Perceived Barriers to High School Graduation Surrounding 12th-Grade Students at Selected High Schools in Northeast Tennessee

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate 12th graders, in select high schools within Northeast Tennessee, who struggled to achieve the necessary requirements towards graduation. The population consisted of students from a rural school and a semi-urban school. The participants consisted of 31 students, 6 teachers, 4 counselors, 5 administrators, and 7 parents. Data were collected using one-on-one interviews with students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. Questionnaires were given to parents whose students attended one of the participating schools and who chose to participate in a one-on-one interview. Data were analyzed inductively with the help of Dedoose -- one of many qualitative data analysis software packages available. The results yielded five themes; (a) a need for better student-faculty relationships; (b) a reworking of the school day and schedule of classes; (c) an awareness of changes at the student's home is needed; (d) equity in access to information and technology is lacking; (e) school-home communication needs to be more prevalent and effective. The results suggest providing equitable access to technology-related equipment, re-working compulsory requirements for graduation, re-working the hours of the school day, creating an inviting parent space at the school which is separate from the main office, and more meaningful teacher and administrator connections with students may result in a reduction in barriers to students' successful on-time attainment of a high school diploma.

Keywords: high school dropout, educational access equity, teacher-student relationships, graduation barriers, graduation rate, high school family connections

Dedication

To Julia, my wife, you are the rock of our household. You are always there with a kind word when one is needed. Your heart is filled with love for those around you. You have traversed through this journey with me and encouraged me to never stop moving forward even when forward was rocky and rough. You have made my dreams your dreams and our family dreams possible. Now one of those dreams is a reality.

To Solomon, my son, you are an inspiration to me. You are so bright, so hard-working, so kind to those around you. I am immensely proud of you. When I was doubting if I could keep going on this trek, I would look at you, and talk to you, and I knew you were rooting for me to succeed. You are a superstar, and I am so humbled to be your father.

To my family and friends, your encouragement through kind words was instrumental in the completion of this degree. Without your support, there would be no finishing. You allowed me to lean on you when I was not strong enough to continue without assistance.

To all of the teachers and professors I had through the years, you modeled what it meant to be a teacher, a leader, a motivator, and a humanity-aware individual. All of you have shaped, not only the teacher I am today, but the human I have become and continue to form into.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Graduation rate is an often-used metric by states to convey to the rest of the nation how well the state is educating the K-12 population. According to the Tennessee Department of Education website, since 2009 it is a requirement for students to earn 22 credits and complete the ACT standardized test in order to be eligible for a State of Tennessee diploma (TDOE, 2019). Within this requirement, there are specific courses a student must pass in order to satisfy the 22 credits needed for graduation (See Appendix B for specific requirements). These are minimum requirements for graduation. Most high schools in the state require as many as 28 credits to graduate with a school-specific diploma.

Graduation rate is important to the State of Tennessee Department of Education. It is one of the six primary metrics listed on the Tennessee Department of Education's school performance indicators (TN Department of Education, 2019). The performance of a given high school's graduation rate is rated on a 1 - 5 scale, with one being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Property values, perceptions of stakeholders in the community, state and national high school rankings, and perceptions of the student population about their school are often tied to numbers such as graduation rate. Therefore, it is important to look at graduation rate, as well as possible barriers students are encountering when trying to fulfill the requirements.

Barriers to graduation occur in various manners. Some barriers may occur in schools, such as bullying, or boredom; others may occur outside of the school building (Dupéré, et al, 2015). These barriers could be temporary, such as loss of a parent job resulting in loss of internet for a time frame, to something much more life-changing such as health and well-being (Evans &

Kim, 2012). This study seeks to identify the barriers students encounter and how they affect the student as they attempt to meet the graduation requirements.

In addition to isolated in-school and out-of-school barriers to graduation, another barrier students encounter is a lack of self-identity. According to Murnane (2013), the barrier of self-identity is something prevalent as a barrier for students working towards graduation from high school. Students who self-identify as having worth and value, tend to graduate at a higher rate than those who self-identify as having little worth and value. This self-identity comes from peers as well as adults in the lives of these students (Murnane, 2013).

In the spring of 2019, 3.3 million US students graduated from public schools across the nation (nces.ed.gov). According to U.S. News and World Reports (2020), as of May 1, 2019, the graduation rate in the United States of America stood at 84.6%. Across the whole of the U.S., over 508,000 students did not graduate from high school on time. There have been multiple attempts by the federal government, and state and local governments, to curb this number. Many states have implemented a graduation rate portion on the report cards for schools and districts in an effort to focus on the problem more proactively. The effects of these mandates are not successfully resulting in dramatic turnarounds for students when it comes to graduation. In fact, the rise in graduation rate in the United States from 2018 to 2019 was a meager 0.5% (Kerr & Boyington, 2019). This equates to an increase of approximately 2900 students nationwide.

Employers tend to pass on hiring students who do not achieve a high school diploma, which leads to loss of local income, state and federal tax revenue, and general welfare of the populous without the means to function in society (Hickox, 2015). The educational communities and government officials must work towards effective solutions to better individuals' educational

attainment and place them on a trajectory for a life with economic stability (Kearney & Levine, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

The 2019 graduation rate across the state of Tennessee was 89.7%. This represents a record high for the state (Aldrich, 2019). Of the seniors enrolled in the 2018-2019 school year, in public and private high schools across Tennessee, 8,807 students were unable to fulfill the necessary requirements to graduate high school (Aldrich, 2019).

In this study, the research will be centered around two high schools in the Northeast Tennessee area. The schools have a state-reported student population of 4,806 students combined. The average graduation rate, in 2019, of the 2 high schools was 94.38%; this is significantly higher than the state percentage of graduation (reportcard.tnk12.gov, 2019). If this number stays at the same percentage for the next four years, 270 students who started at these 2 high schools will not graduate. This study intends to examine some perceived barriers of students who are facing this possibility.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived barriers to graduation surrounding 12th-grade students. It was important to the researcher to uncover what the perceptions of barriers to graduation were among those trying to overcome. It was also important to get thoughts of those surrounding the students. These surrounding participants were: (a) parents; (b) teachers; (c) counselors (d) administrators.

States around the country are looking at graduation rates with increased interest (reportcard.tnk12.gov, 2019). The research presented may lead to a better understanding of the

issues facing students who are at risk of not fulfilling the requirements set forth by the state of Tennessee to graduate high school.

The opportunity this research allows is to go beyond speculation, and to get at possible root causes of failure. This is accomplished solely by the nature of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study will involve actual reporting of the experiences and perceptions of the individuals of whom have faced barriers to school completion. It will also investigate perceptions of those who have attempted to help students over the barriers.

Research Questions

1. What issues do 12th-grade students report as barriers to completing high school graduation requirements?
2. What student assistance programs existed to help students overcome barriers to on-time graduation?
    a. Were students aware of the programs?
    b. Did students use the programs?
    c. Were the programs perceived as helpful?
3. What are some programs that may have been beneficial to the student in overcoming the barriers to on-time graduation?

Significance of the Study

In order to increase graduation rates, research states students need differentiated instruction, hands-on learning, and an increased availability to Career and Technical Education (CTE) instruction (Ferguson, 2018). While this may be true, it may also be believed as a reaction to the poor graduation rates exhibited in many high schools around the country. This study may reveal some of the intrinsic and extrinsic blocks to successful graduation outside of the everyday

academic day. This study may be of particular interest to high school faculty and administration whose focus is on the at-risk population of high school students.

In addition to identifying the perceived barriers to graduation of 12th-grade students, this study will examine programs being tried, their success from the perspectives of students, parents, teachers, school counselors, and school administrators; and what other programs might be beneficial in the future. This will hopefully open up more possibilities to assist in lowering the number of students who do not successfully graduate high school.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were adapted for this study. Unless Accompanied by a citation, the researcher defined the terms below:

Achievement Gap - A disparity in overall academic performance when comparing groups of students. This is often evident in: (a) grades; (b) standardized-test scores; (c) course selection; (d) dropout rates (e) college-completion rates (Ansell, 2020)

At-Risk Student - Students who have a higher probability of academic failure or dropping out of school.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) - The area of instruction of students with a focus on specific career skills. These skills are broken down into 16 categories of career clusters (aeseducation.com). For the specific categories, see Appendix C.

Differentiated Instruction - This is a philosophy of teaching which strives to allow each student in the classroom an opportunity to learn in the way best suiting the individual learning style.

Educational Barriers - Any physical, financial, systemic, attitudinal, or practitioner failure resulting in an impediment to the success of a student.

Graduation Rate - The percent of students who successfully achieve passing grades to receive credit in the state specified academic classes. For the specific requirements, refer to Appendix A.

High School Credit - A credit is received, in the public schools in the state of Tennessee, by achieving an average percentage of 70% in the class.

On-Time Graduation - In the state of Tennessee, a student is considered to be an on-time graduate if, by the end of their 12th-grade year (13th year of schooling) they have passed the 22 minimum credits for the state, taken all of the end of course examinations required, and taken the ACT or SAT.

TEAM Evaluation - This is an observation and dialogue tool used in the state of Tennessee to evaluate teachers and practices in the classroom in hopes of constant improvement being realized. It is rubric-based and occurs for every teacher a minimum of once a semester (Teacher Evaluation, 2020).

Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) - 3rd grade through 12th-grade exams in which the scores in the core subjects are averaged in with the grades for the semester. The high school assessment portion is called an End of Course (EOC). EOC classes include algebra 1, geometry, algebra 2, biology, and US history (Overview of Testing in Tennessee, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

Due to the nature of a qualitative study, there were some limitations. Some of the parents did not send back in their surveys; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to all parents' perceptions of the barriers students face surrounding graduation. Also, the limited amount of access to the principals and counselors for interviews may also limit the ability to generalize

their perceptions as well. Lastly, access to some students who may have been used in the study was not possible due to scheduling issues and early graduation. So, the study is limited to only students currently enrolled and not early graduated.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 presents an introduction to this study including a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, the significance of the study, and a definition of terms. Chapter 2 contains a review of relevant literature and research concerning the history of the attempts to combat student drop-out rates, impacts of dropping out on students and society, known barriers to student success in school, and programs in place that are working towards helping students at-risk of not completing the necessary requirements for high school graduation.. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and procedures used to gather data. Data analysis and findings from the study are presented in Chapter 4. A summary of the study, along with conclusions, a discussion, and recommendations for practice and further study are included in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

According to the 2019 American Community Survey Data, Tennessee had an overall dropout rate of 13%. This number is for all students in the state who attended either public or private schools. Of the 1,574,474 students who are enrolled in schools across the state, 204,681 of them will drop-out before graduation unless the paradigm shifts in a positive direction (Tennessee education data).

This is neither a new phenomenon in Tennessee; nor is it an isolated event unique to Tennessee. In 2010 in the United States of America, 1.3 million students failed to graduate high school (Wittenstein, 2010). Over the next few years, 200,000 more individuals will be graduating, from Tennessee high schools without a high school diploma (Tennessee education data). The research and literature about this issue has been ongoing for decades. Recommendations currently being developed from those making policy are similar in tone and timbre to the voices of those in the 1970s (D'Andrea, 2010). Table 1 shows the trends for the dropout rate from 1972 – 2010 and breaks it down into ethnic groups.

Table 1

Dropout Rates in the U.S. for 16- to 24-Year-Olds 1970-2010

Year	1972	1980	1990	2000	2010
Gender					
Male	14.1	15.1	12.3	12.0	8.5
Female	15.1	13.1	11.8	9.9	6.3
Race					
White, Non-Hispanic	12.3	11.4	9.0	6.9	5.1
African-American	21.3	19.1	13.2	13.1	8.3
Hispanic	34.3	35.2	32.4	27.8	15.1
Asian	-	-	-	-	4.6
TOTALS	14.6	14.1	12.1	10.9	7.4

(Child Trends Data Bank, 2015)

The Dropout Problem

The dropout rate for high school students has been a concern for decades (Child Trend Data Banks, 2015). The problem is significant with far-reaching implications for quality of life in adulthood; research indicates several factors likely to help reduce the rate of dropout (Fossey, 1996).

High school dropouts in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1970s, there was concern over the predominance of high school dropouts in the nation. In 1970, the dropout rate nationwide was 15.3% (U.S. High School Graduation Rate at Highest Since the 1970s, 2020). Much of the literature in the 1970s moved toward implicating the schools as one of the possible problems contributing to student dropout. Russell Irvine, from Georgia State University, posited schools were structured too much towards a “feminine value

orientation," which created an alienation of the males in the school, and therefore, contributed to the dropout rates (Irvine, 1979). This shift to school responsibility for dropouts was of great concern and much of the literature examines the social and cultural inner-workings of the school. Whereas Irvine looked at dropouts of African-American males, others took a more holistic viewpoint and looked from a sociological viewpoint of the student as an entity within the school. This research focused more on the student's caste or class outside of school (Kaplan, 1963).

The culturally disadvantaged student.

The term, "culturally disadvantaged" student became a popular term in the 1970s and was used to explain why students were dropping out at such an alarming rate. It was this shift leading to the idea of differentiated learning (Thornburg, 1975). The origin of the term, "culturally disadvantaged" came to prominence in an article from 1963. It was written, students who are in this class of citizens are needing a greater focus, and programs put into place in order to keep them in school (Kaplan, 1963). The "culturally disadvantaged" would later be known as students who grow up "at-risk".

One of the concerns with the research surrounding the "culturally disadvantaged" student of the 1970's was it exposed the problem, and pointed out the potential pitfalls, of the American education system in handling these "at-risk" students. In Thornburg's article, he lists the main problems in existence in the 1970s perceived as prohibitive to educating the "culturally disadvantaged" student. These issues were: (a) schools were not flexible or staffed enough to handle these students; (b) many of the students who came to schools as "culturally disadvantaged" were generationally conditioned to the lifestyle, and schools were ill-equipped to adapt to these needs; (c) teachers were middle-class individuals who were not experienced in the lifestyle of the "culturally disadvantaged" student; (d) "culturally disadvantaged" students were

often lumped in with “slow learners” and placed into classes inappropriate for their potential abilities (Thornburg, 1975).

The elementary and secondary education act of 1965 (ESEA).

In response to the growing concern over the “culturally disadvantaged” student, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was passed by Congress and signed by President Johnson. The purpose of the act was to “provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965). This legislation was considered one of the major pieces of education legislation in the history of the United States. This was one of the first times a large amount of financial support was provided to bolster the education of America’s youth (Miller, 1967). However, an increase in funding to prevent high school dropouts does not equate to a decrease in the rate at which students drop out (Evans, & Kim, 2012).

The expectations game.

In order to overcome this “cultural disadvantage” addressed in ESEA, it was determined higher expectations on all should be implemented (Alexander, & Eckland, 1977). These expectations need not be so burdensome on the student so as to lead to a perception of no choice but to drop out (Chamberlain, & Majetic, 2018). However, in the 1970s, if the schools were built to facilitate learning for the “culturally disadvantaged” only, there was a difference in the way those schools functioned than the schools which catered to the middle or upper-class individuals (Alexander, & Eckland, 1977). Students who came from wealth were instructed in a way promoting movement onto a top-tier college. Whereas, students who came from these “culturally disadvantaged” neighborhoods did not have the same academic expectations placed on them;

therefore, the structure was less rigorous, and not as highly concerned with the social aspects of education attractive to the top-tier colleges. The top-tier colleges were more interested in students who went to schools focused more strongly on extra-curricular activities, advanced academic classes, and competitive athletics (Alexander, & Eckland, 1977).

One, differing viewpoint came from Edgar Z. Friedenburg in 1963. His contention was expectations should be placed on all students, but expectations placed on them must match the culture to which they belong. A question he poses is, "Can we, or do we even really wish to, help them deal with their situation on their terms with our resources, while leaving our way of life aside until somebody asks for it?" In the 1960s and 70s, if a teacher walked into an urban school and was immediately greeted with what they deemed as unruly behavior; or provocative statements made by the students; or an overall sense of chaos, fear would set in (Parkay, 1974). Looking forward, schools have molded, in some degree, to understand each individual walks through the door with experiences varying from each other and the teacher (Chamberlain, & Majetic, 2018).

High school dropouts in the 1980s.

From 1970 to 1975, the rate of dropouts fell from 15% to 13.9%. Some of the drop may be attributed to the funding the schools had in order to implement the needed changes to all schools in the areas of social and extra-curricular programs (Alexander, & Eckland, 19770. This drop could not be sustained. By 1980 it increased to 14.1% (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). This rise precipitated a new effort into addressing the problem of high school dropouts. The idea of learning styles came back to the forefront of educational literature, and overwhelmingly changed the face of education going forward (Kowald, Werrell, Henry, & Reiner, 2020).

Learning intelligences.

With the dawn of a new decade, came the birth of new ideas related to learning. One such theory came from Howard Gardner. His theory states there are seven intelligences human beings are capable of possessing: (a) linguistic/verbal; (b) logical/mathematical; (c) auditory/musical; (d) visual/spatial; (e) bodily/kinesthetic; (f) interpersonal/other people; (g) intrapersonal/self (Kowald, Werrell, Henry, & Reiner, 2020). With this theory, Gardner postulated every human being was able to attain a sophisticated level of mastery in each one of the seven learning intelligences. He also stated there are different potentials in each of them for different people (Gardner, 1984). This was a seminal theory, shaping not only the 1980s, but educational theory into the future. For those who were interested in determining a way to reduce the numbers of dropouts and potential dropouts, this research appeared promising (Gadwa, & Griggs, 1985).

When learning "styles" of dropouts were researched, the findings were clear. The majority of the dropouts studied, by Karol Gadwa and Shirley Griggs, 1985, showed they preferred variety in learning environments, mobility, varied daily activities and structure, evening classes, and kinesthetic and tactile learning. In response to this research, there was a trend of moving towards special programs and schools in order to comply with the findings of the Gadwa and Griggs research.

Other research showed similar findings but concluded it was not necessarily the program or the school curbing the new rise in dropouts and turning it around, but flexibility by the teacher, and a shift in focus away from form and regulation, and towards how the students learn best (Johnston, Marshall, & Harshbarger, 1986). The Johnston, et. al. research was the first real entrée into personalized learning in order to combat dropouts (1986).

Prescriptive core courses for all.

In addition to the above educational theories introduced, the 1980s began to examine the core course and curriculum pathway (Hahn, 1987). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education introduced recommendations forever changing the landscape of high school curriculum. These recommendations were for every high school student to complete: (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of math; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies; (e) 1.5 years of computer science. The arguments against this prescription were it would limit the number of choices students would be able to have over courses taken in high school (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985).

In addition to the call for a more prescriptive educational pathway for all students, the National Commission on Excellence in Education introduced recommendations for more homework to be assigned, longer school days, and firmer attendance policies (1993). This call for more rigidity in school directly contradicted the research showing poor grades, and the feeling of school not being for them were reasons two-thirds of the dropouts occurred (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985).

Teen pregnancy.

The late 1980s saw a rise in the number of teenage pregnancies. Although rates were significantly down from the "baby boom" years of the 1950s and 1960s, the spike in the late 1980s had many in the educational community concerned for the young person's ability to finish high school (Kenney, 1987).

The research shows, of young women who had a child at age 17, only half of them graduated high school. If they were younger than 17, the numbers were far worse (Kenney, 1987; Livingston, & Thomas, 2019). Not only did this hurt the young woman and her ability to provide

for herself and the baby; in many cases, it set a long-term course for poverty and struggle for both mother and child's generation (Hahn, 1987).

High school dropouts in the 1990s.

With the turn of the decade, the rate of high school dropouts declined; however, there was some question about how the Department of Education was conducting the studies to accurately determine the rate of dropouts (Fossey, 1996).

Gilded data.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 1995, the dropout rate for all students 16-24 years old had dropped from 17.0 in 1967 down to 10.5 in 1994 (Digest of Education Statistics, 1995). In 1967, the rate of dropouts was indeed the rate of dropouts, and there was no adjustment made for anyone going back and completing their education via a general education development certificate (GED), or other programs (Fossey, 1996). According to Fossey, the number of students in 1994 who eventually completed the requirements to be considered a high school graduate did figure into the data; skewing it to look better than it was. In reality, the dropout rate indeed decreased, but the number of graduates "on-time" had stayed relatively the same as 1967 (Fossey, 1996).

The minority report.

The overall dropout rate, or at least the adjusted rate, seems to be falling. However, when looking at the rate for black, and Hispanic males and females rose. Unfortunately, two reported groups were being left behind. African-American, male dropout rate was 14.1%, and Hispanic students were dropping out at a rate of 30%. Moreover, a third group, Native Americans, who are not listed in the report, were dropping out at a rate close to 30% in the 1990s. Much of this research indicated it was not aptitude or abilities causing the dropout rate to be so high, but the

perceptions of the cultural differences, such as hair length and adherence to non-traditional teachings were being perceived as disrespectful behaviors. This eventually led the Native American students and their families to withdraw from the system at a high rate (Ledlow, 1992).

There was a refocused effort on minority education. This effort was both in the schools where policies were implemented for the integration of English Language Learners, and in the education think-tanks, where past practices were re-examined (Bainer, 1993).

Improved teacher education.

One of the recommendations of the Department of Education was there needed to be more minority teachers in the classrooms so minority students would perceive they were receiving a relevant and culturally appropriate education. The goal was more minority students staying in school (Scribner, 1995). Much of the research into this idea revolved around prior analysis performed by Thomas Guskey and John Easton in the 1980s. They researched how teachers effectively taught minority students in community colleges (1983). This research was generalized by the Department of Education and a renewed effort to incorporate these effective strategies was put into teacher education programs around the country (Scribner, 1995). Research from Guskey and Easton indicated it did not matter what race the teacher was, as long as the strategies were in place, the minority students would be able to learn effectively (Bainer, 1993).

The issues surrounding the idea of enrolling more minority teacher candidates into pre-service college programs and into the profession of teaching were daunting. The acceptance rate for minority students into teacher preparation programs was unequal between white and minority students. This issue was in part because teacher preparation programs had focused on the needs of Caucasian students (Bainer, 1993). According to the National Education Center for Statistics (N.C.E.S.B.) 80% of all teachers in the United States were white. This compared with 7%

African-American, and 9% Hispanic. The rates are concerning because in 2015 51% of the students in public schools were minority students, and those numbers are projected to go higher by 2027 (Editor, N.C.E.S.B., 2019).

With the failure of teacher education programs to attract, enroll, and retain minority teacher candidates, preservice programs had no choice but to fall back on Guskey and Easton's research and build in quality, minority teaching methods into their programs. These methods include: (a) teachers spending more extended periods of time with the same group of students; (b) students rarely being placed in low-level classes; (c) parental engagement in their children's education in some way; (d) cultural identity and ethnic pride are fostered within a positive school climate (Scribner, 1995).

High school dropouts in the 2000s to current day.

The turn of the century came and with it a renewed fervor of educational promises with large amounts of funding directed at the problems (Karen, 2005). Government programs were created to ensure every student a quality education and every teacher was to be the best qualified to be in the classroom. The century started with approximately 14% of students not graduating high school with a high school diploma or an alternative method of graduation such as the GED (Karen, 2005). The statistics for on-time graduation, and a traditional approach, show the number is closer to 31% of students who dropped out of high school (Porter-Magee, Eden, & Winters, 2019). As reporting has developed over time, more accuracy has been available to better define the term "dropout". This is positive for those wanting to get to conduct root-cause analysis. There must be a consensus as to the magnitude of the problem in order to determine effective ways of addressing issues (Porter-Magee, Eden, & Winters, 2019). As the 2000s came in, there was great concern over the number of students who were not graduating high school on time. In

2001, the newly elected President of the United States, George W. Bush announced his number one priority for his presidency was education. Thus, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was introduced.

The no child left behind act of 2001 (NCLB).

No Child Left Behind was enacted because President Bush believed too many of the nation's neediest students were not succeeding in school, and it was the primary goal of his administration to correct the issue. No Child Left Behind was the first reauthorization of ESEA of 1965. Between 1965 and 2001, over 200 billion dollars was spent trying to combat the issues of failing students and schools (The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

The reauthorization of ESEA did have some new requirements. The focus of the bill was on the following items: (a) required annual testing in reading and math for grades 3 - 12; (b) graduation rates (although, this was initially used as a secondary success metric.); (c) a requirement of states to report student test performances for groups such as African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, white non-Hispanic, special education, limited English proficiency (LEP), and/or low income; (d) requiring states to set adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals, with the vision for every student to be proficient in math and reading by 2014; (e) any school who did not reach the AYP goal for two years could be taken over by the state for restructuring. This included the possible firing of the principal and teachers for lack of student progress; (f) requiring schools to have "highly qualified" teachers for core subjects. These subjects included English, reading or language arts, math, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography (The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

Criticism of NCLB came from prominent sociologists such as David Karen of Bryn Mawr College. His main contention was there was a single mandate from the centralized government of the United States, and then it was given to the 50 states to implement in the way they saw fit. This meant there were differing ideas all subject to the overarching hammer of the federal government (2005). The centralization of the act and the immediate decentralization of the implementation created confusion and consternation throughout the nation. One author remarked this bill jeopardized the states trying to improve education, and it implemented potential sanctions "designed to punish rather than to build either the desire or the capacity to succeed" (Rose, 2003).

Every student succeeds act of 2015 (ESSA).

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) replaced the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This act was, again, a reauthorization of ESEA, and built on some of the successes of NCLB. One of the main changes from NCLB to ESSA was the inclusion of college and career readiness (Every Student Succeeds Act).

ESSA also took steps toward local innovation. This innovation was not previously part of any of the education bills. Two of the programs created out of this portion of the law were: (a) Investing in Innovation Fund (called i3 grants). These were grants to entities partnering with schools to assist in innovative projects furthering the understanding and education of students. (b) Promise Neighborhoods. These were grants put into place to revitalize 21 neighborhoods and help them to grow citizens who were in good schools with jobs in the community waiting for them when they finished. Both of these programs were put into place to close achievement gaps and lower dropout rates (Every Student Succeeds Act). It remains to be determined if these programs have the desired results on dropout rates and the closing of the achievement gap

(Ansell, 2020). Early concerns about the efficacy of ESSA range from the capacity of states to implement such an open-ended program, to wondering about exactly how far-reaching into the schools this more "hands-off" approach to educational regulation will be (Ferguson, 2016; Weiss, & Mcguinn, 2016).

The Economic Impacts of Dropouts

The success of programs attempting to lower the dropout rate in the United States is not only a sociological issue, but it is an economic issue as well (Binder, & Bound, 2019). The financial well-being of the individual, locality, state, and nation are paramount to an educated society. The far-reaching effects of not tackling the issue may lead to an unforeseen fiscal crisis for our country (Lewitt, 1992).

The economic impact on the individual.

As an individual goes through his or her K-12 education, there is often struggle. This struggle can be psychological, emotional, physical, or economic (Rumberger 2011). The choices the student makes during those years about whether or not to finish compulsory education can create long-lasting personal economic struggles (Peterman, 2018).

The earning possibility for a high school dropout in 2015, an individual earns about $14.00 per hour. In a workweek of 40 hours, the gross income per individual is $560.00 per week or $2,240 per month Binder, & Bound), 2019. As an 18-20-year-old, they may not realize the need to account for taxes, rent, utilities, food, gas, insurance, etc.

Over the past 10 years, the employment participation rate among males in the workforce without a high school diploma has plummeted. In 1995, 75% of male high school dropouts were employed. In 2015, it was 65% (Binder & Bound, 2019). 10% of the men who were at least earning something, are now earning nothing. The outcomes for the number of men who are in the

workforce is going down and will have a grave effect on the individual, and his surroundings (Rumberger, 2011).

When times are tough, there are unfortunately few resources available, or seemingly available, to the individual. Oftentimes, especially with males who are high school dropouts, they turn to some type of crime to try and fill the economic gap, or social gap of worth (Wing, 2018). These crimes range from drugs, petty theft, and robbery, all the way up to rape and murder (Rumberger, 2011). This move to crime does not just affect the well-being of the individual but has far-reaching economic effects on the community and state as well (Binder, & Bound, 2019).

The economic impact on the community and state.

According to Russell Rumberger (2011), in his book, *The Social Consequences of Dropping Out*, in 2010, 45% of the state money spent on housing and food stamp assistance went to high school dropouts.

The victims of crimes committed by high school dropouts are often people who live in low-income communities and are struggling to make ends meet themselves. The fact they have to try and protect themselves by keeping lights on, spending money on alarm systems, paying to have bars installed on their windows, all affect the overall economic status of the community. The money spent on protection could be spent on food, gas, entertainment; all of these would benefit the communities at large (Binder, & Bound, 2019). When money must be spent in general protection, the money is often spent outside the immediate neighborhood (Rumberger, 2011). This reduces the tax base for the communities, as well as the state in many cases, and continues the cycle of community blight, and limits the amount of restoration the community can

bring. The longer the problem continues, the more apt the crime and suffering is to continue (Binder & Bound, 2019).

The economic impact on the nation.

In 2010, there were an estimated 709,000 20-year-old dropouts in the US. The amount of money the federal government will spend on those dropouts over their lifetime on just food, housing, and welfare is estimated to be 2.1 billion dollars (Rumberger, 2011). Once a family is put in this dependence on federal aid, it is harder and harder to break out of the dependency cycle. It becomes a cyclical situation where generations of citizens are relying on the federal government for assistance (Peterman, 2018).

In addition to the expenditures made for housing, food, and welfare, the overall cost of national healthcare is of tremendous importance. High school dropouts are twice as likely to receive Medicare benefits before reaching the age of 65 puts an enormous strain on the economy of the United States (Rumberger, 2011). Rumberger estimates the same cohort of 709,000 high school dropouts, already costing 2.1 billion dollars for housing, food, and general welfare, will cost an additional 28.7 billion dollars in healthcare-related expenditures over their lifetimes (Rumberger, 2011).

There are economic drains on individuals, communities, and the United States due to high school dropouts (Binder, & Bound, 2019). In these times of economic uncertainty, more automation means fewer opportunities for dropouts to find jobs at all. As of 2017, 32% of all routine jobs, some of which require more education than a high school diploma, were starting to be replaced by automation and artificial intelligence (Yang, 2019). These jobs Andrew Yang discusses, are the main jobs high school dropouts fill (Binder, & Bound, 2019).

Known Barriers to High School Graduation

There are many barriers students face when going through the K-12 education system. Some are controllable; others are not. This section examines identified contributors to students dropping out of high school before graduation.

Physical barriers.

Dropping out of high school has long had a stigma of failure and disgrace associated with it. However, there are circumstances under which there is not a choice made, but underlying reasoning precluding a student from completing school. According to Dupéré et al., the biggest indicator of lack of capacity to finish is stress and depression (2015).

Stress and depression.

Children, especially those who come from a low SES background, are surrounded by stress every day (Hawkins, Jaccard, & Needle, 2013). This stress is real, and when it is a stressor repeated over and over again, it can have a cumulative effect and alter the abilities for students to cope with stressors effectively. This load on students creates a feeling of stress and is often overwhelming (Dupéré et al., 2015). Stress and depression can lead to suicide (Evans & Kim, 2012). This load is often a symptom of other barriers presenting themselves to the students as they go through school. The presence of the barrier is real and needs to be considered a real issue. So often, anxiety, stress, and depression are thought of to be "cop-outs" for not wanting to do anything. This behavior is not, in effect, what is happening in many cases, and it needs to be taken seriously (Evans & Kim, 2012).

During the formative years of middle and early high school, students who have high stress and depression may tend to find high-risk behavior outlets to try and counteract the stress they are feeling (Hawkins, Jaccard, & Needle, 2013). This likely stems from the student wanting

to differentiate themselves from their peers and friends. These high-risk behaviors can manifest as drug use, alcohol consumption, and early sexual behaviors. Students in high school are not yet versed in effective coping mechanisms, and this can lead to displays of counterculture behavior, dropping out of school, or worse, suicide (Hawkins, Jaccard, & Needle, 2013).

Pregnancy.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the United States rate of teen pregnancy is among the highest in western industrialized nations (2019). The overall rate is 18.8 per 1000 women 15 - 19 years old, which resulted in 194,377 births to teen mothers. The CDC also reports percentages of Hispanic and non-Hispanic black teen pregnancies were two times higher than white teens. Still, the highest ethnic group was the American Indian/Native Alaskan group.

Early sexual experimentation brought on by chronic stress and depression could be one of the causing factors for these numbers (Berg & Nelson, 2016). According to the same 2019 CDC statistics as in Figure 5, compared to 90% of US girls who do not give birth during these years receiving a diploma, only 50% of the pregnant teen mothers obtain their diploma. This statistic means the physical barrier of pregnancy is contributing approximately 97,000 dropouts in the United States.

Along with the physical ramifications of pregnancy on the girl who drops out of school, research by Berg and Nelson shows some girls from low SES neighborhoods view becoming pregnant as a rational alternative to failure (2016). This data illustrates again the stress of not belonging creates a sense of needing to belong and have a purpose, as opposed to going through life purposeless (Berg & Nelson, 2016).

Financial barriers.

Although established programs are in place, such as the free and reduced lunch programs, the special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children (WIC), and family government subsidies, there is still a tremendous amount of poverty in the US, and students growing up in poverty is a major problem in American schools today (Wing, 2019). In 2017, the percentage of school-aged children who are living in poverty was at 18% (Characteristics of Children's Families, 2019). Figure 5 shows this is down from 2010. However, Figure 6 also shows the minority populations of students who are living in poverty are higher than white children. This epidemic is causing more problems to students than just financial need; it is causing stress, leading to anxiety, depression, and ultimately, can lead to the decision to drop out of high school (Kearney & Levine, 2016). The staggering amount of poverty among the student population in the United States of America continues to put a burden on the well-being and educational abilities of the youth (Dupéré, et. al., 2015).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Abraham Maslow (1943) introduced his theory of the hierarchy of needs in a publication titled, "A Theory of Motivation." In this, he introduces the concept of no other essential human need can be fulfilled cognitively before basic needs are met. Table 2 is a representation of this model.

Table 2

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Tier	Needs	Attributes
1	Physiological	Air, Water, Food, Shelter, Sleep, Clothing, Reproduction
2	Safety	Personal, Employment, Resources, Health, Property
3	Love and Belonging	Friendship, Intimacy, Family, Sense of Connection
4	Esteem	Respect, Self-Esteem, Status, Recognition, Strength, Freedom
5	Self-Actualization	Desire to become the most one can be

(Mcloud, 2018).

Tiers 1 and 2 of the hierarchy show physiological and safety needs. The physiological is likely tied to financial issues. Without the means to acquire shelter, food, clothing, and even water, the stress levels may rise, adding to the load already present (Finnan & Kombe, 2011).

Once the physiological and safety needs are met, there can be a move into building the relationships necessary, and the personal identity associated with "normal" stress on a teenager (Evans & Kim, 2012). In Finnan and Kombe's (2011) research, they looked at building up the identities of students before they got to high school. They investigated how they could promote a positive self-image among middle school students who are struggling with poverty and are at risk of dropping out once they get to high school. Finnan and Kombe researched if the positive self-image would allow them to grow and accomplish success in the classrooms. The results seemed to be mostly positive. Overcoming financial barriers might possibly be a boost to overcome the barrier to graduation (Finnan, & Kombe, 2011).

Systemic barriers.

The main systemic issues discussed in schools is discipline. What is seemingly missed in the conversation is the concept of not just what type of discipline is occurring but how and to whom it is levied (Wing, 2018).

Criminalization of public schools.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the war on drugs was real and the drug problem had reached the halls of public high schools. Still today, schools are struggling to keep drugs out of schools. Compounding the issue was the mass shooting at Columbine. The problem now was not only keeping drugs out but protecting the students in the school from harm. This problem has led to the criminalization of the public-school setting (Wolf, Kalinich, & DeJarnatt, 2016). Schools now have armed guards, metal detectors, cameras on every inch of the building, and a prison-like atmosphere where students are taught how to survive mass shootings. This lends itself, according to Wolf, Kalinich, and Dejarnatt (2016), to a higher level of stress than should be required of a student. Kelissa Wing's 2018 book *Promises and Possibilities: Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, tells of the criminalization of the schools.

> Harsh discipline systems have unfortunately contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline. Many educators, especially in my school experience, resorted to sending students to the office for minor infractions that should have been addressed within the classroom environment. Zero-tolerance policies have made it easy to eliminate or get rid of students who were perceived as problems. Rather than training educators on how to handle conflict within the classroom, schools created zero-tolerance policies and assigned resource officers to deal with their behavior.

Wing (2018) finishes this section by asking, “When did we begin to see our students as criminals?” The FBI reported almost 30,000 students 10 years old and under were arrested (Steinbuch, 2019). During the same time period, Hutchinson (2019) reports, over 266,000 students between the age of 10 and 12 were arrested.

There is a disparity in the numbers of out of school suspensions of black males in relation to the punishments (23%) for the same offenses committed by white students (2%) or female students who are black or brown (5%) (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). This skewed proportionality of discipline levied caught the interest of Smolkowski, et. al. (2016). In their research, it was clear the race of the students being punished was skewed. Similarly to race, socio-economic status was found to be a factor as well. Of those who were given out-of-school suspensions, over two-thirds of them were from low socio-economic families (Smolkowski, et. Al., 2016).

Attitudinal barriers.

The attitude of students is one of the attributes scholars look at when researching the dropout rates in the United States. Peguro, Ovnik, and Li (2015) investigated the relationship between dropout rate and social theory and the effects on engagement and activity of the students in the educational setting. The research identified four main attitudes as prominent.

Attachment.

To obtain positive outcomes in high school, with successful graduation, there is a need for students to feel an attachment to the school in which they are attending (Peguero, et. al., 2015). When there are deep attachments to peers and teachers, the rate of dropout trends downward (Bryan, et. al., 2012). Where the research falls short is in the amount of attachment and dropout rate evident among minority students (Peguero et. al., 2015).

Much work has been done in the area of school attachment, through the use of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL trains and allows students to look inwardly and become more self-aware. The research into SEL implementation in schools by Greenberg, et. al. (2017), suggests the dropout rate may reduce by up to 25%. Implementation of SEL in a school with a large minority population helps at an even higher rate than some other programs possibly implemented (Peguero et. al., 2015).

Some schools, as Haines Elementary School, a K-8 school in Chicago, Illinois, a high minority populated school, are taking this concept a step farther. At this school every student participates in social contracting with their teachers. This contracting attaches the students to their school and empowers students to take actual ownership of their learning and learning goals (Edutopia, 2020).

Attaching to Someone Who Looks Like Me.

It may be difficult for a student to truly attach to an adult in the classroom if there is a disparity between what nationality the student is and the representative nationalities of the school (Trailblazer coalition, 2017). According to the trailblazer coalition (2017), 35% of all Tennessee students identify as a student of color, while just 16% of the teachers identify as a teacher of color. Nationwide, the numbers are 17% of teachers who identify as a teacher of color. Meanwhile, 50.5% of the nation's students identify as students of color (NCES, 2019; Partelow, et. al, 2017). In order to encourage attachment, more teachers of color must be accepted and trained into the teacher training programs (Paretlow, et. al, 2017).

Involvement.

When discussing school involvement as it relates to dropout rates of high school students, there are two groups to address. The first group is the students themselves. This is involvement

pertaining to sports, arts, clubs, and any other extra-curricular activity available to them (McNeal, 1995). The second is the involvement of parents and their effects on the dropout rates of students (Peguero et. al., 2015).

Student involvement.

The more a student can get involved in school activities, the less likely he or she is going to drop out (McNeal, 1995). There is more research being conducted on the effects of extracurricular activities and the lowering of the dropout rate. According to Snellman, et al. (2015), the more students are involved in sports or clubs outside of the academic day, the more they tend to stay in school. This involvement is especially important for minority students who have a higher dropout rate than other groups. According to research by McNeal (1995), by engaging minority students in athletics, clubs, or fine arts, there is a drop of 16% in the dropout rate, regardless of SES or academic ability.

Another extracurricular activity which creates involvement but can also be a barrier to success during high school is a part-time job. According to the college board (2020), a part-time job is a great way for a student to learn responsibility and time management, but it can be a tremendous burden for students who work more than 15 or 20 hours a week. This barrier can sometimes not be avoided if the student needs to work to help the parents out with the finances at home (Whitaker, 2001).

Parental involvement.

Students who have, for one reason or another, had a rough time in school and have come up against barriers impeding the trajectory towards successful graduation, may have parents who had similar encounters. Whitaker (2001) explains how schools want parents involved. However,

many parents, especially struggling students' parents, look at school with a scared and negative reflectionary view and want nothing to do with school involvement (Whitaker, 2001).

The barrier breaker produced by parental involvement in the academic and extracurricular activities at school is seen by grades, test scores, and graduation rates going up (Rockwell, et. al. 2010). Therefore, schools must bring in parents to schools as much as possible.

Belief.

Referring back to Table 2, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), after the basic needs having to do with physiological necessities are addressed, the barriers become more about self. In the middle of the hierarchy there are references to a sense of connection and self-esteem. When these are not present, when belief in one's self is not available, a barrier is created. This occurs sometimes by personal issues, and other times by the systemic rules imposed by the educational establishment (Freire, 2017).

When maximum effort is reached, and students no longer see the value of trying to get over the barriers in front of them, the belief turns into non-belief, and they reach their quit point (Chamberlin, & Matejic, 2018). Adam Chamberlain (2018) put an equation together he called the quit point equation.

If there is no optimism in work producing success, or there is no value in the work, or students have just had enough of school due to other barriers adding to their load, the student may not be able to over the obstacles in their way and put in the effort needed to carry on with the tasks. The students at this point has reached their quit point (Chamberlain, & Majetic, 2018).

Practitioner failure barriers.

Teachers and administrators can make or break some of the most at-risk students in the classrooms (Evans, & Kim, 2012). Students are more apt to graduate high school if they know

there is one caring adult in the building (Pierson, 2013). Contrarily, there is a correlation between a teacher who is disengaged from the students and student struggles to graduate (Dupéré, et. al., 2015).

The banking concept.

Educators limit students when they do not take an inquiry-based approach to learning (Rubin, & Wilson, 2001). According to Rubin & Wilson, there has been a big shift towards inquiry-based learning, even in the standards-based educational system now in place (2001). The barrier lies with educators who maintain the idea they have the goods to deposit into the minds of their students (Freire, 2017). According to Freire, the students are often looked on by these teachers as vessels to be filled with the knowledge being poured into them by the teacher.

Freire points out in his book from 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, educators who have this banking methodology as their way of teaching are in direct opposition to the way students think and learn. The tenants of the banking method of teaching according to Freire can be found in Appendix D. The barrier created with this method is teachers who use this method are attempting to adapt students to their way of thinking, in essence, managing them, not teaching them (Freire, 2017). What Rubin & Wilson (2001) found in their research was students thrived under the concept implementing the idea that discovery itself was the learning, and the freedom to discover was empowering to them. This inquiry-based educational practice Freire (2017) called the "teacher-student contradiction." In Freire's ideal setup, which supports inquiry, everyone involved would be both student and teacher (2017).

Summary

The dropout rate in the United States of America has fallen since the 1960's (Wittenstein, 2010). However, the problem still exists, and the impacts on the individuals, communities, and

country are far-reaching. There are many reasons why students may not graduate high school. There may not be one predominant reason for students to drop-out, but it may have to do with the load placed on the struggling student leading to a helpless feeling. Dropping out is a result of helplessness (Chamberlain & Majetic, 2018; Evans & Kim, 2012).

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Introduction

There is significant amount of research available surrounding the idea of possible barriers students face when trying to obtain a high school diploma. This research often points to not one point of struggle, but multiple barriers leading to struggles. The struggles eventually are too much for the student to overcome and the student drops out of school (Chamberlain & Matejic, 2018; Evans & Kim, 2012; Hahn, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived barriers 12th graders encountered as they worked towards fulfilling the graduation requirements. This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct the study.

Research Questions

1. What issues do 12th-grade students report as barriers to completing high school graduation requirements?
2. What student assistance programs existed to help students overcome barriers to on-time graduation?
    a. Were students aware of the programs?
    b. Did students use the programs?
    c. Were the programs perceived as helpful?
3. What are some programs perceived to have been beneficial to the student in overcoming the barriers to on-time graduation?

Research Design

An exploratory qualitative methodology was chosen for this research to obtain individualized data from participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert data collection and data analysis are performed simultaneously in qualitative research.

This study used a descriptive phenomenological strategy. The creator of this strategy, Edmund Husserl, described his view of phenomenology as something which is lived first-hand, and therefore, explainable and able to be studied (Husserl, 2015). Phenomenology focuses on the description of experiences in order for the researcher who is engaging with those who have shared experiences to develop the patterns and relationships of the observed (Behnke, n.d.).

This strategy was most appropriate due to the nature of the study and how it will inform future educators about the perceived barriers of students. It will also give insight into program efficacies.

Site Selection

Two sites were used in the collection of data for this research. The two sites were both high schools in Northeast Tennessee. One of the sites was a high school within a semi-urban city school district, and the other was a rural county high school. The use of one city and one county school with varied student populations served to validate the findings in both semi-urban and rural settings within Northeast Tennessee.

School demographics.

According to the Public School Review (2020), the rural county school selected to be part of this study had a total school enrollment of 1,161 students. Of this population, 4% identified as a minority; 2% identified as African-American, and 2% identified as Hispanic. The gender makeup of the school was 52% male and 48% female. This school had a 30% free-and reduced

lunch rate. The senior class was made up of 251 students. The graduation rate for the class of 2019 was 97%. There was a teacher-student ratio of 18:1, with a total of 63 teachers on staff.

The county in which this high school is located had a population of 56,402 with a median household income of $38,728, according to datatus.io.com. 19.3% of the county residents were living below the poverty line (dataus.io.com, 2019).

Public School Review (2020), reported the semi-urban city school selected had 2,235 students enrolled, with a 2019 graduation rate of 92%. 468 of the enrolled students were enrolled as seniors. Within this population, 25% identified as minority; 2% Asian, 3% two or more races, 8% Hispanic, and 12% African-American. In this school, 53% of the students were male, and 47% female. This school had a 24% free-and-reduced lunch rate. There was a teacher-student ratio of 16:1, and a total number of 139 teachers in the school.

The city in which this school is located had a population of 65,598 with a median household income of $39,143, according to dataus.io.com. 22.3% of the city residents were living below the poverty line (dataus.io.com, 2019)

Participants in the Study

Before the study began, permission was requested and granted by the Milligan Institutional Review Board (IRB). After target schools were identified, permission was requested and granted by the IRB of the city school and the school administration of the county high school.

The student participants of the study from each school were selected from invitations made by the school counselors. An invitation to participate was based on two criteria: (a) They were current 12th graders in high school; (b) They were struggling to complete the necessary credits to fulfill the graduation requirements set by the state of Tennessee. In other words, they

were having a hard time obtaining the correct 22 credits in order to graduate from high school. Each participant who accepted the counselor's invitation was given, and completed, a consent form. If the student was under the age of 18, a parent or guardian singed the form granting the student permission to participate in the study.

Participant demographics.

Multiple groups of participants were used in this study. A sample of the student and parent consent form is available in Appendix D. A sample of the interview questions is available in Appendix F. A sample of the parent questionnaire is available in Appendix G.

Student demographics.

The 31 students who were invited and accepted the invitation to be interviewed consisted of 20 males and 11 females. There were twenty-five 12th graders who self-identified as white, four who self-identified as African-American, and two who self-identified as Hispanic.

School personnel demographics.

In addition to the students, school personnel were invited to participate in the research. Included in the school personnel were five building level administrators. Two of these administrators were the head principal, and three were assistant principals. There were four male principals and one female principal. All principals self-identified as white.

School counselors were interviewed as well. There were four school counselors. All of the counselors were female and self-identified as white. Counselors were selected for an interview based on their direct knowledge of the senior class. The counselors interviewed also had to have submitted at least one participant student to be interviewed. After the student interviews with the primary researcher, the counselors conducted follow-ups in order to make sure students were not struggling with content brought up in the interview.

Teachers were the final set of interviews conducted at the school levels. Six teachers were interviewed. The teachers were selected by the primary researcher. All of the teachers taught senior-level courses. Two were English teachers; three were math teachers; one was a science teacher. There were three male and three female teachers interviewed.

All school level interviews served to get educator and administrator perspectives on barriers. They also served as a triangulation tool, which is important in helping to validate qualitative research as well as to justify the themes which emerged in the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Parent/guardian demographics.

Questionnaires were sent home to all parents or guardians of the participants. The questions were open-ended in nature. This allowed for responses to be more in line with the free-response concept. Questionnaire participants were asked if they were willing to answer any follow-up questions on the phone; therefore, phone numbers were requested if the answer was yes. If there was a follow-up, the questions asked were for clarification purposes, and the primary researcher took notes on the phone interviews.

Seven individuals sent back the questionnaires. Of these, five self-identified as white, one self-identified as Hispanic, and one self-identified as African-American.

Role of the Researcher

Because the primary researcher was an educator at one of the high schools studied, this researcher's role was a partially active participant. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the students, teachers, administrators, and counselors from the various schools. Because of the desire to not have any perception of partiality, the students identified and accepting of the invitation to participate in this study did not have any prior contact, in any way, with the primary

researcher. All efforts were made to use questioning both of a non-biased and open-ended nature as to ensure responses would be free from coercion or leading in viewpoint (Appendix F). In addition, the parent questionnaire (Appendix G) was created to be open-ended as well.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

The data collection methods used in this research were tri-modal. Students, school personnel, and parents all participated in the study. In doing this, there was sufficient triangulation, as to satisfy the requirement for validity and reliability in the testing.

Prior to the study.

Prior to the study beginning, the primary researcher created a research proposal and presented it to the Milligan College IRB, city school IRB, and building level administration of the county high school. Approval was granted, and the study was able to begin.

Target schools.

One city and one county school were selected for the study. The purpose for this was to get a representative sample of the students who make up the Northeast Tennessee region.

The city school selected is in a semi-urban neighborhood, easily accessible by bus, car, walking, or biking. It was fed by one large middle school. There are other high schools in the city, but they are considered to be part of the county school system.

The county school selected is in a rural community and is not easily accessible by means other than bus or automobile. However, there are some houses around the school, where students could walk or ride bikes to school.

Selection of participants.

Prior to any student being asked to participate, consent forms were delivered as well as parent questionnaires to the counselors at the target schools. These forms were only given to

counselors who had direct duties dealing with 12th graders in high school. The criteria for selecting students were explained, and any questions they had were answered. Counselors were also informed participation in the study itself was voluntary, no student should participate if they did not wish to. Counselors were asked to keep the names of students confidential.

Implementation of the study.

While waiting for the students to be identified and return the consent forms to counselors, interviews with school staff began. The city school staff interviews were completed first, then county school staff interviews were conducted on a separate day, and after the coding for the city staff had been completed. The county school interviews were then coded after they were completed. All coding was completed by entering the data into a Google doc, and pulling excerpts into the dedoose.com software for data analysis.

Once the consent forms were returned to the counselors, interviews with each student began with the interview questions provided in Appendix F. Each student was reminded about the voluntary nature of the participation, and at any time they were free to stop, and their responses would not be used. After the interviews, an appointment with their counselor was made to conduct a debrief to ensure their psychological well-being. At no time was their name ever provided to the primary researcher. Only their age and the ethnicity with which they most identify were provided by the students themselves.

Parent/guardian questionnaires.

Every student was given a parent questionnaire to take home to their parent/guardian (Appendix G). These were returned to the counselor. This questionnaire also had no reference to the name. Seven forms were returned and used in this study.

Data Management

The data collected from the interviews were collected using the recording function on an iPhone 11 Pro Max, and all interview recordings were password protected by Apple technology. The password is only known to the primary researcher to keep the security of the audio recordings protected. The interviews were conducted in private, on the school grounds of the high schools where the respondents either work or are enrolled. The audio recordings on the iPhone 11 Pro Max were then transcribed and coded by the primary researcher. The transcribed interviews, notes from the interviews, as well as the questionnaires, will be securely kept for five (5) years from the date of successful defense of the research in order to make sure there is no need for an addendum. All transcriptions, notes, and questionnaires that were not digitally kept are stored in a safety deposit box owned and controlled solely by the primary researcher. Any notes that were digitally transcribed are password protected on the primary researcher's private laptop. Only the primary researcher has access to the transcriptions, notes, and questionnaires. All associated materials five years from the date of successful defense of the research will be shredded and disposed of securely and properly by the primary researcher. Any digital recordings or digital transcriptions will also be disposed of properly.

Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert data collection and data analysis are performed simultaneously in qualitative research. The method used to analyze and categorize the data was John Cresswell's six-step method for analyzing and interpreting qualitative educational research data (2012).

The steps involved in Cresswell's (2012) method are: (a) prepare and organize the data; (b) explore and code the data; (c) build descriptions and themes; (d) represent and report

qualitative findings; (e) interpret the findings; (f) validate the accuracy of the findings. Data were analyzed inductively, and in order to assist in the coding process, Dedoose web-based software for mac (www.dedoose.com) was used. Themes were generated by looking at all interviews of students and identifying recurring responses. A similar process was completed for the other sub-group participants. Once this process was completed, individual excerpts were taken from the transcribed interviews and placed in the appropriate theme category. This provided a visual analysis of the major and minor themes. After the initial analysis, a manual review of the transcript occurred to ensure no major themes had been overlooked. The findings are discussed in detail in chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

The determination of qualitative validity and reliability is of the utmost importance to check the accuracy of the findings. Therefore, triangulation, by use of multiple data sources such as students, parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators were used in order to pinpoint some of the major themes derived from the findings. In addition, part of Cresswell's methodology is to perform member checking. This method requires the researcher to re-interact with respondents in order to validate the emergent themes and have them confirm the accuracy of the report (2012). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, member checking was conducted remotely with counselors, principals, and teachers via email. No member checking was done with students or parents due to the anonymous nature of the interaction.

A key component to any qualitative research is the validity of the study. This was determined through credibility, dependability, and confirmation. Transferability was achieved through the development of emergent themes through the process. Moreover, the credibility was determined through the process of member checking. Dependability will be achieved through the

safekeeping of the transcripts in their original form for a period of five years. This allows for the completion of any audit of information in case of questioning the findings. One of the most important parts of qualitative research is trustworthiness according to John Cresswell (2012). It is the direct link between the data and the sources from which the data were received.

In addition to the researcher's findings and data analysis, the findings were thoroughly vetted by the researcher's doctoral committee.

Ethical Considerations

In order to perform an ethical qualitative research study, any considerations of ethical issues having a possibility to arise during the research were addressed. Any improper entanglements perceived could reflect poorly on the researcher, the researcher's educational facility, and could have jeopardized the findings and validity of the study (Cresswell, 2012).

In order to protect the rights of the participants, the following steps were established by the researcher.

(1) Each participant was invited to participate by their school counselor.

(2) Each volunteer participant was provided a written agreement, with the objectives of the research clearly stated, and had the understanding they were entering into this research voluntarily and could have withdrawn from the process at any time without any effect on graduation, grade, or class standing.

(3) A consent form was signed by every participant. This form may be viewed in Appendix E of this study.

(4) Each student participant under the age of 18 had a consent form signed by a legal parent or guardian, and also could have withdrawn from the study at any time without any effect on graduation, grade, or class standing.

(5) After the interview, students met with their counselor to address any issues brought out during the interview which created a disturbance psychologically with the student.

(6) Safety of the data collected will be of utmost importance and will be safeguarded by use of password-protected software and retention of the transcriptions for five years from successful defense. Written data will be kept in a safety deposit box to which the researcher only has access. Digital data will be kept on the recording device or the laptop of the primary researcher and will be password protected.

With these safeguards in place, the risk to participants is negligible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability

States around the country are looking at graduation rates with increased interest (reportcard.tnk12.gov, 2019). The research presented in this proposal may lead to a better understanding of the issues facing students who are at-risk of not fulfilling the requirements set forth by the state to graduate high school (Messacar & Oreopoulus, 2013).

The opportunity this research allows is to go beyond speculation and to get at possible root causes of failure. This is accomplished solely by the nature of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study will be of the actual reporting of the experiences and perceptions of the individuals of whom have come up against barriers, as well as the perceptions of those who have attempted to help students over the barriers. Because of the polyangulation and the varied settings of high schools studied, the findings will be valuable to educators in many different applicable manners.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived barriers to graduation surrounding 12th-grade students. Specific objectives for this study were: (a) pinpoint the barriers impeding the successful graduation of 12th graders; (b) identify the programs in place to assist the students towards successful graduation; (c) examine the efficacy of the programs in place assisting the students towards successful graduation.

An exploratory qualitative methodology was used as described in chapter 3. The participants of the study were purposefully sampled from both a city and a county high school in northeast Tennessee, so as to garner broad viewpoints from different systems. Table 3 identifies the demographics of the target schools used in this study.

Table 3

Target School Demographic Information

Target School	School Setting	Total Enrollment	Total Teachers	Total Seniors
School 1	Semi-Urban	2,235	139	468
School 2	Rural	1,161	63	251

Between the two schools, 31 students, 5 administrators, 4 counselors, and 6 teachers were interviewed. In addition to the one-on-one interviews, all 31 students were given a parent/guardian questionnaire to take home to encourage parent/guardian participation as well. Seven of these were returned. At School 1, there were 20 students, 3 administrators, 2 counselors, and 4 teachers interviewed. At School 2, there were 11 students, 2 administrators, 2 counselors, and 2 teachers interviewed. Five of the parent/guardian questionnaires were

completed and returned from school 1. Two of the parent/guardian questionnaires were completed and returned from school 2. This relatively low response rate may have been affected by the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All students eligible for the study were invited to participate by the counselors, and those who accepted to participate are known, while those who opted out are not known. Table 4 identifies basic demographic data from the student participants involved in the study.

Table 4

Student Demographic Information - One-on-One Interviews

Gender	Ages			Ethnicities		
	17	18	19	African-American	Hispanic	White
Male	4	14	2	3	1	16
Female	3	8	0	1	1	9
TOTALS (31)	7	22	2	4	2	25

Both students and adults participated in this study. There were parents/guardians who filled out questionnaires, and there were school-level teachers, counselors, and administrators who participated in one-on-one interviews. Table 5 identifies basic demographic data from the school personnel participants involved in the study.

Table 5

Adult Demographic Information - One-on-One Interviews and Parent/Guardian Questionnaires

Gender	Subject/ Role	Frequency	Grade Level	Ethnicities		
				African-American	Hispanic	White
Male						
	Teacher					
	Math	2	12th	-	-	2
	English	1	12th	1	-	-
	Administrator					
	Head	2	All	-	-	2
	Asst.	2	All	-	-	2
TOTAL		7	-	1	-	6
Female						
	Teacher					
	Math	1	12th	-	-	1
	English	1	12th	1	-	-
	Science	1	12th	-	-	1
	Counselor	4	12th	-	-	4
	Administrator					
	Asst.	1	All	-	-	1
TOTAL		8	-	1	-	7
	Parent	7	12th	1	1	5
TOTAL		7	-	1	1	5
TOTALS		22	-	3	1	18

Analysis of Data

The method used to analyze and categorize the data was John Cresswell's six-step method for analyzing and interpreting qualitative educational research data (2012). Themes were generated by looking at all interviews of the student participants as well as adult participants. The primary researcher identified emerging patterns relating to the research questions.

Research questions.

1. What issues do 12th-grade students report as barriers to completing high school graduation requirements?
2. What student assistance programs existed to help students overcome barriers to on-time graduation?
    a. Were students aware of the programs?
    b. Did students use the programs?
    c. Were the programs perceived as helpful?
3. What are some programs that may have been beneficial to the student in overcoming the barriers to on-time graduation?

Data were analyzed inductively. Inductive analysis was best suited for this research for three main reasons: (a) it allowed the primary researcher to take raw data and organize it into a brief summarizable format; (b) it allowed the primary researcher to make sure there were links between the research questions asked and the data collected. Moreover, inductive analysis shows the data clearly demonstrates those links; (c) from the data analysis, it allowed the primary researcher to come up with a theory, or theories evident in the data (Thomas, 2006). The interviews and questionnaires were transcribed, and, through the help of the Dedoose web-based software, categories were generated, and themes were derived. Once this was accomplished,

individual excerpts were taken from the transcribed interviews and placed in the appropriate theme category. The dedoose.com web-based engine was used to produce charts of themes and patterns. These themes and patterns were then used to identify global and organizing themes.

Reported Barriers from High School Students

There were 31 students who participated in one-on-one interviews. Each student will be identified in this section by a pseudonym of student and the number of the interview (e.g. Student 1, Student 2, Student 15, etc.).

All students were first asked to define what a barrier was in their own words. Most students defined it as something in the way of a goal a person is trying to reach. The second question was how they felt about their current school. Most students had a moderate to favorable feeling. One student had the following definition. “I think a barrier is school in general. Nobody really cares about learning here, it’s just about doing your time. It’s kind of like a prison.” And, as could be expected, his response to feelings towards the school was equally as bold. “This school sucks. They think they know what we need. I know what I need. They don’t need me, and I don’t need them.”

Student participants were asked a series of open-ended questions (Appendix F) as part of a semi-structured interview. Table 6 summarizes the most commonly identified themes from the student participants.

Table 6

Global and Organizing Themes - Reported Barriers Student One-on-One Interviews

Global Themes Organizing Themes	Number of Coded Excerpts in Student Responses
School Personnel Relationships	54
Knowing the Real Me	21
Having Someone to Go To	14
Teachers Do Not Care	11
School Day	47
Starts Too Early	25
Classes are Not Relevant	11
After School Tutoring	9
Changes at Home	31
Divorce	12
Younger Sibling Care	9
Transience	7

School personnel relationships.

Students often discussed the need and desire to have personal relationships with the adults in the building. Students mentioned these people could be teachers, counselors, or administrators, but they needed an adult in the building to be, as Student 6 said, “on my side”.

Knowing the real me.

Students' perceptions showed a belief of no one caring about them as a person. Student 16 even went so far as to say, “My teachers don’t even know my name. I need them to know more than just my name, I need them to know who I am, and what I am all about.” Student 30 agreed.

> I can walk the halls, searching for an adult who knows my problems, and there are very few who do, and those who do, like the counselors, well, that's just their job to know. It would be nice if teachers, who we spend most of the time with, really knew us.

A few students remarked on specific actions the adults in the building could take to show they knew something about them. Student 12 remarked, "I have been here for four years, and not once has any adult said happy birthday to me. The rich girls, they get a happy birthday, but I ain't rich, so no-one cares about me." Similarly, student 1 remarked only one adult, her counselor who saw her with a big teddy bear, questioned if it was her birthday one year, and when the answer was yes, the counselor said happy birthday. Student 1 continued, "But that was because she had to look like she cared."

Having someone to go to.

Students would state they did not know who to go to for support within the building. "Yeah, I could always go to my counselor, and she is really nice, but I did not want to feel like a loser all the time to her," stated Student 29. Students were searching for an "other" someone to go to in a time of crisis. They knew the counselors were there, and they repeatedly reported they "loved them." Student 14 summarized this need of someone, other than the counselor.

> I would go to her office, and the door would be closed. I would go next door thinking that any counselor would at least be better than no counselor, and all of their doors would be closed. They were always so busy. I would try to talk with my teacher, but they would eventually tell me they were too busy. If there was someone else that could help me when I needed it; that would have helped.

A few students gave insight into the perception administration only cared about students when they had to take care of a problem. Student 17 said administrators do not want to hear

about problems unless they are problems caused by a student. Student 10 was more direct. “The only reason an administrator talked to me was to try and send my butt to [the alternative school].” The student went on to say there was a feeling there was no time administration was approachable if there was a personal problem. This student said they were just “cops without guns.”

Teachers do not care.

On more than one occasion, students brought up this feeling their teachers “fake” care, but when students are in need of care, teachers are not willing to help. This feeling was shared equally among males and females. By the time the student was a senior, and teachers tried to encourage more work by saying they cared, anger would be felt by the student because there was a perception of lying. Student 31 stated.

> You would think by the time we were seniors, and 18, teachers would start realizing that we weren’t kids anymore. But, no they still BS’d us about how much they cared about our future, and then they would give us busywork to do. My future is not busywork. If they cared, they would at least make it something useful. When I would ask if we could do something we might use in the future, they would get mad, call me disrespectful, and send me to the office. I didn’t care though.

Every once in a while, a student would add an addendum to their rant over how teachers do not care. The addendum would be something to the effect of all but Mrs. or Mr. _____, she or he cared. I liked going to her or his class.

School day.

The relationships with an adult brought out the most animated, and sometimes raw emotion. However, the school day was definitely the barrier to which students spoke the longest.

Students had wide-ranging opinions about the school day. According to Student 26, “Who works from 7:30 until 2:45? The school day doesn’t even follow a normal business time. Teachers say that we are learning to be citizens, and then they give some weird schedule.”

Starts too early.

In the mind of many students, one of the barriers to graduation success is the school day starts too early. For many of them, the 7:30 bell means they must catch a bus, some as early as 6:15. Student 4 remarked,

> I live on a farm, and we have chickens. Most mornings, I don’t even get to hear the rooster wake up because I am out of the house by 5:50 every day. Some days I do hear him because I just can’t, those days.

A handful of students shared they were absent all the time because they were up late the night before. When 5:00 in the morning came, they were too tired to go to school, so they just did not. Student 28 stated, “There were days I knew I needed to go, but I couldn’t open my eyes. I have to work to help my family, and I work until eleven. Getting up to get to school at 7:30, nope.”

Work was mentioned often, and it was referenced as a reason students could not complete homework, which caused a barrier in getting passing grades. Students remarked they were too tired from work and slept in and went to school late or did not go at all. Student 11 said, “I don’t think I went to first period the whole of my junior year. I knew I couldn’t do Algebra that early, and I wouldn’t have passed it, so I slept and went in second or third.” A few students mentioned they would rather go from 10 - 5 in place of the current schedule. One student, Student 29 said, “Heck, I wouldn’t mind coming in at noon and going to 8 if we had to. I’m up by then. This early stuff kills me. My brain don’t work that early.” The remark about the brain not working in the morning was a common refrain from students who identified the early start as a main barrier.

Student 11 commented, “There is nothing that works on me until about 10. I am not going to learn English at 7:30. There’s no way.”

Classes are not relevant.

Students interviewed often complained about classes being unrelated to what they will use in later life. Student 9 rolled many barriers into one with the following remark.

> How do they expect us to get up at 5 and be ready to learn a subject like Algebra 2 at 7:45? My teacher isn’t even awake at 7:45. I’m not sure he cares if we learn it or not, but even if I would have had a good teacher, I would have failed that class that early. I mean, who do they think we are making us take a dumb class like Algebra 2 that we will never use that early in the morning? To be honest, I would not want to take that class ever. I know that is a bad attitude, but I’m just keeping it real. I don’t see the point.

Another issue with classes not being relevant was students did not feel as though they were given much choice in taking courses in which they were interested. CTE classes were some of the students’ favorite classes, but a few reported they could not take the classes they wanted because their schedule was filled with, as student 2 said, “crap like English and history, ya’ know, the stuff that we have been taught since the 3rd grade.” This served as a demotivator to school for some students. Student 25 talked about how the lack of interesting classes created a feeling there was “no reason wasting my time taking the classes that they gave me. I can sleep at home better than at school. I’d go when I got to choose the classes that were for me.”

After school tutoring.

To a lesser degree than the others, but still, a common theme was the idea it was frightening for some students to ask for help during class. Students reported a preference to have

some after school tutoring to get help from specific teachers. This was not available to them and caused some to start to give up. Student 13 remarked,

> I would sit in class, afraid to ask a question because I missed so much that I was behind. Then when I would go up to the teacher during class, the answer was, well if you would come to class then you would know what is going on.

This student went on to say it was easier just to fail than to look stupid and get "fussed at by the teacher."

Anxiety and learning difficulties were big issues in contributing to the need for after school tutoring as well. Student 5 said if there was after school tutoring, success may have been possible in some classes. This student shared some classes were just "overwhelming to me, and there was no way, with my anxiety, that I could speak in class. I wanted to learn, but eventually, I just gave up." Another student mentioned it would have been easier in a smaller setting. "The classes are too big, and there is only one teacher, and she would never come to me because I couldn't get it as fast as the other kids. I passed, but I know I didn't learn anything." Student 19 went on to say, "I would try and get my teachers after school, but they were never there. So, I have struggled a lot."

Changes at home.

Answers referring to changes in students' homes was the part of the interview evoking the most emotion among the participants. In many ways it ties in with the need for the adults in the building to know the student better, but the root of why it is so important pointed to this theme.

Divorce.

In the United States, between 40 and 50% of marriages end in divorce (Marriage & Divorce, n.d.). Divorce was mentioned prevalently among students who were interviewed. Student 22 mentioned the divorce of parents at home caused so many problems. The student was scared, and "school was not even a concern of mine." This student went on to say when school was attended, which was infrequently, concentrating was hard and grades declined. The semester of this student's parents' divorce was the first-time a failing grade was received, and it knocked the student off of the AP track at school. Additionally, the student shared, "I had to go into a credit recovery class filled with people who didn't care and retake a class on the computer. It was embarrassing." Another student who was affected by divorce put it this way.

> It was the worst. One week I was at the house I grew up in, and the next week I was with my dad in his new apartment. There were four of us in this little apartment way away from school. So, yeah it was tough coming to school those weeks. A lot of the time, because we would have to get up so early to get to school on time, my dad would just tell us to forget it. I knew I was getting behind, but I liked spending time with my dad, and so I didn't fight it.

Student 18 also added school became "unimportant after the divorce. There was a feeling of "abandonment" and the school didn't help or care. So, I just kind of checked out."

Younger sibling care.

The issue of older students having to take on the role of caregiver for their younger siblings when they got home was also prevalent. In the case of Student 8, this was due to a remarriage of the father and the stepmother having three smaller children. "When my dad got married, my stepmom brought her kids. She worked nights, and my dad told me to step up and

help take care of them. This gave me no time to do homework or study." This student continued to say grades began to fall, and the father's response was the grades were, "good enough", and to just "get through somehow."

Student 20 shared the father left and the mom had to take care of this student as well as two other smaller children with no income. This student's mom found a job working at a fast-food restaurant but was too tired to take care of the younger kids. This student ended up having to "feed, clean, and put the kids to bed every night because my mom physically could not."

Student 15 explained mom and dad would fight all the time after dad got drunk and mom stormed off. When this happened, "Someone had to still take care of my brothers. It had to be me. Even in the morning, I had to get them up and ready for the day. If my dad was not recovered, I just stayed home."

Transience.

Transience, or the constant state of moving from home to home, was a common refrain from students when asked about the barriers to graduation. One student, Student 3 moved ten times within four years of high school. The moves included six different high schools, three of them twice. The student remarked, "I have friends all over northeast Tennessee, we moved so much that when I moved my friends would just say, see ya' when you get back." This student added the moves were not good for schoolwork.

> We moved so much that I studied the same sections in classes all the time. The problem is, I missed other sections. It is hard to get good grades that way. I failed a lot. Probably why I'm in credit recovery all day now.

Student 19 said there was never a sense of home the last two years of high school. “My dad got laid off, and we had to move when there was no money to pay rent. Sometimes we lived in a car, sometimes we lived at my mamaw’s.”

The good news was, many of the students who reported transience did comment on the free breakfast and lunch programs at the school helping them. Student 31 went so far as to say, “I only came to school, because I got to eat. The nights we slept in the car, there was no food, so I was hungry.”

Reported Barriers from Adults Surrounding High School Students

In order to pinpoint barriers to high school graduation, the research was triangulated by interviewing fifteen members of the schools’ faculties one-on-one (Appendix F) -- 6 teachers, 5 principals, and 4 counselors. In addition, 7 parent/guardian questionnaires (Appendix G) sent home with all interviewed students for their parent/guardian to fill out were returned. Each participant will be identified by their role and the interview number (e.g. Parent 1; Counselor 1; Principal 2, Teacher 4, etc.). Table 7 summarizes the most commonly identified themes from the adult participants.

Table 7

Global and Organizing Themes - Reported Barriers School Personnel Interviews and Parent/Guardian Questionnaires

Global Themes Organizing Themes	Number of Coded Excerpts in Adult Responses
Equity	32
Access to Information	14
Need for an After-School Job	10
Childcare	8
Communication	30
Home and School Disconnect	12
Family School Involvement	9
Families Feel Threatened	6

Equity.

When the subject of equity is discussed, oftentimes the discussion surrounds financial equity, and the discussion of poverty inevitably begins. However, there is more to inequity than money. As one principal put it, “Poverty is not the root cause of inequity. Money helps, but the root cause is a lack of access to what you need to succeed, and that goes beyond just money.”

Access to information.

As technology grows, and schools adapt to emerging technologies, there are clear advantages for students and their abilities to learn 21st century skills important in the workplace (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2019). However, the divide in access to information was one of the major themes revealed in the interviews with both school faculty and parents/guardians. Specifically, in regard to information and work completed using technology.

Parent 3 complained, “We can’t afford the internet at home. The schools are forcing [student] to use the internet for homework and turn things in. It causes a lot of fights. Pencil and paper worked fine. We need to go back.” Teachers agree this is a problem. Teacher 4 remarked, “I have some students who do not have access to the same materials that other students do. That causes a barrier to learning and success.” Principals are understanding of the equity issues, but they also know technology is here and here to stay. All of the principals, whether technology was already in the schools predominantly, or was just emerging, commented about access to the internet and technology being a huge burden on students and parents. Principal 2 went so far as to admit, “I hate that the computers are being taken home. Some kids don’t have the internet at home. How is that fair?”

Besides technology, there were a few comments about the access to popular culture as being a barrier to success. Parent 7 wrote, “My child was bullied because of the clothes I bought [student] to wear. We don’t keep up with all of the latest trends on TV, we don’t own a TV. [Student] was mortified.” Principal 1 concurred with this. “Honestly, I wish we would have uniforms. The kids pick on the other kids for what they wear. It causes more harm than good.”

Need for an after-school job.

As families grow and change, sometimes students find themselves needing to get an after-school job, not for spending money for themselves but to provide more income for the family. Counselor 4 shared the following.

> Some of my students who are struggling the most to graduate are having the most trouble because they have to work in order for their families to eat and have a place to stay. They work sometimes until midnight and then are expected to be functional at school the next

> morning. A kid cannot handle that load, of course that is going to be a barrier to their possible graduation.

Parent 5 wrote the biggest out of school barrier the student faced was the student "has to work to help out the family finances." This parent went on to explain, "I know it is not good for [student] education, and I try to explain this to the school, but they don't understand that it is the only way we can survive."

The reason this is an equity issue is best described by Counselor 1 who said school went better for the students who had a job outside of school, but if school got tough for that student, they could cut back on the hours. This counselor added, "If the student is counted on to bring home money for the family, and school gets hard, school suffers every time." The teachers in the classroom see the effects of this as well. Teacher 6 remarked.

> I have a student who comes into my 3rd-period class and some days just puts the head down and sleeps. It bothered me at first, and I would try and wake [student] up. One day [student] and I talked. The answer I got was that [student] had to work both jobs the night before, 4-8 and 8-12. Mom and dad needed more money for … whatever. It's not fair for this student. [Student] is a smart kid but doesn't have the ability to take the time to learn the same way others do.

Childcare.

Corroborating what the students often identified as barriers, taking care of siblings was a barrier to which those surrounding the high school students commented. Parents 3 and 4 both commented on how being a single parent with multiple children is hard on the oldest child. The oldest child is often called upon to babysit while the single parent works or runs errands. Counselor 1 said, "The hardest thing on some of these kids is that they have to go home and be

mom and dad, and their grades suffer because of it." Teacher 5 described one of the students who misses consistently because of a need to get the other kids ready for school in the morning because the parent leaves for work so early. This teacher elaborated. "It is hard to argue with being tardy or absent from 1st period when you are running around town for little siblings. Grades suffer, but what are the student's options at that point."

Communication.

A breakdown in communication is something often heard in the interviews and written in the questionnaires. There was not much disagreement amongst the adults questioned as to where the problem lies. The bigger problem is there were no clear ideas about how to improve communication.

Home and school disconnect.

Parents and school staff alike commented on how there seems to be a disconnect in communication between school and home. Parent 5 wrote the only time any information is given to the home is when the student is in trouble. Teacher 3 went so far as to say, "It is almost impossible to get a parent to understand what is going on with their student until it is so far, failure is inevitable. Then they want action taken. We need a better way of communicating." Principal 5 agreed. "The one missing piece, and it is not for lack of trying, in my opinion, is the communication piece between the school and the home." This principal went on to elaborate there could be a number of reasons why communication has been attempted but has not worked. "We must find a way to have a two-way dialogue between school and home. It is what is going to help make success possible for the child." Counselor 1 comment on communication breakdowns.

> Parents are not school people. Too often, the school people expect parents to understand what it is that is being said. When parents do not understand, then emotions take over. When emotions take over, then the problems start to arise. Communication is a huge barrier to the success of the student, and it starts with the school people being better communicators.

Family school involvement.

All principals in the interviews mentioned the need to get parents and guardians more involved in the high school. When asked which programs needed to be added, each one of them would start the conversation with the need to get more parent involvement. Principal 1 said, "If we could figure out a way to effectively get parents involved, this school would run a whole lot smoother and without so much struggle to get the kids to succeed." This principal elaborated by stating, "If parents saw the opportunities first-hand and got on board with us, they would make sure their students would graduate, no-doubt." But, when asked how it could be done, the answer was, "We've tried a bunch of different things. Nothing has worked yet."

Counselors shared their ideas about how to get the parents involved in order to better the outcomes for all students. Counselor 2 said, "We need to make the PTA not a country club, but an inclusive parent organization." Those sentiments were echoed by counselor 4. "The PTA needs to be where parents, all parents, come and work with teachers and administrators to make this a better place for their kids. The PTA is more like a get-together anymore."

Parents were not so interested in the PTA part of inclusion. However, they reported wanting to be invited to anything at the high school level. One parent wrote about when the student was in elementary school and middle school, there were functions all the time the parents could sign up for. But, once the student got into high school, there were no functions other than

sporting events to attend. Parent 4 put it in a different way. “There needs to be more activities for families in the high school because we need to have some way of connecting with our kid’s school that is positive.” Parent 5 did, however, want to write about the PTA. This parent wrote.

> I think the best way to help parents with struggling students is to first get rid of the PTA. I went one time and was ignored for an hour before I left. It may have been because I was the only brown person who went, and I obviously did not have the means the other parents did. But I was trying to help make my student’s time in high school better, but they wanted to have a special club for just the few. There needs to be a new PTA for struggling kid’s parents. Maybe a support group or something.

Parent 7 echoed those remarks by writing.

> The school called when my student was in trouble. I think it would have been nice to have a program set up to get us more involved upfront, like a PTA for parents of troubled kids. Maybe my student would not have struggled so much if I was allowed to participate.

Families feel threatened.

School, for some adults, is a threatening place. One parent wrote, “When I went there it was a miserable place, and now that I am sending my child. It is equally as miserable.” This parent came back around to the idea and wrote, “The first thing they need to do for the parents is have meetings somewhere else because parents don’t want to relive that place.” Counselor 3 remarked it is hard to get parents to come in sometimes. “Parents who graduated from here do not want to come back. They didn’t like it, and it scares them. They have told me that on the phone.” This counselor went on to discuss one of the reasons kids struggle. “If the parent did not like the school, the student is going to know that, and the first sign of trouble, the parent will side

with the student every time." Counselor 1 agreed, and offered, "If we would have an outreach program to parents to see that this high school has changed, and if we could offer them an opportunity to help, that would probably keep some of the bad memories they might have away." This counselor continued. "Getting parents involved is the hardest thing to do because it brings up their high school years. But, if we can do it, it would be a big boost to the student."

Student Assistance Programs and Their Efficacy

Counselors, administrators, and teachers were asked about the programs in place at their schools to assist the student in overcoming the barriers facing the students. Each participant will be identified by their role and the interview number (e.g. Counselor 1; Principal 2, Teacher 4, etc.). Table 8 summarizes the most commonly identified themes from the school personnel participants.

Table 8

Global and Organizing Themes - Available Student and Family Assistance Programs School Personnel Interviews

Global Themes Organizing Themes	Number of Coded Excerpts in School Personnel Responses
Academic Programs	20
Credit Recovery	10
After School Tutoring	6
Alternative Learning Environment	3
Social Programs	19
Free and Reduced Lunch	11
Homeless Program	5

Academic programs.

The first question about programs asked school personnel to explain the programs already in place to help students overcome the barriers they are facing. School personnel brought up a few different programs, both academic and social. Although proud of what is in place, one counselor stated there are, “Not enough programs in place. We just do not have the staff or the money to give these students what they really need to counteract the cards they’ve been dealt.”

Credit recovery.

The most recognized academic program available is credit recovery. It is a class students enter when they have failed a class but still need to obtain the credit. “Credit recovery is the major academic program that is offered to the students,” stated Principal 1. Although Principal 1 admitted it was a good program, also added was, “The problem is it takes a choice course away from the student. So, instead of taking a welding course, they have to use that class period to make up Algebra 1 they failed their freshman year.” Principal 5 brought up the trade-off credit recovery produces as well.

> Credit recovery is our main academic program. I feel bad for the kids who take it because of the stigma it puts on them. It takes away a class they would enjoy and puts credit recovery in the place of it.

Counselors were also quick to mention credit recovery. “When credit recovery is needed, I try and have them take it in the summer so that it does not take away from other classes,” said Counselor 3. The other counselors all spoke to the program of credit recovery as a necessary program and one where a student who is struggling can have another opportunity to make up the credit.

Teachers had a little different view on credit recovery. Although they admitted it was a way to get the student the credit after having failed it, they were not all keen on the idea for one reason or another. Teacher 1 spoke to this with the following statement.

> Credit recovery is the main program we have for struggling students. I get that it is necessary. I wish they would make the students take the class over, however. Too many students give up when the subject gets too hard because they know the safety net of credit recovery is there. They can just go on the computer and get it knocked out in half the time.

Teacher 3 agreed, but with a caveat. "I like credit recovery in the summer, and for spring semester seniors only. It is used as a crutch by too many other students."

After school tutoring.

The lack of after school tutoring was one of the complaints students had when asked about barriers to graduation. Principals, teachers, and counselors brought up after school tutoring as an option to help students. Teacher 6 did admit, however, the after-school tutoring, "Is not as effective as it should be because it is not run by classroom teachers. It is run by instructional assistants." Principal 4 spoke to the need for teachers to be more involved after school.

> It is hard to get teachers to stay after school to help in tutoring labs. That is what these kids need. They need one-on-one time with their teachers, more. The problem is, we can't pay them. Now, we do have instructional assistants who stay after for tutoring. It helps a little, but some of these kids need a lot of help.

Counselor 3 agreed getting more time with teachers after school would be ideal for students who are struggling. Counselor 4 shared. "I've asked teachers to stay after to help certain students. They do for a while, but they are tired after school too. The students who do get help

after school, do much better. I wish more could." Counselor 1 concurred. "Students who seek out the teachers for after or before school help tend to pull out of the holes they dig."

Alternative learning environment.

Both of the school systems where interviews took place have locations for alternative learning. This is different from credit recovery. "In some cases, the alternative school is for behaviors such as zero-tolerance or chronic discipline. But, in other cases it allows students to focus in a smaller school environment," counselor 3 stated. Principal 2 stated some students actually "Prefer the alternative school because they get more attention paid to them." This principal added, "It would be nice if we could take that part and bring it onto the main campus. If every kid felt paid attention to, we might be better off."

Unfortunately, teachers had a different view on alternative learning environments. Teacher 5 said,

> One program that I know we have that I don't like, is the alternative school … I just have not seen a turn-around in behaviors. They come back after their stint down there and it is back to usual. I almost think they want to go back because it was easier, so they do what they can to get sent back there.

Two other teachers referred to the alternative school as a learning opportunity for delinquents. Teacher 1 said, "The only thing they learn down there is how to be more of a disruption and trouble-maker when they get back. They are the same delinquent coming back as they were when they left. Probably worse."

Social programs.

There were two main social programs discussed by the school personnel. Those programs were free and reduced lunch and the homeless program.

Free and reduced lunch.

When asked about programs in place to help students get over the barriers they might face, free and reduced lunch was one program regularly discussed. “Free and reduced lunch is a program that can get a kid a free hot breakfast and lunch. It may be the only meals they get that day,” remarked Counselor 2. This was echoed by many of the school personnel. The words “thankfully” and “luckily” were used repeatedly when staff members would bring up the need for this program and how it helps to ensure students who are near or below the poverty line get access to two meals per day at school. Principal 1 said, “I am not sure if some of the kids don’t come to school because there is free food here, and that’s ok. They get food and an education -- win-win.”

Teachers who brought up free and reduced lunch raved about the program. Teacher 6 said, “I love it when I see a kid walk into my room who I know has it rough at home and there is a smile on the face, and a chocolate milk and breakfast bar in his hands.”

Homeless program.

For the most part, this theme was only brought up by the principals and counselors. According to a couple of the principals who have been in education for at least 20 years, each, one of the largest growing issues is homelessness or extreme transience. One principal, Principal 3 said, “In all my years in education, I cannot remember a year where we have had so many students fall into the homeless category.” This principal went on to explain how it is “not fair” students have to suffer in these ways. Counselor 4 became very somber when bringing up the homeless program as an aid to help students overcome barriers.

> We have a homeless population that we try and feed, and get mental help, and jobs for the parents. But sometimes it just isn’t enough, and then they move away. They move

> away, but those of us who were helping them still worry if they are ok. The problem goes back to family involvement. We have to be involved and engaged with the whole family. If we don't start doing that, and the numbers keep increasing, more and more kids are going to face struggles.

Principal 1 also talked about helping the whole family. "We can only do so much for the homeless child. The problem is we need to do more for the homeless adult at home, so the child has stability and a fighting chance." In addition, the principal stated, "The child who is homeless loses every time. They have no power, and sometimes they act out and then get in trouble. Is it that they are a bad kid, or homeless? I think it is the latter." This principal ended with, "I know we can do better for the whole family. It is a good program, but it needs more power."

Student and Parent Knowledge and Use of Academic and Social Programs

When students and parents were asked or questioned about the programs put in place by the school, and how effective they were, there were only three themes identified. Each participant will be identified by student and the interview number (e.g. Student 1; Student 2, Student 17, Parent 5, etc.). Table 9 summarizes the identified themes from the student and parent participants.

Table 9

Global and Organizing Themes - Available Student and Family Assistance Programs Student Interviews and Parent/Guardian Questionnaires

Global Themes Organizing Themes	Number of Coded Excerpts in Student and Parent/Guardian Responses
Academic Programs	29
Credit Recovery	19
Alternative Learning Environment	9
Social Programs	14
Free and Reduced Lunch	12

Academic programs.

Students and parents mentioned credit recovery and an alternative learning environment as the two academic programs in place to help students get over the barrier of not successfully passing a required class. They were not pleased with the programs, but it was definitely a primary point of discussion.

Credit recovery.

Credit recovery was the most often discussed academic program to help students get over the barriers they face. Student 15 stated, “I have been in credit recovery every semester since my second semester here. I don’t mind it because I don’t have to worry about a teacher yelling at me. I can just do it online.” This student also described credit recovery as something contributing to making, “Me lose one of my electives, and that kinda sucks.” Parent 4 said, “Credit recovery is too easy, but the school said [student] could not take the class again. I think [student] slacks off in the classes he don’t like because credit recovery is an option.” Parent 5 agreed,

> The main program I know about is credit recovery. My child has had to have credit recovery every single semester of high school. After about the 3rd time, [student] realized that there was this way of not having to do the work the teacher wanted, and then take the credit on-line and be done with it. I would have liked [student] to take other classes, but that was the way it went. I don't think it is a good system. It gets them the credit, but they don't learn.

Student 20 had a different idea. "I wish we could take credit recovery at home. We would not lose a class in our schedule. Sometimes it is not our fault we failed a class and have to take credit recovery, but the teachers don't care why." Student 1 remarked, "I like credit recovery in the summer. During the year it sucks because you can't take a class that is cool." Credit recovery is seemingly important for students to get over the barrier they face, but the implementation and the opportunity cost of other classes led to the most negative comments.

Alternative learning environment.

Alternative learning environments, sometimes called alternative schools, was another of the school level academic programs talked about. Students seem to not mind it, but for reasons not so positive. Parents mostly dislike the idea of an alternative school for their students. Parent 5 was the most outspoken.

> Alternative school is one of the programs that was supposed to help my [student]. It was a joke. They go there with all of their buddies, who also do nothing. It should be a place where you are held to very strict rules and regulations. If they are just going to let them play and smoke and do the same things that they were doing at the real campus, then they should have just kept them up there and done something with them. It did not help at all.

Parent 2 was not quite so adamant, but still had reservations. “The alternative school is a program set up to help get the students back on track. My [student] went there and it really did nothing, so I think it is a waste of money for the district.” Student 19 agreed with this statement.

> I got sent down to the alternative school, and I slept the whole time there. The next year I was back up here, so I guess I did what I was supposed to do to get back. I just came up here and got put in credit recovery, so I’m not sure why I was sent to the alternative school in the first place.

Student 4 had a story to tell about the alternative school.

> I guess the alternative school is a program that is trying to help us succeed, but it doesn’t. I got sent to the alternative school for smoking marijuana in the bathroom my freshman year. I got online and did what they told me to do. I had all my credits finished by the end of the year, so they let me come back up to the main campus. I got put in the next classes and realized I didn’t learn [obscenity]. I was behind when I got back, failed classes, and got sent to credit recovery. It has sucked here.

Student 10 liked the alternative school. “I thought the alternative school was better. Less drama, and just focusing on getting work done.” Student 10 went on to say, “I wanted to stay down there, the teachers were nicer, but admin said no.”

Free and reduced lunch.

The free and reduced lunch program provides for students whose families are at or below the federal poverty line to get breakfast and lunch at reduced rates, or if they qualify, free of charge. They must qualify yearly for this program. Student 14 likes the program. “I get free food. What person in this school would turn down free food?” This student also said, “I like that even though my family doesn’t make a lot of money, I still get to eat at school.” This student also

added, “It does kinda hurt my feelings when other students say the food is [obscenity]. They don’t understand how much kids who don’t get to eat much at home, like the food.” Parent 3 also appreciates the free and reduced lunch program.

> One program that I think helps is the free lunch program. I cannot send good food to school with my [student]. At least this way I know there is nutritious food for [student] to eat. Without this program, I think school would be harder for [student] than it already is.

Parent 1 commented, “The only thing that would make it better is if it was just automatic. Filling out the form and having [student] take it back to school might be embarrassing for [student].”

Programs Which Would Have Been Helpful

There were not many different ideas for what programs would have been beneficial to the students who are facing barriers. The one the most mentioned by every sub-group interviewed or questioned, was student choice of classes, or at least choice of level of classes. Counselor 4 was one of the most outspoken,

> What would help these kids more than anything is if we would go back to the good ole days of true college path, and true career path. If a student knows they want to go into the auto mechanic industry, there is no reason for him to take Algebra 2. He has no interest in Algebra 2, and from my experience, he will fail it most of the time. Then, that student has to take credit recovery to make up the college prep course and take him out of the trades course. There needs to be math for trades, and math for college. English is English. We probably need that, but maybe technical writing as opposed to literature for college prep.

Parent 5 also brought up the point about different tracks. “The schools need to add more work with your hands jobs for some of these kids. I’m a welder. I can’t do half the math my [student] brings home today. It’s ridiculous. There needs to be trade programs.” Student 19 agreed.

> I passed all of my woodshop classes with an A. I would go into Algebra 1 and Algebra 2 and struggle to get a D. I didn't even pass Algebra 2 except for on the computer in credit recovery. I just want to build stuff, I don't want to be a mathematics person."

Teachers seem to want a more structured set of classes as well. Teacher 2 said, "I wish that for some of these kids, we could have career-centered math and science instead of the prescribed classes." Teacher 6 put it more bluntly,

> Students whose path is not ETSU, or even Northeast, need a set of classes that will teach them what they need. They need a program for them. The college-bound student needs a program for them, and the top college-seeking student needs a program for them. One-size does not fit all."

Summary

This chapter described results from student and adult interviews and questionnaires pertaining to school barriers. Chapter 5 will present the findings from the lens of the researcher, and discuss implications of findings, research limitations, and future directions for research.

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings, Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

For decades, research suggested an ebb and flow of dropouts in this country (De'Andrea, 2015; Evans & Kim, 2010; Kaplan, 1963; Thornburg, 1975). Funding has increased; programs have been created (Guskey & Easton, 1983; Scribner, 1995); metrics have been calculated, and yet still the problem persists (Child Trend Databank, 2015). This study was performed to investigate possibilities that may prove valuable to understanding barriers to graduation.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions of students, and those surrounding the students regarding barriers to graduation for 12th-grade students. In addition, this study examined the programs that currently exist as well as programs that might be beneficial to implement. The guiding research questions were:

R1: What issues do 12th-grade students report as barriers to completing high school graduation requirements?

R2: What student assistance programs existed to help students overcome barriers to on-time graduation?

a. Were students aware of the programs?

b. Did students use the programs?

c. Were the programs perceived as helpful?

R3: What are some programs that may have been beneficial to the students in overcoming the barriers to on-time graduation?

An exploratory qualitative methodology was chosen for this research to obtain individualized data from participants. This study used a descriptive phenomenological strategy in

order to engage with those who have shared experiences and to develop the patterns and relationships of the observed (Behnke, n.d.).

Summary of Findings

The findings discussed in this section are descriptions of themes that emerged out of the interviews and questionnaires. Those themes were then analyzed and reported. The data associated with the findings were fully discussed in Chapter 4.

Themes regarding barriers to graduation.

Several common themes emerged in relation to barriers students face when progressing through their high school years towards graduation as a 12th grader. Scheduling, family connections, home-life changes, and caring for the individual student were among the most common.

There was a universal feeling from all sub-groups interviewed, the school day was not conducive to the optimal learning environment of the student. Teachers lamented students would either sleep in class or not show up at all for classes that started early in the morning. Teachers indicated a belief that there was a direct relationship with the poor performance and struggle students experienced in those classes. One teacher even stated, “There are some students I do not see, and then they are off my roster one day. When I ask where they went, the answer is either they were dropped from the school or moved to the alternative school.” Voicing agreement, students agreed that getting to those classes starting at 7:30 in the morning was difficult for some. If they did, the feeling was they did not learn and often slept. “I had English 10 my sophomore year, at 7:30. It was the first class I ever failed. I didn’t go half the time because I could not wake up,” stated one of the student participants. Counselors and parents both agreed adjustments to the school day are needed to allow students to be at an optimal learning level of

awareness. One parent wrote, “If I could add one program, it would be a late start. My [student] was a bear to wake up in the morning. I know [student] would have done better going later, ‘cause the later classes' grades were passing.”

Principals, parents, and counselors all concur there needs to be a renewed push in the high schools to get the families involved in a substantive manner with the schools. Research by Whitaker and Fiore (2013) suggests getting the families involved produces more positive outcomes for students in school. Principals and counselors admit to trying many different ways of bringing the families into the school to try and garner some of that positive influence on the students. “We do have a lot of outreach to parents and families, but the turnouts are usually sparse. We need one good turnout done right, and maybe they will come to others,” remarked one principal. Parents only reported seeing the family and school connections through PTA activities. These activities were not well received by parents of struggling students. The PTA in general was looked upon as an elitist organization that more resembled a country club. One parent shared in the questionnaire, “If there was one program I would get rid of, it is the PTA. They are there just to relive their child’s high school years. It’s not for me.”

One thing that was clear through the interviewing of all sub-groups was that home-life changes are something where schools try to assist, but often the situations at home are beyond the control of the schools. What the parent groups and student group wanted most when discussing these themes was understanding. One student remarked, “I just wish the teachers would take into account who I am. They see me struggling but don’t care why.” The parents and the students wanted the administration to understand that times of change were hard on the students, and the students may act out, but it is not out of defiance; it is out of fear of the uncomfortable and uncontrollable. Students and parents wanted teachers and counselors to know

the students are sometimes not missing because they are lazy. Sometimes they miss because they are hurting, or moving, or grieving. Principals, teachers, and counselors all agreed that there needs to be more effort in understanding and communicating with students who are going through times of change in their home-life. A few of these staff members did mention counseling services, but most of them also mentioned that more must be done for our most at-risk students. One principal added, "Some of the kids who come in my office are hurting, and they lashed out. They know the consequences, so I just try and love them through it."

When the need for caring for the student as an individual was mentioned by a student, it was, by far, the most emotional part of the interview. Students who are struggling indicated they did not feel as though they are cared for by any adult in the building. If caring is shown, the student dismisses the reality of the caring as the person just doing their job and not truly caring. Students are longing for some sort of meaningful relationship with teachers and administration. "It would be nice if someone gave a [expletive] in this school. The teachers don't care about anything, why should I?" Shared one student. They all seemed to believe their counselors care, but the repeated reference saying the teachers do not care, or the administration does not care showed that there is a disconnect in this area. The students referred to school as a prison a few times, and the administration as "cops without guns."

The distrust of the adults in the building by these students obviously affected them deeply. A student commented, "In a school like this it is easy to get lost. I have friends who I can talk to, but if I need an adult, they treat me like I am bothering them, so I just talk to my friends." Some of the students were expressing the desire to have after school tutoring sessions with the teachers so that they could get time alone with them. They were intimidated in class by the other students, and when they asked for this time, it was reported that the teacher often dismissed the

request, further ingraining this idea that they did not care about the person. “Teachers just want to get here when the bell rings and leave when the last bell rings. They don’t want to help.” said one, very angry, student.

Another complaint was that teachers and administration did not care what was going on in the lives of the students. They did not care that their parents just got a divorce, or that they had to move suddenly and live in their car for a night or two. In the opinions of the students, all the teachers and administration cared about was if they stayed awake and did their work. If they did not, then they were punished. If this happened too often, then administration would attempt to send them to the alternative learning environment. One of the students said, “This school sucks”.

Themes regarding assistance programs in place.

Credit recovery, alternative learning environments, and the national free and reduced lunch programs were among the most commonly referenced themes in both the interviews and questionnaires. The programs listed were generally referenced as in place. However, the efficacy of the programs differed depending on who was interviewed.

Credit recovery was the most discussed program in place by all participants. For the most part, everyone interviewed knew about the program and understood the purpose of having the program. The main point of contention with credit recovery was that it took the place of another class during the day. That class would have been an elective course for the student. The loss of elective opportunities bothered students and parents alike. “The only thing that really sucked about credit recovery was that I had to take it instead of another class. It was easy though, so that helped,” remarked one student. Students felt there should be more choice in the classes they take. They felt that they would perform better if this were in place. The fact they had to retake a course in credit recovery and lose the opportunity to take a course of their choice caused quite a bit of

angst when interviewed. “I wanted to take culinary arts, but because I failed Ms. [teacher] English class, I couldn’t take it. I had to take credit recovery instead, and it was terrible,” explained a student.

Parents’ complaints about credit recovery were two-pronged. Parents agreed with the students about credit recovery taking the place of an elective course being too harsh. But they also had complaints about credit recovery being too easy, and therefore being an enticement for students to not pay attention in the classes that the students think are too difficult. A few parents’ solutions were to make the students retake the course as an incentive to not fail the first time. One parent solution was, “Get rid of this credit recovery program. Make them sit through it in summer school. That is an incentive.”

Parents and students both felt the computer-based credit recovery was also not teaching them anything, so if the class was a builder course like Algebra 1 is to Geometry and Algebra 2, the student was behind when they got to the next level. “I had to take Algebra 1 in credit recovery, then I had to take Geometry and Algebra 2 in credit recovery because I couldn’t pass those. It doesn’t teach anything it is just an easy way to get a credit.”

Principals and counselors admitted that credit recovery is not an ideal situation for the students, but it is the best system currently available. Both of these groups are hoping for relaxed required courses or changed required courses because Math and English are the two that are most commonly failed in high school according to the counselors and principals. A counselor said, “I wish we could go back to multiple tracks. One for career and one for college.”

Teachers mostly liked the idea of credit recovery. At worst they were ambivalent. They all knew it was an option. Of the teachers who mentioned it, they said it is good that the student has an opportunity. However, they too agreed that some use it as a crutch when the actual class

gets to be, what the student believes, too difficult. “I had students who I would have a ‘fail conference’ with who told me that they were just going to take my class in credit recovery because it was easier” shared one teacher.

Alternative learning environments were mostly discussed by students, parents, and teachers. Alternative learning environments included on-campus classes as well as a physical placement to another campus within the district called an alternative school.

Students seemed to like the alternative school better than the main campus. They felt that it was easier, smaller classes, less time taken to achieve a credit per class, and the interpersonal drama was less. What students readily admitted, however, was that there is no learning done at the alternative school -- just doing. “I learned that alternative school was just a place to put the time in on the computer. No-one gave a [expletive] if we learned anything.” Students found it difficult to transition back to the main campus if the credits that they earned while in the alternative learning environments were builder courses such as Algebra 1, Geometry, English 1 or English 2. This was because the schooling was done on-line, and it was easy to just get the answer without first learning the material. “One student who was sent to the alternative school for excessive absences shared, “I went down the beginning of my sophomore year. When I came back for the second half of Geometry, I was totally lost. I had to take the second part in credit recovery.”

Parents also expressed displeasure with the alternative learning program. They admitted they knew about it, and some of their students had experienced the program. The problem was their children were behind in school when they returned to campus, so it created other barriers for their students. Parents also did not like the fact the expectations were seemingly lower, and they felt their students learned how to be more disruptive and more of a discipline issue as time

went by. One parent wrote, “My [student’s] friend group changed at the alternative school, and from that point on, [student] changed [student’s] behavior to match [student] friend’s bad behavior.”

When an alternative learning environment was mentioned by school personnel, it was usually by saying this is a program that is available. “Some students are placed there for discipline issues, and some are placed there for social-emotional reasons,” stated one principal. The point the counselors discussed is it gives some students an opportunity to focus on one credit at a time and not overwhelm that student with four classes all at once. One counselor explained, “It is nice for some of our students to go to alternative school to focus on work and get away from the issues on the main campus.” This was followed by, “However, the learning structure could be improved.”

Free and reduced lunch was the one social program most participants mentioned. Students who were interviewed, who were part of this program, loved that they received breakfast and lunch while at school. Parents were also appreciative of the program and were thankful the students were able to eat even if they themselves could not provide the food for them.

This program seemed to be most appreciated by the students who mentioned transience as a barrier to graduation. “I had to sleep in a car with my brother and sister some nights, and we would go to sleep hungry. So, school was for food more than anything,” one student said. Transience seemed to disrupt everything, including food availability for the students. So, the fact that the federal program of free and reduced lunch was available to those students helped a tremendous amount.

The only point of contention with the free and reduced lunch program came from a parent who was concerned about the forms that had to be completed and brought back to school. This parent pointed out how that can be embarrassing for some and wondered if there was an alternative to filling out that big form.

Discussion of Findings

This section will serve to provide discussion for how best to work towards alleviating the concerns of students who encounter barriers. In addition, strategies to better engage families who are trying to support their struggling students the best they can will be discussed. The main barriers that will be addressed are: (a) getting to know each child; (b) building a better family connection; (c) scheduling; (d) alternative learning environments.

Getting to know each child.

This theme was the most shocking theme of all. To think that there are children walking through the hallways of the school who are feeling like they have no adult who knows them and cares for them was unbelievable. Rita Pierson (2003) gave a ted talk titled, *Every Kid Needs a Champion*. In this presentation, she describes the kind of children she encountered in her days as a teacher. She encountered these students who feel alone, and she took them into her fold.

It is imperative that every child has a champion. This champion needs to be a teacher or an administrator, and it must be intentionally done. This could be done by having a daily homeroom, and perhaps assigning administrators to a home room as well. Administrators are, as Baruti Kafele (2019) states, “the glue that binds the school together.” What better way to truly bind the whole school together than every administrator taking on the responsibility of a homeroom with his or her teachers. This homeroom time could potentially be a time of bonding in the school and could be a time where teachers and students should have one-on-one

conversations and learn from and about each other. This time could also promote deep connections between peers, as mentioned in the research by Bryan, et. al. (2012). This time should be whole-school planned and undertaken with a great sense of intentionality to do everything possible to ensure every child has an adult in the building who knows about them.

In creating this type of experience, the program will need to be carefully designed so that it does not turn in to a time for students to sit and do nothing, study hall, or a necessary holding tank. Although this time could be used for lunch rotation, the time must be intentional and accountable. This time could promote self-discovery and a time for teachers and administrators to build strong relationships with every student in their homeroom so that every child has a champion (Pierson, 2003). This should be a time for students to learn what humanity is by seeing it on display at school and by all school personnel.

Specific goals for the homeroom are also recommended. This is a time for teachers and administrators to note any changes in behaviors, grades, family life, or any other warning sign for a possible barrier. The homeroom teacher might consider logging the activities performed with the student and outcomes seen as the student continues to work through issues. This information may be of use for teachers and administrators to benefit other students who display similar characteristics in falling grades or aberrant behavior.

Additionally, teachers and administrators could employ ways to celebrate student accomplishments. Praise, as discussed in research by Finley (2017), should incorporate the following general concepts: (a) it must be perceived as authentic and sincere; (b) it must have specificity to what the celebration of accomplishment is referring; (c) it needs to be focused on something the student has accomplished, not what their ability level is; (d) it must be immediately given. This praise can be through any number of mediums. It can be a certificate

given by each teacher for an accomplishment. It can be a special lunch with the principal. It can be a prize chosen by the student. It can be a positive phone call home. As long as it is an acknowledgment of achievement, and as long as it can be attained by all students, then it is a positive step towards being that special someone for every student. Of utmost importance is that the family of the student is informed of the achievement as well.

Building a better family connection.

Family connection is not something to be taken lightly. If schools get parents involved in a substantive manner, not only does research show that the student does better in school, but it shows that there is a positive impact on the school as well (Rockwell, et al., 2010). One of the improvements Rockwell states can occur with increased parent involvement is an improvement in the overall attitude of the parent towards the school. The attitude towards the school of the parents who filled out the questionnaires was highly negative. Schools must reach out and do everything they can to bring all parents into the educational arena with the faculty and staff.

One of the major points of contention from the parent questionnaires was the exclusivity of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) organizations. School districts must immediately look at the makeup of the organization and the structure that is established. Districts must work towards ensuring that all families are welcomed. Too often all means all who can afford to be part of the PTA. Too often all also leaves out those whose children are also marginalized by the school during the school day (Quinlan, 2016). All parents, grandparents, or any other caretaker of these students should be encouraged to participate, and the administration should ensure no sign of cliquish behavior is being displayed. If there is, then there must be a discussion and action plan put in place to ensure total participatory availability to all families regardless of socioeconomic or any other metric by which people are marginalized. Meetings must be held at a

time and location where all are able to attend. This must include working parents. If multiple meetings need to be held to facilitate attendance, then it should be investigated. Moreover, if there is a family who wants to attend, and cannot due to transportation needs, the PTA must take it upon themselves to provide transportation to and from the meeting. Another sentiment brought out by the parents in the questionnaires was that there may be underlying bigotry within the ranks of the PTA. The meetings must be free of the sense of racism, classism, sexism, or quid pro quo. Again, if there is any sense that a person or group is being discriminated against, either intentionally or unintentionally, the school and district must step in and reorganize. One suggestion from Quinlan (2016) was to have a shared leadership between someone who is from a higher income and someone from a low-income bracket. If this is unattainable, refocus the group towards its purpose of total inclusivity. If the marginalization of students in school is to stop, then the marginalization of the family in the parent organizations must stop.

Another issue discussed by parents was they did not feel comfortable coming to the school building itself. Schools can be intimidating and bring up some of the very things that parents wish to forget (i.e., bullying, failure, childhood trauma, etc.) (Finders, & Lewis, 1994). It is incumbent upon the school districts and schools themselves to engage in a paradigm shift that keeps school safety at the forefront, but not at the cost of family engagement.

Often, the front entrance of the school is an intimidating main office, where parents and other family members may remember waiting to talk to the principal when they were in school (Whitaker, & Fiore, 2013). This office may be very nice, but it should not be the first visual the parent sees. The main entrance for parents and visitors should be a place where they can relax and be comfortable. It should be a place where there are comfortable chairs, nice furniture, a flat-screen television displaying the latest positive social media hits that the school received, and

some sort of refreshments. Off of this area can be meeting rooms and places where closed-door activities can occur. But the school personnel participants need to meet the parents there. The parents should not be told to wait in some bustling front office anxiously waiting to be taken to the principal's office. Understandably, space is of the essence in some high schools, but if there is an interest in getting parents more involved, then parents and family members need to have a place that does not resemble that which they hated years ago (Rockwell, et. al., 2010). Moreover, this place needs to be displaying all that is right with the school. It is the sales and marketing office of the school.

Finally, parents should hear from teachers, counselors, and administrators on a regular basis through positive phone calls home. One of the complaints from the parents and students was that they only were communicated with when there was a problem. One parent wrote that the only time anyone from the school called was when the student was being placed at the alternative school.

Positive phone calls home can make a tremendous impact on the relationships that are built with both students and parents (Pfotenhauer, 2019). Parents get a choice now to accept or decline calls when the school number comes up on their cell phones. The desire of all school personnel should be to have 100% acceptance of calls. In order to strive towards that goal, the message on the other end must be positive. For every one phone call home that is relaying a negative situation about a child, three phone calls home should be positive calls about the child (Aguilar, 2015).

Scheduling.

There were two organizing themes that were brought up by students and parents under the global theme of scheduling. The first was the start of the school day. To many of the struggling students, a 7:30 or 7:45 start is undoable and creates a barrier to learning.

According to research done by Edwards (2012), some school systems are already delaying the start of school by one hour. Whereas the school day used to start at 7:30, it now starts at 8:30. This was done in the Wake County (North Carolina) School District. The results of doing this showed an average increase of 2 percent on the 10th grade achievement exams (Edwards, 2012). Edwards points out that there are physiological, hormonal changes that account for the lack of ability to get up, but there are also other reasons. Many of the students who stated that a 7:30 or 7:45 start time was not feasible explained that they have to have a job to help support the family, and the job does not allow for them to get home until after midnight. Others pointed out that when they get home, they have to take care of the younger siblings until their parents get home, which is sometimes after midnight. It is incumbent upon the school systems to take a long look at the start times of school. The most vulnerable students in the school are some of the ones who are being most affected by the scheduling. Moreover, starting just one hour later may help all of the students to perform better academically.

The second common organizing theme was the school day schedule leaves no room for student agency in the classes they take. Because of the state-required courses (Appendix B), very few classes are classes students actually get a choice in taking. For the struggling student, this can be a barrier. In 1962, The psychologist Lev Vygotsky introduced a concept called *Zones of Proximal Development* (ZPD). One of the areas this concept examined was the relationship between the level of challenge and the student engagement in the activity. The outcome was

shown to be if the student is appropriately challenged, in other words in the zone of proximal development, and the challenge is joyful, the student engagement is at its highest peak (Vygotsky, & Cole, 1981).

Keeping in mind ZPD, and the students reporting the perception they get very little choice in classes they get to take, no wonder so many of them fail these classes. The standard operation of the school day, in the two schools that participated in the study, was a standard block schedule. Four classes per day, for one semester, and then four more the next semester. If a student has eight classes in a year, and there has to be one math, one English, one social studies for the first three years, and one science for the first three years, that leaves the students with four classes of their choosing. In addition, in Tennessee, there is a wellness requirement of two credits. If the student takes wellness as a 9th grader and wellness as a 10th grader, that leaves the student with three choices per year. The three choices can be electives, but the electives must satisfy the elective focus requirement of the state. It is not as if the student has carte blanche to pick and choose and explore different avenues. Also, one of those electives must be a fine art at some point in the four years, and if the student plans on attending college after high school, that student will need a minimum of 2 years of the same foreign language. Clearly, the paths for the students are limited, and if other barriers are impeding the success of students and they start failing classes, the choices become less and less because of credit recovery needs. Of the 32 credits needed in high school, 28 are form-fitted to satisfy the requirements set forth by the state. That leaves four classes in four years that are choice and exploration for the student. That is assuming all classes were passed the first time.

This scenario does not coincide with the concept of ZPD optimization. What systems must do is push back on the state to get the requirements changed so that choice is a major part

of the students' high school experience. Secondly, the systems must demand that the prescription of some of the classes such as Algebra 2, English 11, and English 12 be examined and alternate routes to completion available to students with classes better suited for some students. There will still be a large number of students taking all of the maths and all of the English classes. But, for those students who are struggling, there need to be applicable maths and applicable English classes. If the schools can give students a choice for a few paths in high school, there is a better likelihood the ZPD will be more attainable for more students (Anderson, 2016). If the state does not offer any concessions, then it is up to the districts to create classes and curriculum that satisfies the state requirements and get those classes approved by the state board. No longer can the students suffer needlessly in classes that some fail before they set foot in the room. This is not a teacher problem, although teachers must certainly champion the cause; this is a state educational infrastructure problem.

Alternative learning environment.

Alternative learning environments, for this discussion, are limited to environments that are not on the main high school campus or are isolated from the main campus in an environment that is self-contained. Alternative learning environments serve two main purposes; (a) continue the education of students who are placed away from the main campus environment due to discipline issues; (b) needing a more focused environment due to physical, social, or emotional need. These two alternative learning environments are very different, but they require some of the same functions (Logdon, 2020).

There were answers in the interviews of students who had been remanded to alternative school for behavior issues such as excessive fighting, drug use on campus, attendance, and the general failure of classes. In this case, the alternative school is an appropriate remedy. What was

discovered in the interviews with students, and questionnaire responses from parents, was the alternative school environment is neither rehabilitating the behaviors nor academically assisting the students. It seemed as though students and parents reported the return to school was putting the student in a position that caused more of a struggle because of the lack of attention to academics at the alternative placement. Putting a student in this situation could lead to an increase in behaviors that are not acceptable (Banks, n.d.).

Alternatively, there may be a need for a student to be placed in an alternative learning environment due to a physical, social, or emotional need. In the article, *Problems at School? How to Handle the Top 4 Issues*, Banks (n.d.) reports some students experience anxiety around the idea of going to school. The anxiety could stem from the feeling of boredom, loneliness, depression, bullying, and many more (Scott, 2020). These students may be in need of placement at the alternative school, or there may be a need to look at an alternative placement of homebound services, or online schooling if the school provides that. Either way, the school must do something to protect the students who are displaying tremendous amounts of anxiety. In conjunction with the alternative placement, social-emotional services may be appropriate for these students where anxiety is a barrier to graduation.

Whether it is for behavior, or it is for social-emotional reasons, there is a need at whatever alternative placement is deemed best for upholding the standards of the district's academic expectations. It is also important for the students to receive the mental health care they may need. An alternative learning environment must not be a holding place for students while they serve a sentence for their behaviors at the main campus. Students already report that the schools are like a prison, and the administration are "cops without guns." Therefore, an

alternative placement must serve to educate, rehabilitate, and care for students who are the most vulnerable in society.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the study being performed based on who accepted an invitation to participate, there was not much opportunity to gather responses from a wider variety of student ethnicities. Out of 31 student participants, 4 identified as African-American, and 2 identified as Hispanic. Of the 22 adults, 3 identified as African-American and 1 identified as Hispanic.

Given the student-participants were invited by the counselors, and student names were not shared with the researcher, any student member-checking was going to be handled by the counseling department. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this student member checking was not possible to be completed.

The study was conducted via one-on-one interviews only, so the data collected were solely representative of the statements of the participants. No verifiable artifacts or corroborating cross-checking was done to validate the statements of the participants. Participant bias could have been present in the answers, and therefore presents a limitation.

This study was conducted with a small sampling of 12th graders in the schools, and in the Northeast Tennessee region. This may be a limitation as to differences in the responses given by other students in different localities.

Conclusions

Parents and students desire more interaction from the faculties and staff of high schools. Students need to know the adults in the building do care about them on a personal level. Students need reassurance from the adults that they are important and have value beyond how they perform in class. Analyzing the responses, this is not always the case. Students want to feel safe

when asking for help. This could be in the form of help with homework or help in general due to issues beyond their control. Mostly, students want a voice. They want to be heard and for someone to listen. Students seem to have a desire to look back on their high school with fondness, but when they do not feel a part of the school, they have a hard time finding the fond memories. This will continue to breed animosity towards schooling when these 12th graders get older and have school-aged children of their own. Schools need to build the next generation of public-school advocates now.

Parents of struggling students want to be a part of the solution. Schools try to incorporate parents, but the parents feel these attempts are not satisfactory. In order for students to feel part of the school and look back on their school with pride and joy, parents need to have a sense of joy and belonging as well.

Recommendations for Practice

School-district and school-level personnel, in an effort to show awareness and provide education and care to the students who are most vulnerable, may wish to implement the recommendations in this section. All students need education and care, but the vulnerable need intentional and targeted care. Not only do the vulnerable students need the staff working for and with them, the parents of the vulnerable students are also struggling and need district and school level advocacy and inclusion. An outreach to support them and work with them to help clear a path of success for the student may be attainable with some adjustments. The following are recommendations for practice:

- District leaders, in conjunction with building administrators may wish to investigate creating a space for parents to feel comfortable, welcomed, safe, and cared for at the school. This ideally would be a space separate from that main

office. Recommendations of accommodations for this space are as follows: (a) comfortable seating; (b) large screen monitor with upcoming events and positive social media postings; (c) relevant reading material; (d) refreshments and water; (e) places off the main part of the room for private meetings. This room is where the administration and faculty will come to the family member(s). A concerted effort should b made to keep meetings away from classrooms or offices of administration.

- District-level leaders could engage with the state department of education to re-evaluate the options of re-configuring class requirements for all students. Students need more relevant classes, as well as choices in the paths they wish to explore in high school.
- District leaders and administrators working together to look into ways of making the school day more flexible and in line with the needs of the students who cannot attend classes at times prior to 9:00 A.M. may assist those who work late or must assist in morning childcare duties at home.
- District leaders and school administrators may be able to work out a way to provide Wi-Fi to communities where families are unable to afford it on their own. This may be done through a partnership with local carriers. Or, it may be done by using buses with Wi-Fi transmissions and routers being parked and locked in neighborhoods where lack of technology equity is most prevalent. The buses could serve multiple purposes throughout the day.
- Administrators could improve student engagement practices by taking a more active role in the day-to-day activities of the school. These may include: (a)

scheduling a daily homeroom for each administrator; (b) surprise class pop-ins to announce an achievement for a student in the class; (c) 3 weekly positive parent calls home; (d) a general understanding and an unwavering display of support for the most vulnerable students in the school.

- Administrators may wish to investigate ways to make alternative learning environments more in line with social-emotional learning and support for students and parents. Moreover, the pacing of academics may need to be evaluated for assurance of a pace on par with the main campus. This may assist in fostering a sense of belonging and success if and when the student returns to the main campus.
- Administrators and the PTA organization should look for ways to work together to ensure complete inclusive practices. These practices include but are not limited to: (a) racial inclusion; (b) varied income level inclusion; (c) transportation services if needed (d) grandparent support groups; (e) relevant topic discussions (f) intentional and proactive invitation for marginalized parents to plan and participate activities at the school (g) multiple meeting times.
- Counselors and teachers may wish to collaborate in hopes of better equipping the teachers to deal with the most vulnerable students in the building. If teachers are given tools to better service at-risk populations, these students may succeed more.
- Administrators and counselors could look for alternatives for credit recovery to be available for students and not impede on their ability to take elective classes that they would enjoy taking.

- Teachers can identify strategies to address every student by name every day. This effort to acknowledge the presence of every student they encounter in their classroom may increase the feelings of belonging for all students.
- Teachers may wish to have some sort of achievement recognition in place for all students that is attainable by each student. This recognition program should strive to convey the student's achievement to the parents/guardians at home as well.
- Teachers could make an attempt to learn and acknowledge significant dates and facts about each of their students in order to better connect with them.
- Teachers may want to implement a system where they make a minimum of 3 positive phone calls home a week. Hopefully, every student this way would have at least one positive phone call home per month.
- Teachers could look into times they could make themselves available either before school, after school, or both, and publish times they are committing to availability. Students can sign up for this time. This time, ideally, would not be used for anything but connecting with students.
- Administrators and teachers could formulate a schedule for meaningful homeroom activities that connect the school personnel to the students, and the students to other students. These activities, in order to promote school-wide connection, should be similar in practice and may want to incorporate skills also used outside the classroom or school building.

Recommendations for Further Study

- A research study on the effects of positive phone calls home from teachers and administrators on the overall attitude of parents towards the school.

- Research the effect of the PTA organization on parent and teacher satisfaction with the school.
- Research optimal times for the hours of a school day, based on research and interviews with students, parents, faculty, and the business community.
- Research what other states and countries are doing to maximize the amount of student agency with regards to classes taken at a high school level, and how that could be adapted to Tennessee.
- Perform a study analyzing student academic outcomes the semester before placement into the alternative school campus, and the semester after they return.
- Since this study was performed with rural and semi-urban schools, perform the same study but using two urban center schools as the targets. This will assist in making the research be transferable to more school settings.
- Study the effects of standardized testing on the perceived barriers to graduation for 12th graders.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived barriers to graduation surrounding 12th-grade students. Specific objectives for this study were: (a) pinpoint the barriers impeding the successful graduation of 12th graders; (b) identify the programs in place to assist the students towards successful graduation; (c) examine the efficacy of the programs in place assisting the students towards a successful graduation. This study was conducted in two high schools in Northeast Tennessee. One high school was in a rural setting within a county school district. One was in a semi-urban setting within a city school district. Participants included students, teachers, counselors, and principals in one-on-one interviews, and questionnaire

responses from parents. Results indicated that an effort must be made to better connect teachers with students in meaningful ways. The study also uncovered the need for better communication between schools and homes, especially for the at-risk of failure population. Lastly, classes must be evaluated for college and career relevance and worthiness of student effort. Students and parents/guardians are counting on district and school-level personnel to step up and make a difference for their lives. It can be hard work, but it is worthy work. Hamish Brewer (2019), principal of Fred Lynn Middle School in Woodbridge, Virginia wrote in his book, *Relentless*, in a chapter on trying to figure out what it is we do, and why we do it, he wrote, "Remember three things. It is the people. It is the people. It is the people."

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Appendix A

Milligan IRB Approval Letter

Date: March 30, 2020

From: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Milligan College

Re: *Perceived Barriers to High School Graduation Surrounding 12th Grade Students at Selected High Schools in Northeast Tennessee*

Submission type: Full Review Submission

Dear Paul,

On behalf of the Milligan College Institutional Review Board (IRB), we are writing to inform you that your study *Perceived Barriers to High School Graduation Surrounding 12th Grade Students at Selected High Schools in Northeast Tennessee* has been approved. This approval also indicates that you have fulfilled the IRB requirements for Milligan College.

All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission, meaning that you will follow the research plan you have outlined here, use approved materials, and follow college policies.

Take special note of the following important aspects of your approval:

- Any changes made to your study require approval from the IRB Committee before they can be implemented as part of your study. Contact the IRB Committee at **IRB@milligan.edu** with your questions and/or proposed modifications.
- If there are any unanticipated problems or complaints from participants during your data collection, you must notify the Milligan College IRB Office within 24 hours of the data collection problem or complaint.

The Milligan College IRB Committee is pleased to congratulate you on the approval of your research proposal. Best wishes as you conduct your research! If you have any questions about your IRB Approval, please contact the IRB Office and copy your faculty advisor if appropriate on the communication.

Regards,

Tawsha Clay

The IRB Committee

Appendix B

Tennessee State Requirements for High School Graduation

Table 10

Requirements for High School Graduation

Course	Number of Credits	Minimum Requirements
Math	4	• Student must complete a math every year • Classes completed must include algebra 1; geometry; algebra 2; and a 4th higher level math class
English	4	• Student must complete an English every year
Science	3	• Classes completed must include biology; chemistry or physics; and a 3rd laboratory science
Social Studies	3	• Classes completed must include: World history and geography; U.S. history; U.S. government and civics; and economics • Passage of a general U.S. civics test is required.
Personal Finance and Economics	1	
Physical Education and Wellness	1	
Foreign Language	2	• Students must complete two credits of the same language
Fine Art	1	
Elective Focus	3	• Students must complete 3 similar classes in CTE, AP, or fine arts
TOTAL CREDITS for STATE DIPLOMA	22	

(TDOE, 2019)

Appendix C

Tennessee State Career and Technical Education (CTE) Categories

Table 11

CTE Categories

Health science	Business	Sales	Finance
Information Technologies	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)	Manufacturing	Logistics
Hospitality	Government	Law	Agriculture
Human Services	Construction	Training	Arts, audio/visual technology, and communications

(TDOE, 2019)

Appendix D

Prevailing Attitudes and Practices of Paulo Freire's Banking Method of Teaching

(2) The teacher teaches and the students are taught

(3) The teacher knows everything; the students know nothing

(4) The teacher thinks and the students are thought about

(5) The teacher speaks and the students listen - meekly

(6) The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined

(7) The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply

(8) The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher

(9) The teacher chooses the program content and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it

(10) The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students

(11) The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the students are mere objects (Freire, 2017)

Appendix E

Sample of Participant Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

You are invited to take part in a research study of the perceived barriers to graduation surrounding 12th-grade students at selected high schools in Northeast Tennessee. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Paul Blair, who is a doctoral student at Milligan College, and a member of the Science Hill High School faculty. This study is separate from the role of teacher at Science Hill High School.

Background Information:

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate perceived barriers to high school graduation surrounding 12th-grade students in selected high schools in the Northeast Tennessee area.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in the following activities:

- One-on-one interview
- Possible questionnaire to be mailed back to the researcher, Paul Blair, in the provided stamped and addressed envelope.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not to choose to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time without any effect on graduation, grade, or class standing.

Risk and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress, or becoming upset. Being in this study would not pose a risk to your safety or wellbeing. If students do have adverse effects from the interviews, the school counselors will be available to provide them assistance.

All steps will be taken to limit any psychological effects to the student. These steps will include the invitation by a counselor to participate in this study. There will be no interaction by the researcher with any of the students until the student has agreed, and if under 18, the parent or guardian has given their consent. In doing this, it is minimizing the perception of being "singled out", which might cause a feeling of angst or disturbance.

This study will benefit students in the way schools approach students who have a perception they may not graduate. In addition, the students will learn about the research process, which is a life-long learning activity.

Payment:

There will be no monetary or gift payment for participation in the study.

Privacy:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Data will be kept secure by keeping the transcripts in a password protected or locked location that is accessible only to the researcher. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by Milligan College.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or, if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via blairp@jcschools.org. If you wish to talk privately about your rights as

a participant, you can contact the Milligan College Institutional Review Board at IRB@milligan.edu. Or contact Dr Patrick Kariuki, director of Educational Research at Milligan College (423) 461-8744.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of Consent _____

Participant's Signature _____

Parent of Guardian Signature if under 18 years old _____

Researcher's Signature _____

Appendix F

Sample of Interview Questions

Student Interviews

(1) How old are you?

(2) What is your definition of a barrier keeping you from a goal?

(3) What is your overall feeling about this school?

(4) What grade level in high school did you first encounter a barrier that might keep you from graduating?

(5) What were barriers at school that were in your way and possibly keeping you from graduation?

(6) What did you do to get over that barrier?

(7) What support did the school provide in an effort to help you get over that barrier?

(8) How did the supports put in place by the school ease or change the barriers you faced?

(9) What worked in the support that the school gave?

(10) What was lacking from the support that the school gave?

(11) What were barriers outside of school that were in your way and possibly keeping you from graduation?

(12) What did you do to get over that barrier?

(13) Who were individuals who helped you get over that barrier?

(14) What did those individuals do that helped you overcome the barrier?

(15) What are some things that you would have wanted someone to do to help you successfully get over the barriers you have faced or are currently facing?

School Personnel Interviews

(1) What is your current position at the high school?

(2) What is your definition of a barrier keeping a student from a goal?

(3) What is your overall feeling about how this school supports students who are running into barriers on the way to graduation?

(4) What grade level in high school did you feel students, generally, first encounter a barrier that might keep them from graduating?

(5) What were barriers at school that were in the way of students that could possibly keep them from graduation?

(6) How do you think a student who encountered a barrier reacted to that barrier to graduation?

(7) What did the school do in terms of support services to help the student get over that barrier?

(8) What worked in the support that the school gave?

(9) What was lacking from the support that the school gave?

(10) What were some barriers outside of school that were in the way and students possibly not graduating?

(11) How do you think a student who encountered a barrier reacted to that barrier to graduation?

(12) What are some things that you would like to see done differently in the future to help students successfully get over the barriers they face?

Appendix G

Sample of Parent Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in the research questionnaire. The research question at hand is, what are the perceived barriers that 12th-grade students encounter throughout high school that increase the likelihood of not completing the necessary high school graduation requirements? I would like to have parent perspectives on this as well. Please be as open as you feel comfortable with being. None of your answers will be published in any way identifying who the participant was. In fact, the questionnaire does not ask for your name. You may write on a separate piece of paper if you need to elaborate on an answer. Please just identify what number you are continuing to answer.

Please return this and the signed portion of the consent form, completed in the return envelope provided.

Thank you for your participation.

Paul W. Blair, Ed.D. Candidate, Milligan College.

(1) With what nationality would you self-identify?

(2) What is your definition of a barrier keeping you from a goal?

(3) What is your overall impression of the school your student attends?

(4) What grade was your student in when it first became evident that there were barriers that may prevent your student from graduating?

(5) What are the barriers that you believe the school has put in place that are keeping your student from graduation?

(6) What are the barriers outside of school that you believe are barriers to your student graduating?

(7) How did the supports put in place by the school ease or change the barriers your student faced?

(8) What worked in the support that the school gave?

(9) What was lacking from the support that the school gave?

(10) How could the school be more proactive in ensuring student success as they strive towards graduation?

(11) How can the school be more helpful to the parents of students who are struggling to get over barriers to graduation?

(12) Please feel free to expand on your thoughts on the barriers your student has encountered while attending high school.

Thank you for your participation in this research. You volunteering your time and effort is greatly appreciated.

Paul W. Blair