build capacity and empowerment of teachers to make decisions that improve at-risk student learning and outcomes.

Suggestions for Future Studies

The findings of this study may not establish conclusively that alternative leadership practices improve at-risk student graduation rates and outcomes. The following considerations would benefit future research.

1. This study could be replicated using a mixed-methods approach of quantitative and qualitative data collection, which would enhance the study's findings.
2. Researchers could conduct a study investigating the opinions of alternative students and their perceptions of the influence alternative educational leaders and teachers had on their experiences in school.
3. Replicate NCES's 2001 study. A replication of the NCES FRSS is needed provide a longitudinal trend and status of district alternative schools and program data since the NCES 2001 survey report. Data from this report could provide district school leaders

with the needed indicators in deciding needed adjustments to both traditional school and alternative school leadership practices.

Reflections

After reflecting on this process, the researcher determined that if the study were to be repeated, the following changes would be made.

1. Alternate the timeframe for data collection. The months of September and October were extremely busy for school administrators. Due to higher priority commitments, it was difficult to confirm previously scheduled interviews with consenting alternative school program leaders.
2. Include alternative education program teachers and students in the study. Inclusion of alternative education leaders', teachers' and students' perspectives in the study would have enriched the study and resulted in a higher degree of data saturation.
3. Include a research and interview question on the perception of training that specifically prepared leaders for leadership in the alternative education setting. Review of the literature suggests there has been limited research conducted on administrative licensure program or endorsements that emphasizes leadership of alternative schools. Leaders of traditional schools complete courses in administration and supervision to acquire an Educational Specialist (Ed.S) endorsement to operate and manage the operations of a school. In most instances these individuals are leaders of a traditional school. By contrast, alternative school leaders who possess the Ed.S endorsement and professional training lack the specialized training necessary to address the diverse needs and characteristics of at-risk students in alternative schools. As a result, alternative schools have developed into placements for students who are at-risk. Due to the scarcity of research on alternative education programs, there is little guidance on what alternative education leaders should know to ensure positive outcomes for students enrolled in alternative education programs. Alternative schools must operate differently in order to ensure positive outcomes for at-risk students. Helping students meet successes in school is a challenge for any leader. However, the task of educating at-risk students is a greater challenge for school leaders who have not been trained specifically to run programs for at-risk students in alternative

education programs. Up-to-date research data could provide leaders of alternative education programs with the tools necessary to ensure positive outcomes for at-risk students.

References

A.B. 413, Education: At-Promise Youth. (2019, October 14). California Legislative Information. https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB413

About IDEA. (2020, November 24). U.S. Department of Education. https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2011, July 18). *Education and the economy boosting the nation's economy by improving high school graduation rates* [Fact Sheet]. https://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/education-and-the-economy-boosting-the-nations-economy-by-improving-high-school-graduation-rates/

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2016, June 9). *Every student succeeds act primer: High school dropout prevention and reengagement of out-of-school youth* [Fact Sheet]. https://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/FINAL-ESSA_FactSheet_Dropout-Prevention.pdf

Amove, R. F., & Strout, T. (1980). Alternative schools for disruptive youth. *The Educational Forum*, 44. 453–471.

Aron, L. (2006). *An overview of alternative education.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED500807.pdf

Aron, L. (2003). *Towards a typology of alternative education programs.* https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/59371/410829-Towards-a-Typology-of-Alternative-Education-Programs.PDF

Atkins, T., Bullis, M., & Todis, B. (2005). Converging and diverging service delivery systems in alternative education programs for disabled and non-disabled youth involved in the juvenile justice system. *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 56(3), 253–285.

Bailey, C. A. (2006). *A guide to qualitative field research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Barr, R. D., & Parrett, W. (1997). *How to Create Alternative, Magnet, and Charter Schools That Work. National Educational Service.*

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.

Beken, J., Williams, J., Combs, J. P., & Slate, J. R. (2009). At-risk students at traditional and academic alternative school settings: Differences in math and English performance indicators. *Florida Journal of Educational Administration & Policy*, *3*(1), 49–61.

Bell, M., & Habel, S. (2009). Coaching for a vision for leadership Oh the places we'll go and the things we can think. *International Journal of Reality Therapy*, *29*(1), 8–23.

Beken, J. A., Williams, J., Combs, J. P., & Slate, J. R. (2009). At-Risk Students at Traditional and Academic Alternative School Settings: Differences in Math and English Performance Indicators. *Florida Journal of Educational Administration & Policy*, *3*(1), 49-61.

Berg, B. (2008). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (7th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Berliner, B., & Barrat, V. (2009). When dropouts return to high school. *Leadership, 39*(2), 8-10.

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2015). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston: Pearson.

Bowen, G. A. (2008). *Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: A research note. Qualitative Research, 8(1),* 137–152. DOI:10.1177/1468794107085301.

Bowers, A. B., Sprott, R. R., & Taff, S. A. (2012). Do we know who will drop out? A review of the predictors of dropping out of high school: Precision, sensitivity, and specificity. *High School Journal, 96*(2), 24.

Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Balfanz, R. (2009). The High School Dropout Problem. *Education Digest, 75*(3), 20.

Burdick, C. L. (2014). A correlation study on attachment style and GPA of students at an alternative education center. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development, 3*(4), 237-290. DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v3-i4/1281

Burmeister, E., & Aitken, L. M. (2012). *Sample size: How many is enough? Australian Critical Care,* 25, 271–274. DOI:10.1016/j.aucc.2012.07.002

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.

Carswell, S. B., Hanlon, T. E., Watts, A. M., & O'Grady, K. E. (2012). Prevention-related research targeting African American alternative education program students. *Education and Urban Society*, *46*(4), 434–449. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124512458119

Cassidy, W., & Bates, A. (2005). "drop-outs" and "push-outs": Finding hope at a school that actualizes the ethic of care. *American Journal of Education, 112*(1), 66.

Carver, P. R., & Lewis, L. (2010). *Alternative schools and programs for public school students at risk of educational failure: 2007–08 (NCES 2010–026)*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010026.pdf

Chaskin, R. J., & Richman, H.A. (1992). Concerns about school-linked services: Institution based verses community-based models. *The Future of Children*, 2(1), 107-117.

Clark, V. L. P., & Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Pearson Higher Ed.

Cohen D., & Crabtree B. (2006). *Qualitative research guidelines project.* http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.html

Cox, S. M., Davidson, W., & Bynum, T. S. (1995). A meta-analytic assessment of delinquency-related outcomes of alternative education programs. *Crime and Delinquency, 41*. 219–234.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publishing.

Creswell, J., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (6th ed.).

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing.

Croninger, R. & Lee, V.E. (2001). Social Capital and Dropping Out of High School: Benefits to At-Risk Students of Teachers' Support and Guidance. *Teachers College Record*. 103(4). http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=10776

Cuban, L. (1985). Conflict and leadership in the superintendency. *Phi Delta Kappan: The Professional Journal for Education*, *67*, 28–30. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/20387519?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Cuban, L. (2020, March 22). The open classroom. *Education Next*, *4*(2). https://www.educationnext.org/theopenclassroom/

Devono, F., & Price, T. (2012). How principals and teachers perceived their superintendents' leadership in developing and supporting effective learning environments as measured by the superintendent efficacy questionnaire. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal, 29*(4).

Evans, L., & Teddie, C. (1993). Principal's change facilitator styles in schools that differ in effectiveness and SES. http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED360727.pdf

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). (n.d.). U.S. Department of Education. https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn

Fashola, O. S., & Slavin, R.E. (1997). *Effective Dropout Prevention and College Attendance Programs for Latino Students*. http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/hdp/4/

Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research. 59(2).*

Fuller, C. G., & Sabatino, D. A. (1996). Who attends alternative high schools? *The High School Journal, 79*, 293–297.

Gardner, L., & C. Stough. (2002). Examining the relationship between leadership and emotional intelligence in senior level managers. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal, 23*(1–2), 68–78. DOI: 10.1108/01437730210419198

Gay, L. R., & Airasian, P. (2000). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Glickman, C. D., Gordon, S. P., & Gordon, J. M. (2009). *Supervision and instructional leadership: A developmental approach* (9th ed.). New York: Pearson.

Green, R. L. (2013). *Practicing the art of leadership: A problem-based approach to implementing the ISLLC standards*. Boston: Pearson.

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York: Paulist Press.

Gregg, S. (1999). Creating effective alternatives for disruptive students. *Clearing House, 73*(2), 107–113.

Groves, P. (1998). Meeting the needs of 'at risk' students: The day and night school. *The High School Journal*, *84*(4), 251–257. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40364472

Harris, A. (2013). *Distributed leadership matters*. Corwin Press.

Hatch, A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Hauserman, C. P., & Stick, S. L. (2013). The leadership teachers want from principals: Transformational. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *36*(3), 184–203

Heck, R. H., Marcoulides, G. A., & Lang, P. (1991). Principal Instructional leadership and school achievement: The application of discriminant techniques. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 2*(2), 115–135.

Henderson, D. X., Washington, K., Hamit, S., Ford, S. J., & Jenkins, K. (2018). Modeling resilience in an alternative education context. *The Urban Review, 54*(2), 1–18. DOI:10.1007/s11256-018-0461-1

Henderson, J. L. (2013). *In order to teach me, you have to know me: A mixed-methods study of African American male classroom engagement*. (Publication No. 1434915084) [Doctoral dissertation. Union Institute and University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Hinds, D. (2013). *Evaluating alternative high schools: Program evaluation in action.* [Doctoral dissertation. Portland State University]. PDXScholar. http://doi.org/10.15760/etd.1076

History.com (Eds). (2010, February 22). *The Space Race*. HISTORY. https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/space-race

Howard, G. R. (2007). As diversity grows, so must we. *ASCD: Professional Learning & Community for Educators*, *64*(6), 16–22. https://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar07/vol64/num06/As-Diversity-Grows,-So-Must-We.aspx

Inside Higher ED. (2019). *Changing the conversation about "at-risk" students in California*. Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Career Advice, Jobs. https://www.insidehighered.com/print/news/2019/11/05/changing-conversation-about-%E2%80%9C-risk%E2%80%9D-students-california

Johnson, F. A., & Perkins, W. G. (2009). What we know about at-risk students: Important considerations for principal and counselor leadership. *NASSP Bulletin, 93*(2), 122–134. DOI:10.1177/0192636509340692

Jones, E. P., Margolius, M., Yan, C. T., Cole, M. L., & Zaff, J. F. (2018, July 11). *Disciplined and disconnected: The experience of exclusionary discipline in Minnesota and the promise of non-exclusionary alternatives*. America's Promise Alliance and Pearson. https://gradnation.americaspromise.org/report/disciplined-and-disconnected

Jordan, A. W., Jordan, K. H., & Hawley, T. S. (2017). Purpose and passion: The rationales of public alternative educators. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, *41*(4), 263–273. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2017.01.004

Kafka, J. (2009). The principalship in historical perspective. *Peabody Journal of Education, 84*(30), 318–330. DOI: 10.1080/01619560902973506

Kellmayer, J. (1995). *How to establish an alternative school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kerr, C. (2010). Assessing and demonstrating data saturation in qualitative inquiry supporting patient-reported outcomes research. *Expert Review of Pharmacoeconomics and Outcomes Research*, *10*(3), 269–281. doi:1586/erp.10.30.

Kleiner, B., Porch, R., and Farris, E. (2002). Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000–01 (NCES 2002–004). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002004.pdf

Knutson, G. G. (1996). Alternative high schools: Models for the future? *The High School Journal, 79*. 119-124.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African-American children* (2nd ed). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Lagana-Riordan, C., Aguilar, J. P., Franklin, C., Streeter, C. L., Kim, J. S., Tripodi, S. J., & Hopson, L. M. (2011). At-risk students' perceptions of traditional schools and a solution-focused public alternative school. *Preventing School Failure, 55*, 105–114.

Lange, C., & Sletton, S. (2002). *Alternative education: A brief history and research synthesis*. Project Forum. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Special Education Directors.

Lasley, T., Matczynski, T. & Rowley, J. (2002). *Instructional models: Strategies for teaching in a diverse society* (2nd ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning.

Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2010). *Practical research: Planning and design* (9th ed.). NewYork: Merrill.

Lehr, C. A., & Lange, C. M. (2003). Alternative schools serving students with and without disabilities: What are the current issues and challenges? *Preventing School Failure*, *47*(2), 59–65. doi:10.1080/10459880309604431

Lehr, C. A., Tan, C. S., & Ysseldyke, J. (2009). Alternative schools: A synthesis of state-level policy and research. *Remedial and Special Education*, *30*(1), 19–32. DOI:10.1177/0741932508315645

Leone, P. E., & Drakeford, W. (1999). Alternative education: From a "last chance" to a proactive model. *The Clearing House*, *73*(2), 86–88.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills: SAGE

Love, A., & Kruger, A. C. (2005). Teacher beliefs and student achievement in urban schools serving African American students. *Journal of Educational Research, 99(2),* 87–98.

Lowe, K. B., Kroeck, K. G., & Sivasubramaniam, N. (1996). Effectiveness correlates of transformational and transactional leadership: a meta-analytical review of the literature. *Leadership Quarterly, 7*, 385–425. DOI: 10.1016/S1048-9843(96)90027-2

Lewis, B. (2014). NCLB No Child Left Behind. Retrieved from http://k6educators.about.com/od/educationglossary/g/gnclb.htm

Makel, M. C., & Plucker, J. A. (2014). Facts are more important than novelty. *Educational Researcher*, *43*(6), 304–316. DOI: 10.3102/0013189x14545513

McCabe, N., McCarthy, M., & Eckes, S. (2013). *Legal rights of teachers and students* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River: Pearson.

McGee, J. J., & Lin, F. (2016). Providing a supportive alternative education environment for at-risk students. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *61*(2), 181–187. DOI: 10.1080/1045988x.2016.1254082

McNamara, C. (2009). *General guidelines for conducting interviews.* Retrieved from http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/intrview.htm

Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (2019). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Mills-Walker, S. (2011). *Triple A: Alternative for at-risk adolescents?* (Publication Number 3474299) [Doctoral dissertation, Lindenwood University]. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses

Morse, J. M. (1994). Designing funded qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). (p. 5). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE.

Muñoz, M. A., Owens, D., & Bartlett, C. (2015). Removing non-academic barriers in urban schools: School-linked social services. *Planning and Changing, 46*(1/2), 71

National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *The nation's report card*. https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/main2005/2006451.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). *Alternative schools and programs for public school students at risk of educational failure: 2007-2008*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2010026

National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). A part of the U.S. Department of Education *The conditions of education 2015*. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015144.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). Status dropout rates. A part of the U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coj

National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline. (n.d.). https://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/learn/reference-guides/zero-tolerance

National dropout prevention center. (n.d.). National Dropout Prevention Center. https://dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/alternative-schooling/

Natriello, G., McDill, E., & Pallas, A. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Newmann, F. M. (Ed.). (1992). *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Nowicki, J. M. (2019, June 13). *K-12 Education: Certain groups of students attend alternative schools in greater proportions than they do other schools*. U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO). https://www.gao.gov/reports/GAO-19-373/

Ozalp, J. E., & Snyder, R. E. (2016). School Accountability after No Child Left Behind. *Wisconsin Lawyer*, *7*, 28. https://www.wisbar.org/NewsPublications/WisconsinLawyer/Pages/Article.aspx?Volume=89&Issue=7&ArticleID=24967

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Perzigian, A. B., Afacan, K. Justin, W., & Wilkerson, K. L. (2017). Characteristics of students in traditional versus alternative high schools: A cross-sectional analysis of enrollment in one urban district. *Education and Urban Society, 49*(7), 676–700. DOI: 10.1177/0013124516658520

Peterson, S. J., Galvin, B. M., & Lange, D. (2012). CEO servant leadership: exploring executive characteristics and firm performance. *Personnel Psychology, 65*(3), 565–596.

Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., & Bommer, W. H. (1996). Transformational leader behaviours and substitutes for leadership as determinants of employee satisfaction, commitment, trust, and organizational citizenship behaviours. Journal of Management, 22, 259–298.

Poole, J. L. (2016). *Characteristics of effective alternative schools in Georgia: Leaders' perceptions*. Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1486/

Porowski, A., O'Conner, R., & Luo, J. L. (2014, September). *How do states define alternative education?* (REL 2014-038). Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL_2014038.pdf

Price, T. (2009). We can do it: Preparing leaders to lead in alternative education schools. *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal* (Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 1-13).

Price, T., Martin, R., & Robertson, L. (2010). Wanted/needed: Leadership preparation for leaders of correctional education and alternative schools. *Journal of Correctional Education, 61*(4), 299–313. www.jstor.org/stable/23282763.

Price, T., Stoops, T. & Martin, R. (2012). Alternative education: An evolution of purpose, need and the students served. *Journal of Juvenile Court, Community, and Alternative School Administrators of California, 25*(1), 23–31.

Rand Education. (2007). *Standards-based accountability under no child left behind: Experiences of teachers and administrators in three states*. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG589.pdf

Raywid, M. (1998). The journey of the alternative schools movement: Where it's been and where it's going. *High School Magazine*, *6*(2), 10–14.

Raywid, M. A. (1994). Synthesis of research alternative schools: The state of the art. *Educational Leadership*, *52*(1), 26-31.

Roberts, C. M. (2010). *The dissertation journey: A practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation* (2nd ed.). Corwin Press.

Ross, J., & Gray, P. (2006). Transformational leadership and teacher commitment to organizational values: The mediating effect of collective teacher efficacy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 17*(2), 179–199. DOI: 10.1080/09243450600565795

Rumberger, R. W. (1987). High school dropouts: A review of issues and evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, *57*(2), 101–121. DOI: 10.3102/00346543057002101

Rumberger, R. W. (2001, May). *Why students drop out of school and what can be done* [Paper presentation]. Dropouts in America, Howard University.

Rumberger, R. W., & Palardy, G. J. (2005). Test scores, dropout rates, and transfer rates as alternative indicators of high school performance. *American Educational Research Journal, 42*(1), 3–42.

Samuels, C. A. (2008). Principals at the center: The Pittsburgh school district believes cultivating effective instructional leaders is the key to school improvement. *Education Week*, *27*(35), 26–28.

Saultz, A., Schneider, J., & McGovern, K. (2019). Why ESSA has been reform without repair. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *101*(2), 18. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=138803842&site=eds-live&scope=site

Sawchuck, S. (2008). Leadership gap seen in post-NCLB changes in U.S. teachers. Education Week, 28(3), 1. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ809545

Scheel, M. J., Madabhushi, S., & Backhaus, A. (2009). The academic motivation of at-risk students in a counseling prevention program. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *37*(8), 1147-1178. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000009338495

Schwab, J. R., Johnson, Z. G., Ansley, B. M., Houchins, D. E., & Varjas, K. (2016). A literature review of alternative school academic interventions for students with and without disabilities. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *60*(3), 194–206. DOI:10.1080/1045988X.2015.1067874

Seidman, I. (2005). *Interviewing as qualitative researchers: A guide for researchers in education & the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative researchers: A guide for researchers in education & the social sciences* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

Sekayi, D. N. R. (2001). Intellectual indignation: Getting at the roots of student resistance in an alternative high school program. *Education, 122*(2), 414–422

Skiba, R. J., & Peterson, R. (1999). The dark side of zero tolerance: Can punishment lead to safe schools? *Phi Delta Kappan*, *80*(5), 372–382. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/stable/20439450

Skiba, R., Reynolds, C. R., Graham, S., Sheras, P., Conoley, J. C., & Garcia-Vazquez, E. (2006). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations. *American Psychologist*, *63*(9), 852–862. https://doi.org/10.1037/e516602012-001

Slaten, C. D., Elison, Z. M., Hughes, H., Yough, M., & Shemwell, D. (2015). Hearing the voices of youth at risk for academic failure: What professional school counselors need to know. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, 54*(3), 203–220. DOI:10.1002/johc.12012

Smith, G.A. (1991). Program planning for at-risk students. In West, L. L. (Ed.). *Effective strategies for dropout prevention of at-risk youth.* Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers, Inc.

Smrekar, C. (1998). The organizational and political threats to school linked integrated services. *Educational Policy, 12*(3), 284–304.

Smyth, J. (2006) When students have power: student engagement, student voice, and the possibilities for school reform around dropping out of school. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 9*(4), 285–298. DOI: 10.1080/13603120600894232

Sparkes, A. C., & Smith, B. (2013). Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and Health: From Process to Product. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852187

Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36*(1), 3–34. DOI: 10.1080/0022027032000106726

Stegall, D. & Linton, J. (2012, April). Teachers in the lead: A district's approach to shared leadership. *Phi Beta Kappan, 93*, 62-65.

Stoops, T. (2012). *An examination of the beliefs and practices of alternative education principals* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Youngstown State University. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/

Suh, S., Suh, J., & Houston, I. (2011). Predictors of categorical at-risk high school dropouts. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *85*(2), 196–203.

Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J., & Palma, S. (2009). The consequences of dropping out of high school: Joblessness and jailing for high school dropouts and the high cost for taxpayers. 22% daily jailing rate for young black men who drop out of high school. https://repository.library.northeastern.edu › downloads › neu:376324

Tashakkori, A., & Teddle, C. (2003). *A Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The Education Coalition. (n.d.). *Goals 2000*. https://www.tecweb.org/eddevel/telecon/de99.html

Trochim, W. M., & Donnelly, J. P. (2001). *Research methods knowledge base.* Retrieved from http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualval.php

U.S. Department of Education. *A nation at risk*. (n.d.). https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.htm

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Every Student Succeeds Act.* https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=m

U.S. Department of Education (2016). *Non-regulatory guidance: Student support and academic enrichment*. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essassaegrantguid10212016.pdf

U.S. Department of Education (2017). *The Federal Role in Education.* https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html

Virginia Department of Education. (2020). *Alternative education programs*. https://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/alternative_ed/programs.shtml

Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). *Virginia cohort reports*. https://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/graduation_completion/cohort_reports/index.shtml

Virginia's Legislative Information System. (1980). Virginia Administrative Code. https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter330/section10/

What is the Every Student Succeeds Act? (2020, October 28). Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. https://oese.ed.gov/families/essa/

Wegner, L. (2004). Organizational leaders and empowered employees: The relationship between leadership styles, perception of styles, and the impact on organizational outcomes. *International Education Studies*, *6*(11), 29–34.

Wehlage, G.G., Rutter, R.A., Smith, G.A., Lesko, H., & Fernandez, R.R. (1989*). Reducing the risk: schools as communities of support.* New York: The Falmer Press.

Wells, S. E. (1990). At-risk youth: identification, programs, and recommendations. Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press.

Wilkerson, K. L., Afacan, K., Yan, M. C. Justin, W., & Datar, S. D. (2016). Academic remediation-focused alternative schools: Impact on student outcomes. *Remedial and Special Education, 37*(2), 67–77.

Williams, S. (2012). Examination of the skills and dispositions needed for assistant principals to be effective disciplinarians: having the "right stuff" as assistant principal. *Michigan Academician*, *41*(1), 92–110. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A313708425/PPAG?u=viva_vpi&sid=PPAG&xid=f7fdebcd

Young, T. W. (1990). *Public alternative education: Options and choices for today's schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Zaleznik, A. (1977). Managers and leaders: Are they different? Harvard Business Review on Leadership (pp. 61-88). Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Appendix A

Virginia Tech CITI Training Certificate

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 27-Jan-2021
Expiration Date 27-Jan-2024
Record ID 40595554

This is to certify that:

Millicent Tyler

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Social & Behavioral Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w86f2e38c-1760-4068-a5c7-536247586f0c-40595554

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter

VIRGINIA TECH

Division of Scholarly Integrity and
Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 21, 2021

TO: Ted S Price, Millicent Denise Tyler, Carol S Cash

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

PROTOCOL TITLE: An Examination of Alternative Educational Leadership Practices in Southeastern Virginia

IRB NUMBER: **21-720**

Effective September 21, 2021, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
Protocol Determination Date: **September 21, 2021**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

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

Appendix C

Division Superintendent's Letter

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Millicent Tyler, and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute University. My doctoral dissertation is entitled "An Examination of Alternative Educational Leadership Practices in Southeastern Virginia."

The purpose of this correspondence is to respectfully request permission for me to include your school division in my study. I am seeking administrators of high school alternative schools in Region II as participants for my research. This study is important because there is very little or limited published research or literature on the leadership practices of alternative education leaders. The purpose of this study is to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs.

This research involves a 45–60-minute interview (phone/video conference). A copy of the interview questions is attached for your review. There is minimal risk involved in participating in this research, and it will not be possible to identify the person who provided any specific information for the research. All of the school divisions in Region II will be listed in the final report; however, the names of the participating school divisions will not be identified in this study.

Please use the link below to either grant permission for this study to be conducted in your school division, deny permission for this study to be conducted in your school division, or provide the contact information for your designee to obtain permission.

Click the link below to access the Survey:

[insert survey link]

If you choose to participate in this study, simply inform your alternative program administrators that they will receive an email with the Participant Recruitment Form. If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me directly at 757-753-1414 or email mtyler17@vt.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the Virginia Tech HRPP at irb@vt.edu or (540)-231-3732. Thank you, and I appreciate your time and effort in this matter.

With gratitude,

Appendix D

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Alternative Education Administrator,

My name is Millicent Tyler, and I am a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute University. My doctoral dissertation is entitled "An Examination of Alternative Educational Leadership Practices in Southeastern Virginia."

The purpose of this correspondence is to respectfully request your participation in a qualitative study. I am seeking administrators of high school alternative schools in Region II as participants for my research. This study is important because there is very little or limited published research or literature on the leadership practices of alternative education leaders. The purpose of this study is to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. This research involves an interview (phone or video conference). A copy of the interview questions is attached for your review. There is minimal risk involved in participating in this research, and it will not be possible to identify the person who provided any specific information for the research. All of the school divisions in Region II will be listed in the final report; however, the names of the participating school divisions will not be identified in this study.

Should you choose to participate in this study, the link to complete the Participate Recruitment Form is provided below. Once the interview date and time have been determined, you will receive an interview verification email with the date, time, and interview method (phone or video conference). A reminder phone call or email will be placed one day prior to the scheduled interview. Interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be audio/video recorded for transcription purposes.

Click the following link to access the Participate Recruitment Form

Thank you for your time and consideration. It is only with the generous help of people like you that my research will be successful. If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me directly at 757-753-1414 or email mtyler17@vt.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the Virginia Tech HRPP at irb@vt.edu or (540)-231-3732.

With gratitude,

Appendix E

Interview Scheduling Letter

Dear Alternative Education Administrator,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study which aims to examine alternative educational leadership practices in Southeastern Virginia. Your consent to participate in this study is implied by your offer of dates and times of your availability which will be used to schedule the interview. If you have not done so, please provide three dates and times that are convenient for you to be interviewed.

Please remember that participation is entirely voluntary. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate. The interview will take 45-60 minutes. Your answers to questions will be completely confidential and anonymous and will be released only as summaries in which no individual's answers can be identified. All references and quotes from the interview will be associated with an identification code. Your name and the name of your school will be removed and never connected to your answers in any way. The transcriber, members of my dissertation committee, and I will be the only ones who will access the data. At the conclusion of this study, I would be pleased to share my results with you.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in my study. I look forward to scheduling an interview with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Millicent Tyler
Phone: 757-753-1414
Email: Mtyler17@vt.edu

Appendix F

Interview Verification Letter

Dear Alternative Education Administrator,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. Your consent to participate is implied by scheduling this interview and will be verified again before presenting interview questions. Based on the dates and times that you provided, your interview will be scheduled for:

Date:
Time:
Method:

Please remember that participation is strictly voluntary and will not have any effect on employment. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer, and you can choose to stop at any time without penalty.

The interview will take 45-60 minutes and will be audio and or video recorded for transcription.

Thank you again for your participation in my study. I look forward to our scheduled interview. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Millicent Tyler
Phone: 757-753-1414
Email: Mtyler17@vt.edu

Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Title: An Examination of Alternative Educational Leadership Practices in Southeastern Virginia.

Interview Date: Interview Time: Interview Method:

Interviewer: Millicent Tyler Interviewee:

[*Begin recording*.]

Opening Script: Thank you for your willingness to participate in this qualitative study. I will combine what I learn from you and the interviews of other administrators to identify leadership practices that alternative education leaders indicate are effective in increasing positive outcomes for students in alternative education programs. All of the information in this interview will be confidential. My notes from the interview will be assigned an identification code. I will not use your name in my dissertation or any other published or unpolished materials. I will not share any of your personal information in this interview with anyone at your school or district.

I hope that by learning about your experiences and that of other alternative school leaders, I will be able to make recommendations to alternative education programs that will prepare future alternative education leaders to develop programs that effectively increase positive outcomes for students. Again, thank you.

I want you to feel comfortable responding to the interview questions. Remember you may refuse to answer any question or choose to discontinue the interview at any time. I will take notes and record our conversation for transcription—the purpose of recording the interview to capture themes. The only people who will listen to the recording are the transcriber, myself, and Dr. Price. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

[*Wait for responses from the interviewee. Address any questions or concerns that may arise. If there are no questions or concerns, proceed with the interview*.]

Can you tell me how long you have been in your current position?

Research Question 1: What do alternative educational leaders indicate are essential practices in developing and implementing an effective program?

1. Describe your leadership practices in creating a school vision and philosophy for the alternative education program.
2. What are the characteristics of potential staff applicants you look for when conducting interviews?
3. What would you want to see in the alternative learning environment that you do not currently see in your program?

Research Question 2: What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student attendance in the alternative school setting?

4. How do you support positive attendance as a school leader?
5. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding attendance.

Research Question 3: What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student positive behavior in the alternative school setting?

6. Describe how you assist your staff in connecting with diverse populations.
7. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding positive behavior?
8. What leadership practices and school incentives have you found effective in increasing alternative student positive behavior?

Research Question 4: What do alternative educational leaders indicate are effective practices to increase student graduation rates in the alternative school setting?

9. What staff development trainings are provided to improve alternative student outcomes?
10. How effective have these leadership practices been in improving alternative student graduation rates?

11. Describe the sources of data monitored to measure student progress regarding graduation rates.

[*Closing*] I value your input and thank you for allowing me this opportunity to interview you. Did you have any final thoughts on the interview or the interview process that you would like to share with me at this time?

[*Wait for responses from the interviewee. Take notes on their final thoughts about the interview and the process*]
Thank you for your feedback. I sincerely appreciate your help with this qualitative study. This concludes our interview.

[*Stop recording*]